

# The New Orphic Review

*Editor-in-Chief*  
Ernest Hekkanen

*Copy & Associate Editor*  
Margrith Schraner

*Managing Editor*  
Michael Connor

Nelson



Canada

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# Contents

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Ernest Hekkanen	4	<i>Writing the Local</i>
Carl F. Thompson Jr.	8	<i>Antworks</i>
John Grey	22	<i>Three Poems</i>
Joan Baril	26	<i>Cousin Bloomers</i>
Allan Vello Ennist	36	<i>Four Poems</i>
Fred Annesley	39	<i>Pheasant Soup</i>
Robert Cooperman	53	<i>Four Poems</i>
Michael Washburn	58	<i>Voyeur</i>
Sean Arthur Joyce	70	<i>Three Poems</i>
Margrith Schraner	74	<i>To Travel the Distance</i>
Ross Klatte	85	<i>Canoe Country</i>
Ernest Hekkanen	96	<i>Violent Friday</i>

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by Ernest Hekkanen

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 44 books. The most recent are *Flesh and Spirit: The Rasputin Meditations*, *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*.

## Writing the Local

### Ernest Hekkanen

IN JULY OF THIS past summer, I was invited to read at the inaugural Elephant Mountain Literary Festival, the theme of which was *Reading and Writing the Local*. The opening-night gala featured six writers who were paired with six different wines, an event that was billed as *Fine Words, Fine Wines*. Jon Langille of BC WineGuys did the pairing. I was matched with Pyramid Winery's Pinot Noir, a transitional wine, because my roots are still adapting to the soil here in the West Kootenays, apparently. I chose to read "My Unfinished Heart," a poem which appeared in my collection, *Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow* (New Orphic Publishers, 2011). That poem is admittedly 'transitional', due to the fact that my unfinished heart has never firmed into a finished one. By the time I got up to read, the audience was feeling quite jolly after four previous glasses of wine, and then the Pinot Noir on top of that.

The festival also offered several panel discussions by publishers, editors and writers. On Saturday morning, I ran downhill to take in a discussion entitled *What's Happening! Panel on the process and future of publishing*. It took me less than five minutes to jog from my house on Mill Street to the Kootenay Art Therapy Institute on Falls Street, where all of the panel discussions took place. I guess that might be called one of the benefits that come with being local—at a festival devoted to *The Local!* I didn't have to spend a dime on parking.

The first panel discussion featured four publishers from Toronto's Anansi Press, Calgary's Freehand Books and B.C.'s Caitlin Press. The objective was to give the audience an insider view of what goes on at a publishing house, in particular how manuscripts are chosen for publication. After a while it became clear to me that the editors and publishers were indulging in an elaborate defense having to do with how they come to pick books which will bear their imprint—all important information worth

knowing, of course. The discussion also became an argument for why every writer needs an editor. At this point one of the publishers found it necessary to berate self-published authors. In her estimation, self-published books were self-indulgent, poorly structured and badly edited, and even when they were good, well, they could only be sold to family and friends, and so the market for such books was extremely limited.

As you may have guessed, I became somewhat annoyed.

Rita Moir, the moderator of the panel discussion, invited Morty Mint of the Mint Literary Agency to reply to the panel members' remarks, and he stressed that writing and publishing should be viewed as a business, replete with a product and a market, and that writers ignore this at their peril. After Morty had spoken, I was invited to say a few words. I concurred with Morty that writing and publishing must be viewed as a business, but that the business model often doesn't work very well in Canada. To support what I was saying, I acquainted the audience with my own personal history. In the mid-80s I signed a contract with General Publishing for my novel, *Chasing After Carnivals*, which was supposed to appear under Stoddart's imprint. That novel got all the way to the bound galley proof stage and was even reviewed in the pages of *Quill and Quire*. At this point, because of a downturn in General Publishing's financial fortunes, publication of my book was postponed indefinitely, although, after some haggling, I did manage to obtain the remainder of my advance from General, as per my contract.

After my nearly three-year-long experience with Stoddart, I had two short story collections appear under Thistledown's imprint, I informed the audience. I soon discovered that I, the author, had to become the salesman for my books—to buy them at 40% off the cover price and to resell them to customers. When you're forced to do that, I said, you might as well publish your own books and make a larger profit. I asked the panelists to respond to what I said, and one of the publishers agreed with me. She said more authors should think in terms of turning their vacations into road trips to sell their books.

My contention in this editorial should be underlined: *Publishers—large and small alike—aren't taking care of business.* They are publishing books as a kind of gift to their authors and then they expect the authors to go out on the road to sell them, rather like The Watkins Man, who used to go door to door selling products to housewives. How have we arrived at this state of affairs in the publishing business? I think it's due to the way the book publishing industry operates here in Canada. Publishers select books that suit their idiosyncratic needs. Fair enough! The cost of publishing those books is written off by the Canada Council's aid to book publishers. Some publishers are even awarded 'operating grants', for crying out loud. Any small margin of profit that is made after receiving such grants is deemed 'good enough', because the grants alone are

sufficient to keep a publishing house in business. Writers are satisfied with this business model because it gives them and their work an air of legitimacy, but, let's face facts, the vast majority of books published in Canada never leave the warehouse. That's one of the big, dirty secrets that the public is unaware of. Most of the books published in Canada never see the light of day on the shelves of a book store, and that's because they don't sell very well. Even before they are shipped from the printer's, they are deemed 'depressed stock'. Why put 'depressed stock' on the shelf? After all, a book store has to make enough money to pay the rent and the wages of the staff.

In a further panel discussion called *Shaping the Local*, our assembled publishers lamented the difficulties they faced getting 'local' books on the shelves of Big Box Stores like Chapters/Indigo. To call a book 'local' is the kiss of death. Book stores simply don't have any space for 'the local'. Our quartet of publishers also lamented the financial damage being done them by online booksellers such as Amazon.com. One of the publishers confessed that after the 50% price break demanded by Amazon, there was only a very slim profit to be made. At this point I couldn't resist raising my hand, even though it wasn't the designated question and answer period. I asked her, "So, how does Amazon manage to obtain your books?" She confessed that she sold them to Amazon. I replied that it was my experience that Amazon demanded a 60% price break and that I, the publisher, would have to pay the shipping costs on top of that. I said when I was approached by Amazon, I simply said, "No, thank you." I asked her why publishers weren't in the habit of saying 'no' to Amazon. If they were to band together and refuse to sell to that behemoth, the problem might soon be solved. She responded by placing the blame firmly on the shoulders of authors. According to her, they want their friends to be able to purchase their books through Amazon—at vastly discounted prices!

The more I listened, the more I came to realize that publishers view authors as the 'problem'. However, as an author, I don't believe that is the case. I think it has a lot more to do with the way the Canadian publishing industry goes about conducting its business. Canadian publishers are willing to put up with Amazon's onerous terms because the expenses associated with producing a book are written off by the Canada Council. Publishers don't need to glean much of a profit to survive. They can afford to store vast numbers of books in warehouses, which is very expensive, and, moreover, they can afford to discount them at 60% off the cover price, precisely because they don't need to sell many books to justify their existence. They are happy to be part of what I would term 'a false business model'. Provincial and federal governments subsidize their existence by issuing grants to them, and they are content with that equation for doing business. In fact, the publishing business has become

the business of obtaining grants. This has resulted in a tremendous lack of courage on the part of publishers and so they are willing to be embraced by distribution bullies like Amazon.com. They are willing to put up with the onerous terms dictated by online booksellers precisely because they are running government-subsidized cottage industries that don't need to turn a profit. For them, any small profit they make is icing on the cake. And damn the writers.

I think there needs to be a tremendous shake-up in the book publishing industry in Canada. I think we should start by denying grants to publishers. That way, they would be forced to act like businesses rather than fiefdoms in a feudal kingdom.

CARL F. THOMPSON JR. is a short-story writer who lives with his wife Patricia in Annandale, Virginia, and at Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. His stories have appeared in *The New Orphic Review*, *The Potomac Review*, *Thema*, and elsewhere. In 2011, *Stories OFF the Garden Path*, a collection of twelve of his stories, was published by Main Street Rag Publishing Co., Charlotte, NC. Thompson is a retired U.S. federal employee, a 1969 graduate of the University of North Carolina and a U.S. Army veteran.

## Antworks

### Carl F. Thompson Jr.

THE STRETCHING EXERCISES still hurt. But, all in all, standing on the front deck of his and Ginny's mountain cabin, Jake felt nearly healed. It was a warm but comfortable Saturday for West Virginia in July. Distant mountains shone blue under a cloudless sky. Wildflowers saturated the fields.

His December jogging injury—a fall on ice causing a severely turned ankle—had set him too long on the shelf. In August he'd turn forty, and forty worried him. Any extended period of inactivity could now freeze up knees, stiffen a back. Plus, he'd gained weight. So, was he really ready to run? As Ginny listened to afternoon NPR, he set his mind on a serious test: a rigorous hike.

Opening the sliding glass door to where Ginny sat captured by the luxuriously romantic themes of Puccini's *La Bohème*, he said he planned to forage about a bit.

\* \* \*

For a good, bracing trek, he needed a new route in the forest. This was in the acreage across from his and Ginny's cabin, at the cabin the two young women—Kate and Victoria—had owned before they sold and moved another ten miles out. The new owners seldom showed. Absent as usual, they obviously wouldn't mind Jake's small incursion.

It was the kind of woodlands in which one-hundred fifty years ago the armies of the North and South had fought the great Wilderness Campaign. The woods were oppressively dense, though many of the trees were scrawny. Within the dead refuse of old, fallen timbers ran a dark underworld of knotted roots. Overall, the forest possessed a weepy, deranged look—trees snared in forearm-thick vines and nets of brambles that sought clothing and the bare skin of calves, arms, ears.

To ensure a workout, he avoided paths. Since his injury, he'd not only



gained twenty fiercely unwanted pounds, he'd developed a phobia: Merely by bending over, he could at any time imagine himself in the girdle-like grip of some misplaced Florida boa, as if by stealth the boas had made a northern probe through inland waterways. This fear of Florida boas he knew to be ludicrous, yet didn't it fit with other 21<sup>st</sup> century ills: the glut of tornados, the weird African lakes that in the dark of night issued forth methane gas, killing thousands? Weren't astronomers spotting ever more Earth-grazing asteroids, the very thing that killed off the dinosaurs?

But his real fear, he knew, had little to do with natural disasters, just the simple disaster of gaining so much weight he'd never get rid of it.

\* \* \*

Near a familiar outcropping of limestone, he passed the saltlick left years ago by Kate and Victoria. Stomping noisily through dead leaves and next a tangled thicket, he suddenly came upon a broad ravine with steep sides. Wary of re-injury, Jake descended carefully, grasping saplings and low-hanging branches on the way. He had to fight for handholds once more as he hauled himself up the opposite side. There he found another ravine which led to another.

Ascending from the last, he grew winded. At the crest he found new limestone outcroppings where he sank wearily to a squat on a rock just large enough to hold him if he tucked his feet close to his butt. He wanted to sit and not move. Maybe his ankle was back, but he wasn't.

All about him he heard forest life. Some animal bolted, scampering among the dead leaves. It created a racket, but he knew that it could have been merely a squirrel. He'd never seen bear in this forest, though once he'd seen a red fox. Deer were common, although given their coloring he was more apt to spot them in the meadows behind their cabin. Then there were the hidden things he hoped he'd never encounter. Only last fall he and Ginny had driven to a lookout on a nearby mountain where they'd found a man in his sixties standing before an easel, painting a landscape in oil. "Did you see the rattler?" he'd asked. "Six-footer crossing the road when I drove up. Pity you missed him."

Pity, hell, Jake remembered thinking.

He took a deep breath and exhaled. For no particular reason, he looked at his feet. He blinked. Right below him marched a trail of black ants. Looking both left and right, he realized at once he'd found an enormous ant column. How long it was he couldn't be sure. Given the ground cover, it could be as long as his imagination. It was a long line that proceeded left to right, passing right before his feet.

But wasn't it the case that army ants—if that's what these were—belonged south of the Rio; in any event, not in West Virginia? Global warming? Manmade? Or—as the doubters had it—did the evil come from a hotter overhead ball of bright yellow gas? Whatever the cause, now, like him, they were here. Not that that made them equals.

Gazing down, he saw some ants break off from the line and head in a new direction. Wait. Rather than breaking off, as the chain of ants approached where he was sitting, the whole column diverged to its left, in a curve away from him. But then the curve changed again, first cresting, then breaking downward toward him, making a loop before continuing. “O.” The ants had clearly formed a circle—an O—in the middle of their trek. The O persisted as the ants maintained this circular maneuver in their otherwise forward march. But again they changed course, steering still to their left, though not in a curve, but sharply, in a rigorous line perpendicular to the column’s original direction, before returning straight to the place where they had diverged. “L.” That’s an L, he thought. Odd, odd, odd. The column continued, once again making a midcourse maneuver, another large loop like the first one. “O.” Certainly, it was a second O. Jake didn’t know what to make of this: an enormous, organized corps of ants, moving forcefully through the forest, passing left-to-right before him, the column spelling out OLO under his very nose, and moving on. No. Again the chain veered—or poked—left, in a line that angled slightly to Jake’s right. Then the line plunged toward the rock, again in a slight slope to his right, opening an angle that looked like:  $\blacktriangle$ , before immediately repeating the maneuver, ascending and descending:  $\blacktriangle \blacktriangle$ , but without a gap between the symbols. So be it: “M.” The ants as they passed before him danced out the letters OLOM before resuming their path. Huh. A column of ants marched left to right, straight and unwavering, except at his feet, where in this uncanny maneuver they spelled out a word he knew so well, his last name: Olom. OLOM—OLOM in the highest! What a display! How unbelievable! Had they made him their god?

Noting his bearings, he ran (trotted, really, his waistline jellyrolling) to their cabin, where he found Ginny still listening to the Met on NPR. “Quick, quick, grab your shoes! You gotta see this. It’s absolutely incredible!”

Ginny, a pretty and fit blonde of thirty-six, showed no eagerness in leaving her post. Besides listening to the Met, Jake could see she was reading a fat Russian novel. In Russian. Though Jake liked knowing his wife would soon have an advanced degree (in *Russian* lit!), it did tend to remind him of his own past failings: A junior year dropout in business administration, he now spent his days training others in such intrinsically stimulating topics as TQM and Change Management. He couldn’t see training as an actual career. Nor could he see a two bedroom apartment in the exurbs as an actual home. That’s why he felt so indebted to a deceased uncle for leaving him—nine years ago—a mountain cabin a mere ninety-minute drive west of Manassas, Virginia.

“So what’s so incredible?” Ginny queried.

He could hardly tell her “Ants.”

“Here,” he said, handing her her running shoes. “Fine, your T-shirt and shorts are fine. Let’s go!” He nearly pushed her out the door.

Taking a route through fields behind their cabin, he by-passed the ravines that had caused so much trouble. Fifteen minutes later, they breathlessly reached the rock, which he immediately leapt onto. Left and right, the debris of dead leaves and tree limbs obscured all signs of a path of ants—but if he looked just below his nose, there they were. He stepped away. “Go sit on that rock,” he said to Ginny.

“Sit on this rock?”

“Yes, sit.”

He grabbed her arm and guided her.

“Pull your legs up in your arms, it’ll be easier. I managed and I’m bigger.”

“So?” she said once she had done as he’d asked.

“Now look down.”

“Wow,” she said, “marching ants! I’ve never seen a column of ants before. Wow!”

“Wow is right,” he agreed.

She bent down for an even closer view.

“Is the line perfectly straight?” Jake asked.

“Yes, perfectly. One after the other.”

“No bends, no kinks?”

“No, absolutely straight.”

“You’re sure?” he said, his voice edgy.

She said “Yes” once more.

“We can’t be too late, can we?” he said, rushing forward. Had the fates once more betrayed him?

Ginny started to stand, but he insisted she stay seated.

Soon she said, “Wait, something’s happening.” She blinked. “It’s as if they’re on maneuvers. Moving about, you know?” She began blinking furiously. “O-my-god! They’ve formed a letter!”

“The letter, O, right?” exclaimed Jake, who edged forward.

“No, not an O.” She knew her answer wasn’t the one he wanted.

“What do you mean? *Isn’t* it an O?”

“No, it’s a C. They’ve marched up in a curve and marched back the same way.”

“I’ll bet it’s an O, with some leaf blocking your view.”

“No, it’s a C. O-my-god, they’re making another letter. This is really neat!” she said, showing an enormous smile. “Wow! They’ve made a U.”

“I don’t understand,” Jake repeated, “they’re not spelling correctly.”

In the end, the ants had spelled CULLEN. “My maiden name,” Ginny shouted.

“Are you sure?” he said. Then he saw for himself.

CULLEN

Talking, mind-reading ants.

\* \* \*

“We’ll have to tell the girls,” they said to each other, back in their cabin. They meant Kate and Victoria.

“Too bad we left the camera at home,” Jake said. “We’ve really got to remember it.”

“Or get a cellphone that takes pictures.”

Their two young female friends owned a sign shop in a town in central Maryland. When they sold their cabin and bought property ten miles farther out, they’d built larger and grander on land that gave onto magnificent views of neighboring mountains. So Jake and Ginny phoned them, without luck, but leaving a message. They would repeat this exercise frequently in the weeks to come.

That evening they talked right through a good Cabernet. With variation, what they said over and over was, “This is crazy impossible, just crazy impossible.”

\* \* \*

At two a.m. Ginny caught Jake reentering the house from their front deck. She’d heard him closing the sliding glass door.

“Milky Way?” she asked, sympathetically.

“Milky Way,” he confirmed. The Milky Way was a bright glittering ribbon in the black West Virginia sky. Someday Jake hoped to own a telescope with a large aperture mirror: a big light bucket capable of focusing deep space objects. Better, he’d like to house it in a roll-off roof observatory in their back field acreage.

“I feel insignificant beneath those stars.”

But Ginny knew him to feel insignificant generally, the way his life had worked out.

Jake crawled back into bed. For a while his eyes rummaged the ceiling. “I said insignificant, but you know what I really feel about this?—Pride. Pride that they chose us to break their silence.”

Listening, Ginny felt good. He needs this gift, she thought. He was so constantly down on himself. His job was one thing, but jobs—she still believed—could be changed. His great disappointment (on the heels of dropping out of school) came when he realized they would never have children. Male infertility—a bad sperm count—could be such a blow to a man’s ego. He’d even asked if she wanted a divorce. But she didn’t wholly mind the news and told him so. Oddly, she’d never been confident of her abilities as a future mother. Though she doubted that Jake had ever fully believed her disclaimers. But their sex lives did return to normal. The cure needed now was a change of careers for her man. Or a commanding hobby.

“So, are we deserving of this great honor?” she asked, meaning their position as humankind’s host to these tiny ambassadors.

He knitted his brows. "It leaves me feeling wary. As you say, why us? What if they want something? Ants and people don't mix. We see an anthill near our cabin, we want to wipe it out. Not that these ants necessarily know that."

"But what if they do know? Would it make you feel different?"

"Hm. Maybe I should start reading that Harvard ant guy, E. O. Wilson."

"*The Ants*, or *Consilience*?" she said, naming two of the famed entomologist's books. She raised an eyebrow. "If I were an ant, or an ant negotiator sent to bargain with humans, I think I'd have far greater missions for you to perform than reading a book."

"That's scary," he said.

"Mm," she agreed.

\* \* \*

The next weekend they arrived at the cabin Friday evening. Early Saturday morning they checked for ants. Nothing.

"I'm going to take a run," Jake said. "I've let myself go to pot." He put on his old running gear from all those pounds ago and trotted along the gravel road that ran up and down the neighborhood hills. It was a hot day. A mere mile-and-a-half drew sweat, grunts, and gnats, but his ankle felt fine and for that he was happy.

That afternoon, the vagaries of mountain atmospheric left Ginny without decent reception for NPR.

"Come on," said Jake, grabbing a ball cap.

At the site, Jake hopped onto the rock.

"Jesus."

"What? What?"

"They're back."

From separate rocks, they watched the column march left to right, just as before.

"You'd think they'd reverse directions, wouldn't you?" he commented.

"Maybe they do. Maybe they do this several times a week."

"Maybe it's not the same ants."

"Gotta be the same guys," she replied. "I'd think."

"Look! They're veering!"

Ginny hopped on his rock with him and grabbed his waist. They teetered slightly as they watched.

After multiple curlicues and double-backs, it read:

OLOMCULLEN

Jubilant, they hopped up and down, performing a little dance on the rock.

"But where's the camera—we don't have the camera!" Jake complained.

"Wait," Ginny said, "aren't they doing ...?" She watched as the ants constructed a new message:

FOOLS

“They’re telling us we’re fools for leaving the camera,” he said.

“You mean they can hear us, they can listen?”

“They can read our minds. We already established that. How else would they know our names?”

“Yeah, but maybe they can hear, too,” she noted.

“I don’t know. Maybe we do need to read up on ants.” Once again, he remembered the great E. O. Wilson. This time he swore he’d read him.

“Are they going to say anything else?”

They waited fifteen minutes, a solid quarter-hour of being told they were FOOLS.

\* \* \*

That night as they lay in bed with the light out, talking, Jake said, “Maybe they’re just saying man is a foolish species. We’re representatives of mankind, so they’re calling us fools simply because we’re human. Maybe they’re jealous of our achievements.”

“Like wars?”

“They have their own wars, you know. ... But tell me when ants will ever go to the moon, for instance.”

“When will we ever go again ourselves?” Ginny rebutted.

“Yeah, there is that.”

But Ginny was tired and closed her eyes.

Jake was making assessments. They’d been married fifteen years, yet he was a man without weight or substance. But out of the whole world, the ants had recognized him. Whatever had happened up to now, this was his opportunity for change. “Read Wilson,” he whispered to himself. This time he meant it.

\* \* \*

The next weekend it rained hard.

“Yeah, we’re fools for doing this, that’s for sure,” said Jake, as Ginny missed the Met’s performance of *Turandot*.

Wearing slickers and boots, they hiked to what Ginny had now dubbed the Antworks.

Once again the ant column had a new message:

ELECTROLYSIS

“Electrolysis!” they said together. “What the heck?” Jake said.

“I think it’s about your hairy back.”

“How would they know about my back?”

The ants re-formed. WAX JOB, a second message said.

“Yes, it’s about your back hair.”

“It could be your little mustache.”

“They attack a few wisps of hair on me while you’re hirsute?”

SIMIAN, the third message said.

“God, they’re roaring critics!” Jake snapped.

They debated whether the ants could actually see them, visually detect their faults. Did they send emissaries up his clothes to check out his back? Jake certainly hadn't felt any ants crawling up his back, and it was unlikely they could see her barely perceptible mustache. But Jake knew he was embarrassed by his body hair and that Ginny was sensitive about her upper lip. Thinking it over, they agreed that the ants' detection methods were probably nothing more than their usual mind-reading.

"They're making us scapegoats for the faults of the human race," Jake said.

"They're so insulting," Ginny added.

\* \* \*

On the last Saturday in July, a day that was blazing hot, they remembered the camera. From atop the rock, Ginny snapped pictures while the ants minded their manners, marching in a straight, unwavering line, not spelling out a single word.

"Jesus, is it the camera?" said Jake. "Are the damned things camera shy?"

"Coy, I'd say." Without another word, Ginny hopped off the rock and set the camera behind a tree thirty feet away.

In less than a minute, the ants began to maneuver.

#### ANTS WORK

was followed by

#### HAVE A NICE DAY

At the cabin, Jake was beside himself. "Those insufferable little Hymenoptera!" He'd learned the term from reading E. O. Wilson. "They're making fun of your calling their little Spelling Bees—that's a laugh—the Antworks."

"I can't see how that would upset them," Ginny replied.

"Oh, hell," Jake said, opening a beer. "They're telling us that ants *work*. They're contrasting them and us."

"Us?"

"*Homo sapiens*. Us. They're using the word 'work' in the sense of 'work hard,' 'never stop,' 'persevere.' As always, they're criticizing."

"I think they just understood why I called it the Antworks and conceivably were even complementing us for creating the term."

"Not letting us take a photo was just rubbing it in."

While Ginny stared, he chugged a full beer, something she'd rarely seen him do.

\* \* \*

The first Saturday in August began as a downpour. Jake was reading a book on the Cold War, titled *Downfall of an Empire* by an author with a Slavic name. Shortly after 10:00 a.m., the rain let up and the sun came out.

At the usual time, they visited the ants. This Saturday's gift was:

WE WILL BURY YOU

“Fucking Nikita Khrushchev,” Jake said angrily as they huffed back to their cabin. “Nicki fucking Khrushchev at the UN, pounding the table with his shoe. ‘We will bury you!’ They’re Commies! Lousy Commies!”

“Well, of course, they’re communist,” said Ginny. “That’s the way ants *are*. I thought you read Wilson.”

“We won the war, Ginny. We’re not going to fight it again and lose.”

\* \* \*

The next Saturday was August 12<sup>th</sup>, a mild day, not a bad day to be standing on a rock in August in West Virginia.

Ginny stared at the ants’ one word message and said, “What?”

The message read:

PERSEIDS

“The Perseids!” Jake exclaimed. He was excited. “It’s a reminder about tonight’s meteor shower! The sky’s clear, too. The Perseids are nearly always the year’s best meteor shower. We’ll have to stay up and watch.”

Now Ginny remembered Jake having mentioned the Perseids in earlier years. But usually it was too cloudy or the meteor shower wasn’t timed for a weekend when they’d be at the cabin with West Virginia’s dark skies overhead. The Perseids, she recalled, were named after Perseus, the constellation out of which the meteors emanated.

On their hike back to the cabin she asked, “But if this is an annual event, could the ants be telling you something particular about tonight’s shower?”

“Huh.” Jake nearly missed a step. “Well, to do that, they’d have to be able to predict, wouldn’t they?”

\* \* \*

At midnight Jake and Ginny sat in lounge chairs on their deck, waiting. So far, they’d seen a total of three shooting stars.

“It’s supposed to get better the later it is,” Jake noted.

“Well, I hope soon, otherwise I’m heading to bed.”

About 1:45 she gave up, heading inside. Jake almost gave up, too.

But an hour later the sky burned with meteorites, legions leaving long bright trails, some crossing from near Perseus clear to the horizon. It was the best meteor shower he’d ever seen. He was sure it’d make that morning’s news.

Was that what had the ants’ message had meant: How great the display would be? *Could* the ants predict and had they given him a gift this time?

It was a quandary. All night he lay on the deck and pondered.

\* \* \*

First thing in the morning, standing in the bedroom doorway, Jake told Ginny, still in bed, “That was the most fabulous meteor shower I’ve ever seen. I should have got you up again to see it.”

He went on, “I’ve been thinking about this communist business, too.



The ants could be saying nature itself is communal, that it all fits together. If the ants really can predict, that would explain how they advertised the Perseids. But it's a trick—a setup. They want us to applaud and say thanks for the free tickets to last night's grand display, *then* they'll go ahead and bury us—take us down one way or another. Because their real message is, "You're weak, while we're as powerful as all of nature, earth or sky."

Ginny, barely awake, stared at her husband. He looked disheveled and bug-eyed. He hadn't even wished her good morning.

"Covers the boardwalk, I'd say," she said. Her mouth felt gummy and she needed to pee and she supposed she needed to fix them both breakfast, too.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, on an early Friday evening at the cabin, Jake said, "Why don't we just drive over and see if the ladies are in?"

The foursome had been friends ever since Jake had inherited the cabin from his uncle. The Oloms enjoyed visits to their friends' new cabin, which featured large ceiling beams, flooring made from barn planks, and expansive windows showing off the great outdoors.

"That's their SUV," Ginny said as they drove up and parked.

Dogs barked when they knocked. Kate, a black-haired woman with smooth olive-dark Mediterranean skin and lively eyes, greeted them at the door with hardy hugs. Behind her stood Victoria, the "nature girl," as Jake called her. This tall and lithe woman was a passionate fly-fisher who could slide a kayak into water while barely making a ripple. Jake had once said he could visualize Victoria perfectly at ease as the sole survivor of an air crash at sea, a castaway on some tiny Pacific island, spearfishing and enduring. Add that both women were karate experts.

The hugs continued when Victoria managed to corral the two tiny, yapping Corgis in a bedroom. The warm greeting was natural for this first meeting in over a year.

As always, Jake crooned rhapsodic about the ladies' new cabin. "God, how I envy you this place," he said, staring out a window. "It doesn't matter where you look, you've got nature all around you. Look at that mountain!"

They migrated to the living room with its Vermont Castings stove. Ginny and Jake took the two chairs while Kate sat on a patterned sofa.

"Oh, we've had our war stories," Victoria noted, moving into the kitchen. They apologized for not having seen them all summer, but business was booming and they'd had little time for weekend getaways. Victoria fished a wine bottle from the refrigerator and worked the cork.

"War stories?" Jake said, as the wine was poured out.

"Ants," said Kate. "About a month ago I came out alone and found that entire wall"—she indicated a dining room wall—"coated top-to-bottom in ants. A literal yard-wide swath. We've had the pest control

people out here three times.”

“Ants crawling up the whole wall?” Jake said.

“You bet.”

“All the way up this cathedral ceiling?” he remarked.

“Ants! That’s so strange,” said Ginny.

“Why so strange?” Kate asked.

“It’s some rather peculiar ants we found on your old property,” Jake said.

A glance passed between the two female business partners.

“Have you made some discovery?” Victoria said tentatively.

“Oh, boy,” Ginny and Jake replied in unison.

Jake started, “Yes, we’ve—”

“You’ve found the column!” exclaimed Kate.

Jake’s face drained of color. Ginny touched his hand.

“You know about it, then,” he said, stunned.

“You *absolutely knew* about it all along,” Ginny echoed.

Kate held her hands up. “Wait. Let’s clarify column.”

Jake was direct. “A column of ants that talks by spelling out words in formation. Ants that read minds.”

“And you discovered this when?” asked Victoria.

“Two months ago.”

“And you haven’t thought you were out of your minds?”

“Not after two months.”

“Try five years of it,” responded Kate.

“*Five years?*” Ginny and Jake repeated.

“Isn’t it like contact with aliens?” Jake exclaimed. “You didn’t notify anyone?” But his mind skipped ahead. “And now you’re fighting them off out here. Didn’t five years buy you any relief?”

“Relief?” Kate looked incredulous. “We lived there two years before we found them. Of course, it is unbelievable. At first you feel giddy, like you’re stoned silly. We stayed up that whole night talking. It’s like you’ve discovered a secret key to the mysteries of the universe. And then you get the little barbs and deprecations. WE OUTWEIGH YOU. And they do. In total, ants outweigh humans. Then warnings in the guise of civil rights theme songs. WE SHALL OVERCOME. And psychological warfare. WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? Meaning measly us versus Great Big Them. Of course, just to confuse things, they occasionally throw you a bone, but even then it’s something to show their all-knowing powers of prognostication. At the end of summer in 2003, they spelled out XENA ERIS. Late that October, astronomers discovered a tenth planet, first named Xena, but in 2006 renamed Eris. Then the definition of planet gets changed and away go both Pluto and Eris. Or KATRINA WILL BE CHAOS in August 2004. Everybody knew the storm was coming, but no one gauged the effects. So, they not only read minds, but predict events

and correctly calculate their effects. GLOBAL WARMING MEANS GLOBAL SWARMING. Their nice little way of telling us they're immune to global warming, while we presumably aren't. Hubris. Hyper-hubris. ELEGANCE ON THE MARCH, the little bastards once called themselves. And the ever-lovable WE EAT HOUSES. Which has soured us a bit on the idea of co-existence."

"Yes, Jake's quite taken with the analogy with Communism," said Ginny.

Victoria motioned with her glass. "But that was the Cold War. This one's hot."

"Fuck 'em," said Kate.

"'Fuck 'em' *could* be a slogan," Ginny tentatively agreed.

"Right, a slogan," said Jake. "But isn't there a larger issue here? I mean, what do we do now? Shouldn't we tell the world? This is important, isn't it? Communication with another species? Why let them bray at just us? Why not, say, some eminent scientist? And I'm beginning to have new ideas about these creatures. Is it possible that what we're witnessing—all this bravado with slogans—is in fact a *lack* of confidence—a false bravado? Is it possible they fear something? Butterflies and frogs are disappearing. Honey bees are dying in droves. Maybe ants are in trouble, too. Maybe the declarations are a form of denial. But I'm no psychologist, let alone an ant psychologist. What we need are experts. We're a low level audience for such an august message."

At that the group fell silent, as if considering a problem in chess.

\* \* \*

When eighteen months later a small publishing house released their book, *Four Against the Ants*, their expectations had been minimal. After all, who would listen to four unknowns arguing that the ants, like sea coral, were in danger? Though they expected their claims of communication with ants to be dismissed as absurd, they knew no other way to sell the idea of the plight of the ants, except through written revelation.

Of course, by then scientists had actually begun to observe that *some* species of ants *were* on the decline. The great E. O. Wilson in his book, *The Diversity of Life*, had earlier warned about the loss of numerous life-forms worldwide. But as for the quartet's book, *Four Against the Ants*, one eminent scientist proclaimed it opportunistic "antics." Jake, listed as primary author, took it on the chin from the scientist, who said that the seriousness of the situation did not warrant charlatans making attention-grabbing claims. Then some fringe groups read the book, as well as certain radio talk show hosts who wanted Jake to denounce the ants for being exactly what he'd once declared them—soulless communists. Jake grew despondent and began to turn down interviews. In concert, all four authors of *Four Against the Ants* declared a moratorium on interviews. After Jake turned down Oprah, the news hounds realized he was serious.

Still, the book went through three printings, making the authors a reasonable nest egg. Their agent, of course, appealed to them to accept more publicity.

On a memorial return trip to the rock, Jake stood and observed a diminished ant column that granted him a lackluster performance. Messages were either loopy or grimly defiant:

WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE WIZARD  
WE ATE NOAH'S ARK FROM THE INSIDE OUT  
TRUST ORDER, NOT DEMOCRACY

Jake found no happiness or wonderment in any of it. On the other hand, book sales and his new credentials as an author had allowed him to end his career as a trainer.

In a year, the ant column disappeared. Ginny returned to listening to the opera on NPR, while Jake bought an eleven-inch catadioptric astronomical telescope.

"So, who'll show us the secret of mind reading now?" he asked Ginny one evening.

"Don't forget prognostication," she added, her finger holding a place in Andrei Bely's novel, *Petersburg*.

Watching news reports of various declines in species, Jake now roamed about their new home in Reston, Virginia (bought from book royalties), saying such things as, "Where's the order in the natural order anymore?"

That year the Perseids appeared on the night of August 8<sup>th</sup>, not the 12<sup>th</sup>. It was a strong shower, but no one had expected the early date. Fortunately, Jake had happened to be at the cabin alone that particular day, and happily took in the display. Storms and earthquakes continued to rock populations in poor and rich countries alike. In the United States, in a single week in March, four hundred twenty-nine tornados ripped their way across more than five hundred towns and cities. Professional engineering societies begged city planners to demand better construction standards. An unexpected side effect of urban destruction was an increased interest in amateur astronomy. With fewer lights, enthusiasts found they had darker, clearer skies for observation, and sales of astronomical telescopes rose.

One evening as he set his telescope up for observing in his West Virginia meadow, Jake heard an ominous rattling. He'd nearly set his telescope tripod on a rattler. Calm heads, both his and the snake's, prevailed. From now on he'd wear boots. Maybe he'd carry a cane or a heavy stick, too. Nature could come at you from so many angles. Perhaps he should go ahead and build that observatory if only for the sake of safety.

Soon after the encounter with the snake, Ginny mentioned to him numerous reports that showed clear skies prevailing over many beach communities. Should they sell the cabin and trade for a beach house? In

Reston, they lived within a three-hour drive of several good beaches.

“Sea-level rise,” Jake answered. “Sooner or later.”

Still from their book earnings (the foursome finally approved a fourth and fifth printing), they decided to vacation in St. Lucia in the Caribbean. The Category 3 hurricane that eventually hit the island waited a full three days until after they’d finished a refreshing week of sun-filled leisure.

The following year NOAA reported record rises in sea levels around many Atlantic coastal beaches.

“Nature boy,” Ginny began to proclaim him. “How do you do that? The sea levels, the hurricane?”

“Would you believe the last ant message I got was, ‘WOULD YOU LIKE THE POWER TO PREDICT?’” He laughed. “So I said, ‘What about the power to control, too?’ That’s when an ant bit me hard. I knew they were pulling my leg, just like everything else that ever happened to me in life.”

When Jake knocked the glass of red wine, the spill just missed *The Racing Form*. He found an unusual humor in the near miss. If Ginny kept running morning after morning sick to the bathroom, he could spill a glass of wine every now and then. Right?

JOHN GREY is an Australian-born poet, playwright and musician. He's been a US resident since the late 70s, works as a financial systems analyst. He was recently published in *Poem*, *Caveat Lector*, *Prism International* and the horror anthology, *What Fears Become*. He has work upcoming in *Potomac Review*, *Hurricane Review* and *Pinyon*. His plays have been produced in small theaters in New York, Los Angeles and his home town of Providence.

## John Grey / Three Poems

### Combing Her Hair

It takes all her strength to untangle her hair,  
not because fingers gripping comb fail her  
but she questions who she makes the effort for,  
as nothing is presentable in cancer's eyes.

Plastic teeth dig harder than intended in her scalp,  
threaten to take those long thin gray strands with them.  
Cancer likes its women bald.  
The comb is on that devil's side.

But the wave that emerges is her wave,  
the fringe is the latest in a long line of fringes,  
the part in the middle reverts to the part it's always played.  
The mirror won't accept anything less than herself.

Comb drops to the dresser, job reluctantly done.  
Her fingers celebrate a minor triumph.  
Pain may be their subject at hand  
but they still know something of loveliness.

## Anna's Winter of Discontent

Her eyes tried to widen  
but her brow pushed them back down.  
It was up to her mouth  
so it twisted uncontrollably.  
And inside her head,  
twenty questions time erupted.  
Who lives here?  
What room is this?  
And whose idea was the fireplace?  
And who launched such cruel fire?  
Brass andirons glowing smugly,  
logs cackling,  
heat drifting diffidently  
into cold places.  
A hearth, indeed.  
No longer a symbol of comfort and warmth.  
Just another flutter of flame  
against the chilly tide.  
Sure, it was good enough for the dog  
but when did dogs ever have  
to open letters  
and read their sorry content.  
And the weather outside  
was rain, rain and more rain.  
It lacked the imagination  
to turn to snow.  
And suddenly she thought  
that Joe would marry another  
and she dug her nails  
into her palms  
until they bled,  
the best scream she knew how.  
The fire died then.  
Or, at least,  
it made its excuses.

## Fish out of Water

“Writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net”

Robert Frost

It leapt from the water  
and didn't look back,  
slapped onto the bank  
with a shock that whipped up  
its gills with all this  
newly available air.

No, it was Joshua,  
at the ballet,  
his baseball uniform  
under his one ironed shirt,  
Jessica beside him,  
clenching his hand.

That fish flapped up the grassy slope,  
awed by the scenery,  
finally settled on a blue blanket,  
pressed round black eyes  
against a page of John Grisham,  
nibbled on bread and crackers  
and read *The Firm*.

Joshua saw the error  
of his aesthetics,  
no more hip-hop,  
no more American Idol,  
strictly Tchaikovsky,  
Lully and Rameau,  
pointework, Balanchine,



grand jeté, and, oh yes, Jessica  
from that moment on.

No, I died. The fish died.  
Joshua left in the middle  
of the first pas de deux.  
But I did play tennis.  
Without a net,  
thank you Mister Frost,  
though I still tripped over it.

A native of Thunder Bay, JOAN BARIL has had short fiction published in *Room*, *Prairie Fire*, *Other Voices*, *The New Orphic Review*, *Ten Stories High* (as a second prize winner of the Canadian Authors' Association, Niagara Branch, 2009 contest), *Canadian Stories* and *The Copperfield Review* (an American magazine specializing in historical fiction), *The Artery* and *The Story Teller*, an American literary magazine. For ten years, she wrote columns in *Thunder Bay Post*, *Hot Flash* and *Northern Woman's Journal*.

## Cousin Bloomers

Joan Baril

A WEEK AFTER his wife moved out, Ross Sinclair got an e-mail from his cousin Bloomers in Winnipeg.

"Sorry to hear about you and Jennifer," she wrote. "Your sister told me. Why don't you visit for longer than one day? Why not a weekend? Take your sister Bethie for the usual trip to the zoo. You know how nuts she is about the place. Or you and I could do a short canoe trip in the Whiteshell. At our age, it has to be short. I'm sending you good thoughts. As ever, Cousin Bloomers."

Ross read the e-mail from the depth of his bed. Fifty-eight years old and ditched like a teenager. He could hardly believe it. Sunday was the only day his auto shops closed and, on this Sunday, bed seemed the best place. Even though it was a bright June morning, the drapes kept the summer out. The laptop flipped down a few more e-mails, all about business. Ross knew what his cousin was up to, worried about him and sending concern and caring through the broadband.

No e-mail from Darla, Bloomers' sister. Even years ago, when his first auto shop burned down, there'd been nothing from Darla. He closed the laptop, got up and put it on the dresser. He took the bottle of vodka from the night table and put it back in the freezer. What he needed was Darla, but what he always got was good old Cousin Bloomers.

After showering, Ross ate some left-over pizza, put on work clothes, dragged out the stepladder and drop cloths, ready to start painting the living room. His wife, who was a partner in a real estate company, was listing the house at the end of the month. But first, he booked West Jet for next Sunday. He'd arrive in Winnipeg late morning and fly out the same evening. Back to the old agenda. Like a smoothly greased wheel, routine had always held his days in place, sheltered him from surprises. He hated surprises.

\* \* \*

Eleven years old and hungry, Ross arrived home from Boy Scouts at five o'clock. Maybe, with luck, the old man wouldn't be there. Maybe he'd done everyone a favour and stayed at the beer parlour. Maybe today, he'd come home late and pass out fast. But no. There he was on his back in the middle of the kitchen floor, legs spread like fallen tree trunks across the old lino, vomit down one side of his face. Not unusual. It took Ross a minute to make sense of the bulky object beside his father, a white box covered in black coils, the fridge, face down on the floor. A yellow fluid oozed from underneath.

His father groaned and spat, the liquid bubbling over his chin, and Ross, still by the back door, locked his fists against his chest to control his fear. Ross knew his mother was still at work at the hospital, and he guessed his older sister Bethie was at the DaLucca's where she now spent all her time after work. He considered his chances of getting something to eat. Should he step over the twitching legs to reach the cupboard with its peanut butter jar and then ease along the counter toward the bread box? He studied the outspread figure, ready to bolt. His dad mumbled, spouting spit, a volcano partly dormant. A dark patch spread down one leg of the old man's jeans. The bastard pissing himself again. He saw his father's eyes open and fix on him like two malevolent insects. Even blind drunk, the old man could be dangerous.

Ross fled.

As usual he went to his aunt and uncle's place up the hill and across the park. They were all eating supper. Ross stood in the kitchen doorway, ashamed because this was the second time that week.

His cousin, Bloomers, saw him first. "Ross's here again." Bloomers grabbed the kitchen stool and pushed it between her and Darla. "Sit here." Aunt Bess stood to get a bowl. She spooned out macaroni and cheese from the casserole set on a trivet in the middle of the table, adding a fork from the cutlery glass. Bloomers pushed the catsup bottle closer. Ross perched on the stool, feeling himself too big, taking up too much room. He hunched over the macaroni. He wanted to eat, but at the same time he wanted to disappear.

"Ross." He looked up to see Uncle John frowning across the table. "Your mom home yet?"

"No."

"Dad?"

"Yes. He fell on the kitchen floor. He knocked over the fridge. Maybe he grabbed on to it..."

He saw Aunt Bess put both hands over her face. Uncle John stood up.

"He's parceled out again," crowed Darla.

Uncle John reached for his jacket from the hook by the back door. "Bethie at the DaLucca's?"

Ross felt himself nodding, hunching lower. "I think so."

“I’ll get over there before your mom comes home, make sure she’s all right.”

“Bring her here,” said his aunt.

“Your shirt’s too small,” Darla said to Ross. “You’re busting the shoulders.”

“Give it to me after supper,” his aunt said. “I’ll sew on those badges properly.” Ross had sewn on the scout badges himself, but the stitches had come out too big. “Eat up, dear,” his aunt said. “Your uncle’ll sort it out. You’ll spend the night. Your mom too.”

“There’s all threads hanging down,” Darla said, pointing with her fork.

Bloomers glared around him at her sister Darla. “Shut up,” she mouthed. She turned to Ross. “Never mind her,” Bloomers whispered. “When we get big, we’ll kill him.”

\* \* \*

It always gave Ross a tick of surprise when people used his cousin Bloomers’ real name, which was Alice. His wife had called her Allie, but then, his wife hadn’t grown up with them. It saddened him that the old nickname, Bloomers, was dropping into oblivion, as if he were living in a country with no history. He liked things to stay the same.

Three or four times a year, Ross did a Sunday morning flight to Winnipeg to check on his sister, Bethie. This time, as always, he picked up his cousin Bloomers at her apartment, picked up fish and chips at Mannie’s Fish Fry, the only take-out food Bethie would eat, and drove the empty Sunday streets to the North End and his sister’s little house to have lunch.

As he pulled up, his sister was standing inside the chain-link fence with the key in one hand, ready to unlock the padlock on the gate. Her terrier, Max, who was getting too old to bark, managed a single woof when they came in the front yard. Bethie, well over sixty now, heavy, stooped, grey hair shorn, face creased and brown, was dressed like a bag lady in outsized pants and shirt from the Sally Ann.

But Bethie could still jump around, in her dancing bear way, whooping with happiness to see them, Max half dancing beside her. She locked the gate behind them. “Wonder, wonder.” She hugged Ross hard. “Life brings on wonders, and I am inside them, looking out through a golden bubble.”

“You bubble head,” Bloomers said, and Bethie’s booming “har har” reached a man passing in the street, who looked through the chain-link and smiled.

Inside, three tiny rooms. Ross saw that the kitchen counter and table were covered with découpage boxes, Bethie’s latest kick. They were lined up on the bookshelf in the tiny living room, ready for the craft market. The bookshelf was made of boards held up by stacked books. The living room furniture was also made of books, books that Bethie had collected on her bicycle from libraries and senior homes in Winnipeg.

“They just throw books out,” she’d once explained, ignoring Bloomers’ look of pain. “I get them for free, drill holes in them, put in dowels and glue them together. They’re very useful. I insulated the attic with books and it makes a big difference on the gas bill.”

Once, last winter, Ross had shoved his head up through the trap and saw hardcovers carefully laid over the plywood that covered the joists, paperbacks stacked crosswise on top, four or five deep. Now he eased his large frame onto the foam cushions of the book couch and Bloomers took the book chair. It was comfortable, a bit upright, solid enough but unmovable. Bethie set the tea things on a coffee table in the centre of the room. It too was made of glued books and covered with a piece of fabric.

Ross knew his sister slept on a foam mattress over a sheet of plywood held up by stacks of books. The night table was made of old dictionaries. However Bethie used a regular dresser for her clothes. “Can’t think of a way to make the drawers,” she’d said. “But it’ll come to me. I’m also considering lawn furniture, but I’m not sure. The books could rot. Might be a flush-button idea.”

His cousin Bloomers, who taught literature at Red River College, winced at the book massacre but took Bethie grocery shopping every Saturday, nevertheless. For his part, Ross sent his sister regular cheques and paid the taxes on the house. His wife had complained when he mentioned it, but he never hid that from her. Ross had no idea what Bethie did with the money he sent. She didn’t seem to buy anything. Maybe, he thought, she used the money for the dentist. Her teeth were large and strong-looking although nicotine stained. Another of his wife’s complaints. And the new chain-link fence probably cost a lot.

“Fish out the fish,” his sister said, laughing. When Bloomers and Bethie got together, non-stop laughing. More laughter in a couple of hours than in a week at home with his wife. Ross carefully leaned back on the upright slice of foam to listen as they chatted about TV programs, Winnipeg weather, old stories of Thunder Bay. They laughed about the stolen chocolate bars, about the witch lady at the corner store, about the time all three got caught in the rain fishing on the Kam River. They ate Mannie’s fish and chips from the boxes on their knees.

“I got about a thousand more books stored in the basement,” his sister said. “I’ve got them all sorted by sizes. The ones with pictures I’m using for the découpage. I’m doing a Margaret Atwood box of her paperback covers. I’m not sure if it’ll sell or not. If it goes over big, I can do Carol Shields or, even better, Nora Roberts. More colourful.”

“I’m also thinking about a window seat in the kitchen where I can watch the birds,” Bethie went on. “Maybe a fern stand. Trouble is, once you glue books in place they are way too heavy to move.”

“Books do furnish a room,” Bloomers murmured.

Ross smiled at her. “That’s a title, isn’t it?” He seldom read a book,

but Bloomers and her sister Darla grew up surrounded by them, piles of books all through their house.

“Anthony Powell,” said Bloomers. “Long forgotten.”

“I think he’s in the basement somewhere,” said Bethie. “But we’ll never find him now.”

“It’s great to see you so busy,” Ross said to Bethie. “OK, I mean.” He’d heard schizophrenia often eased when a person aged and he was hoping.

His sister grew quiet. “On and off. Things dim out once in a while. They lose their significance. That’s when the trouble starts. But when you guys visit, everything sharpens.” She squinted at Ross. “You don’t understand what I’m talking about, do you?”

He shook his head. Bethie talk.

“The fish is excellent,” he said, taking another piece. “Significantly so.”

Bethie’s laughter boomed out. She waved her fork. “You guys make everything significant, you and Alice, all the time.”

When had Bethie started calling Bloomers, Alice? He wondered what name Darla would use now, but Darla seldom visited Winnipeg, much less returned to her home town, Thunder Bay. New York or Paris were more her style.

\* \* \*

Alice became Bloomers on a slushy Saturday in March. Every time Ross thought about that day, he pictured his cousin’s long legs in their black tights scissoring across the park, the pom-poms on her boots bobbing, her mittened hand firm around his as she trotted Darla and him towards the library. She was eleven, two years older than he, but looking much the same then as she did now, fifty years on—tall, plain brown bangs, a narrow face, wide mouth, glasses. And bossy.

It began when she changed her mind about taking them to Story Hour. “Forget this place,” she’d said when they got to the big double doors. “Let’s go exploring. Have an adventure.” She turned to Ross. “Where’s your dad? In the beer parlour as usual?”

Ross hunched.

“We’ll go down there and stare at him through the windows. Make faces at him.”

“No windows in a beer parlour,” Ross mumbled.

“Let’s go see it anyway.”

“They’ll never let me in,” wailed Darla. “I’m too little.” At seven years old, Darla was the youngest. She was a tiny child, a doll child with a delicate pale face.

A long lane ran behind the shops. Today, it was empty of people but several cars were parked along its length. They walked in their winter boots, kicking ice clods. Darla slid against a garbage can set outside a

windowless door marked “Tamblyn’s Drugs” and fell on her knees in the wet snow. “Help me,” she blubbered. Ross lifted her up, wiped her down, took off one mitt and smoothed the tears from her cheeks.

“Carry me, Rossy,” she sobbed, her arms up. Ross often carried her. She was a snug bundle, not heavy at all. Her arms came around his neck, her familiar breath on his cheek, the blond wisps from beneath the velvet tam draped his right eye. Even in her winter jacket, she had a familiar smell, soapy and clean.

“One peek at the old man,” Ross whispered to her, “then we’ll go back.”

Alice read out the names painted on the blank doors or on small signs affixed to brick walls. Chang’s cafe, The Wentworth Arms, Before Our Time Antiques. She pulled the door handle of the Wentworth Arms. “Rats,” she said. “It’s locked. We’ll have to go round the front.”

Behind them, a creaking sound. The back door of Tamblyn’s Drugs opened and a young man in jeans and a plaid jacket stepped into the lane. He eased the door closed by slowing it with his work boot. In each hand, he carried a bulging plastic bag. The man glared at Ross and the girls with the same malevolent look used by Ross’s dad. The three shrank behind a parked car, but the man ran past them down the lane.

“His bag’s got a split,” Darla whispered. As she said this, the plastic broke, tumbling the contents, small bottles and boxes, into the slush.

“Shit.” The man stared at the pile. He ran back to the garbage can outside the drugstore door, emptied the contents of the full bag into it, tossed in the shredded bag and ran back to his pile. In a second or two, he had the items on the ground scooped into the good bag. He straightened, looked around and took off at a run, slipping a bit on the slush, eventually disappearing between two buildings farther down the alley.

Ross was the first to reach the garbage can and look in. It was filled to the top with chocolate bars, or at least filled from the old garbage up. “Bonanza,” he shouted. “The guy bought too much. He couldn’t carry it all.”

Alice ticked off the brand names. “Sweet Marie, Eat More, Caramilk, Coffee Crisp, Aero.”

Ross felt Darla sigh in his arms. “Holy baloney! Talk about a sweet tooth. It must be a mile long,” she said.

Ross carefully set Darla down. He tried to tie up the strips of plastic bag to carry the candy bars, but it was impossible. He looked around for some sort of container but saw nothing. He almost didn’t see Bloomers make her move if it had not been for Darla’s “Hey!” In one swoop, his older cousin had her long dark blue flannel bloomers off and was tying the legs together. She grabbed handfuls of chocolate bars and shoved them in the pouch.

“Ewwe,” said Darla. “I won’t eat them. Not from your bloomers. I’m

going to tell.”

“You shut up or you won’t get any,” Bloomers said. “I’m going to start with a Jersey Milk.”

Darla was silent for a minute. “McIntosh Toffee,” she said.

On the way home, each eating a bar, Ross had a scary thought. “We might be carrying stolen goods,” he said. “Why else would that guy sneak out the back door and run away so fast? He could’ve gone back in the store for another bag.”

“We’re not stealers,” said Darla. “We’re founders.”

“You’re right,” said Ross. But they knew they wouldn’t tell their parents.

They hid the chocolate bars in the old garage at Ross’ place. They couldn’t find a container so they made neat piles on a board and shoved the board along the wall behind a stack of old windows. The garage was a good place, Ross thought. It was a no man’s land of junk, with his sister Bethie’s bicycle, which leaned just inside the door, the only useful thing. “She won’t use it until the snow melts,” Ross said. “We’ve got a month or so, is my guess.”

Every morning, Ross brought several chocolate bars to school and parceled them out to his cousins. In turn, they gave bars to their friends. A small crowd always awaited his arrival. Darla told the story to everyone. When she came to the part about the bloomers, everyone said, “eww.” But they ate the bars just the same. And so his cousin Alice acquired her long-running nickname, Bloomers.

On a Friday, two weeks later, Ross arrived at the playground in a rush. He held his hands up, palms out. “They’re all gone.”

Darla was indignant. “You oinker,” she yelled. “You scarfed them all down, right?”

“Bethie took them. She must have. She’s disappeared.” Ross tried to keep his voice steady, but he could hear a wobble. “She didn’t show up at work yesterday. Her bike’s gone. Terry DaLucca doesn’t know where she is. None of the DaLucca’s do. My mother phoned the police.”

His two cousins stared at him, their eyes round. “After school, we’ll go and search,” said Bloomers, patting his arm.

The police found his sister later that day, bicycling through the rain along Lakeshore Drive, soaking wet, yelling at every one she passed. This led to her first sojourn in Lakehead Psychiatric.

\* \* \*

Ross was in love with Darla. Darla, Darla, Darla, he wrote in his grade twelve math book. She haunted his bed every night. He had it all planned out, step by step. His uncle had lined up his auto apprenticeship to start after graduation. When he got his ticket, maybe in three years, he and Darla would marry.

Foolishly, he told her as he walked her home from school.



“Brainless idiot. I’m your cousin. You can’t love your cousin.”

Ross thought there was some law. “Maybe they’ll change the rules.” He always remembered the expression on her face then, part derision, and part something else, a sort of crowing look or one of speculation. He was filled with a sudden shame.

She was tiny, blond, perfect. Ross reached for her hand, but she pushed him in the chest. “Oh, my God,” Darla said. “Some family. Me marry a dumb-ass greaser? In your dreams. Forget it, Ross.” She ran off, rounding the walkway to her back door.

Her words stung as did her tone when she said “some family”. Things were not too bad, in his estimation. His sister Bethie was out of the hospital, dopy with drugs, but working at Boston Pizza. His dad had joined AA again and had been sober for three months. His mom was OK too, but tired sometimes. They were all going tenting this summer, the first time ever.

The two families set up tents at the Little Dog Lake campground for a week in July. Bloomers and Darla had their own snap-up Timberline, and he had a beat-up Canada Tire special that he’d used for scouting. His mom and dad set up on the beach, and his aunt and uncle were sleeping in the screen tent. Bethie had stayed home because she had to work.

A week previous, Ross and Bloomers had taken a one-day workshop on whitewater canoeing at the YMCA. So after setting up their tents, they paddled the Kam River from Little Dog Lake down to the Second Bridge in the old Wolverine canoe, doing the Crooked Rapids, Paddy’s Rapids, the Lift-over and then a series of sharp drops, but staying afloat and exhilarated, whooping into the air with each successful manoeuvre. Bloomers’ dad drove them back to the campground and dinner.

In his sleeping bag, the adrenaline of the white water keeping him awake, Ross saw line after line of lightning run across the nylon sides of the tent. The thunder marched across the lake in sharp drum rolls, closer and closer as the lightning snaked up and around. Rain throbbed against the tent, hissed among the trees.

In spite of the noise, he heard the zipper. He sat up, reaching for the flashlight.

It was Darla. “Cuddle me, Rossy,” she said.

The storm did not let up for most of the night. It was his first time, and everything merged into the noise of the storm, the weird glow that accompanied the lightning, the shaking and the wild flapping of the tent fly. At dawn, when it was raining lightly, she dressed and left. “Bye, Rossy,” she said, dropping a kiss on his lips. The dark expanded around him in black waves, finally dropping him off the lip of the world into sleep.

Darla became the focus of his life. Every few months she’d phone. “Do you want to go to the Valentine Dance? Why don’t we drive to the

beach tonight? How about we get a pizza after you finish work tomorrow?" The dance, the beach, the pizza, then two bodies outside on an old Hudson Bay blanket under the trees or in the back of his car. He had other dates, but every few months, he had Darla. But only when she phoned him. Ross was not to phone her.

When Darla came home from university the first Christmas, when she got her first job in Toronto and he visited for two wondrous days, and even after she married the stock exchange guy, once in a while, every six months or so, there would be a time. Sometimes a year went by. She had two children. In spite of the fire at his first shop, he was making money and lots of it. When e-mail started in the nineties, Darla set up a code, RV, for rendezvous. She told him the meeting place and he got there. A week in a resort in Jamaica, a beach house on Cape Cod, a pricey hotel in New York.

Ross married late, when he was past forty, after living with Jennifer for ten years. No kids. Maybe if there'd been kids he would have stopped, he sometimes thought. Maybe.

One close call, the day his wife leaned over the laptop and saw Darla's message. "Just bought a new RV. I'll pick it up in Palm Springs on January 2 at the Hyatt Arms dealership. I'm sure it will be lovely. I can only stay a couple of days."

"That's odd," his wife said. "Didn't she buy an RV last year? She never seemed the campground type."

Ross typed a reply with his wife reading along. "Congrats on the RV. Come and camp in the old hometown. We'd both love to see you after so many years. Or what about Bird's Hill Park in Winnipeg? You could visit Bloomers and my sister Bethie. Jennifer sends her love, Ross."

\* \* \*

Now, after the fish-fry lunch and the obligatory trip to the zoo, Ross drives his sister Bethie home for her afternoon nap and then winds his way into central Winnipeg to take Bloomers home. She lives in an upstairs suite in an old house on Walnut Street, in the area people call the Granola Belt.

They sit in the car shaded by the elms. Ross feels reluctant to say goodbye.

"I liked Jennifer," Bloomers says. "It was a mean trick running out on you at her age. And for a lawyer yet."

"Yeah," Ross says.

"Does she know about Darla?"

"What?" His eyes snap open. "You knew?"

"Everyone knows, you twit. How well do you think Darla keeps secrets?"

Ross considers. "I don't think Jennifer knew," he says slowly. "The problem was me. I'm such an old stick, a bore really. Just a grease monkey.

Never wanted to go out. Just the same thing every day. Work all the time, even the evenings.”

“Except for your little side trips.”

“Yeah, OK. You’re right. But I still don’t think she left because of Darla. Jennifer found this guy, sold him a house and they were off, just like that. She deserves someone more...”

“Faithful?”

“Shut up.”

“I suppose you think you’re Darla’s only fling?”

Ross hadn’t thought of that. Darla’s still married, her kids grown up.

“God, you’re a bitch, Bloomers,” he says. “An old-maid bitch.” He grabs her hand before she slaps him.

“I love you so much,” she whispers. “Always have.” She wrenches her hand away, turns and opens the door of the rented Mercedes.

Ross realizes, with a pang, he’s always known.

He reaches out and touches her shoulder. She looks at him, her eyes huge behind her glasses. She takes them off and Ross sees a rim of tears on the bottom lashes and another tear on her cheek. He smooths it away with a soft knuckle.

“I’ll be back in a week or so,” Ross says. “Or maybe next week. Okay if I come back next week?”

She nods, swings her long legs out and runs inside.

ALLAN VELLO ENNIST was born in Montreal, to Estonian parents, and lived there for the first half of his life. He has spent the second half in Toronto. He intends to live for quite a while longer. In his youth he was seduced by French poetry of the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries, and classic Japanese poetry—and loves them still. He was also a Beat for a while and, when it was the *de rigueur*, hitchhiked across Canada. He has worked at a variety of jobs, including: translator, salesman, landscaper, dock-hand, web designer, house-painter, audio-visual technician, insurance clerk and factory worker.

## Allan Vello Ennist / Four Poems

### Passages

we were once  
joined in the heart of the sun

then  
the careless advance of years

and the move  
and the fall from grace

occasional visits now  
to and from your coast

the comfortable silence  
touching

the bed sharing dreams  
made and unmade

the invitation always  
open

## Points of Light

he stood before the roses  
standing in their bed  
drew and held his breath  
'til stars bloomed in his head

he let go and flowers  
red pink yellow white  
opened into memory  
of his favourite wife

## Country Road

a long hard walk  
the moonlight bleak  
on laminated snow

here  
feet punched  
through frost-bound crust

there  
a candle flickers  
warm behind a clouded window

## Between the Lines

a passage from someone's unpublished masterpiece

a haiku wreathing  
around a blossoming branch  
and rearranging

it wavered as the Korean grocer's wife  
priced aubergines  
and vanished when she looked up  
and saw me

another figure now

FRED ANNESLEY has worked as a reporter and editor at a shocking number of daily newspapers across Canada. In 2000 Dublin editor David Marcus chose Annesley's short story, "Charlie Barley," for that year's issue of *Phoenix Irish Short Stories*. His fiction has also appeared in Leeds University magazine *Stand* and in Brooklyn's *The Saint Ann's Review*. Born in Northern Ireland, the Toronto resident has completed a novel called *The Haymakers*, set in wet Fermanagh where police recruits posted at the Cavan border as punishment must cope with calf smugglers and volatile deputized lawmen.

## Pheasant Soup

Fred Annesley

TREVOR THE ULSTERMAN is slipping about the still edge of a wilderness lake in British Columbia in the silk outfit he'd been handed in a bag by the fading rehab kid at the Vancouver wedding-gear franchise along with the assurance that the bride had called in his measurements. Tired off the plane and still annoyed that Deenie had reneged at the last minute on her word that for her father formal wear would not be mandatory, he didn't try the outfit on. At Cultus Lake he finds the trousers will not stay up. He brought no belt with him and the pockets of the rental togs yield no suspenders. This sends him back years to something he still finds hard to take, something said by a Sinn Fein leader in 1981 after the front-lawn murder of an Ulster-born baronet. The leaves have nearly all fallen and bufflehead ducks float sure that it will be time enough to fly south when the lake freezes. Deenie exchanged vows in the park rangers' axe-hewn social hall. She and her green friends had pounced on the off-season rate for the hall. In search of some nicotine-free air, Trevor paces on grass now looking its best with the geese gone. The faint material rides as annoyingly as the dinner getup Trevor's father had lent him for the big night at the abbey, ancestral home of the host, who was to be murdered more than 20 years later.

\* \* \*

The driver for the big night is a bookkeeper called Sandy. The income from his business is small and he makes no money at all doing volunteer work for Sir Norris. Sandy's tight black car is all Sandy. The chrome twinkles and the leather shines from wear. It holds four with more comfort than looked possible from the outside. Sandy gives the front seat to the girl, a longer specimen than the rest of the Armagh press contingent, two boys lanky enough themselves. Joyce, just past her 18th birthday, is not about to waste the journey. The two in the back could sit silent in their buttoned dinner jackets and miss a chance to wring something out of the

Unionist lackey while he drives them to his patron, but not Joyce. “God, Sandy,” she says to the driver who could have been in long trousers when her father was born, “it must be an MBE you’re after, is it? Slogging at the arithmetic all day, on top of that you go to meetings night after night for no pay to record the minutes. Driving people about at all hours for Sir Norris.”

Sandy watches the shortness of the headlight beams in the fog.

Floyd, at 19 the senior member of the corps, speaks up. “I can see it. I’m sure something like an MBE would be worth it.” Sandy tugs his herring-bone overcoat closer to his neck. Floyd is looking at the rim of dust on a collar that has never been turned up in its long life. Sandy, with two small daughters at home, says, “You can’t see it.”

“Exciting stuff there, Sandy,” Trevor says to Sandy’s trilby, “taking HRH’s stooges and their set speeches round all the farmers’ halls.” Trevor, still not 17, has been on *The Armagh Tribune* for three months, straight out of Foyle. He is still trying on his scorn and makes his rivals from the region’s other two papers seem nearly respectful. “Byre-muckers,” he says. “You’re actually worried these byre-muckers would vote for somebody else? Who else would they vote for, Sandy? The whole road from Armagh to Westminster is Orange anyway, so why would your English bosses worry?”

“Suez,” says Sandy. “The farmers need a clear picture.” The motor driving the wipers is working hard and moaning for a drop of oil. “Not one of your bosses,” Sandy says, “would come out for this. What does that tell you? Dinner with Sir Norris, and not one editor will come out.”

Joyce hoots. “You’re lucky any of us are even here, Sandy.” Joyce’s paper is so loose it could be taken by some as republican. “Nobody wants to hear Sir Norris give his boss’s side of Suez.” She waves at the blackness behind her seat. “These boys understand it less every time they hear it. What do your bosses say?”

“Yes, well, we seriously nearly sent nobody,” says Trevor. “Willie,” he says, meaning the coughing cloud of Erinmore and much-decorated WWI veteran who is his editor, “said he wasn’t up to going. He said I didn’t have to go, either. Willie just left it up to me.”

The trilby does a jerk. “I’d like to see you call him Willie to his face,” Sandy says. “But you’re here anyway.”

“It’s dinner,” Trevor says.

“Did he say that?” Joyce says. “Did he really mean that when he said there wasn’t even need for you to go?” She turns to talk at the dark. “I’ll bet you Willie would never go that far.”

“The paper’s going broke, Joyce,” Trevor says. “Are you happy now?”

The car drifts when the wheels hit the river pebbles of the abbey’s long avenue. Sandy works the furrows with one hand on a spoke and barely slows. “That’s been the situation for a long time,” he says.



“That may be,” Floyd says. “But I hear he’s done this time. Government ads is all he gets these days. He can’t last like that.”

Joyce watches the wipers. “Get your Da’s dinner jacket taken in a bit, Trevor, before you head for England.”

The headlights catch white ankles in hobnail boots before a man on hands and knees vanishes into flanking laurel bushes. Only Joyce sees, and she says nothing.

The servants are on their half-day, but Sir Norris plans to heat up the pheasant-and-barley soup while Lillian takes care of the poached salmon and the eternal trifle can represent dessert. Sandy had said a girl and two boys. Lillian counsels her husband that if he’s going to offer the boys a beer he should see if the girl will take a sherry.

“What have you done with Sandy?” Sir Norris says in the hallway to the silent three. Not one of them can answer. Sandy had told the reporters he’d be back for them and everybody can hear his retreating wheels popping pebbles. “A very busy man, our Sandy,” Sir Norris says. “I don’t know where he gets his energy from.” Joyce is starting to straighten up a bit, allowing her breasts more of a level mounting and taking one hand off purse-clutching duty. Sir Norris doesn’t look unlike the man Joyce calls his boss, Anthony Eden. “You’re using a new typeface, I’ve noticed,” Sir Norris says to her. He turns to Lillian. “You mentioned that this week, darling.”

“Much cleaner,” Lillian says, putting Joyce in a tight spot. Joyce’s paper had not changed at all and here was the wife going along with her husband’s blether. It wasn’t Joyce’s nature, but she passed up her chance. “Thank you,” she says. Sandy could have stayed long enough to do introductions and now nobody was calling anybody anything.

Lillian’s schedule for the meet-the-press task didn’t allow for any dawdling on the way to dinner. Joyce dearly wanted to soak up more of the horniness of the first drawing room with all its leather and stumpy Ottoman footstools but the baronet and his lady keep marching. Going through the second drawing room, more of a trophy room meant for the brandy-and-cigar ritual, Sir Norris and Lillian are talking but they have gone back to full plum that the trailing guests can’t catch.

Sir Norris arranges the visitors at a hinged-down dining room table still nearly as big as the whole dining room in the Fivemiletown farmhouse Trevor grew up in. “How about a glass of sherry?” Sir Norris says to Joyce.

“Joyce,” she says, sounding annoyed. “And this is Floyd and this is Trevor. I’d love a sherry, thank you.”

“The men,” Sir Norris says, letting the light at a strip of gold bordering a long front tooth, “might go for a beer, would I be right?” His Armagh accent, when he uses it, testifies that he was born in Armagh. By the time three bottles of Tennent’s are emptied into two tankards and Sir Norris

has a whisky ready for himself, Joyce is out of sherry. She signals more with a tip of her glass. Lillian, who is not having a drink, lowers the tureen to the table and goes off to see to the salmon. Sir Norris starts on Suez with the ladling of the soup. It pleases him to see by Joyce's steady eyes and gathered lower lip that she is listening. So it's *The Sentinel* she's from. The boys, not sure who Nasser is, are getting the soup down because no plate has been set out for Lillian and they want to get back to the beer. Sir Norris watches for any easing of the Joyce lower lip after each sip of sherry, but nothing. She would, no doubt, stay by her editor's stand that the canal belonged to the people of Egypt. "Do you know," she interrupts her host, "I saw a man scuttling into the bushes out there when we were driving up?"

"Breen," Lillian says, starting to gather up the soup crockery. Sir Norris helps her. "Breen," Sir Norris says to the reporters, "is our personal tramp. He lives on the grounds."

"He does?" says Joyce. "I hate to tell you what I thought he might be. I didn't say anything at first, I was that scared."

"Catch yourself on, Joyce," Trevor says.

"The dearest man," Lillian says. "My husband can talk to him for hours on end."

Trevor sets his beer down harder than he'd meant. "About Suez?"

No more for him, Lillian tells her husband with her eyebrows.

In the tiny office at the bottom of the greenhouse Sir Norris enjoyed talking to Breen about anything, although they would just about never land on politics. Breen didn't vote, didn't collect any kind of cheque and he refused to work for Sir Norris. He worked a bit on neighbouring farms at harvest time and might sometimes feed animals on weekends when farm families tried to get in a bit of seaside time. When his cash on hand wouldn't cover food and tobacco he'd go to Sir Norris's kitchen door where the help had standing orders to feed him and get him a tin of the master's Gold Flake. Breen doesn't camp at any one spot on the estate, moving from hay loft to orchard to gazebo to tennis pavilion to a nest among the laurel bushes at the front of the abbey. He grows his own potatoes at the back of the rhubarb patch, digs them and leaves them in a wire basket at the kitchen door. They always get eaten, never mind that the gardeners grow and store more potatoes than the household can possibly use. "Best of spuds again," Sir Norris said to Breen. The tramp winked his secret. "Soil near the greenhouse can't be beat."

Halfway through the salmon course, Joyce sets down her empty third glass of sherry. "Floyd here was joking Sandy about shooting for an MBE. I don't think Sandy saw the fun in it."

"I was not joking him at all," Floyd says. "I was just telling him I could see why he would go for it. And you started it, Joyce, not me."

"Serious business for Sandy," Sir Norris says.

“Poor wee man,” Joyce says. “Can you even get him one?”

Eton slips back into Sir Norris’s voice when he fills Joyce’s glass once more. “It wouldn’t do to promote the idea that I can’t, Joyce, now would it?”

“That there,” announces Floyd, “would change the man’s whole life. And look what it would do for the chances of all coming after him. Who can blame him?”

Lillian sets out plates of trifle. She frowns at Floyd. “Blame?” She takes her chair.

One of the golden retrievers barks and the other dogs watch the French doors he’s watching. Joyce gets up and goes to the tall panes. Sir Norris rises. “Come and sit down, you silly girl.” He speaks to the barker without looking at him. “That’s enough, Michael.” Lillian tilts her nose high to hide her worried eyes. Joyce comes back to her seat. Floyd is talking about Armagh’s rugby hopes. Trevor is watching Joyce piling into the trifle; she’s lifting great silver spoonfuls to her slack mouth. “What’s out there?” Trevor asks her under the rugby talk. Joyce finishes her trifle but not her sulk. “Nothing a mop handle couldn’t take care of, I’m sure.”

Joyce’s crisis with a mop handle in Armagh has done the rounds. She got to thinking one day that the RUC cap peeping from the sandbag turret outside the courthouse never seemed to move. She started saying hello during her lunchtime strolls and there never was a quiver from the shined peak. Then one night after last call she brought a folding chair from her whist set to the silent grass oval of the Mall. She sat there for nearly two hours making sure the quiet was definite. Even the dog walkers had gone to bed. The courthouse across the road from the fringe of the Mall is not 50 feet from where she sat. She rose and folded her chair and walked to within six feet of the sandbag sentry box. “That is some quiet tonight,” she said strongly to the slot. She knew there’d be no answer so she set up her chair, looked in and then lifted the cap off the mop handle. The sergeant at the police barracks told her somebody needed to give her a real spanking and he shoved the cap under the guardroom counter. “You’re volunteering, I’d imagine,” she told the sergeant. The next day the cap was back on duty. The public relations officer still answered calls from Joyce, but when she’d mention security cost-cutting he would wait in silence for her next question. Far worse was her own editor’s reaction. In the way he looked at her he was saying her stupidity was embarrassing him. “I don’t know what you thought we can do with a story like this, Joyce.” And the worst part was that Joyce had broken her own rule about never talking about a story she was working on for fear her rivals would get it out first. She had gone ahead and told Trevor and Floyd about the mop handle on duty at the courthouse; keeping it safe from terrorists. She was sure they wouldn’t touch the story. She was wrong. The boys wrote it, but they couldn’t sell it to their bosses. Security worries aside, the editors decided

that poking fun at the RUC was not what loyalist newspapers should be doing in the Ulster Plantation stronghold of Armagh. Floyd's employer, nevertheless, flogged the tip to Fleet Street, where it didn't make the cut. In the boarding-house room that served as the Armagh press club (one typewriter, a desk made of Guinness crates, a telephone and a sink) Floyd and Trevor drank their press-day stout and said nothing to Joyce about the story that hasn't appeared in any of the three newspapers on the floor.

"Who'll take more trifle?" Lillian says. "Could not," Floyd says, looking to the two who came with him and making it too hard for Joyce to say she could.

Lillian excuses herself and Sir Norris leads the three up one short flight of stairs to a sitting room only big enough for two armchairs, a sofa, a fireplace with a fire in it and a narrow cabinet stocked, like the trophy room downstairs, with brandy and cigars. He offers Joyce a cigar and she takes out her cigarettes. "Understanding Suez," Sir Norris says to the boys because he knows they understand a lot less about it than Joyce, "is something your readers could well do with; a proper grasp of the situation is to everybody's benefit, would you not say?" He pours for his guests three dribbles of brandy.

Joyce would write three paragraphs, accurate quotes from Sir Norris's dinner table remarks. The boys, after consulting each other at the pub, would turn in no quotes, just the news that Sir Norris told reporters at the abbey on the weekend that he supports Sir Anthony Eden's position on Suez.

At the potting table in the greenhouse Harold Breen said to Sir Norris, "I was never even on a boat. Never mind a plane." They had their pipes burning well, the Gold Flake challenging the sweet reek of manure bags soaking in barrels. "Flying about to different countries is no more to you than getting on a bus would be to me."

"If you ever got on a bus, Harold."

"You're lucky you're alive, I would say," Breen said.

A tomato-heavy stalk sagged close to Sir Norris's head. He brushed a tomato with the back of his hand and passed the hand under his thin nose. "I can hardly agree that it amounts to luck, when you consider all those flying safely every day. I barely give it a thought, quite honestly."

"You were in the war, that's what I was thinking about."

"I was in two wars, Harold."

Breen's hair is like General Custer's, only a dark copper and his stubble survives to a Sunday. He rubbed at six days' worth. "I'll forget. To me it's as if it's all the one. I was about 6 when the first one started and I heard nearly nothing about it. After it ended the next thing was they were training Spitfire pilots over Portrush."

"You could say I was lucky all right."

"You went. I'd never have went."

Sir Norris gave himself another sniff of the tomato dust. "It's as well you didn't, Harold."

"They have no record of me. Anyway, they wouldn't have wanted a man over 30 who never went to school. Would they?"

"I'm glad you never asked them, Harold."

"You went."

Sir Norris touched at his moustache, which gets its bristle every morning from a dab of methylated spirits. "More like sent. Conscription by family, Harold."

"There's another spud or two still in the ground. I'll bet you there's the full of a basket there yet."

"Lillian," Sir Norris says to Joyce, Floyd and Trevor, "has not been feeling herself all week, I'm afraid. Can I tell her you'll excuse her? I think she might need to lie down."

The minute Sir Norris goes to see to Lillian, Trevor is up at the cabinet. He snakes brandy silently down the inside of his snifter like a barman pouring Guinness. Floyd looks frightened and wildly signals No when Trevor turns to him. Joyce is calm about it and gives Trevor a tolerant face before putting her hand over her glass. She decides she might need a lift out of her sherry blues after all and reaches her glass to Trevor, who puts about a triple in it. She makes a face at Floyd with his empty glass. "It says a lot for us that we get invited to dinner on the help's night off," Joyce says.

"Do you," says Trevor, standing in front of Joyce's chair and leaning at her face, "little Dorothy, think the wuzzard or even his wife ever wondered what we might think about that? It's not as if they even knew our names. That's Sandy's job."

Joyce snorts into her snifter. "All right. All right. We're not real guests. This place can give a person airs inside of about two minutes."

"We're press," Trevor says. "We're charmed to be here."

"Don't tell my mother," Floyd says, "we're not Sir Norris's real dinner guests."

"She needs to slow down," Sir Norris says, standing in the door in his desert boots. "She doesn't listen. Not even Sandy can persuade her that she needs to put her health before the party. Lord knows she's done enough for the party."

Floyd gets up. "I was just wondering where Sandy is."

"Sandy will be in the pub now waiting for a telephone call," Sir Norris says. "But I hardly need to ring him yet, do I?"

Joyce gazes unfocused at Monet's flowers, letting the colours bleed. She stands, sighs, and stays steady. "Please thank your wife for us."

\* \* \*

Harold Breen was standing at the end of the bar in a corner dimmer than the rest of the tiny smoke pen. Sandy came in and spoiled Harold's

Guinness dream where he was honeymooning with Sir Norris's daughter at the Italian harbour from the painting in the abbey kitchen. Sir Norris's daughter lives in London, divorced from some man bad enough to ruin such a union. "How's two-pint Harold getting along?" Sandy said.

"One of these nights I'll have three and you'll need a new name for me."

"That'll be some day, that. I'd have more chance catching Harold Breen casting his vote."

"You're not going to start that again, I hope. I won't be voting ever. I'm surprised at you, to be truthful. You want me to officially be somebody, for to get my name on government papers, just so you can get one more vote. And you don't even need it."

"Never say that," Sandy said.

"Here's a new name," Breen shouted. "One-pint Harold." He pushed his way toward the door.

"If you wait I'll be driving up there soon," Sandy called, but he did not turn to watch Breen's exit. Sandy had to stay near the bar for his telephone call. The door made no noticeable dent in the smoke.

\* \* \*

Sir Norris goes to the telephone and Joyce moves out of the room while he is waiting for the barman to answer. She goes downstairs to the windows Sir Norris had called her away from. The same golden retriever stands still and silent at the panes. The other dogs lie dozing. Joyce stands close to the retriever and they both look out at the blacker darkness that is the clump of laurels. "Would Michael bark at Breen?" Joyce says to the soft-booted Sir Norris creaking the floor behind her.

"No." Now she can smell the dope he puts on his moustache.

"I thought not." She stays facing the windows. "I imagine your wife is fully aware of that as well. It wasn't only your pet tramp, now, was it?"

"You learn not to worry about every noise." Sir Norris chuckles, making Joyce turn to give herself more space. "Prostitutes, my dear girl," the politician says, "would have had to have found their first customers somewhere, wouldn't you say? I've always said their clients would most likely have been poachers. They seem to have been about forever, too."

"Can I look outside? Will you come with me?"

"I'm surprised you're still standing, Joyce. Lord knows you've had enough sherry and brandy. Now please stop this nonsense, right now."

"Can we take Michael too?"

Michael looks to Sir Norris for an answer and gets it in the shortest of nods. The dog leads the way to the kitchen exit. He goes straight to Breen's nest among the laurels. There's one boot in there. "One pair of boots is all Breen has," Sir Norris says, sounding annoyed. "Where the hell's bells can he be?" he says, sounding angry.

A car comes up the avenue, no menace in its starry glitter and sure

passage. Michael goes out to get Sandy. "He left the pub in a huff a good while ago," Sandy says. "I was going to check here anyway to see if this is where he went."

"Where would he get," says Joyce, "with only the one boot?"

Sir Norris kicks at Breen's open bedroll. "Well, did anybody leave with him?"

"Harold drinks alone," Sandy says. "Not entirely by his choosing."

"Nonsense," Sir Norris snaps. "Breen bathes. He uses the stream in all but the worst weather."

"I think," Joyce says, talking to Sir Norris as if there are things an 18-year-old reporter can see that a manor-living politician can't, "Sandy means that not everybody wants to be friends with a friend of the man on the hill."

"Something in that," Sandy says. He pats the restless Michael. The dog leaves Breen's nook, pushing forward through the low branches to the pebbled path beyond the bushes. Joyce turns around and goes out the way Breen normally comes in. The others follow her and they walk around the thicket to where Michael waits for them on the path. Something rough had gone on along the route Michael chose out of the shrubbery. Where he now stands bathed in moonshine on the white-pebble frosting of the tended walk there are black gouges, broken twigs and stray laurel leaves. Michael leads the way through the kitchen orchard and sits whimpering on the grass bank of the trout stream.

"Jesus," says Sandy.

There is not a question among them, Michael included, about Breen's condition. Breen, naked and white as a salmon belly, is dead. They look down from the bank at the long corpse facedown in water no more than a foot deep, the toes touch one shore, the fingers the other. Breen's fanned-out hair moves like a jellyfish in the summer-weary stream. "Jesus," Joyce whispers. "That's who he looks like, there. You'd think he was Jesus Christ."

Sir Norris goes alone into the stream and kneels in his ironed flannels by Breen's head. Michael will go into the water only as far as where Breen's feet move to the rhythm of the stream. The dog wades in a tight circle while his kneeling master stays still. "Is that true, Sandy?" Sir Norris calls without raising his head. "He's counted a friend of mine?" Sandy walks in and helps Sir Norris to his feet. They stop at Joyce on the bank, and Sir Norris will not reach for his handkerchief when he stares at her with spilling eyes.

\* \* \*

Lillian is driving a two-tone brown and cream Hillman Minx. She has no trouble at all finding a place to park along the curb in front of Joyce's flat. It is 10 a.m. on a Tuesday, not a good time to be trying to park on the narrow street of Edwardian semis so close to the Mall. At least four

generous spaces are available this morning in front of the house Joyce lives in. Lillian buzzes Joyce's flat and the reporter, brushed and perfumed, brings her tailored visitor in.

\* \* \*

Joyce came back up to the small sitting room where Trevor and Floyd had been left to gossip about Joyce and her ambitious ways. "Don't put it past her," Trevor was telling Floyd. "There's nothing I would put past her."

Joyce came into the room just when the nose-stroking Floyd was saying, "The old boy wouldn't be past it, the way he's been watching her nylons."

If Joyce heard that she had no time for it. "The boss says go ahead and have another drink of brandy. Sandy can't drive us back just now."

"I was wondering," Trevor said. "First it sounded like Sandy's car coming in. Now I could swear that was Sandy's car going out again."

"He brought urgent papers for His Nibs to sign. Then he's away to some courier we're not supposed to know about. He won't be long, he said."

"What's keeping the man himself?"

"Up seeing how Lillian's doing. Thank God. He was talking the leg off me about Suez." Joyce poured brandy for Trevor and pulled Floyd's empty glass from him to put a good drink in it. She didn't add to the brandy still in her own glass.

"Aye, Suez," said Floyd. "Oil on the brain."

When Sandy comes back no attempt is made to find Sir Norris and Lillian. The reporters and their Unionist chauffeur get in the car and Floyd falls asleep before they're through the gates. Trevor is beyond trying to make sense of the murmuring from the front seats. "Believe me, in the long run you'll be far ahead," Sandy is saying to Joyce. "So will everybody."

\* \* \*

"Lillian, please just call me Lillian," Lillian tells Joyce. She is watching Joyce take a small flat tin from her bookshelf. "I was a photographer on Fleet Street before I met my husband. Did you know that?"

Joyce lights the joint and takes her time. She presses smoke from fresh lipstick and passes the weed to her guest. "I did," Joyce says.

"Will you grant me that I have some idea how difficult it is to sit on something like this?"

"Oddly enough, Lillian, I grant you nothing of the sort. Knowing something about playing games with the competition is hardly the same as doing nothing about a murder."

Lillian sucks again and then wipes her front teeth with a finger tip. "You would be doing something for your country."

Joyce giggles. "You're a good one, Lillian. If you ever looked at my



newspaper you might see hints in there that not everybody sees the same picture when you say your country.”

“Joyce Moody,” Lillian says, a dope smile lighting her face. “You would never.”

“All of a sudden I’m Joyce Moody of the Moodys of Aughnacloy. Mind you, I’m not surprised your husband’s office got busy on me.”

“I have to say it was very bad of Sandy not to have mentioned—or did the little man even know?—that one of our press guests was the daughter of a winger on my Old Girls team.”

“I’d be surprised if he knew that.”

“I’m disappointed in you too, Joyce. Surely a keen young career woman would have made sure my husband and I knew whose journalist daughter might welcome a tip now and then.” Lillian passes the weed. “But then, you are just starting.”

“I am. But infiltration would not be my approach.”

“You would never,” Lillian says again, smile gone. “Your family would never turn its back on the government.”

Joyce snicks the joint. “You don’t know how near I came to phoning London, Lillian.”

“You didn’t tell those other two reporters, either. They’d have been on to London in a flash.”

“I’m probably screwed already. I don’t know how your husband managed it. He got me to hold on for one day and now where am I? I didn’t tip London, I didn’t tell my own editor because I don’t know what way he’d jump. But it’s clear enough to me now what I have to do.” The buzzer goes and Joyce scoots to the front window and sees Sandy’s car in the street. “I have to write the story for Thursday’s paper and that is that. And my editor, Lillian dear, will damn well come to heel. He doesn’t know who I might have told and he daren’t check. He’s nothing but a lapdog.”

“Exactly whose lapdog?”

“That’s of far more interest to you than me, Lillian.”

Joyce throws the door open for Sandy. Lillian goes straight to Sandy before any hellos get said. “She says she’s writing it for this week’s edition.” Sandy gets out of her way and she’s gone.

“She’s away to London this morning,” Sandy says, overcoat still on and buttoned. “Faugh a Ballagh, Clear the Way. They jump when that lady lands in town.”

Joyce rolls a chair to one side of his legs and then to the other, but he will not sit down. She ends up standing to face him. “Now you’re going to try and threaten me, is that it Sandy?”

“Nothing of the sort, Joyce. I am simply pointing out to you that this particular lady has a good bit of clout.”

“Anybody could see that. Good woman to have on your side, would

you not say, Sandy?”

“Yes.” Sandy pulls drifting marijuana smoke up his nose. “What story do you think you have anyway?”

“A labourer was killed on the estate.”

“He didn’t work for Sir Norris. How do you think he died?”

“I think he was murdered, Sandy. How else do you think?”

“That’s why we have inquests.” Sandy bends backwards in one more good sniff. “That stuff is delicious, isn’t it?”

“Maybe your daughters will share with you when they come home on weekends. If they don’t pick universities in Australia or California or somewhere.” Joyce sits quick on her coffee table. “What inquest, Sandy? Nobody knows Harold Breen is dead.”

“More to the point, nobody knows Harold Breen.”

“I’m 18,” Joyce says. “Whatever that means to you. Whatever it does mean to you, Sandy, I can tell you I’m both younger and older than that. I know as clear as a 6-year-old what is going on in your head. There’s your MBE and there’s Lillian’s shoe in London’s door for me. And as well as that, Sandy, I am old enough to know that you’re not hard enough to set aside a man’s death as if it never happened.”

“Not if it was any other death, Joyce, no.”

“No?”

“This was more a case of what you said.”

“I said murder, Sandy. Can you not say murder, Sandy?”

“Come on for a run,” Sandy says and goes down the stairs and out the front door to his car.

“Sandy, Sandy,” Joyce gasps when she’s in beside him, “stop this bloody nonsense. There is no tape in my flat. For God’s sake.”

Sandy starts circling the Mall in second gear, beech trees plopping raindrops on his roof. “You would know, would you?”

“I’m not quite as conspiracy-mad as you, anyway. The killing of Breen is simple enough and you agreed as much, out at the estate there, when we found him.”

“Joyce, Sir Norris told Lillian immediately, including the fact that you were there, and then Lillian would have got working. You go ahead and believe nobody is watching us if you like, but the truth is everybody is watching us.”

They’re passing the rain-black granite of the asylum for the insane and Joyce spots a nurse going in the gate, a nurse she has been working on for weeks in the canteen and at asylum staff dances in a slow gathering of leads surrounding ugly doings behind those walls. Joyce turns away from the window. “Lord God, Sandy,” she whispers, “why can you and your abbey friends not get back to worrying about Suez and leave me to my wee job.”

“Suez, Joyce. The key to the Middle East, Joyce. The key to everything.

Suez, Joyce, is all we worry about.”

“And Harold Breen.”

Sandy drives to a gate the weeds have seized at the far end of the asylum’s long wall and spins the car to a halt on the green gravel apron. “Harold Breen knew as much about his part in any of this as your average trilobite knew about its future in the oil business. For a man who lived nowhere, Harold Breen got killed for where he lived. On the estate of Sir Norris, and with his blessing.”

Joyce rolls her window down enough to let some needed raindrops in. “All right, Sandy. Why are you prepared to let these fuckers get away with this? You want to do nothing about the execution of somebody your precious Lillian calls the dearest man.”

“Good,” Sandy says. “At least you see it for what it is. Their property-damage campaign is going nowhere. Blowing up transformers is getting next to no attention. Taking shots at police barracks worked not too bad there for a while with all the increased security costs it brought with it. Still a long way from making Northern Ireland a dead loss. And a very long way from getting anybody at No. 10 to even look in this direction.”

Joyce sends her cigarette into the weeds. “But you think the death of a faceless tramp is what people looking for a voice have decided they need.”

“When everybody in the party is urgently involved in keeping Egypt at the top of the agenda, terrorism on the Northern Ireland estate of a baronet is definitely not what our party needs. Or even a hint of it.”

On the Wednesday, Joyce borrows a car from her creep admirer at the Ford dealership and drives to Achnacloy and the junior Palladian mansion sitting ochre and alone among the dark grazings of Tyrone. Her mother’s response is not what she’d expected. “But Mummy,” Joyce says, “this is downright against my religion.” Her mother’s amused eyes ask, “Religion?” “My reporter religion. I have a duty here. I am the scribe in the dark corner. ‘A chield’s amang you takin’ notes, and faith he’ll prent it.’ Remember, Mummy?”

Mummy knows her Burns and she knows Lillian too. From the way Mummy spoke to Joyce about duty—duty to frustrate Breen’s killers, duty to support the government and Sir Norris, duty to deliver to Sandy and his family a whole new life, duty to herself to accept from Lillian the key to all the doors now shut to unconnected reporters—Lillian may have already confided in the Moody matriarch.

\* \* \*

“Did you know this man?” Joyce’s London producer asks her. “You worked in Armagh once upon a time, did you not?”

“I did. But I have nothing to offer as far as the tribute goes. I only met him once, 25 years ago.”

“I take it you’ve seen some of the Irish response.”

“Irish response. I have, yes, seen some of what you won’t stop calling the Irish response.” Joyce wags her head. She looks out at the dazzling double-decker tourists floating by.

“I was thinking about Adams in particular,” Blake says.

Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein had told reporters the only complaint he had heard “is that he was not shot 40 years ago.” Joyce nods. “Who didn’t hear that?” Joyce says, getting her matches and cigarettes into her pockets. “Blake, just do me a favour and leave me out of this whole coverage.”

Blake turns to the story board. “Maybe Martin can handle the abbey security angle. As in, why was there none?”

“I have an interview to do in Paris, tonight.” Joyce turns at the door. “He was a lot more than a symbol. Whatever they tell you, they don’t know the half of it.”

Nearly thirty years beyond the murder of Sir Norris, the cigarettes got Joyce Moody. She had believed for a long time that they never would, but they had and it was time she wrote the story about lovely Jesus Harold Breen in the trout stream, and how he came to die and who all it was who wouldn’t do him the courtesy of acknowledging his death.

\* \* \*

Deenie comes up behind her father at the Cultus Lake dock where he’s remembering Sir Norris and the Joyce story he had run in his Toronto newspaper. “So glad you caved in on the tuxedo,” Deenie says. “Just for me.” Trevor rolls the waistband one more time and gives the bride a squeeze.

ROBERT COOPERMAN's latest collection is *The Lily of the West* (Wind Publications). *Little Timothy in Heaven* is forthcoming from March Street Press. Cooperman has won the Colorado Book Award for Poetry with *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains*. His work has appeared in *The New Orphic Review*, *Sewanee Review* and *The North American Review*.

## Robert Cooperman / Four Poems

### The Myrmidon Letheres, a Stowaway on Odysseus's Flagship

With Lord Achilles killed, his crazed bastard,  
Neoptolemus, grabbed our spoils, claiming  
Troy indestructible without his sword,  
and left us—who had fought ten years—nothing.  
I'd no wife, children; parents dead, and all  
I had to look forward to was to toil  
in Neoptolemus' fields, tossed hard  
bread and moldy cheese until I'd have dropped.  
So I hid on Odysseus' flagship,  
knowing him for a fair and true leader.

When I popped out of hiding, we had put  
Troy leagues behind us; Odysseus smiled,  
“Well done, whoever you might prove to be.”  
That's when the storm reared up: giant clouds black  
as mad Neoptolemus' brow when any  
dared speak against him, rage springing from him  
like a pack slashing at a wounded stag.

Odysseus' men grumbled I'd brought  
this ill-luck and should be flung overboard  
to appease the Sea Lord, Poseidon.

“Row!” he roared. “This storm is no more his fault  
than slut-Helen's yapping little lap dog.”  
So we all put our backs into our oars;  
my new lord taking his place: his example

giving us strength; finally, the wind calmed,  
and we spied a wide, welcoming harbor.

My Lord Odysseus took me aside.  
“I’ll not ask what brought you to seek shelter  
on my ship, but you did good work today,  
and I’ll give you a portion of my spoils.  
You’ll find Ithaca more pleasant than the land  
your old lord might have had you rowing for.”

## Memnes, One of Odysseus' Men, Attacked by the Laestrygons

Nine of our ships ventured into the harbor;  
only Odysseus held back; we others  
saw fruit trees in succulent abundance,  
and signaled to our captain. But he kept  
a tight rein, as if restraining a stallion  
that will need stamina for a long race.

When the monsters showed themselves, we ran,  
but the creatures hurled stones at our vessels,  
our one desperate chance: to hope the beasts  
made quick work of us, so huge, our weapons  
useless as ants battling boys who crush armies;  
and each monster is faster than swift Achilles  
when he toyed with fleeing, craven Hector.

Now, I'm the one man still alive, the beasts  
edging in, not for fear of my sharp sword—  
little better than a bronze pin against  
their leathery hides—but curious to see  
what sort of strange, wee creature I might be.  
Their leader brings me to his face, his maw  
wide as the cave leading down to Hades,  
his fangs wolf-yellow, huge as cedar trees.

My fists flail, the beast laughs and flicks me off  
like a bug; I hit the water, like landing  
head-first on a deck, falling from the mast,  
like one mate, his blood an urn of spilled dye.  
At least no pain, as I drift down and down,  
lay sprawled beside Styx without the coin  
for the Ferryman in this twilight.  
What's another eternity of waiting  
when at worst, I can be killed only once?

Polymenes, One of Odysseus' Crew,  
Opens the Bag of Winds  
to Disastrous Consequences

Ten years I battled at Troy, and for what?  
A pittance of Odysseus' booty.  
So when Aeolus, god of the winds, gave  
our captain-king that heavy sack, I thought—  
as did the others—here was more treasure.  
Indeed, he kept it firmly between his feet  
at the tiller while we rested on our oars  
and let the breeze bear us to Ithaca.  
So as my comrades' elbows dug at my sides,  
and Odysseus, for once, snored and slept,  
I opened the sack, expecting gold, gems.

Instead, all the winds of the world leapt out:  
the storm batting us: a lynx with a hare.  
If only Odysseus had told us  
its contents! But as always, he adored  
his secrets, his cleverness, more than us,  
who'd fought far from Ithaca's turquoise skies.  
All night and day we reefed the sails and bailed.  
Finally, the storm blew its fury out,  
and we fetched up outside a calm harbor,  
the shore inviting as our wives' warm arms.

Our other ships dropped anchor in the cove,  
but Odysseus held back, the coward,  
trying to make us think he senses danger,  
while our comrades feasted on luscious fruit,  
and I screamed, "We're starving; enter the cove."

"Hard astern!" he shouted. I look: monsters  
feasting on our brothers like fresh baked loaves,  
Odysseus staring bronze darts at me.  
Not as if I acted alone, but always  
the blame falls on me, like a heaved boulder.  
As for our poor shipmates who perished here,  
who's to say they're not the fortunate ones:  
our voyage to Ithaca without end.



Xanthos, One of Odysseus' Crew,  
Considers His Friend Polymenes  
As They Row Away  
from the Land of the Laestrygons

Every man in our nine other ships killed  
by those monsters, and all Polymenes  
can think of is that their hardships are done.  
And still he mutters against our captain,  
Odysseus, for withholding the bag  
of the winds from us, keeping its contents  
secret, when time and again, he's saved us  
from danger with his strength and cleverness,  
seeing threats the rest of us are blind to:  
blithe as lambs that can't feel the shepherd's blade.

Always Polymenes complains, blames others  
for his own failings, and yet I loved him.  
But no more, let him survive on his wits  
and stop whining: not his place to protest  
his share of the spoils. We all had fair shares,  
but he'd never admit that; all of it  
too little, but who'd he complain to then?

And to shed not a tear for the good men  
his foolhardy opening of the god's  
sack of winds caused! The war has tainted him.  
When...if we do find Ithaca, I fear  
for my poor sister, his wife. The least thing  
wrong, he'll be a leopard at her throat.  
She'll run to me, Xantippe and my wife  
never getting on, so my life will be  
worse than Ixion on his wheel of flames.

But we face more pressing problems: reduced  
to one ship, we're prey for monsters and witches,  
and row with hearts grieving for our lost friends  
and kin; all, that is, save Polymenes.

MICHAEL WASHBURN is a fiction writer, journalist and editor based in Brooklyn, New York. He has traveled widely in the U.S. and Canada and has met many interesting people on buses and in hotels. Michael's short stories have appeared in the *Brooklyn Rail*, the *Montreal Review*, *Midnight Street* and *Rosebud*, and he is in search of a publisher for two novels, one set in Southern California and one in the Europe of Kafka and Odon von Horvath.

## Voyeur

### Michael Washburn

PETERSON WALKED FROM the station to the hotel in the freezing rain. Downtown Montreal had never seemed as cold and empty as it did on this Thursday in the middle of March. He reached the hotel at the corner of St. Catherine and St. Laurent and climbed the stairs to the lobby, where the clerk took his bills and handed him the key to a room on the top floor, no. 306.

Blessedly, the clerk was too weary to ask questions, so Peterson didn't have to go through the spiel again: He wasn't meeting any friends here, he didn't know anyone in Montreal. He just wanted to get away for a while. How puzzled the young customs agent who came into the train at the border had been to hear that Peterson was taking this 4-day trip on his own. In a sense, Peterson was a drifter. He'd moved out of the house where he'd lived for the past 10 months, and the lease on his new apartment hadn't take effect yet. If you're going to have some time to yourself, it might as well be in a place with world-class museums and bookstores and cafés, he'd decided. Peterson enjoyed the train ride through upstate New York, with the mysterious villages and the majestic beauty of Lake Champlain rolling by.

Room 306 was practically a closet, with a bed facing a dresser surmounted with an old TV. He dumped his bags on the floor, decided he wasn't up to going out on the town just now. He'd spied a *dépanneur* on St. Laurent that sold beer and wine. Not quite 20 minutes later, Peterson was back in the room with two bottles of red wine. He poured some into one of the plastic cups he found on top of the sink, then settled into the chair in the narrow space between the bed and the window looking out on St. Laurent, on the Burger King where hookers and junkies sat around late into the night. On the television there came a stream of ads sponsored by the Conservatives, the Liberals, or one of the smaller parties vying for a

win in April's federal elections. Harper, Layton, Ignatieff, Duceppe...crime, schools, taxes, sovereignty...he quickly lost track, allowing the rhythms of the *patois* of the French Canadians to wash over him. He dozed off in the chair, woke up, saw that the cup had fallen to the floor, leaving a scarlet stain on the floorboards. Peterson raised the bottle to his lips, hearing cries at intervals within the depths of the hotel—"Maman, venez! Maman!"—until he climbed into bed and fell asleep with the TV on.

In the gray morning, Peterson pulled himself off the bed and stared at his haggard visage in the mirror above the sink between the bed and the door. Even in his slide into early middle age, he'd never quite learned to anticipate the train wreck that would stare back at him from a mirror when a new day dawned. He grabbed a towel, moved down the hall to the shared bathroom, showered, and returned to his room to get ready to go out. The clerk at the desk in the lobby did not acknowledge Peterson as he passed from the stairwell to the front door. Though it was the off season, he seemed quite busy with reservations, cancellations, moving parties from one room to another. Or maybe he found the sight of this guest distasteful. Peterson stepped out into the crisp air of St. Catherine Street. The black leather jackets and the graffiti reminded him of the East Village, but he knew he had only to go a few blocks in any direction before the impression faded amid a cluster of *libraires* and the Royal Bank of Canada and university buildings. He walked up the hill of St. Laurent until he reached the Gallimard bookstore, where a pretty blonde in a pair of glasses with thick square lenses asked if she could help him. No, he said, he just wanted to lose himself here. And so he did, until he reluctantly narrowed down his purchase to a couple editions of François Mauriac and Julien Green. Then he walked down to Sherbrooke Street, turned right, and continued on to the Musée des Beaux Arts, where the Giacometti exhibit kept him preoccupied until well into the afternoon. The odd figures of the sculptures seemed to be obediently moving, as individuals or in crowds, toward the destiny handed to them. The plinth of one of these sculptures was at just such a height that the strange, ragged figures caught your eye in a disturbing way, as if they saw you and were walking resolutely toward you. Should you try to turn them away? Perhaps they were walking to a city of horrors.

Now back to that hotel which was not exactly a dive, but did not make it into the tourist brochures, either. He thought about what this trip would be like if he were with someone. It would be hard to convey his impression of the exhibit in terms that someone else would grasp. When he reached the hotel's lobby, the young, quintessentially Gallic-looking man in a dress shirt had left, and a middle-aged lady with brittle features had begun her shift. She smiled at Peterson as he passed from the entrance to the stairwell. As he passed through the second-floor landing, he heard a woman's voice from room 214, or maybe it was 216. This guest was

talking on her cellphone. From what he gathered, the woman had driven through the streets of her town, where the snow had not yet begun to melt from the streets and the roofs. Along the way to the train station, she'd glimpsed lonely houses with icicles hanging from the eaves, but never a face in one of the windows, until she reached the station where she'd had to leave her car in the hope that no one would break into it before she returned the following week. The woman still belonged to that place, Peterson thought. In a way, it seemed as much with her as the walls and rooms around her now.

Peterson continued up to the third floor, collapsed into the chair between the bed and the window, and opened a Julien Green novel. After a while, he heard four or five female voices outside in the hall. He slid through the space between the bed and the dresser and gazed through the peephole of his door. Four young women had checked into the hotel and were settling into the room directly across the hall. So animated was their talk that he'd imagined there might be five of them. They were all pretty. He studied the women: a tall one with dark hair and glasses who seemed to command some measure of authority among the others, a shorter brunette, also in glasses, whom you could picture at a poetry reading, and a pair of blondes you might more easily envision at a keg party. Of the last two, one was more talkative than the other. Even if his clothes were on fire, Peterson could not have budged from the peephole.

In the moments when their door was open, as one of them passed to or from the bathroom or the pay phone, he caught glimpses of the others unpacking their suitcases or standing before a mirror. Then a long time passed without their door opening, until Peterson threw himself on the bed and tried to refocus his thoughts on Julien Green. Only now did he notice that his hands were shaking and beads of sweat sliding from his forehead down his pale, anxious face.

Later he rose, splashed some water on his face, and returned to the peephole. They must all be watching TV, now. Suddenly he heard more voices coming down the hall—two young guys, as it turned out, in windbreakers and baseball caps. They waited patiently until the door opened, then began bantering with the girls. At this point, Peterson decided they were all a bunch of students from Boston or someplace, up here for a weekend of drinking and partying. Peterson finished getting ready to go out, then he was once again on St. Catherine, walking west toward the heart of downtown. Twice he nearly slipped on the slick pavement before the contemporary art museum and the cafés and banks beyond it. His breath billowed out before him as if he were some kind of half-breed neither men nor dragons would accept as their own. Up the street, dark shapes flitted through the spaces of the outdoor loggia of a department store, the red lights of cars receded into a night vaster and more nebulous than he could have imagined while staring at the screen in his closet-

sized room. He felt a bit like a deep-sea diver who'd lunged too fast for the surface. He was so ill-prepared for the ice, the battering wind. But he advanced stubbornly up St. Catherine until he stood at the top of a flight of stairs leading down to a steel door with a slit at eye level. From beyond the door came the sounds of thrash metal. For a moment, he stood in the freezing air counting his money, then slid his wallet back in his breast pocket, descended to the gray door, rang the buzzer. After ascertaining that Peterson was not a *flic*, a dark-suited man on the other side opened the door, took money, and ushered him to the tables opposite the entrance, on the far side of the stage. Here the shapes of people were silhouettes against the red, blue, and yellow lights ringing the base of the stage in the room's center. Straining his eyes, Peterson thought he made out a man talking to a female employee at a table at the western end of the place, and a pair of businessmen at a table on the side of the room nearest the street.

Almost as soon as he sat down, one of the shapes by the bar moved closer, until the woman had slid into the other chair at Peterson's little round table. The tips of her toes started brushing his ankle. Although the shape was barely more than a shadow, Peterson could make out her jowls, marked by a pouty fullness, as if she were the type of working-class girl who sits on a stoop, joins in the masculine pursuits of the other young people on her block. She had a huge chest and long, mousy brown hair. Oh yes, Peterson knew the type. As politely as he could, he answered her questions: I'm visiting from X, I'm in town for Y. The moves of her toes grew more insistent, suggestive as she smiled in her homely way. Peterson tried to pull his foot away, rotated his bottle of beer in his fingers, finally whispered to her, "I don't want to be rude, but I think I'm going to leave when I finish this." The dumpy woman was gone as fast as she'd appeared.

On the stage, another girl whom Peterson regarded with indifference was spinning around a pole, kicking out with one leg, then the other, in a mime of the actions suggested by the angry, aggressive music. One of the servers was leaning forward over a table on the other side of the room, but otherwise Peterson could not make out the features of anyone off the stage. He started to think of the places, the life to which he'd have to return soon. But now another shape was moving lithely in the direction of the stage. Instead of mounting it, the form turned and walked straight toward Peterson, who realized he was sitting just beside the door to the women's restroom. Now he saw the figure approaching: she had jet black hair and wore black gloves and boots. She moved through the door, then re-emerged after a minute, naked except for the gloves and boots, smiling, speaking briefly to Peterson before continuing to the far side of the room. Her voice was as light as a wind in May. Though all she said to Peterson was something to the effect of, "It's awfully slow tonight," he

could not feel calm and casual when she turned to him and he saw her body silhouetted against the stage lights, the white of her arms and upper legs and torso with patches of black encroaching upon each region. She had lucid eyes below thin arching brows that suggested acute intelligence, and her nose was exquisitely smooth and beautiful, though if it were much larger he could almost have called it a snout.

The girl sauntered back toward the stage, turning again in Peterson's direction as her buttocks swung. He had a strange sensation, as if he were walking nude on the roof of a tall building, feeling the wind, the moisture of the air in every pore. She bent her head forward until bits of her spittle landed on Peterson's lips when she spoke. "*Voulez-vous une danse?*" Without hesitation, he nodded. His chair backed against the wall, his elbow abutting the doorknob of the restroom, the woman stood facing him, smiling, as serene as a purring cat. The dance began: her nipples danced before his pupils, then her abdomen, then the region of blackness at the lower extremity of her torso. She turned around, expertly raised the cleft of her buttocks as close as it could be to his face without actual contact, held it there tantalizingly; she was getting ready to perform a series of massaging motions against his groin when suddenly one of the chairs at another table came flying against the wall, as if someone had kicked it with brutal force. In reality, it was inadvertent. A 45-year-old man with tousled hair and a busy mustache, the edges of his dress shirt hanging out of the pants around his bulging gut, slammed into the door of the ladies' restroom, then tottered forward until he was almost on top of the girl. He grinned a shit-eating grin, not seeming to notice Peterson at all. He half-fell, half-swooned on to her, shoving the table where Peterson had rested his bottle of beer with such force that its remaining contents spilled on Peterson's lap. In disgust, Peterson shot up from his chair, wiping his pants, stole across the room and out into the freezing rain on St. Catherine, where strangers gave him a wide berth, as if he carried a disease up from the depths of the club whose music spilled out into the dark street: "*Listen bitch / I want my dick sucked!*"

When he got back to the lobby of the hotel, a guy in a parka was having some sort of altercation with the clerk. The guy was with a woman with stringy yellow hair, wearing a leather jacket and a rather tacky red dress with white polka dots. The clerk was insisting that only registered guests could be in the hotel after a certain hour, but the guy did not want to pay for a double. The dispute was getting ugly. When Peterson got up to the third floor, he heard not a word or a titter from Room 304 across the hall. As so often throughout his life, desperation gave rise to what he'd later recognize as a half-assed idea. Peterson would move his chair between the bed and the door to his room, prop open the door, and sit there reading a book with a sage look. Passing by, one of the young women would see him and would grow so curious she'd strike up a conversation,

giving him the chance to invite her inside for wine.

So he sat there, listening to the traffic and the shouts and curses down at the intersection of St. Catherine and St. Laurent, affecting a deep interest in the words of Julien Green. He sipped more wine from a plastic cup, feeling a little tacky, as if he were drinking mouthwash at the dentist's. After a while he began to nod off, dropped the book, then shook himself awake, as the sounds of traffic blared on. It took him a moment to reconstruct the circumstances. *Ah yes...sitting here, wondering if the girls will come back...hope I didn't fondle my groin while I was dozing.* He picked up the book again. Green's novel was about "the other sleep," the one where the real imaginings predominate, not the pedestrian illusions of a dream state. He drank some more wine, tried to jump-start his concentration...and now he heard female voices approaching again. He put on his most serious, studious look. The two dark-haired girls walked up to their door, noticed Peterson across the hall, exchanged words and titters as the tall one rummaged in a pocket for the key. He wondered where the blondes were. Soon the hall was empty once again. *To hell with this,* thought Peterson. He closed his door, turned on the TV, shut off the light, and flopped onto the bed, taking in a long stream of political ads. He gazed through the open shutters of his window at the seedy corner where the whores plied their trade. Every week, people in this city were contracting AIDS, bodies with track marks were turning up in gutters.

Around midnight, he heard voices in the hall. He got up, turned the volume on the TV all the way down, approached the peephole. One of the girls was returning from the bathroom with a beige towel around her waist. She vanished into the room just as the towel came loose, the door swinging shut on Peterson's view of her right buttock. As soon as he saw her, he eased his hand down past the band of his underpants, staring, sweat breaking out again. When the door blocked his view, he wanted to cry. He stood there, saliva creeping out of his mouth, dribbling down to the base of his chin, to the still raw cut where he'd nicked himself shaving over that dinky little sink an eternity ago. Still, he waited, even as his legs began to tremble, even as he badly needed to piss. Inside the girls' room, there were laughs, the knowing chatter of people who were all in on something, the rest of humanity be damned. He jerked his hand out of his pants, rubbed the stubble on his chin, urinated in the sink, waited again at the peephole, felt his legs begin to vibrate like pillars in an earthquake. What time was it now? He was sweating profusely. But he felt he could no more tear himself away than he could alter the course of the earth.

He looked around the room for something he could pile onto the chair so he could sit at the peephole. He was in a cold sweat now, his legs trembling, not just vibrating a little but quaking, but every so often the

cadences of the girls' laughter and the movements on the hard wood floor sent his heart up into his throat in the hope that their door was about to open. Again he looked toward the sink, felt tempted to piss himself right then and there, deal with it later, but finally he tore himself away, moved to the sink.

As he was standing at the sink, he heard the door across the hall open. He darted back into position, but it was too late, feet were scurrying down the hall toward the bathroom. Peterson could not help letting out a shriek.

*Christ! The whole floor must have heard that!*

He stood there, sweating, thinking that now they must all be exchanging whispers about him. No—they hadn't heard the shriek. It was loud only in the confines of this room. Only in his heightened state of awareness.... Now he felt he could grow a beard before moving from this spot. After a few minutes, one of the blonde girls, clad in a lime green towel, returned from the bathroom. In the couple of seconds as she entered the room and shut the door, he caught the briefest glimpse of the bare back and right arm of the tall girl as she leaned over a bed on which she'd opened a suitcase. Then the door snapped shut.

Perhaps he would pass out and hit his head on the sink, ending his trip a bit ahead of schedule. If they came out again soon, then perhaps not. He stood fast. The minutes flowed into hours, the babble at the intersection reduced to the stray cries of drunks. At one point, Peterson heard a giggle, then the taunting silence reigned in the hall again. *I'm going to faint I'm going to faint I'm going to faint I'm going....* But he could not budge. He was sweating harder now, or maybe he'd grown so exhausted he was crying. He could not budge.

Hours passed. With the agony in his legs, he thought he knew what people with diseases like Parkinson's go through every day. Just as he felt that quaking swell into a seismic spasm, he saw motion through the peephole, rubbed his eyes, and saw the door across the hall open slowly. In the space beyond were white limbs and a torso with regions of blackness all around...suddenly the door closed. Open, it could have served no purpose other than to present a sight to Peterson's haggard eyes. He remained standing for four hours, got nothing in return for those four hours of his life, woke up on the cold wood floor with saliva caked all over the lower third of his unshaven face.

Peterson washed, shaved, threw on fresh clothes and a jacket, and descended to the lobby. In one of the deep red chairs between the racks full of brochures and the ATM sat one of the guys who'd come to the young women's room earlier, clad as before in a windbreaker and baseball cap. He stared at Peterson with an unfathomable look. Hadn't Peterson heard one of the girls address this fellow as Greg? Peterson stole out of the hotel, along St. Catherine to St. Denis, then up that street in the



direction of a used bookstore called Mona Lisait. Around him in the frigid air, the students, the packs of young tourists, the happy couples took no notice of Peterson.

When he returned to the hotel with a bag full of used books, he found a handwritten note from one of the maids on his bed. In its entirety, the note read, "*Je vous en prie, monsieur.*" Peterson told himself he shouldn't care, he'd be out of here soon, anyway. He began changing, organizing his filthy clothes in a pile beside the TV. He looked at his watch. Maybe he could take in the tail end of the Giacometti show. No, he decided that the images and impressions he'd gathered were more interesting in a raw state, without the refinements of further scrutiny. He looked around his tiny room, at the maid's pithy note, and made a decision.

Peterson hit the street again, moving in the direction of one of the parks, hugging his coat against his shivering frame as his breath billowed out on the gray street. When he got to the park, Peterson looked around at the gaunt trunks coated with icy drizzle, the desolate walkways, the benches with a handful of bundled vagrants sitting or lying on them. One spot in the park was reputedly the best place in the city for scoring what Peterson had come here to score. As he approached the intersection of two paths at the western edge of the park, where he spied a figure in a white parka with the hood fully concealing his head, Peterson paused, thinking of the people he'd shared a house with until just recently, and the taste that was still in his mouth, figuratively speaking. A voice in his head suggested that maybe that figure up ahead was a cop. He preferred not to pursue his thoughts on the matter any further, so he walked back to St. Catherine and bought a movie ticket.

In the evening, Peterson sat reading with the door to his room open as the young women came and left, came and left again, not looking at him. On the latter occasion, the two guys in windbreakers and baseball caps were with them, seeming, to Peterson's eyes, almost overly protective of the two blondes. No doubt they were all heading out to the bars and clubs on Crescent and St. Catherine. *Well*, thought Peterson, *go out and party for three hours. At the end of it, your bodies will be three hours older and you'll have a ton of dead brain cells and you won't have improved your minds or learned a thing except the rules to a moronic drinking game or the size of a stripper's penis.* As for Peterson, he had Julien Green, and saw no contradiction in enjoying a bottle of red wine with his novel.

He was lying on his bed trying to follow the interminable political battles when the knock came. Gazing through the peephole, he saw to his utter amazement that it was the youngest of the female guests from across the hall. She had medium-length straight blonde hair, and a face that was lovely, but was a bit too much there to belong to a model or an actress. Her white t-shirt bore the logo of a school he'd never heard of before,

and her khaki trousers brushed the tops of her sandals. On seeing him, the smile that made her lips resemble a shard of peeled apple skin did not seem the least bit guarded; here was someone she could speak to openly, ingenuously.

“Uh, hello, sir. My name’s Ellen. Look, I’m really, really sorry to bother you, but my friends all went to a club that won’t let me in, because I’m only 20. They’ve deserted me. *Sooo...* I’m just wondering if you still have some of your wine left?”

He couldn’t believe it. Should he feel thrilled? Or humiliated that he’d come across as a wino? He moved aside to admit her into the tiny room. He took the chair, she sat on the edge of the bed facing him.

“Are you going to *say* something?” the girl asked.

He stared at her. He couldn’t tell her, *I’m a very miserable and pathetic person who hasn’t spoken to a young woman in months*. As he studied her features, she seemed to follow something of his thought process. She smiled again.

“Forget it,” she said.

“I suppose you want to know why I’m here all by myself?”

“Well, I’m not going to lie. I am a tiny bit curious about that.”

Peterson felt like telling the truth. He had so much to get off his chest, and here was an angelic Florence Nightingale to help ease his pain. But of course he had to play his cards right. The truth would only cast him in a positive light, he figured. Peterson had been living with a group of fellow graduate students in a weathered two-story house at the dusty eastern edge of their town, he told her. Besides Peterson, there were a couple of law students, a philosophy major, a guy who read his poetry to unimpressed guests over weed and wine, and another fellow who belonged to a society of medieval re-enactors who enjoyed mock battles, jousts, stuff like that. People sat around in the small living room studying, shooting the bull. It was cozy. The problem... ah, the problem was the dog of a neighbor two doors down the street. This big mangy German Shepherd never stopped barking. The noise came right through the rotting walls as the housemates sat buried in their studies, pretended to go on studying without taking notice of the racket, but nobody was fooling anybody. At one point, Dan, one of the law students, walked up the street to have a chat with the owner. The bald, middle-aged fellow took everything he said to heart, promised to make things right. The dog went right on giving concerts, when everyone in the house urgently needed to cram. Another talk with the owner yielded the same result. The concerts went on, and on, and on. One night Peterson walked in the door and saw Eric, of the local medieval society, talking to Dan.

“Get me that bow and arrow from the closet,” Eric told Dan.

Eric went outside, took careful aim at the 4’ x 4’ shed where the dog was, and let fly. The shaft sailed through the wall, neatly impaling the

German Shepherd.

"I packed and left before that poor dog's owner knew what went down."

"Good for you," Ellen said.

Ellen had so much to divulge. Her host had been so honest. By this point, the current was going to run its course, no matter what. Ellen and her female companions came from a farming community near the little town in upstate New York called Rouses Point. They lived on four farms close enough that they could see one another from their bedroom windows. Throughout their lives, they'd live in such proximity to this metropolis across the border, but their parents would not entertain the idea of their traveling. Oh no, their parents aimed to protect them from all the filth and seediness of this world. The farms on which they walked in the abundant sunshine were so pristine, and in the corners of the barns, the farmhouses, they revealed elegant handmade gifts to one another. The girls organized picnics, cookouts, and every so often their parents consented to allow them to arrange a chaperoned dance with some of the boys from the other farms of the county. But not much happened at these affairs, not with the men and women in overalls sitting yards away, staring at every twist, every gyration of the young bodies. There was no pleasure, no release. They were safe from all the filth and horror of the world.

So things went, until they pooled enough of their earnings to take a trip. After so many years of model behavior, their parents finally agreed to dispense with chaperones. Ostensibly, they were going to Portland, Maine, to take in a jazz festival. With that Ellen smiled, drained the rest of the wine from her cup, and gazed at her host with the suggestion of an almost unheard-of transgression playing about her deep blue eyes. Rather than forbid or encourage her, Peterson just sat there in his seat, the empty cup in his hand as if he were awaiting a dentist's instructions.

Ellen raised her shirt. She had no bra. Her breasts were neither too small nor too large. Next, she reached for the buckle of her belt. The pants fell, then her underpants. The host stood up. He flicked the light off. They kissed. But even as he knew the bliss of pressing his lips against the girl's, he thought he'd noticed something odd in the space between her legs, just before his finger reached the light switch. Something that had no right to be there. He kissed her, he moved the flats of his hands over her bare back like sandpaper—but now there was some kind of commotion in the hall! He continued to kiss her as the last of his clothes fell away.

Banging at the door. Urgent appeals.

"Ellen! Are you in there?"

They kissed, steadily, luxuriantly, now with their mouths pressing hard, now with only the skin of their lips, now with their full mouths again.

"Ellen!" It was a male voice, one Peterson had heard before.

He kept kissing her passionately, felt her all over, and she returned the compliment. Though he could scarcely believe it, something in his gangly, defiantly tough and resilient physique appealed to the girl. She reached down, down, until she was clutching his organ, caressing it fondly. But in his rapture he had this sense, this growing, confounding sense....

*"Ellen!"* Now one of the guys was ramming the flimsy door like a linebacker. Again, and again, and again. Peterson couldn't believe it was still in its frame.

*"Ellen, Ellen, what's he doing to you? God damn it, scream if you can hear me! Scream hard!"*

The young guy battered the door. They could hear metal raking wood. He rammed it again, yet again.

*"Ellen! Ellleennnnn!!!"*

Peterson's hand drifted down to the space between her legs, to the cleft with a coating of dark hair like grass around the mouth of a cave. Blonde on top, dark down below. That was rare. But that wasn't what was unheard of, in Peterson's experience. What was in that space, why was it there?

Bang! Thump! Bang!

*"What's he doing? Scream if you can hear me! Come on!"*

At first, he'd wondered if she was a, what's the word, *hermaphrodite*, but that was not the case. With a singleness of purpose he could scarcely believe in the growing chaos, he moved his hand down again toward that cleft, in the dark region, feeling, probing...thinking that they'd done something, reconfigured something, *what was it exactly?* He had to be sure...to be sure...that all the right passages were *open*....

*"Ellen, these people, back where you live, what did they do to you?"* Peterson asked.

She smiled, kissed him on the lips.

*"Find out if you're curious,"* Ellen whispered.

Probing with his fingers, he detected something thin and horizontal, like a stitch administered by a medic. No, wait, there were two such stitches... or three?

*"They operated on me when I was little. Fluids can leave me, but it's hard for anything to enter..."*

Peterson's fingers moved gently up and down inside the cleft.

The edge of the door slammed into the bed. Greg streamed into the room like a commando into bin Laden's lair, shoved Peterson onto the floor between the dresser and the window and kicked him hard in the head, then twice in the face. The drifter tried to get up, thinking that Greg must have mutilated his face, which was streaming and sending riotous signals to his brain. A second blow to the head knocked Peterson out cold.

When he woke up sometime on Sunday morning with blood and sa-

liva caked all over his face and neck, the room across the hall was empty. They'd taken everything except his clothes, his passport, and his return train ticket. In the gray light, he realized to his horror and dismay that he couldn't even buy a coffee on the train ride home. Then again, maybe it was better if he slept soundly as the train hurtled past the silent villages.

SEAN ARTHUR JOYCE has been published in numerous literary journals, among them *Canadian Author*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Whetstone*, *Horsefly* and *The Elephant Mountain Literary Review*. He is a regular contributor to *The New Orphic Review*. His poetry collections, *The Charlatans of Paradise* and *Star Seeds*, appeared under the imprint of New Orphic Publishers.

## Sean Arthur Joyce / Three Poems

### Thaw

The world is going soft beneath my feet.  
Not so long ago, the ground only  
turned to muskeg once a year, at spring.  
But lately spring becomes longer and longer—  
a vast, insidious tide of blue quicksand.  
Where once we were white with glacial glare,  
now we are white with exhaustion.

How do we answer the hunger  
in our little ones' eyes? At least  
they can forget occasionally—  
spun in a cub's delirious  
tumbler—even mobbing mama  
into the blissful game. *O carefree days,*  
*so long gone for me now.*  
Like a memory so ancient, you wonder

if it was a dream, a lie of imagination.  
*That* blank tundra can be both trap  
and escape. Oh, yes—imagination exists  
vividly in this clan. We can imagine  
a crisp, blue-white world of ice cliffs  
and half-asleep gods in the water—a shuffling  
sommnambulist dance under sheet-pale sun.

When it is gone, we will imagine it alive,  
because it is in our bones down to the marrow.  
We have lived just such a wonderworld—swum it,  
fished it, fought its storms beneath quilts  
of glittery snow. But we are hunters,  
not marathon swimmers. And I fear  
as the horizon becomes liquid and  
more and more distant, it will stretch  
and snap what's left of my heart.

## Struggle

“Why does there always have to be  
a struggle?” I asked her, “A fight  
just to hold your place, never mind  
gain ground?” Seems like every time  
I turn my head, a new onslaught,  
from the Sassenach hordes  
to pirates in Armani suits.

Eat the roses, *sans* thorns.  
Eat the trees, *sans* light.  
Eat the ore—suck the power  
from the sun and spit out the core—  
pulp, seeds and all.

Understandably, she shrank from me,  
couldn't withstand the hurricane  
snarling in broad afternoon. Suddenly  
an ant crawled up my bare leg—lost  
or curious in my grasslands of hair.

Caught in my laser stare, I identified  
Carpenter ant—jogging single file  
all through my house, building cities  
in the soil of potted aloe vera, nibbling  
at walls, hollowing out sanctuary.

Crushed him under heel  
but when I lifted my foot,  
there was life—doubled over,  
clinging to itself—thorax broken  
beneath legs pulling in a futile  
circle. O, and me a mad, childish god,  
lashing out thoughtless,  
unsheathed claw flashing.

## Separate Worlds

—Galena Bay, Arrow Lake  
April, 2012

Otter unzips the lake's  
pristine stillness—  
her wake dissolving  
a spring sky stacked  
with steely clouds  
still brooding winter.  
She reaches shoreline's  
sculpted granite,  
scampers onto sun-palmed  
stone to be with her mate.  
They nuzzle, chase,  
dive and climb out again,  
vanish into a cleft.

We stand watching  
with binoculars—mortals  
seeking a god's-eye view.  
Suddenly aware of us,  
she raises a whiskery face  
to peer back at us—  
dark eyes wet and full,  
wondering what creatures  
creep into her realm  
from such a distance.

But something soon  
pulls her away,  
and the curtain closes,  
its brief shard of light  
extinguished. She cleaves  
water swiftly, bound  
for favourite fishing grounds.  
We follow the elegant  
heads of mergansers—  
certain of their direction,



dowsing for sustenance—  
and return to the car  
as the ferry approaches.

A crack in the veil has opened  
and we carry its sliver of light  
into our separate worlds.

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*. Set in Switzerland, *To Travel the Distance* is a novel-length work in progress that has been serialized in the *NOR* for eight years. “Dream Dig” was published in the *Journey Prize Anthology* in 2001. Her book, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*, was released in 2006. Her story, “Changing Trains,” appeared in the *NOR* in the spring of 2012.

## To Travel the Distance

(The Serialized Saga of Ulyssa Segantini)

Margrith Schraner

### Chapter 14

BEYOND THE *BERGHUUS*, a single cloud in a blue, blue sky, a wide swath of lighter trees alternating with dark ones, and the valley to the right, falling sharply away—of all these, Ulyssa barely took notice. It seemed to her that they had been trudging up that well-trodden trail for an eternity, trying to keep pace with Walter as best as they could.

Further up the trail, Walter and Maria Teresa were arguing. The jolly posse of mountaineers appeared to have lost their mirth.

“It isn’t the road ahead that wears you out,” Tomas said, turning to Ulyssa. “As it turns out, it’s the small pebble in your shoe.”

“Some mountains are tough to climb.” There was a tone of suppressed hysteria in Maria Teresa’s voice. She was facing the rugged mountain with a narrow squint and throwing up her arms as if in accusation of the sudden, dazzling brightness that engulfed everyone.

“Mountains are mountains.” There was a stuck quality to Walter’s voice.

The air around them appeared to have grown thick with dissent.

Walter fixed his eyes on the sunflower pattern on Maria Teresa’s blouse. “The best time to see the summit is in the glow of the morning light. Only Sunday hikers take extended breaks.”

It was unbearable. The inexplicable, faint whir of cicadas in Ulyssa’s ears, which had been there for some time, had suddenly grown louder. “I’m dizzy with hunger,” she heard herself say, but her words fell on deaf ears. Everyone seemed to be moving along as if in a trance. Only she, Ulyssa, was awake enough to realize that what lay beyond the next ridge might be uncharted territory. The alpine meadow of Radons, kept alive in her memory for years, if not decades now, may prove to be little more than a figment of her imagination. Little, purple flowers dotting the sparse

grass beside the trail, golden centers ringed around with diminutive petals, presided over by a sky of enticing blue that reminded her of cornflowers in a wheat field—an image the color of hallucination. Or a dream.

“These sloping meadows, this wild array of alpine flora,” Walter said, echoing Ulyssa’s thoughts. “This is all virgin territory—never been touched by a plough.”

Ulyssa heard him hum a few bars from *The Happy Wanderer*. Now and again, he stopped to refer to his topographical map. Beyond the next ridge lay the halfway point, he informed them, holding out a promise of unparalleled views, as if a single glimpse of some glacier would be ample recompense for the trouble he was putting them through.

They had stopped briefly near the ridge where the trail veered in two directions around the shoulder of the mountain, atop which some craggy rock shot up into the sky like an errant wing of a prehistoric bird. A small, yellow sign stated the destinations and the approximate traveling time. To the left lay Radons.

“The path, it is wavy, though the map says it’s straight,” Maria Teresa said.

Ulyssa had begun to sweat profusely. The sky was blinding her with its metallic sheen, a shade so extreme it forced her to squeeze her eyes shut. Radons appeared far off, at the edges of her vision, an unreachable destination.

“Ulyssa, where is your straw hat?” Tomas asked, full of concern for her.

She had forgotten all about her hat. Only then did she remember where she had left it—on the counter of the village store in Riom, where she had gone the previous day to buy provisions for their hike. But the straw hat was hardly of importance to her at the moment. *Radons, Radons*: The name seemed to be chanting itself; it coursed like blood in her veins, surged to her head like an incantation. If the ascent was a necessary part of the pilgrimage they were on, as Maria Teresa had suggested earlier, she would have to stay the course. And, when finally faced with the Oracle of Delphi at the top, her turn having come to ask a question, what she would ask for would be a moment of pure arrival.

“Ah, yes, just as I suspected,” Walter announced. Maria Teresa bent over his shoulder to take a look at the topographical map. “Let’s see—*Mot Laritg*—there is another *Wanderweg*—further up, at this elevation. The route to Radons actually takes us out of our way, on a big circumambulation that avoids these rough patches here—and here,” he added, pointing with the broken nail of his index finger to some swirls on the map. “I say we go straight up and catch this trail, up here. That’ll save us some time.”

But Ulyssa had seen the smidgen of doubt on his face. Maps could be deceptive; above all, they were not to be confused with the territory. She

was seized by the irrational thought that it had never been Walter's intention to lead them to the alpine meadows of Radons. Consequently, the more they advanced, the further they would be moving away from that destination.

Tomas eyed Walter with a skeptical look. "Should we be taking that trail in the sweltering midday heat?"

"Ach." Walter gave a simple shrug.

"Ulyssa made a promise," Maria Teresa tried to argue. "She wanted to show Tomas the patch of blue gentians, near Radons. And an edelweiss or two, if he's lucky."

"The best way to enjoy the edelweiss is in your schnapps," Walter told Tomas, who stood near him wiping the sweat off his brow with a cloth handkerchief.

*Radons.* The mere thought of grassy tracks leading through beautiful, wild, empty high meadows traversed by small streams made her dizzy. If only to experience a moment of pure arrival, of setting foot in a place so exalted it would necessitate shading one's eyes to adjust one's vision, a single moment to take in the magnitude of what had been hidden by the clouds only moments before, the entire range of rugged mountain peaks, every crevice and ravine offset by the fine chisel of eternal snow.

Walter was beaming. "It's one beautiful sight, huh?" He had taken them straight up over the brow of the hill and across a wetland depression on the other side, where a number of rugged rocks were jutting sideways out of the ground. "Once you get off the trail, you get a real impression of the terrain. See, up there, on that hillside?" He pointed with his walking stick. "That is the path I saw on the map."

The lush meadows looked oddly bleached in the strong light of the sun. They were dotted with wildflowers, most prominent among them a species of white funnel lily, and spread out to the left and right as far as the eye could reach. Herds of cows could be seen grazing on grassy slopes scattered with firs and larches.

"In Canada, we wouldn't think of using high-altitude meadows for grazing," Tomas said.

"Ach." Walter gave a good-natured laugh. "But Canada is a big country, no? Here, we have to utilize what little we have. Cow-pies make perfect fertilizer. We do the mowing later in the season, after the hay flowers have gone to seed."

"So it isn't exactly virgin territory, then?"

"No, but the next best thing to it."

Ulyssa had stopped walking. She stared at the hazelnut trees which, oddly enough, seemed to have animated themselves and were swaying gently in unison. The sight of birch and balsam trees that extended fairly high up the slope made her dizzy. On the mountain tops to the east, she heard a far-off rumble suggestive of a rockslide—the side of a mountain

becoming detached and thundering down a ravine, much like an avalanche—and the thought made her feel weak in the knees. The sweltering heat made her skin crawl. A dull pain was radiating near the top of her head and flecks of silver dust swam before her eyes like languid fish in a darkening sea, rudely elbowed aside by ghostly spiders that bounced up and down as if from bungee-cords.

The ominous rumble had come closer. Maria Teresa was walking beside Tomas, now; they were crossing a tundra-like area, carpeted with mosses and lichen, when the talk veered off to the subject of glaciers.

“Did you know that for centuries now, pious, deeply Roman Catholic women were prohibited from wearing colored underwear for fear of provoking the glacier?” Maria Teresa said, laughing beside Tomas. “The *Aletsch* is the largest glacier in Europe. Think of the massive, advancing ice mass from the glacier, encroaching on the inhabited areas. As it melts, the floods often wreak havoc on the isolated mountain hamlets, resulting in natural catastrophes that bring about loss of life, both animal and human. Each year, for close to two hundred years now, the villagers in southern Switzerland have renewed their sacred pledge to lead virtuous lives so that God, in turn, would spare their homes and livelihoods.”

“And so, the need to wear white underwear continues,” Tomas said, humoring her. “But now, with global warming, the picture has changed, of course. The average glacier, I’ve been told, recedes about 30 meters a year.”

“Did you see, down there, we just passed a hut,” Ulyssa exclaimed, trying to catch her cousin’s attention. She had glimpsed a cabin along a side-trail, nestled into the hillside, further down. Her pulse was racing from the arduous climb. To stop walking, if only for a moment, she thought fervently. To find some respite from the scorching heat. To rest for a while in the cool shade of the hut....

Maria Teresa dismissed the idea. “It’s a sheep-herder’s hut, in pretty run-down condition, if you ask me.”

They walked on, only to stop a little while later at a bluff, so Walter could consult his map, again. The bluff afforded them an unimpeded view of the surrounding peaks.

“Isn’t it grand what God has given us?” Walter said, turning to Tomas and sharing his binoculars with him.

“God is a figment of our imagination,” Tomas muttered, as if the words were meant for no one else’s ears but Ulyssa’s.

“Look there.” Walter pointed out a squat, grayish structure, perched in the solitary heights. It seemed to cling to the bare face of rock on the opposite slope much higher up. “That’s Ziteil, the church of the citadel. Legend has it that a sighting took place in a clearing not far from there, way back in ancient times. A young girl had been gathering wood, when a lady dressed in white suddenly appears to her. People are dying; the

brooks are drying up. People must do penance if they don't want their harvests to shrivel up and wither, the lady says, using the girl as a messenger. *Piz Curver*, the mountain, is said to have emitted a glowing light at the moment of contact between the human and the divine. The girl tells her mother about the vision, and the mother tells the priest. It wouldn't hurt to build a chapel in the clearing where the vision took place—that's the decree of the Vatican."

Maria Teresa nodded. "Ever since reading a book about the visions of St Bernadette, I've been inspired to make the pilgrimage to Lourdes."

"There, too, a lady dressed all in white appeared to an unsuspecting, young girl," Tomas confirmed. "We've seen the movie. Do you think it's a coincidence? Personally, I'm suspicious of such visions. More often than not, they tend to be the fanciful work of an unstable mind."

Walter raised an eyebrow. "But you're a writer, no? And writers depend on having visions, do they not?"

"There's a big difference between a writer's imagination and the mind of a young girl growing up during what could be called the dark ages."

"For those who believe in god, no explanation is necessary," Maria Teresa countered. "It says so in the book about St Bernadette," she added, clearly excited now.

Walter completed the quote for her. "And for those who do not believe in god, no explanation will suffice." He wiped the sweat from his brow. "Same difference, different explanation." He threw up his hands and looked skyward, as if he meant to share a private joke with Tomas.

"Legend tells us that processions were ordered by the Vatican. The stone cutters started to prepare the stones to erect a small chapel at the place of the sighting. However, it is said that the angels carried the stones even further up the slope during the night."

"To what is now the Ziteil sanctuary?" Tomas asked.

Walter nodded. "I was full of vim and vigor when I went up to Ziteil with my buddies from the military, that first time. The one thing we had in common was our youthful folly and our thirst for adventure. What started out as a prank turned into an impromptu pilgrimage, I guess you could say."

"You're joking." Tomas shaded his eyes. The place was clearly far above the tree line, out of reach of anyone but birds.

Maria Teresa narrowed her eyes. "How come you never breathed a word about that to me?" she asked, clearly annoyed.

"It happened a long time ago—before your time—at the end of the summer; in September, I think. Christian, Bruno and I had managed to obtain leave from military service. You see, Christian was going to get married at the end of the week and this was his only chance to have a stag party—just the three of us, riding the small, red train together. It was getting on toward late afternoon, I seem to recall. We left the train in

Tiefencastel to enjoy a sausage and a few beers at the station restaurant and to play a game of cards. The postal bus was there, waiting for us when we came out. So, for a lark, Bruno says, let's go for a ride. Christian agrees with him; we can always turn around when we get to Salouf.

"Salouf? The name rings a bell with Bruno. You see, he's enrolled in Fribourg, at the seminary there, studying to become a priest. Someone has mentioned a place called Ziteil to him. It's located at 7200 feet—the highest pilgrimage site in all of Europe."

Again, there was a sudden rumbling, far off, over the mountain range, where some clouds were now amassing.

"The postal bus follows the narrow, winding road to Salouf," Walter continued. "There, we find the door to the village church open. All the pews are empty; it's suppertime. From the basket near the donation box at the back, we grab a couple of those cheap, little medallions that have the picture of saints on them. The ones in the basket are of St. Christopher. He's the protector of travelers, as well as the patron saint of that church."

"Was it like mine?" Maria Teresa asked him, fingering her silver pendant and sliding it back under her blouse.

"Yours is St. Bernard." Walter was breathing rather heavily now, as he jostled up and around a tricky shoulder of rock. "He protects skiers, alpinists and mountaineers."

"About your bachelor party," Tomas reminded him.

"Yes. So, here is how it went," Walter said, leaning on his walking stick and resuming his tale. "We find ourselves sitting on the steps outside the church of Salouf, sharing one of Bruno's chocolate bars, when a farmer passes by on a horse-drawn cart. Bruno mentions Ziteil, asks him for directions. The church of the citadel could be reached in less than four hours, says the farmer and draws him a quick sketch. Then he tells us to hop in.

"He lets us off at the trailhead. 'To the right,' he calls after us as he waves his arm. 'You want to go to the right.' Bruno discovers a way-marker, hidden by the foliage of a tree. From there, we cross farmers' fields and skirt pastures, until we meet a shepherd grazing his flock. He helps us decide which of the two paths we want to follow: Is it the longer one that wends its way along the ridge above the valley, or do we want to take the shorter one that leads more or less straight up and over the pass?"

"We climb and we climb. We seem to be treading the pilgrims' path that winds ever upward; it has been in use for more than four hundred years, the farmer told us. There are anemones in bloom. The panorama starts to open out before us. We enjoy a cool drink from a trickle of water that gushes out from a rock crevice. Here and there, we come upon a wooden cross—these are stations for prayer, Bruno informs us. Christian says there must have been cows using them to scratch their itchy hides; he can see tufts of hair clinging to the edges."

“Hmm—I don’t like the look of those dark clouds that are coming towards us,” Tomas said, pointing skyward.

The dark clouds billowing over the mountains from the east had rolled in from nowhere. At first bunched up, they had spread out rapidly, obscuring the higher peaks. Ulyssa watched as heavy trailers combed the flanks of the opposite mountainside—rain tails, Tomas had referred to them, once. The air was suffused with the scent of approaching rain.

“Needless to say, we didn’t make it,” Walter said, hastily trying to bring the tale of his pilgrimage to a close. “Not on that day, anyway. Must have taken a wrong turn or something; missed one of those yellow signs, maybe.”

Lightning forked overhead, to the east. A flock of little, gray birds flitted sideways across the path, as though fleeing the drawn-out rumble of thunder that was trying to catch up to the rain. The sky overhead looked threatening now, as if it might start to unburden itself at any moment of all the rain it had harnessed.

Less than a minute later, when a few heavy drops began to fall on the slope they were climbing, Walter decided to herd them back down the hill. “C’mon, you guys, let’s head back to that hut; chop, chop.” He hurried back along the path to where the trail had veered off to the right, scrambled down the incline and strode ahead of them, crossing a large, wet field of recently scythed summer grass to reach the hut with the slate roof. By now, the rain was full upon them, large drops pelting their shoulders.

Maria Teresa, running behind Ulyssa, was panting quite heavily. “Walter likes to go ahead of everyone else,” she said, laughing. “He likes to be first; that way, he has time to settle in, light his pipe, and enjoy the view.”

The sweet smell of new hay followed them into the dark interior of the herder’s hut. It was not much bigger than a tool shed and had fallen into disrepair. It no longer had a door. “Here it comes, the deluge,” Tomas laughed, turning to look back out the doorway. He peeled off the kerchief from around his neck and hung it from a nail on the wall.

Maria Teresa shook her head vigorously to whisk every last drop of rain away from her short hair. Some of the drops landed on Tomas. “But I never finished telling you about the villagers and the glacier,” she told him. “Apparently, the townsfolk living in that isolated hamlet have now approached the Vatican—.”

“Don’t tell me. They want permission to let the women wear colorful underwear—to bring back the glacier.”

There was lightning overhead, followed by an instant crash of thunder, recalling a ton of gravel unloaded from the back of a truck.

“Seems like you’ve managed to rile up the anger of the Norse gods with your story about the Vatican,” Tomas teased Maria Teresa.

“What the villagers have asked for is permission to alter the prayer,”



she said, now obliged to raise her voice above the thunder.

“Do you think the Vatican will listen?” Ulyssa was standing near the opening of the hut, looking out at the sheets of rain that swept the mountainside. The sudden chill in the air made her shiver.

Maria Teresa gave her a quizzical look. “What the villagers want is to be allowed to pray for snow.” She swatted a mosquito that had landed on her arm. “Snow turns into glaciers; glaciers are ice; ice is water, and water is the source of life.”

“It’s quite simple, then.” Tomas scratched his neck. “What I would say is, keep the vow and change the prayer—with or without the Vatican’s permission.” Crouched on the dirt floor next to Walter, he was busy rummaging in his daypack. He handed Ulyssa a small, brown vial containing white globules, some of which she placed under her tongue.

“What’s that?” Walter gave a soft whistle. “Woo-woo stuff?”

“*Veratrum*—a homeopathic remedy.”

Walter chuckled. “A truth serum?”

“Mountaineers call it the corpse reviver.” Tomas’s voice fell to a whisper. “Ulyssa has had some trouble breathing, of late.”

“Might as well break into the cheese and bread while we watch the show, eh?” Walter said from his comfortable seat in the corner. “*Salsitz*, anyone?” He jutted out his chin to indicate the emaciated figure depicted on Ulyssa’s T-shirt. “That guy sure looks like he could use some.”

“Food won’t be of any help to him,” Tomas said. “Alberto Giacometti’s *Walking Man* speaks of a different kind of hunger. What he suffers from is existential in nature.”

“There’s no angst that can’t be cured by *Salsitz*,” Walter insisted. “*Salsitz* is one of our specialties, derived from game in the Grisons.”

“What kind of game might that be?”

“Wild boar. Have a taste.”

Tomas chewed thoughtfully. “Spicy, isn’t it?”

Ulyssa lay on her back on the cool floor of the hut, her head resting comfortably on Tomas’s thigh, while he rummaged in her backpack. In the dim interior of the hut, everything had taken on a dreamy unreality; everyone, it seemed, was huddled around her as if in a fog.

Maria Teresa held a dark peasant loaf against her chest. She was sawing off one thick slice after the other, tapping first one and then the other of the men with the handle of her serrated knife before handing them their slice. Tomas was shaving off slivers from a hunk of alpine cheese Ulyssa had lugged up the mountainside.

“Be my guest,” he said, spearing a small piece of the cheese and offering it to Walter on the tip of his Swiss army knife.

“Be my guest,” Walter repeated.

“Had you been a guest of mine when I was living in Finland, custom would dictate that I chase down a reindeer and saw off a buttock for

you,” Tomas told him. “As a child, my diet consisted almost exclusively of reindeer. To tell you the truth, I can’t stand it, anymore.” He feigned a miserable look. “Now, all I want to eat is pasta.”

“Pasta?” Maria Teresa laughter rang out, pleased. “All I really have an appetite for these days is cassata.”

Everyone, it seemed, was getting on with the business of eating. It was an age-old tradition in Switzerland, Ulyssa thought, for people to be engaged in conversation about the food they liked to eat. And if they weren’t busy doing that, they were busy reminiscing about the food they had indulged in on other, more memorable occasions. At least, Tomas had been gracious enough to abstain from sharing the part of the reindeer tale he usually regaled his guests with, at home, embroidering it with barely plausible details, such as the reindeer stumbling to its feet and limping off across the terrain with a bloodied buttock—.

Tomas rummaged in Ulyssa’s pack, again. “Let’s lighten your burden by indulging in some of that *Tarta da nuschs grischuna* you’ve lugged up the mountain,” he said, removing the cellophane wrapping and laying it out on top of the pack.

“Who could refuse a delectable slice of walnut pie?” Walter said as Tomas began to divide it up. He proffered a bottle of Rivella to Tomas, who reached for it eagerly. “Here’s to a blue-bonnet day,” he added, proposing a toast by thrusting his bottle up toward the low ceiling of the hut.

“*Salute.*” Maria Teresa clanked her bottle against his.

“*Prost,*” came Walter’s jovial call to Tomas.

Lightning illuminated the interior of the hut. It was immediately followed by cymbal claps of thunder that resounded in the heavens directly above them, and tumultuous rain that drummed on the roof. Moisture from the trailers of mist mingled with the lingering scent of animal fur. Drips from the roof began to collect in rivulets in the gravel outside the door.

“*Molto drammatico.*” Maria Teresa was obviously enjoying the show.

Something appeared to have been shaken loose up on the roof. There was a clatter, followed by an unearthly, drawn-out whine. Thunder reverberated. The walls of the hut shook. A pitchfork leaning against the wall suddenly fell over.

“Odin has obviously taken the conductor’s stand,” Tomas said. “The opera being performed by the elements is superb. It puts the cymbals in Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* to shame.”

The intense heat was starting to dissipate. Ulyssa breathed easier now; the remedy Tomas had given her seemed to have taken effect. “Let’s get back to the tufts of hair on the wooden crosses,” she said to prompt Walter, who was sitting on his haunches on the floor with his back against the wall, stuffing his pipe with tobacco from his pouch and lighting it with

the lighter Tomas had handed him.

Walter was happy to oblige. He took a couple of quick puffs and cleared his throat. “By now, it is evening,” he said, effortlessly continuing from where he had left off. “Darkness is starting to fall on the mountain. Christian has been complaining about his chafed feet; he’s unsure whether he should pop the blisters on his toes. Our tongues are hanging out from exhaustion so we decide to share the cheap bottle of Chianti in Bruno’s rucksack. A little pagan ritual can’t hurt, and in the failing light we play one last game of Rummy. We’re half an hour from the top, but we don’t know it. That night, we fall asleep out in the open, sprawled on the grass near some boulders, gazing up at a river of stars.”

“The Milky Way?” Ulyssa looked at Tomas, enchanted. She stopped chewing on a soft piece of bread into which Tomas had inserted some wild boar meat.

Walter leaned over to help himself to more.

“Your wife,” Walter said with a wink at Tomas, taking his time and noisily sucking the remnants of boar salami from between his teeth, “I think she’s going to survive, thanks to a timely dose of *Salsitz*.”

Tomas smiled. “So, you spent the night on the mountain?”

“We did.” Walter puffed on his pipe. “There’s a chill in the air when we wake the next morning before sunrise, stiff and sore from our climb. *Piz Mitgel* looks like a cock’s comb against the pale morning sky. Later, we see dewdrops glittering on the grass. Bruno says he’s suffering from the worst headache in history. As for me, I don’t recall eating a proper supper the night before. And so, when we hear that bell ringing out, far above us, we spring to our feet to heed its call.

“From the edge of a cliff, we get a bird’s eye view of Savognin, tiny, down below. We’re above the tree line now. I’ll never forget the sight of sunshine, at the precise moment when it strikes *Piz Curver*, to the North. The last part of the climb is the hardest, a mere goat track up the bare, steep slope. It’s getting blustery. We encounter pockets of snow, visible here and there, amidst the rocks. We ask ourselves whether we’ll ever reach our destination.”

“Well, and did you?” Maria Teresa was impatient to hear more.

“Did I what?” Walter’s gaze rested on her only for the briefest of moments.

“Reach the citadel? Get to the end of your expedition, already.”

Walter had a far-away look in his eyes. Outside the door, the rain was coming down even harder. Raindrops were leaping, bouncing off the rocks by the door.

“Yes, we finally get there—by hook or by crook. We are face to face with the robust stone structure. It’s a miracle, really—a minor miracle, because we started out so unprepared. Bruno makes a furtive sign of the cross as we enter the pilgrims’ quarter. Morning mass is already over by

then. We sign our names in the guest register—all three of us, useless vagabonds that we are—right below all the names of the good pilgrims who have spent the night doing penance, who have knelt down on each and every one of the fourteen steps reciting the *Ave Maria* prayer, who have gone to confession, and so on....”

“Some divine joke, that,” Tomas said with a smirk.

“I admit to feeling a smidgen of guilt as we line up for a simple bowl of oatmeal and sit down at the long table along with the other pilgrims. Some kind soul pours Bruno a cup of coffee. Christian, who has been hobbling about on sore feet, is offered some blister pads and gauze bandages. We all feel somewhat foolish, like—how would you say it—like foreigners?”

“Interlopers?” Tomas suggested. He was talking with his mouth full of pickles.

“Schmoper-Popers?” Ulyssa mirrored his exaggerated chewing. “*Infiltrators* might be a better word.”

“Translating isn’t my forte, but any of those might do.” Walter heaved a sigh. “And so, after we’ve finished our breakfast, Bruno decides he wants to help out with the washing of the bowls. He’s star-struck, you see. Right there, up on that mountain, at an altitude of 7200 feet, he meets the girl of his dreams. And it isn’t the Virgin Mary, either. What are the chances of that happening, I ask you. Looking back, I believe it was fate that brought them together. He discovers right there, in that kitchen, that he isn’t cut out for priesthood. And the rest is history.”

No one said anything for a long while.

The tumultuous rain had subsided. There was near silence now; only the soft patter of rain on the roof, and the intermittent, raucous call of a crow, some distance away.

“Not much wildlife up here, I guess,” Tomas said.

“And what about you?” Ulyssa eyed him with suspicion. “Did you by chance meet a nice girl, up there, when you were doing research in the far north of Finland?”

Tomas gave a roguish laugh. “Me? You know me better than that, Truffles.”

“Least said, soonest mended,” Walter cautioned, as he grabbed his walking stick and went to stand by the doorway.

Outside, a shaft of sunlight had broken through the cloud cover. “Miracle of miracles,” he announced. “I think we’ve banished the ghosts of that storm and sent them away for good.”

“After the rain, the rainbow.” Tomas pulled Ulyssa up by her outstretched arm. “Let’s go see if we can spot one.”

ROSS KLATTE and his wife emigrated to Canada as back-to-the-landers in 1971. He began writing seriously in the 1950s while serving in the U.S. Navy and has published short stories in literary and men's magazines in the United States and Canada. In 1959, he won a Longview Foundation award for fiction, and in 1990 first prize in the personal essay division of the CBC Literary Competition for what became in a revised form, the opening chapter of *Leaving the Farm: Memories of Another Life* (Oolichan Books, 2007), an account of his Minnesota boyhood. In 2011 he was one of three finalists for the Writers' Trust of Canada's Journey Prize for a story that originally appeared in *The New Orphic Review*.

## Canoe Country

Ross Klatte

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON as they were portaging around rapids in the Knife River, it began to rain, a hard, chilling downpour that drove them into a crouch under the overturned canoe on their shoulders. Lightning struck, almost on top of them—there was a flash and a snapping sound, then a clap of thunder that was like a mallet blow against the aluminium hull of the canoe. The trail began to run in rivulets, forming pools around their feet.

“It’s not gonna stop,” Carl said.

“Naw,” his father said. “This is just a shower.”

And as usual, he was right. The rain let up as quickly as it had started, and the sun came out, making a rainbow above the dripping trees. They stood up again under the canoe and continued along the trail, their farmer's high work shoes slipping on the glacial rocks and sinking into the forest humus, until they came to the river again above the rapids. Ahead was wider, slower water. The paddling would not be so hard now against the current.

They went back for the three duffel bags. Approaching where they'd left them, his father grinned at Carl and put a finger to his lips. The outfitter had warned of bears getting into unattended duffels on portages. The possibility of seeing a bear now, albeit one tearing through their food supply, was part of the thrill of being in canoe country. That they might see bear or moose or even wolves up here had been a mutual excitement during the planning of this trip.

“Hell,” his father said when they reached the canvas bags and found them intact, no bear in sight. “I guess we're out of luck this time, Carl.”

His father was wonderfully relaxed—almost too relaxed, Carl thought uneasily: it wasn't like him. On the farm he was a driven man, always anxious about the weather and the crops, the animals and the work. When

the work was going well, though, he tended to whistle. He was doing that now. This was their third day out, and they had the hang of it finally. They'd started this canoe trip more or less in shape for it after first-crop haying on the farm when, from mid-June to early July, they put up three thousand bales of prime alfalfa in their barn. Still, paddling and portaging a canoe all day was as hard as haying in its way, and they bent to it without talking much, as they bent to their farm work back home.

Their first day out, after parking their car in the dirt lot at the end of the road out of Winton and choosing a canoe from the rack of them there, they'd run into a newlywed couple who were heading back after only two days at this. The pretty young wife, splotchy with mosquito bites and with blistered hands and sore muscles from paddling, was outspokenly angry with her husband for making her rough it on their honeymoon. The young husband, smiling ruefully, said they were headed for some picturesque motel overlooking Lake Superior with a sauna and a swimming pool. Carl and his father had a laugh about them as soon as the newlyweds were out of earshot. Since then they'd been alone, paddling through this wilderness of woods and water, the Boundary Waters of Minnesota, as if they were old French *voyageurs*, Carl imagined, instead of farmers on vacation.

With the duffels now, they swung into the procedure they'd developed, Carl shouldering the heaviest bag and his father picking up the other two. At the next portage they would switch. His father had begun by carrying the bulk of their gear himself, out of habit, out of pride and impatience and that fine contempt he had for other people's supposed inability that was one of Carl's grievances against him. Later he would understand something of the insecurity, the anxiety behind his father's truculence, understand it because he himself had some of it and began eventually to express it like his father. But for now a good part of his feeling for the man was just a thick wad of resentment. Well, he would be free of him pretty soon. His leaving was what had prompted this trip together, this father and son adventure.

They pushed into the river. Carl's father, in the bow, had the steadier job of paddling. Carl, paddling and steering in the stern, had that old view of his father's back, of the will and energy you could see in the back of his stubborn, German neck. His will and energy surmounted everything, including fatigue, though his father must be getting tired by now. Carl was tired and ready to look for a place to camp, but he would wait for his father to call the halt. He'd paddle behind his father stroke for stroke just as, during the haying, he hefted sixty- to eighty-pound bales of alfalfa with his father until his father, not he, was ready to quit. Working together under the hot sun in the fields or in the suffocating barn, his father gave him his grin sometimes. Carl had learned to work for that occasional, mute acknowledgement.

He looked down through the clear water. They were passing over a sunken log jam, a jumble of timber cut around the turn of the century and now seemingly preserved on the bottom of the river. They floated as if on air above the tangled mass.

“Look down, Pa.”

“Yeah, what a waste. You’d think they’d have a way of salvaging some of that wood.”

His father reached back for the tin cup on top of the duffels and dipped it into the water beside the canoe. He drank and smacked his lips, then handed the cup to Carl. Being able to drink the water right out of the lakes and streams up here was one of the unspoiled things about this country they both appreciated. It was just another aspect of their trip together that allowed Carl to pretend they were in an earlier, less complicated time.

Toward evening they came out on Knife Lake, along the Canadian border. It showed long and narrow on their map, like its name, but the expanse of water ahead of them was wide, stretching along the forested shores to the horizon. Away up the lake, they saw the smudge of an island. As they paddled toward it, the island became two islands, separated by a narrow channel, and as they pulled close they were surprised to see an arched wooden bridge connecting them. His father swung around in the canoe.

“Looks like somebody lives here,” he said. “Wanna see?”

“Sure.”

They paddled under the bridge, looking for a landing. Past the bridge they found a little inlet and, on the rocky shore, an overturned canoe.

“Let’s see if anybody’s home,” his father said quietly, as if he meant not to disturb whoever lived here.

They found a path, climbed it to the level, wooded top of the island and came upon a shapely woman, standing naked, poised on a diving board jutting out over the lake. As they watched, she bounced off the board, arched, and plunged into the water. She surfaced, turned around and saw them.

“Oh. Hello! My cabin’s just through the trees there. I’ll be right up.”

She smiled without embarrassment, treading the transparent water as they looked down on her from the rocky bluff.

“C’mon.” Carl’s father had averted his eyes. Carl had been staring, and he held the image of her nakedness after he turned away.

Her cabin was a neat, rectangular log affair with a shake roof. In front there was a roofed veranda on which were a swinging settee, hung on chains, and two or three chairs, all sturdily made of poles and wooden slats. There was a metal cooler beside the cabin door and an empty coffee can nailed to the wall above it. Above that was a cardboard sign:

HOMEMADE BIRCH BEER

10 CENTS  
HELP YOURSELF

“Don’t mind if we do,” Carl’s father said. He dropped a quarter into the can, then opened the cooler, pulled two bottles out of the ice water, and handed one to Carl.

They were sitting on the porch drinking her delicious birch beer when the woman strode up, a towel around her neck and wearing jeans and a man’s work shirt. She was big and healthy looking, with short, curly brown hair and a tanned handsome face. She smiled broadly at them.

“Name’s Margaret. What’s yours?”

Carl’s father introduced them. She shook their hands. She had a man’s grip.

“On a canoe trip, eh? You boys look like farmers. I’ll bet you’re finding it a whole lot easier than some city folks I’ve met.”

“How’d you know we were farmers?” Carl’s father grinned, a little tightly. “Whatta farmers look like?”

The woman grinned back at him.

“You’re tanned like farmers,” she said. “You got those telltale white lines on your foreheads from the caps you wear. And you look fit. You guys work for a living, I can tell that, and you spend a lot of time in the sun, not necessarily to get a tan.”

Carl and his father both laughed. “You got us down,” he told the woman.

She asked where they were camped. When Carl’s father said they’d just arrived on the lake, she told them of a place. It wasn’t far, a small island around the next bend. They couldn’t miss it.

“I’d invite you to supper,” she said, “but you’ll want to set up camp, I imagine. Come back later, though, and visit.”

“We might just do that,” said Carl’s father. He kept grinning at the woman.

They found the island about a quarter mile away. It was a humped piece of rock sticking out of the lake with a few scraggly trees on it only a hundred yards or so from the south shore.

“Looks good,” Carl’s father said. They liked camping on islands because both had the idea that on an island they’d be safe from bears nosing around their tent at night.

It was a regular campsite, with a couple of rock-lined fire pits and pieces of weathered rope on the trees where tents or clotheslines had been strung, but they might have been the first to camp here this year. They worked fast to get the tent up before the sun went down and the nightly horde of mosquitoes descended on them.

“Look there,” his father said. He was pointing just past the island to a mound of sticks that might have drifted and caught in shallow water near the shore of the lake, except Carl guessed what it was from pictures he’d



seen in books.

“That looks like a beaver lodge!”

“I think you’re right,” his father said.

And then they actually saw a beaver, its blunt head making a V in the water as it swam past the island. Suddenly it flipped under the surface with a loud smack of its tail.

“How about that! You ever see that, Carl?”

His father seemed more boyishly excited than Carl was. Down in the south-central part of the state, where they came from, there were only muskrats with their little reed-and-mud houses in the marshes around the lakes. His father used to trap them.

Once the tent was up, they ate a quick supper of canned beans and wieners, washed down with Kool-Aid made with lake water. Then, following the printed instructions from the outfitter in Ely, they washed the tin plates in the lake using sand to scour them, packed garbage and food in the same duffel, and hung it from a tree branch out of reach, they hoped, of bears and wolverines. Then they got into the canoe and paddled back to the bridged islands to visit the woman.

She opened the screen door of her cabin and stepped onto the porch as they came up the path from the landing. “Come in, come in,” she said. “The mosquitoes’ll eat you alive.”

A Coleman lantern, hung from a wire along the ceiling, lit the cabin. The woman moved the lamp down the wire to above her wooden table. “Sit down,” she said. “You like some coffee?” She carried cups and a pot of coffee to the table.

“Sounds good,” Carl’s father said.

“Your boy drink it?”

“Sure,” Carl said.

The Coleman hissed above them. The woman reached up and pumped it a few times, then adjusted the gas. Her arms were muscled like a man’s, Carl noticed, and she smelled of the clean lake. Down the long single room, he saw a ladder in one corner, leading up through the ceiling.

She saw him looking and said, “Up there’s my sleeping loft. It’s nice enough in the summer but pretty cold in the winter. I load the stove at night and just enough heat rises up through the ladder hole and a couple of vents to keep me from freezing.”

Carl thought of this woman on winter nights, alone in this isolated cabin, surrounded by wilderness. He felt the romance of it, then imagined the two of them, himself and the woman, wintering here together. His head filled again with that image of her, naked, poised on her diving board.

His father and the woman were talking excitedly. His father was full of questions—he took a sometimes prying interest in people and how they made a living in the world that opened some of them up and made

others wary. But this woman met his questions with questions of her own. Then she talked about her life up here and how it had started. She came from Chicago.

“My father was a judge. He and my mother and I used to come up here on summer vacations. After my mother died, my father and I came up here. I got to staying on alone through the summer until school started—I was in college by then. One year, after college, I stayed on through the fall and then the next year I stayed all winter. Dad, meanwhile, got old and I wound up nursing him at home—I’m a nurse, you see. After he died, I sold our house down there in the city and moved up here. Been here ever since.”

“How long ago was that?” Carl’s father asked.

“This is my fifth year up here by myself.”

“Don’t you ever get lonesome?”

“Not much in the summer,” she said. “Too many visitors. In the winter I go into Winton when I need supplies, and into Ely about once a month. Canoe out in one day with an outboard to Moose Lake, where you guys started, then walk to an old trapper’s place. He gives me rides into town. Winters, though, it’s a two-day trip, either way, ’cause I have to snowshoe out over the frozen lakes.”

“How the hell you make portages with an outboard motor?” Carl’s father asked. “Excuse my swearing. Must take an extra haul.”

“I do it in one carry,” the woman said. “Grab my little motor in one hand and the canoe in the other, and haul whatever else in a backpack.”

“You wouldn’t shit an old farmer, now would you?”

“Is it possible to shit a farmer?” They both laughed.

“How old are you, anyway?” he asked in his guileless way. “You still look like a young woman to me.”

“Going on forty,” she told them. “And in case you’re wondering, no, I never married. Never found a man that could keep up with me.”

“I’ll bet you couldn’t,” said Carl’s father.

\* \* \*

Bedded down with his father in their tent that night, after paddling to their island camp under a partial moon and bright stars that reflected on the lake, lighting their way, Carl listened to the eerie, lonesome cry of a loon. Then he heard the wind through the trees. The first time he heard it, their first night in canoe country, he thought it was a train passing in the distance. But how could that be? From their map he knew there were no train tracks along the border here. No roads either. They were in the roadless wilderness of the Quetico-Superior country, and that low roar like the sound of a distant train was just the wind, he realized finally, the rush of wind through the needled trees that filled this whole corner of the state and went on into Canada.

Listening to that wind made him think of the great world he was going

out to soon, reminded him that he was leaving home finally. To be on his own! To be free, finally, of the rages and belittlements of the loved and hated man beside him, to say goodbye to his sympathetic mother and his comradely sisters and his worshipful little brothers. Just thinking about his leaving put a hole in his stomach at the bottom of which lay excitement and anxiety and a premature homesickness.

\* \* \*

They woke to the usual morning fog. Carl started a fire and warmed himself by it. His father made flapjacks for breakfast. Then the sun broke through the mist, and the mist dissolved. They pulled their sleeping bags and air mattresses out of the tent and hung them over tree branches to air.

The day turned hot. Carl stripped naked and put on his mask and flippers. He cringed into the lake. The water took his breath away, but he eased into it, dove, and swam down some fifteen feet to the bottom of the channel between the island and shore. Below the surface the water was numbing but perfectly clear with the sun slanting through it. He swam into a shadowed alcove under the sheer underwater face of the island and flushed a big fish, a northern or a muskie, which flipped away then halted, suspended in the water, and looked back at him. Carl imagined himself in a warm sea out of the pages of the *National Geographic*, staring through his diving mask at a shark or a barracuda.

When he surfaced, his father called, "How's the water?"

"Cold!"

He swam to the island, peeled off his flippers, then pulled on his jeans and got into his shirt. He walked barefoot over the rocky, pine-needled hump of the island to the fire.

"I saw a huge fish!"

His father said, "What do you think we should do? Stay here today or move on?"

"I dunno."

"Let's stay the morning, anyhow," said his father. He looked a little sheepish. "Whattaya say we visit that woman again. I'd like to talk with her some more."

"Okay."

"Stay here if you like. Maybe catch us somethin' for supper."

"I'd rather go with you."

"Let's go then."

They closed the tent, slung their food and garbage up a tree again, then got in the canoe and paddled back to the woman's place.

"Hello again!" she called from her landing as they glided toward it. She was in shorts and a college athletic department sweatshirt with her hair tied back that showed her broad, beaming face. She looked as glowing as the morning.

"We thought we'd come back for another visit before moving on."

“Glad you did!”

His father and the woman smiled at each other. Carl smiled too, then looked away, seeing again his image of her naked, mature woman’s body.

“Come on,” she said. “I’ll show you the other island.”

They crossed the bridge and entered the woods on the smaller island.

“Here’s my ice house.”

They were in front of a square, windowless log building that stood in the deep shade of enormous old trees, virgin white pines, the woman said. “These islands hadn’t been logged when my dad acquired them in the twenties,” she told them. “Look here.” She walked to a tree and pointed to where, long ago, someone had chipped the bark out with an ax or a hatchet to make a mark. “I used to think that was a timber cruiser’s mark until a professor from the university identified it as a trail blaze from the days of the fur trade, maybe a hundred-and-fifty years ago.”

“Is that a fact!” said Carl’s father. He and Carl examined the blaze, a faded scar now virtually blended into the bark of the tree.

It was dark and chilly inside the ice house. They stood on the wet stone walkway between bins full of blocks of ice packed in sawdust. The woman had closed the door behind them—“To keep the cold in”—and produced a flashlight. In its pointed beam they could see their breath.

“I cut all this ice myself in the winter with my dad’s old gas-powered saw. Keeps most of the year, until the lake freezes again and I can cut some more. That’s how I happen to have ice-cold pop to sell.”

“You’re quite a woman,” Carl’s father said. Her eyes glittered in the shifting light she held.

She invited them for lunch. In her cabin she heated a stew on her Coleman stove and cut thick slices of her home-baked bread.

“I bake it in my stone oven,” she said. “The stew’s got smoked venison in it—from the deer I got last winter, out of season, but don’t tell anybody. Got a smokehouse, too, on the other island.”

She went to her icebox. “Here’s butter.”

The stew was delicious, a rich broth with chunks of the chewy meat among carrots and potatoes. To drink they had her strong black coffee with brown sugar.

“Want some rum in it?” she asked Carl’s father.

“No, thanks,” he told her. “Don’t drink.”

“Well I do. It’s a comfort sometimes.”

She brought a quart bottle to the table and poured a big shot out of it into her coffee. She drank her coffee without eating, while Carl and his father emptied their bowls of stew, had second helpings and two more buttered slabs of her good bread.

“I’ll eat later,” she told them, and poured more rum into her cup, now empty, Carl noticed, of coffee. Her face had taken on what he saw as an attractive flush and she was talking fast now, as if they might interrupt

her, about the old trapper who gave her rides into town. “Typical Swede bachelor,” she said. “Used to go up to the Northwest Angle and cut pulp all winter. He’d wait for freeze-up, then mush out into the lake with his dogs and sled—he had some kind of box shelter on the sled that he could sleep in. He’d move around the lake and cut pulp, tag it, and stack it along the shore—Lake of the Woods, you know. Then, before spring breakup, he’d mush back home across the ice, and once the ice was out, the company he’d cut for would gather his logs into booms and tow them down the lake to the mill. And he’d get paid finally—so much a log.”

“You’d think he’d go crazy up there all by himself, all winter,” Carl’s father said, while she gulped at her rum. “*I* would.”

“Some say he’s crazy now. He *is* a little strange. But then, who isn’t?”

She drained the rum in her cup, added more and said, “I’ll tell you who was crazy and that was my father—and *he* was around people all his life.”

Carl’s father smiled uncertainly.

She smiled too, in a funny, unsmiling way, and in a bright, mocking voice told them, “Yeah, he was a little bit of a bastard, all right. Can you imagine having a judge for a father?”

She looked from one to the other of them, still smiling with only her lips, her eyes not smiling at all. Carl tried to smile back. His father was looking down and not saying anything.

“Yeah, even after he wore diapers and I had to change ’m, he still thought he was God Almighty.”

She poured more rum into her cup and drank it.

“Demanding old son of a bitch. Nothing you did for him was ever good enough.”

Carl’s father, a strained look of sympathy on his face, said, “Musta been tough.”

“He . . . he’d grab at me when I was bathing him.” She stared at them. “He’d want me to do things.”

Carl wasn’t sure what she was talking about. His father didn’t say anything.

“Finally,” she said. “*Finally*, he just wanted to die, and I . . . I knew that.” She let those words hang in the air. Then she pushed herself up from the table. “Ready for dessert? I’ve got some homemade pie in the ice house.”

“Naw,” said Carl’s father. “It’s time we got going, ain’t that right, Carl? Thanks anyway.”

“Let me make sandwiches for you then,” she said. “That’ll save you time. You can get started right away and eat while you’re paddling.” She opened her icebox and reached for a jar of peanut butter. It fell, broke into goeey pieces on the plank floor.

“Oops,” his father said lamely. He pushed his chair back.

She walked toward them, bumping the table. Carl was alarmed by the look on her face, the fury in it. Before she reached them her features softened, collapsed. He was afraid she was going to cry.

"You're a nice man," she said. She stood next to Carl's father, smiling down at him as he sat in his chair and couldn't meet her eyes. "You too," she said, and reached over and caressed Carl's neck, then tousled his hair.

Carl's father sat perfectly still as the woman allowed her body to rest a little against his shoulder. His father's face was set, no expression on it, no more able to break the woman's spell, it seemed, than Carl could.

Then something happened that shocked Carl at the time, but when, years later, he thought back on it, usually while under some difficulty that made him wonder what his father might do in his situation, he was comforted. He felt his father's presence then, heard the sound of his voice, recalled hazily what he looked like: a handsome man, with hair still black as an Indian's then, who perhaps never guessed that a woman other than Carl's mother might find him attractive.

His father stood up and, somewhat awkwardly, patted the woman's shoulder. At once she was in his arms, responding in a way Carl had seen his mother do when his father came up behind her in the kitchen sometimes to pat what he called her French fesses and tell her she still looked like a movie star. This woman had her arms around his father's neck now and her body was folded into his. For a terrible moment, Carl waited for them to kiss. But they just held each other for a second or two while Carl tried to think how he should feel about it.

Then his father gently disentangled himself and said quietly, "Let's go, Carl." The woman swung away, turning her back to them. "You all right?" he asked her.

"I'm fine," she said, without turning around. Carl looked down at the mess of glass and peanut butter on her floor.

"Take care of yourself," his father told her.

"Goodbye," she said, still without turning around.

\* \* \*

That night, camped on another island in another lake, Carl listened to the drunken voices of a party of fishermen camped on the mainland. They'd arrived in the early evening in three canoes, one of them loaded, apparently, with canned beer. Carl watched the men fill a big fishnet with the cans and sink it into the lake. Far into the night, from the sound of it, they kept pulling that net out of the water.

At last they were quiet. Now Carl heard the mosquitoes at the open flap of the tent, whining outside the netting. It was hot and he couldn't sleep. His father, though, was snoring. Then he stopped.

"You awake, Carl?"

"Yuh."

His father threw open his sleeping bag. Except for the mosquitoes, they might have slept outside, under the stars.

“So your mind’s made up, huh, Carl?”

“About going in the service, you mean? Pa, I’ve . . .”

“You sure I can’t talk you into staying another year at least?”

“I’ll stay through the fall, Pa. I told you that.”

There would be the haying to finish, two more crops, along with combining in August and then silo filling and corn picking in the fall. And of course the cows to milk. Another four months, maybe, of working for his hard father, who’d softened a little on this trip but who’d revert to his driven self, to his haranguing of Carl as if Carl was still a kid, once they were back on the farm. Anyway, he was going. He had to go, despite his father’s pleas—no, not pleas, his frank enticements: *Stick with me, Carl, and the farm’ll be yours someday*. His last year of high school, the Korean war going on, he and the other twelfth-grade boys had talked of the draft that would put them in the Army for two years and maybe into the fighting. The war ended after graduation, but there was still the draft, and his friends Jack and Tommy had volunteered for it, to get it over with; Carl, after an agony of indecision, had fixed on the Navy—it would mean an enlistment of four years, but he’d see the world, as the recruiting posters promised, and get the full GI Bill afterwards to go to college. That finally, arrived-at decision had dismayed his folks, especially his father—*You’re my hired man, for chrissake!*—and filled Carl with guilt as well as excitement. He still felt guilty, as his father’s oldest boy, his hired man, to be leaving the farm.

His father didn’t say any more. Carl thought he was asleep again. Then:

“Some woman, huh?”

His father hadn’t said anything after they left the woman, and Carl had been afraid to speak. Paddling away from her place, they’d both kept stiffly silent, unable to break the tension between them. It was like that on the farm sometimes, too.

“I guess,” Carl said now.

Again his father was silent while Carl waited uncomfortably.

“What say we head for home tomorrow? We could only stay up here another day or so anyway.”

“Okay,” said Carl.

Then Carl waited, expecting his father to talk now about all the work at home waiting for them and how Carl would have to buckle down and forget about leaving for a while and keep his head out of his ass and *pay attention, goddammit!*

His father stirred beside him, took a breath.

“I’m missing home,” he said. “I miss your ma.”

ERNEST HEKKANEN is editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review*. See page 4 for further details.

## Violent Friday

Ernest Hekkanen

THE DAY BEGAN with a random act of violence.

I was sitting in our living-room alcove, indulging in a bowl of yogurt, hemp hearts and banana slices, idly watching the morning rush-hour traffic lurch in fits and starts along Victoria Drive. It was spring. The leaves of the trees along the boulevard had unfolded a couple of weeks before, and there were deep pools of shade on the sidewalk. I was thinking on the weekend I should mow the lawn before the landlord came by to complain, when, all of a sudden, I heard this loud honking.

Across the street, a driver had tried to nose his black SUV out of Napier Street into the northbound traffic on Victoria Drive and the driver of an older-model Buick had prevented him by quickly pulling forward. This wasn't an uncommon occurrence; I had witnessed it many times before, but this being a Friday, the last day of the work week, tempers were a little bit frayed, I guess, and the guy in the Buick simply lost it. He rammed the big bumper of his Buick into the left front fender of the black SUV. Instantly, a lot of angry yelling ensued. The guy in the older-model Buick got out of his car and that's when I noticed he had a baseball bat in his right hand. He headed around the front of his car to the black SUV and started bashing out the SUV's right headlamp. At this point the passenger riding shotgun in the SUV threw back his door, stood up with a pistol in his hand, a Glock from the looks of it, and proceeded to pump several rounds into the guy with the baseball bat.

Before the shooting came to an end, I picked up the phone and punched in 911. "My name's Ted Zinski. I'd like to report a shooting. At Napier and Victoria Drive. There's a man down on the pavement. Looks like he might be dead. A black SUV is turning around in the street and heading east on Napier."

"When did this occur?"

"Moments ago. I'm reporting events as they unfold. I live at 1095



Victoria Drive.”

“You said, a man was shot?”

“Shot dead, would be my guess. Some people have gotten out of their cars. They’re kneeling beside the body. One is on a cellphone. He’s probably going to report what I just observed.”

“Stay on the phone, please. A police car will soon be there. Meanwhile, I’d like you to describe the assailants to me.”

“The dead guy was driving an older-model Buick. Could be one of those show cars, the kind they use in the movies. He’s not going anywhere. The other two were in a black SUV. I don’t know the model, but it shouldn’t be too hard to spot. The right headlamp was bashed out by the guy who’s lying dead on the ground. The guy who shot him was about five-ten, I’d say. A 180 pounds or so. Quite tan. Black hair. I last saw the SUV heading east on Napier Street. It nearly plowed into a pedestrian who was crossing the street. The pedestrian didn’t stop. He’s walking south along Victoria Drive, but he probably got a good look at the guys in the SUV. That’d be my guess, anyway.”

There’s a fire station on Victoria Drive, just south of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. Moments later, I saw a V.F.D. emergency vehicle come barreling down the wrong side of Victoria Drive, lights and siren engaged. Shortly after that a couple of police cruisers converged on the scene.

“Look,” I told the dispatcher, “I’ve got to hang up. You’ve got my name and number and everything. I have to finish my breakfast and head off to work. Hope you catch the guys who did the shooting.”

By now, my fourteen-year-old daughter had come downstairs, dressed in a robe, her feet bare below the hem. Her brown hair was uncombed.

“What in the world is going on, Dad?”

“Look for yourself. Some guy was shot dead in the street.”

“What for?”

“For doing something foolish.”

“Like what?”

“Like using a baseball bat to bash out some other guy’s headlamp.”

“Why would he want to do something like that?”

“Because he was pissed off. That’d be my guess.”

Debbie sashayed over to the alcove windows and looked out into the street, rubbing the back of her hand around in her eye. “My God, how horrible! Why is everybody standing around? Why don’t they do something?”

“Your mother said to make sure you lock the front door when you leave for school today. She said she found it unlocked when she came home yesterday afternoon.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“You were the last one out of the house, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, but I used the back door.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Positive.”

My wife, Sylvia, is a lawyer. She had to prepare for an early-morning case she would be arguing in court, and had left by taxi a half-hour earlier. I went to the master bedroom to put on my work clothes. Moments later, there was a resounding knock at the front door.

“There’s a cop banging on our door,” my daughter hailed to me. “Why’s he banging on our door?”

“Answer it. I’ll be right there.”

“I don’t want to. I’ve got nothing to do with any of this.”

“Geez,” I exclaimed.

\* \* \*

By the time I finished retelling the story of the shooting to the cop, I was running awfully late. I hauled my Vespa out of the basement into the backyard. I used to park it in the backyard, on the concrete pathway out there; however, my first Vespa was stolen a few months ago and so now I take the precaution of putting my second one in the basement.

The intersection at Napier and Victoria was still clogged with traffic. I pushed the Vespa down the sidewalk to the next alleyway to the south of us, and there I revved it up before heading off to work. My wife worries that one of these days I’ll be killed riding over the 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue viaduct or along Terminal Avenue to Quebec Street, where I turn left up to 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. Admittedly, everyone driving across town is in something of a hurry. Now and then, cars will brush past me with an impatient honk. That’s why I try to take up as much of my lane as possible. Once in a while someone will give me the finger or yell an obscenity out of a car window, but I ignore such things, for the most part.

After all, I drive the speed limit. It’s everyone else who drives over it.

At Quebec and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, I slowed down to catch a red light that I gauged was just about to turn green. I probably would have zipped around the corner onto 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, but I noticed a man just about to step down off the curb. Good thing I hesitated. A transport truck gave a sustained blast of its horn as it ran an extremely stale yellow light, just as the man stepped down off the curb. The guy was sucked down under the big front bumper of the tractor. He was spun up into the well of the front wheel before being spat out onto the pavement and being run over by the first of the tractor’s drive wheels. The truck driver skidded to a stop with the man lodged between the two rear wheels.

By then, the victim looked like a large bloody mound wadded up in the fabric of his clothes. It was a very unpleasant sight. I pulled my Vespa onto the sidewalk and used my cellphone to call 911.

“It’s Ted Zinski again. I’m at Quebec and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, where I just witnessed a man being run over by a semi-trailer truck. The victim’s lodged under the rear wheels of the tractor. He’s a big bloody mess, quite dead,

I'm sure. I saw the accident take place. I'm traveling on to my place of employment at the Indoor Garden Centre on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Between Balsam and Vine. I'll be there in about ten minutes. You can reach me at the Garden Centre if you want an eyewitness account of what just happened."

By now, the driver of the semi-trailer had climbed down out of the cab and was inspecting the man trapped between the drive wheels of his rig. The truck had skidded for quite some distance, and there was a long bloody smear on the pavement. He threw up his hands, and yelled: "Jesus Christ, what next?" as traffic began to flow rather slowly around him and his truck.

Needless to say, I was in some shock. A bit nervous. My legs were weak and my hands trembled when I got back onto my Vespa and resumed my journey to work.

\* \* \*

I parked out behind the Indoor Garden Centre, off the alleyway. After riding across town, I always feel embraced by the plants we sell to customers off the street. My partner, Gabriela Smith, arrives at the shop at nine-thirty every morning. I arrive at eleven o'clock. I barely got to work in time to start my shift.

"You look a little bit frazzled this morning," Gabriela observed.

"With good reason. I witnessed two people getting killed."

"Killed! How?"

I described the first killing and then the second.

"My God! Why did you even bother coming into work? You should have phoned. I would've told you to take the day off."

"The first killing simply felt surreal. It's the second one that really shook me up. By then I was midway between home and here, so I decided to come here."

"It looks to me like you could use a coffee. I'll go up to the Starbucks on the corner to get you one."

"Thanks. That would be very kind of you."

I was feeling rather dissociated. Despite myself, I kept visualizing the guy who was run over by the semi. I kept seeing him spun up into the wheel well before being spat out onto the pavement.

Thank goodness, a customer came into the store shortly after Gabriela went to fetch me a coffee. I love talking about plants to my customers. In the process I usually learn a fair bit about the person's life. My first customer of the day wanted several bouquets for an event she was planning to host at her house that evening. A dinner party, she informed me. Her husband was a pianist. Several of their guests were members of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

"I was hoping Gabriela would be here...."

"She ran up to the Starbucks to get me a coffee."

"How nice of her." I could tell by the saccharine tone of her voice that

she thought Gabriela getting me a coffee was politically incorrect.

“She noticed I was looking kind of frazzled,” I told her. “I witnessed a couple of people getting killed this morning.”

“Oh, gosh. I’m so sorry.”

Just then, Gabriela walked in through the front door, with a Venti clutched in her right hand. “Why don’t you sit down in the back for a few minutes,” she said. “Get yourself centred.”

Gabriela is a yoga enthusiast. She often says things like “Let’s get centred now,” or “We need to get some balance here.” She’s the majority owner of the shop. We work well together most of the time. She and my wife were good friends at university. They’re still good friends.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, a cop showed up at my workplace to get a statement from me with regard to the guy who was run over by the semi-trailer truck.

“I was on Quebec Street, southbound, first in line to turn right. The light was just about to turn green for me, but I held back because I noticed the victim was about to step down off the curb. The truck driver must’ve run a vastly stale yellow light, if not an early red one. He blasted his horn. The next thing I saw was the victim being rolled up around the truck’s front right wheel before being spat out under the back wheels.”

“How fast do you think the truck was going?”

“Fast. Over the speed limit, that’s for sure. He skidded quite a distance with the guy caught between the drive wheels.”

“Why didn’t you remain at the scene?”

“I phoned in the accident. I wasn’t going to save anybody’s life by sticking around, now, was I?”

“What sort of car were you driving?”

“I wasn’t driving a car. I was on a Vespa.”

“May I see your Vespa?”

“Sure, it’s out back. Why?”

“Someone gave us a statement. They said you rode your Vespa up onto the sidewalk.”

“That’s right. I didn’t want to use my cellphone while I was sitting in the right-hand turn lane.”

“You’re aware it’s an offense to drive a licensed vehicle on the sidewalk, aren’t you?”

“Don’t tell me I’m going to be ticketed for that?”

“Just show me your vehicle, please.”

I took the cop out to the back of the flower shop so he could check out my Vespa. He jotted down the vehicle license number and then he asked to see my driver’s license. “You reported another incident this morning, too,” he said. “Didn’t you?”

“That’s right. I saw someone get shot.”

“Someone who died on the spot?”

“That’s right.”

He tore off the ticket and handed it to me. “From now on, don’t drive on the sidewalk.”

\* \* \*

At two-thirty, I walked up the street to the East Indian Deli where I bought a couple of samosas and a cup of tea. I sat down at a small table on the sidewalk and tried to relax in the early spring sunshine. I was watching clouds scud across the blue sky above the Safeway grocery store across the street, a little bit abstracted, even pleasantly tired, when a grimy hand with rings of dirt embedded in the knuckles reached down to grab my second somosa. I grabbed the guy by the wrist. Instantly he spun around with a box cutter gripped in his hand. I jerked my head back in just enough time to avoid being slashed across the cheek, but the blade managed to catch the tip of my nose.

“Shit,” I yelled, grabbing my nose.

The homeless guy ran off down the sidewalk, his unzipped jacket flapping around him.

“Shit,” I yelled again, now glancing at the palm of my hand. It was already quite bloody. More blood dripped on the blood in my palm.

“Fuck,” I swore again, holding a napkin against my nose.

An employee who works in the deli came out to see what the matter was. I showed her my nose.

“Some guy just slashed me with a knife.”

“Would you like me to call the police?”

“Please. That would be very kind of you.”

“How about an ambulance?”

“Sure, I guess that would be a good idea, too.”

The tip of my nose was stinging quite badly. A few minutes later, a police car double-parked in front of the deli. The cop took his time getting out.

“So what happened?”

“I was eating a samosa. Kind of absent-mindedly. A guy reached down to grab my second samosa. I grabbed his wrist. He whirled around with a box cutter in his hand. I jerked back out of the way, but it managed to catch the tip of my nose. The guy took off that way,” I said, pointing east along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

“Let’s see what he did to you.”

I showed the cop my nose.

“It looks pretty deep,” he said. “What did your assailant look like?”

“I would bet he’s a homeless guy. Long, oily brown hair. Bearded. I’d say he was probably in his forties. Brown jacket, blue jeans, worn-out runners on his feet.”

The cop got on his hand-held squawk box. “I’ve got a man on 4<sup>th</sup>

Avenue, between Vine and Balsam. He says he was slashed by a knife. His assailant was last seen running east. Could still be in the area.” He described the man, in brief. “Your name?” he asked me.

I showed the cop my driver’s license. It was difficult getting it out of my wallet while also holding the napkin against my nose. I was going through a lot of napkins because I was bleeding quite heavily.

An ambulance pulled up behind the police cruiser. Dashed its lights and siren. Passers-by on the sidewalk kept gawking at me. I felt like a curiosity item on public display.

“You’re not going to die, that’s the good news,” the ambulance attendant told me, “but you’ll need some stitches to close that gap.”

\* \* \*

On the way to the hospital in the ambulance, I called Gabriela on my cellphone. “Can you hold for a second. I’m just ringing in a customer.”

I could hear her chatting with the customer.

“Okay, what’s up?” she said.

“I’m in an ambulance, on the way to the hospital. Some guy slashed me with a knife while I was having my lunch. Nothing serious, although I’m producing a lot of blood. I’ll be a little late getting back to the store.”

“God, you’re really having a shit-filled day,” she said, very unyoga-like. “How did it happen?”

“Quickly. Before I knew what was going on.”

“Should I phone your wife?”

“No, there’s no need to do that. It’d only alarm her. I’ll take a taxi back to the shop after they’ve stitched me up.”

\* \* \*

The ER was busy. I sat in a waiting area for two hours, holding a gauze pad to my nose. When I asked how much longer it was going to take before I could see a doctor, the guy at the window told me: “We book them according to how serious the injuries are. Your nose is well down the list.”

When it was my turn to be looked after, the doctor squeezed and probed my injury, applied some disinfectant and gave me five stitches. “I’ll have a nurse give you a tetanus shot, just to make sure.”

“Then I’ll be free to go?”

“Then you’ll be free to go.”

I took a taxi back to the Indoor Garden Centre. My nose was numb from the injection I was given to dull the pain of the stitching. My face felt like a mask. When I smiled my cheeks were like cold rubber that wouldn’t crease properly.

“Excuse me, sir,” the taxi driver said, “there’s some sort of disturbance going on up the street. See all of the emergency lights? Can I let you out here at the corner?”

“Sure. I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

There were a couple of police cruisers pulled diagonally across 4th Avenue, their beacons flashing red and blue. Right away, I realized the incident had something to do with our flower shop. I ran up the sidewalk to where things were being mopped up. Two cops had gripped the upper arms of a man who was being led to one of the cruisers. His wrists were handcuffed behind his back. It was the guy who tried to steal my samosa.

“Hey, that’s the man,” I yelled. “That’s the man who did this to my nose.”

The guy snarled at me. He could have been the brother of Charles Manson. Blank, impersonal stare. His right cheek was scuffed, showed some blood. The nearest cop snarled at me. “Stand back, please,” he said. “Stand back.”

“Yes, but that’s the guy who slashed me with the knife. Right here, across my nose.”

The cops stuffed the guy in the backseat of one of the police cruisers.

“Now what’s this about your nose?” one of the cops said.

I explained what had happened earlier on in the afternoon. It turned out that the same guy had hurled a newspaper box through the front window of the Indoor Garden Centre after being refused change by a customer going into our store. He had jumped up and down, yelling at everybody in the “goddamn shop with the goddamn plants that could all go straight to fucking hell.” His fit of rage had extended to vandalizing several cars parked along the curb.

The cop tapped his temple with his index finger. “Narco-delirium would be my bet.”

The cop opened the passenger door of the cruiser, sat down on the front seat and consulted his on-board computer. “Who did you say you were, again?”

I spelled my last name.

“Hey, you’ve had a real busy day today,” he said, glancing up at me. “Your name comes up three times. Are you sure you didn’t plan all of this?”

“You’re kidding, of course.”

“Yes, I am—kidding, that is.”

Gabriela was sweeping up shards of broken glass on the shop floor. She paused in the midst of her sweeping.

“I saw you talking to one of the cops out there.” She nodded. “What was that all about?”

“The guy who broke our window. It’s the same guy who slashed me with the box cutter.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

She shook her head. “Some people are so angry. I wonder where all the anger is coming from, anyway?”

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