

# *The New Orphic Review*

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## In Search of a New Orphic Hero

Ernest Hekkanen

THIS ISSUE of *The New Orphic Review* has something to do with heroes or possibly, the lack thereof. At least I think it does. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell states that “the hero is the one who, while still alive, knows and represents the claims of superconsciousness which throughout creation is more or less unconscious.” He also maintains that “the first problem of the returning hero is to accept as real, after an experience of the soul-satisfying vision of fulfillment, the passing joys and sorrows, banalities and noisy obscenities of life.” And in *The Power of Myth*, he contends that “the adventure that the hero is ready for is the one he gets.”

In this day and age, at the close of the second millennium, there is no lack of corporate-sponsored and culturally-driven heroes; indeed, there has been a terrible proliferation of such heroes in the past little while and nearly all of them beg us to emulate them in style, dress and behavior. But nowadays, our heroes often turn out to be little more than time bombs. They self-destruct in front of our eyes and we, the hero-worshippers, have to pick the resulting shrapnel from our flesh. That is, our heroes turn out to be false heroes.

When we take the measure of a hero we must first understand that a hero, like a poetic metaphor, is replete with an infrastructure of largely hidden meaning and only by unfolding that infrastructure of meaning in greater or more literal detail can we come to understand what our faith in a particu-

lar hero will end up doing to us. In their book *Science, Order, and Creativity*, the physicists David Bohm and F. David Peat maintain that:

The notion of a metaphor can serve to illuminate the nature of our scientific creativity by equating, in a metaphoric sense, a scientific discovery with a poetic metaphor. For in perceiving a new idea in science, the mind is involved in a similar form of creative perception as when it engages in a poetic metaphor. However, in science it is essential to unfold the meaning of the metaphor in ever greater and more 'literal' detail, while in poetry the metaphor may remain relatively implicit.

The metaphor of the hero can be unfolded in much the same way that Bohm and Peat suggest we unfold a scientific metaphor and in so doing, we can come to understand what sort of effect a hero will have on our behavior.

We have only to look at the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colorado, as well as the copycat crimes that subsequently took place elsewhere in North America, to understand what a grave matter hero-worship can be. The most baffling thing about such mass-murders is our expressed incredulity: "How could such a thing happen here?" or "Why did this occur? I don't understand it." Indeed, the most surprising thing about such mass-murders is that they don't occur more frequently, given the pantheon of heroes we have come to worship in North America.

Let me cite a personal example in order to drive home what I am talking about. When I was a youngster of nine or ten, America offered up for emulation the well-known frontiersman and "Indian fighter," Davy Crockett. His renown was paraded across the television screen by Walt Disney, in the figure of a romantic hero, played by the actor Fess Parker. If I remember correctly, there were two competing records that sang his praise and the lyrics of one of them claimed that he had killed a bear when he was only three. In supermarkets across the country, huge bins full of coonskin caps suddenly appeared. Some of the caps were the real thing but the majority were simply good imitations. The closer your cap came to the real thing, the greater your status. One detail, however, was always real and that was the raccoon tail. Nearly every young fellow my age had to have a coonskin cap and I was no different. I wanted to be a Davy Crockett knock-off, too. I wanted to emulate what I saw on the family television screen; that is, I wanted to actualize the myth of Davy Crockett in my own life.

For me, it wasn't good enough to wear a coonskin cap. I had to pursue the entire backwoods fantasy, with a trap line and a gun. My father had an assortment of steel leg-hold traps that he had brought with him from Wyoming, where as a young man he had collected pelts for a living. After a lot of nagging, I finally got Dad to show me how to use them. I proceeded to trap every mountain beaver in the woods around our house. One day I took one of those poor animals to school, for show and tell. The other children were suitably impressed. I described how I was going to kill and skin it, just like Davy Crockett. Mind you, things were a lot different back then. Cruelty to animals wasn't the big deal it is nowadays. What I did wasn't considered abnormal, for I was a country boy and such acts were socially sanctioned, if not encouraged.

At that time I belonged to a Boy Scout troop. Mothers took turns being den-mothers. On this occasion it was my mother's turn to have us boys over for a get-together. I intended to teach my fellow scouts how to kill, skin, and gut the mountain beaver I had caught down in the woods. I draped the animal over a boulder and bashed it on the head with a baseball bat – just enough to dispatch it into a state of unconsciousness. Winding wire around the rear feet, I hung it upside down from nails on the garage wall and proceeded to remove the pelt. Although terribly injured, the mountain beaver was still alive. Peeling the hide down over the body caused it to writhe in agony, but not for long. The pain caused a massive failure of some kind. I cut the hide from around the head and held it up like a trophy – like a scalp! The other boys cheered, as boys are wont to do on such occasions. Bonding takes place around scenes of mayhem and murder. This feeling intensified when I slit open the animal's belly. My fellow Scouts pressed in close around the mountain beaver in order to touch the entrails, which go through peristaltic movements long after death.

At this juncture, Ted Bundy arrived on the scene. He came running down over the hill, the tail of his coonskin cap (a genuine one, by the way) flapping up and down on his back. Like the rest of us, he touched the entrails of the animal. Then, picking up sticks, we proceeded to stab the carcass of that mountain beaver until it was little more than a mass of hanging guts and torn flesh. The intestines ruptured. Fecal matter spilled from them in the shape of gooey pellets, adding to the visceral aroma. Eventually, my mother discovered what was going on. She verbally abused me in front of the other boys, and that seemed to bring us to our senses. We became sheepish. We even managed to slump our shoulders, the way naughty boys are supposed to do. Later, when the episode became general knowledge, I was asked to leave the Boy Scouts – for provoking un-Scout-like behavior!

Don't get me wrong. I'm not proud that I caused such suffering to another sentient being; I don't approve of such behavior, or encourage it. However, I'm not the sort of person who flinches when it comes to disclosing such incidents from my past. I don't harbor any shame about it, because to do so would be to deny the shadow in my life – a shadow that is as large as the country that helped give rise to it. Here in North America we tend to deny that we are capable of committing acts of cruelty and atrocity, no matter what the circumstances might be; meanwhile, such things go on all around us and we pretend to be baffled. When circumstances align themselves in the proper fashion, we as a nation have no trouble engaging in such behavior. We murder, we mutilate, we disembowel the enemy, and then we contend that we have done the right thing. In fact, we hand out medals to individuals who commit such acts on our behalf and we regard the recipients of those medals as heroes.

What I am trying to say is that by subscribing to the myth of the Davy Crockett hero – that is, by identifying with the myth and trying to actualize it in my own life – I ended up shaping my behavior in a manner that was not commendable. By trying to emulate a TV-hero, I ended up causing a great deal of suffering. Indeed, for a while, I became a serial animal-killer. To this day, I wonder to what extent that childhood incident might have affected Ted Bundy – whether it was a pivotal event in his life that might have con-

tributed to his future behavior as a serial killer. I think around seven of us participated in the torment and murder of that mountain beaver. Not all of us ended up becoming social deviants. One of us became a policeman, another a writer, a third a real estate agent, a fourth a teacher and one or two were killed in the Vietnam War.

I'm not the sort of person who enjoys or encourages censorship, but neither am I stupid enough to think that the violence portrayed in films and books has no effect on us. We either become paranoid about such violence being perpetrated against us or we become inured or, in my case, we try to actualize what we see on the big screen. Those who identify with heroes like Davy Crockett usually do so unconsciously, without analyzing the hidden infrastructure of such heroes. Davy Crockett, who was portrayed as an "Indian fighter," stood for American jingoism; he was little more than a murderer who engaged in ethnically cleansing the countryside in order to make it viable for the interests of white men; he stood for the exploitation of nature – that is, turning it into something "useful" that would feed the U.S. economy; and he also stood for expansionism – for *overspreading* the continent, which was part and parcel of our *manifest destiny*. While he fit quite nicely into the economic design of his country, he was not a particularly admirable person. And that, regrettably, was the myth I was allowing to instruct my behavior.

In my book, *Turning Life into Fiction*, I explore in detail how we end up fictionalizing our lives. To a large degree, the fiction we create for ourselves on a daily, on-going basis is one that has a lot to do with our perceptions and concepts, all of which society imbues in us, although our volition allows us to create small variations upon the theme. We allow ourselves to subscribe to certain metaphors and myths, usually ones that are pretty well established. The metaphors and myths that we subscribe to in turn instruct our behavior. It disheartens me to hear that there is now a paperback sequel to *The Silence of the Lambs* and that that paperback version will soon be turned into a movie. Since 1960, when Hitchcock's *Psycho* appeared, we have been given a steady diet of *Psycho* spin-offs. In the last decade we have had a veritable glut of such movies, and there are more to come. We are going to see more people cut up and butchered than we can possibly digest.

*Psycho* burst onto the screen toward the end of a sexually repressed era in the United States. We were so repressed sexually, we had to send Norman Bates forth as our emissary to open the door on the subject. He not only opened the door, he pulled back the shower curtain as well, armed with a fanatical desire to do his part in our liberation.

Norman Bates is a Peter Pan Syndrome boy-man. According to Dr. Dan Kiley, who wrote a book entitled *The Peter Pan Syndrome*, such men shed their contrived subservience to females by adopting:

an attitude of despal toward the opposite sex, blaming them for...feelings of powerlessness. Men caught up in this conflict will exhibit exaggerated respect when face to face with women, yet heap criticism and derision upon all females when talking with his buddies. This braggadocio will often include their superhuman ability to put women in their place.

Bates, the character in the *Psycho* movie, put women in their place in the most definitive manner possible, by killing them. In 1960, such psychopaths were depicted as sniveling, smarmy creatures with mommy-surrogate tendencies. Not so in the 1990s. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Hannibal the Cannibal has been imbued with supernatural intelligence that turns such psychopaths into Nietzsche-like supermen who can deceive and, indeed, elude the law-enforcement agents of an entire nation. Hannibal is a man with superhuman cunning, versatility, talent, insight and will-to-power. Put a cape on his back and an S on his chest and you would have Superman. Even the way Anthony Hopkins uses his eyes suggests that he might have x-ray vision.

I'm afraid of this individual, but for different reasons from the guy sitting in the seat next to me in the theater. In *Hunting Humans*, Elliot Leyton points out that:

the number of victims [of multiple murder] began to accelerate during the 1960s: the total of seventy represented a rate of 0.58 per month. During the 1970s, 219 were murdered, a trebling of the rate to 1.83 per month; and during the first four years of the 1980s, the 444 victims represent another quadrupling of the rate, to 9.25 per month, a frequency of victimization one hundred times that of the 1950s.

Those statistics scare me. What scares me even more is the way Hollywood, which can't exactly be called a bastion of ethics, glorifies such mass murderers. In effect, we are being told by the film industry that this is a legitimate way to become famous – to become an idol, in fact. We have only to examine the way Charles Manson is being glorified on a website devoted to his activities to get some idea how topsy-turvy the star-industry has become. Manson has attained cult hero status; indeed, *Marilyn Manson*, the androgynous rock star, has premeditatedly associated himself with Charles Manson by adopting his last name. Ripper movies, I have come to think, tell us a lot about the psychological barometric pressure in society. Anxiety is compounding, and one way the male of the species is being told to relieve it is through violence – in particular, violence against women. Marilyn Manson seems an odd expression of that tendency.

We Canadians have an odd fascination with things American. This is best typified by a movie called *My American Cousin*, which we flocked to see a couple of decades ago. We are enamored by the tinsel, the glamour, the power and the swagger of Americans, while at the same time finding such things rather obnoxious. What we don't perceive quite so well is the dark side of America – its immense Jungian shadow, which is best typified by the ripper movie. We should have been wary of creating free-trade ties with a country that produces movies like *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Sleeping with the Enemy*, because that country is unconsciously trying to tell us something about its nature. We Canadians are too naïve and too provincial to deal with our much larger psychopathic neighbor to the south. Unlike the character played by Jodie Foster in *Lambs*, we haven't had special FBI training, nor do we pack the same deadly force. As a result, we don't stand a very good chance of surviving, if ever we should encounter somebody like Hannibal the Cannibal. Unknowingly, though, we Canadians have met Hannibal



face to face and have since bedded down with him, in a marriage of economic convenience.

I find it curious, one year after the Gulf War, that Americans (and Canadians) flocked to see such movies as *Sleeping with the Enemy*, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, *Basic Instincts*, *Cape Fear* and *The Silence of the Lambs*. The popularity of such movies should have told us something about the state of the American psyche; it should have told us something about the level of anxiety in that country and, moreover, possible scapegoats to vent frustrations on.

Knowing a habit must be changed or modified can result in a great deal of anxiety, which is too often released by resorting to the sort of violence typical of children who throw tantrums or men who commit violence. Violence seems to resolve the situation because it releases the accumulated anxiety. But, in fact, that is a form of magical thinking. Violence doesn't rectify or resolve the situation that has led to the anxiety; it only releases the pressure, usually for a short time only. This equation for action is typical not only of violent males, but also of violent nation-states. The violence of the Gulf and Balkan Wars did nothing to rectify the tensions in those areas of the world. The forces that created the anxiety, resentment, envy and covetness are still very much with us today. The habits and patterns of belief, reinforced and exaggerated by military and economic might on all sides of those conflicts, have not been altered – not by one iota. The violence that Saddam and Bush, and later Milosevic and Clinton, paraded as proof of being right is not proof at all. None of those individuals was willing to modify his world view, because that would have seemed to credit the other's point of view. This is a problem shared by mass murderers and violent males the world over, even those who become presidents and heads of state.

Unwittingly, perhaps, Hollywood has conferred best-picture honors on a sickness that is plaguing America. Also, unwittingly, it has pointed to a problem with the U.S. psyche, one that is not being dealt with in any substantial fashion. I wouldn't think of asking anyone to boycott the ripper movies that Hollywood pumps out ad nauseam, although I would be pleased if they did. I am simply asking people to see themselves in terms of the lifestyle they wish to advocate and to see that lifestyle in terms of economics. What we subscribe to with our hard-earned cash determines, to a large extent, the myths that we hold dear to our psyches.

Here in North America we are confused about what comprises a hero. The nation holds up for admiration sports personalities such as Michael Jordan and Dennis Rodman of basketball, Mark McGwire of baseball, O.J. Simpson of football, Wayne Gretzky of hockey and various muscle-bound hulks of the World Wrestling Federation. The business community offers us its Ted Turners and Bill Gateses. The military establishment parades Norman Schwarzkopf and Oliver North. All of these men are market-driven and media-inflated heroes who rise to the heights of our awareness, usually before deflating and plummeting to earth again. We see them profiled in newspapers and on television, officially endorsed by corporations – anyway, until they fall from economic and social grace. We are asked to imagine ourselves being just like them, but what a poverty of imagination they represent!

Characters like Davy Crockett and Hannibal the Cannibal are also market-driven heroes. The same applies to *The Terminator*, *Braveheart* and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, played by men like Arnold Schwarzeneger, Mel Gibson and Kevin Costner. Such heroes are depicted as using weapons in order to resolve conflicts; indeed, two of them hold clenched fists aloft and yell the word ‘freedom,’ an act of defiance which endears them to American audiences. American audiences go for that type of bait every time. For them, it recalls the Boston Tea Party. No taxation without representation. Rebels with and without causes unite. Take up arms and fight your oppressors. Movies like *Braveheart* and *Robin Hood* are, in fact, propaganda movies. They propagate the myth of the rebel who fights dastardly authorities in order to bring freedom to the masses. However, it’s all a lot of bunk and hokum. Any rebel who seeks to rise up and spurn the authorities in such a manner is summarily dealt with; we have only to consider the cases of Theodore Kaczynski and Timothy McVeigh to know this to be true. However, propagating the myth of the rebel-hero is important to the United States; it helps to shape the mentality of the populace, to keep certain patriotic myths alive and well.

In North America, a whole pantheon of weapon-bearing heroes is offered up to us for veneration, and then we have the temerity to wonder why we have so many violent social problems. Weapons are promoted as a means of getting what we want, and of getting it rather quickly, without a lot of training or discipline or dedication. Weapons are depicted as a means of redressing situations. The powerless can become powerful by stockpiling and using weapons. As a boy, I was so enamored by this particular myth, I had acquired three rifles by the age of eleven. I blasted birds out of trees, shot rats in the dump and killed several neighborhood cats.

There is a practice in Tibetan Buddhism that might shed some light on hero worship and what it is doing to us. I’m referring to deity absorption. Those who practice deity absorption visualize a particular deity in great detail prior to dissolving that deity and absorbing it through the crown chakra. By doing this repeatedly one is supposed to be able to modify one’s subtle karma in this lifetime, as well as lifetimes yet to come. What these deities comprise are very sophisticated metaphors that don’t need to be unfolded in greater and more literal detail here in this editorial, other than to say that the practitioner practices deity absorption in order to expunge negative karma, reach enlightenment and, in turn, benefit other sentient beings. Many, many hours are spent practicing this form of discipline. One must use a great deal of concentration; one must visualize the deity in great detail – that is, employ the imagination. A lot of time is spent identifying with a deity before dissolving and then absorbing it, but the important thing here is that it is done with a positive motivation and in the service of all sentient beings. It isn’t done in order to serve the ego. Here in North America, the heroes (let that read, minor deities) offered up for veneration are heroes that serve the idea of self-interest – the economic mandate of the capitalist society. We are asked to visualize deities that enrich us to the exclusion of others, for that in turn serves the aims of our highly competitive society; therefore, it shouldn’t amaze us that we have gone badly off the rails. It is the result of what we value; that, and nothing more.

The principle at work in hero (or deity) worship is rather simple, really. By identifying with a mythological figure that is positive in nature, we will have positive effects on our behavior – on our lives. It is equally true that if we identify with a mythological figure that is negative in nature, we will have negative effects on our behavior. Is it any wonder, in the gun-toting culture of North America, where we offer up as deities such figures as The Terminator, RoboCop, Blade and Dirty Harry, that we have problems with misbehaving children who resort to solving their problems with guns? No, it really shouldn't surprise us. What should surprise us is that we don't have more serial killers and mass murderers than we do. Angry, resentful, spiteful people tend to worship angry, resentful, avenging gods. Angry, envious, competitive people tend to lavish praise and money on heroes of a similar nature.

In Tibetan Buddhism, our human and social problems are thought to originate from something called *wrong view*. Because of wrong view we engage in delusional thinking and that, in turn, results in us engaging in less than positive behavior. The Sanskrit word for this condition is *samsara* – suffering that is caused by ignorance. Much of our ignorance is due to our egos, which tend to obscure us. One of the obstacles to *right view* has to do with the notion of emptiness. In Tibetan Buddhism, nothing exists onto itself. We are devoid of personal existence. We exist because of everything else. We have little actual autonomy, and we tend to have even less when we are gripped by ignorance. We do not exist independent of the context we find ourselves in. That makes us, and all phenomena, empty of inherent existence. John Donne referred to the same thing when he wrote, “No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*...”

In the society of North America, where we start the day by genuflecting to the ego and then proceed to serve it by acquiring things that contribute to our self-interest, *right view* is nearly impossible to achieve. Indeed, much of this economy is based upon flattering the ego on a more or less constant basis. By holding the ego in high-esteem, we become ensnared in greater and greater ignorance. For instance, our economy profits enormously from what are called the Seven Deadly Sins. We have gotten into the habit of promoting them in order to make money. A society which promotes what is basically negative and delusional shouldn't be surprised when it is depicted on the big screen or when it is acted out by members of the society. Promotion of the Seven Deadly Sins comprises a significant part of the economic mandate of North America and it will not soon change, unfortunately. America is so mired in *wrong view*, it might be impossible to change the situation, for *wrong view* makes a ton of money each day. That is why we parade a pantheon of heroes devoted to *wrong view*. But those heroes make us wealthy while at the same time devaluing our lives.

In this issue of *The New Orphic Review*, a number of writers have addressed the issue of heroes or the lack thereof. In the article preceding her offering of poems, our Featured Poet, Catherine Owen, addresses this situation in a literary manner. So does Hillel Wright in his article about Jorge Luis Borges. Jurgen Joachim Hesse (who came of age in Nazi Germany, when that country was urging one and all to adopt a monster for a hero) has

spent a lifetime in search of socially redeemable heroes, and Jane Covernton, in her own handmade fashion, searches for something akin to a hero, something that will give her life a sense of steadfast purpose. In a rudderless, drifting, post-modern society, where structure is wiped out by flux on an ongoing basis, it is difficult to tell a hero from an anti-hero. However, if humankind is going to survive into the next millennium, we must learn to identify with heroes whose hidden infrastructures will communicate to us the poetic beauty of emptiness and existence, so I am putting out the call – find me a New Orphic Hero I can lend my credulity to without having my credulity sorely abused, a hero who, to paraphrase Joseph Campbell, will bring back the boon of the superconscious and yet be able to endure the banalities and noisy obscenities of the present age.

Fiction writer and playwright J.J. STEINFELD lives in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. He has published a novel and seven short story collections, the most recent being *Should the Word Hell Be Capitalized?* His one-act play, *Headlock Romulus and Gyration the Perpetual Motion Dream Doll*, was put on as part of Alumnae Theatre's 1999 New Ideas Festival.

## The Mirage-Keeper

J.J. Steinfeld

THE MORNING following his forty-seventh birthday party, at which he had celebrated with a few too many drinks, Reginald, sitting at the kitchen table, said to his wife, Gail, as she came into the kitchen, "We're ninety years old now – when you add our ages together."

She was surprised to see him, in his running outfit, sitting at the table, and asked why he hadn't gone out for his run yet. She liked to make breakfast while he was out and they would begin to eat after he returned, invigorated.

"I'm taking a Sunday off," he stated casually. "What's the big deal?"

Preparing their morning coffee, she said, "We've been married for fourteen years, and I can't remember you ever missing a morning run. The worst weather. You've run with colds."

"My ankle's sore," he explained, rubbing his left ankle, but couldn't remember injuring it. "Must have given it a twist or something."

"You should see a doctor," she encouraged.

"What for? I had ice on it before you got up. Just needs some time to heal."

"Maybe you were sleep-running," she teased, "and you twisted your ankle."

The realization that their ages were a combined ninety years had not struck him as humorous whatsoever and he said the number again, seeming to hurl it at a wall. "Oh, but we're a well preserved ninety," Gail said to her husband's sour expression. At his birthday party he hadn't seemed to her to

be depressed about being a year older – hadn't he cheerfully proclaimed for all to hear, "I feel better now than I did when I was twenty-seven or thirty-seven, and I can run farther and faster. Anyone want to race me?" Sure, she had heard him do his little comedy routine about his administrative job eroding his brain but she believed that despite his musings out loud about needing to switch careers, he liked his job with the charitable foundation.

From the kitchen counter, Gail stared at Reginald sitting quietly, and she thought she saw his lips form the number *forty-seven*. Last night, at her husband's birthday party, it seemed to be *her* age that was at issue. Recently she had taken to saying that two decades of her life had been as a high-school English teacher, although she was quick to mention that she had been at five different schools over the years, no stagnation or ossification for her. At the party, Reginald said that was not true, about two decades of her life as a high-school English teacher. "You took a year off when our son was born. Nineteen teaching years, to be precise, not twenty," he stated. "I was still a teacher, albeit on maternity leave," she argued, and he said that a teacher who doesn't teach is not a teacher, and stuck out his tongue at her. The argument lasted only a few minutes, but it did have an intensity to it.

"In another year, I'll be twice as old as my father when he died..." He had been named after his father, who had been killed in a collision of his car with a delivery truck and a taxicab, driving to meet his pregnant wife after her medical appointment. She had been standing outside her doctor's office building, waiting for her young husband, and saw the accident. I almost lost you, the shock was so great, the grief devastating, Reginald's mother told him numerous times as he was growing up. As she grew older, she added to the story, describing the faces of the passengers in the taxicab. The final time she told the story, she described the face of an albino witch, with eyes twice the size of normal and shimmering lavender. "No one has lavender eyes, Mom," he had said to his dying mother, and it troubled him that those were the last words she heard.

"We can start breakfast early, if you're not going to run this morning," Gail said, pouring coffee for herself and for Reginald, at the kitchen table. "I love Sunday mornings," she declared joyously, and he told her that he loved her more than he loved Sunday mornings, though it was close. She gave him a kiss and wished he would undo her robe, see that she had nothing on underneath. Gail returned to the kitchen counter and placed the coffeepot back into the automatic coffee maker. "There should be two Sundays a week," she said.

"Not a bad idea," he said, and she leaned back against the counter and asked towards the ceiling, "Do we dare ask for three?"

"Something magical about Sundays," Reginald said, reaching down and rubbing his sore ankle again. Maybe he could run, he thought, but why risk screwing up his leg completely.

"A week with three Sundays, sunny or otherwise, that would be blissful," Gail said, removing four slices of bread from the bread box. A wedding present that was still functional. She had read a story two nights ago about an unhappy, bored couple who, on impulse, make love in their backyard flower garden, in the middle of the afternoon. What was it called? "Changing Destinations"....A title like that.

“Unfortunately,” Reginald said, putting on his professional voice, “it would be a less productive world with three Sundays a week.”

“But better,” she said.

“Depends if you mean materially or spiritually. The standard of living would plummet,” he said, making a plummeting motion with his coffee cup.

As Gail squeezed the four slices of bread into the toaster oven, Reginald said, kicking his son’s empty chair, “Micah is not at the table yet. We can’t start without him.” She pointed out that they were starting earlier than usual.

To his wife’s unconcerned expression, he waved a forefinger in the air and said, “Can you recall one single time when our bundle of energy wasn’t sitting at the table and waiting for us?” Again she reminded him that he was forgoing his twenty-minute run, and he said, “We always eat as a family on Sunday morning.”

“He’ll be down here any second, you’ll see,” Gail said, soothing the slight annoyance she detected in her husband’s voice. Reginald called upstairs, telling his son to hurry down to the kitchen table, and Gail told her husband to be patient. “Sunday lasts only so long,” Reginald said, as if he were stating an irrefutable cosmic law.

The toaster-oven bell rang, and Reginald shuddered. “You must be tense because you haven’t run,” Gail gave her diagnosis, and brought the slices of toast to the table. Whole-wheat bread. Thickly sliced. Baked yesterday, before his birthday party. “Make some toast for Micah,” Reginald instructed, but Gail, buttering the toast for herself and her husband, said she would do it the second she heard their son coming down the stairs.

“You forgot the cereal,” he said to her, raising his voice.

“I didn’t think you were in the mood for cereal,” she said defensively.

“Don’t we always have cereal on Sunday?” he said, raising his voice still louder. When she didn’t go to the kitchen counter to get the cereal, he said, “Toast, cereal, coffee – a simple Sunday breakfast, as usual,” and went to the kitchen counter himself.

“We could have something different if you want. Eggs? Pancakes?” she said, and he felt she was mocking him. He responded mockingly himself: “No, no...it’s good to have some constancy in the world.” He returned to the table with three bowls, three spoons, cereal, and milk. Then he rearranged their order on the table, as if he were putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

“Want a little more coffee?” Gail asked, ignoring Reginald’s actions. Preparing all three bowls of cereal, he said, “What’s Sunday without coffee?” While her husband ate his cereal, she went to the kitchen counter. “Coffee and Sunday, the indestructible fabric of our lives,” she said, and he asked, between spoonfuls of cereal, “Do you think we drink too much coffee?”

“Four cups a day doesn’t seem excessive,” she said, removing the coffee pot from its holder.

“Four cups a day, 365 days a year, it adds up,” he said, seeming to reveal a long-hidden secret.

She returned to the table and poured the coffee for both of them, saying, “We used to drink seven or eight cups a day,” and he said, by way of confession, “Some days at work I’d have nearly that many by myself.”

“Stress...anxiety,” she said, and added skim milk, no sugar, to their coffees. Then she sat down and began to eat the cereal her husband had prepared for her.

Gail, taking a sip of coffee, asked if he wanted to go for a drive in the country today, and Reginald said that he was tired of taking Sunday drives in the country. She leaned away from the table, as if his statement had pushed her, and said, “You can’t get tired of Nature, darling.”

“You know what I mean,” he said. “So many people driving about. Lunatic Sunday drivers...” She laughed at his comment, and he said he was serious.

Finishing his coffee, he asked her if he should go get their son, his cereal was getting soggy, and she again said to let him come down on his own. “It’s not that early anymore,” Reginald argued, and Gail said that Micah would be down eventually.

“Waiting for our son to come to the table is like waiting for Godot,” Reginald declared, and Gail remarked, “A literary allusion, how impressive.” He accused her of being sarcastic and she denied being sarcastic in the least. When he kept going on about her sarcasm – *How impressive, how impressive*, he imitated her – she told him, “You just don’t make that many literary allusions. You surprised me. I like being surprised.”

“I acted in *Waiting for Godot*,” Reginald stated, and Gail said, “The play by Samuel Beckett?” Again he thought she was being sarcastic. “Well, it wasn’t written by any of our friends,” he said sarcastically, and she responded that he hadn’t really acted in the play, finding the idea impossible to accept. “I certainly did,” he assured her, “during my second year at university.” Gail tapped the table, and said, “You never told me.”

He looked away from her, at his coffee cup, and said, “It hasn’t come up before.” She tapped the table again, and said, “That’s a rather important bit of information, if you ask me. I never thought you were interest in theater.”

Gesturing theatrically, he said, “I played Lucky. Not the easiest of roles.”

With a sudden poke to his coffee cup, as if questioning its solidness, she said, “I can’t picture you acting.”

He moved his cup away from her, and said, “Acting was just a phase for me. I was in three university productions in three years. That was the extent of my acting career.”

She gave a perplexed smile: “All you ever mention are your business courses when you talk about university.”

“I could have done more acting, but I wanted to concentrate on the practical. I was brought up to value marketable skills,” he said.

“What were the other two plays?” Gail asked, and Reginald, after a pause, trying to recall their names, admitted that he couldn’t remember their names or what his roles had been.

She was certain now that he was attempting to fool her, and said, intentionally thickening her sarcasm, “You remember vividly that you were Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* but you can’t remember the other two plays? Selective, aren’t we?”

“Can you remember the names of all your courses at university?” Reginald said angrily, and Gail responded, “Every last one of them, including



the grades I received.” Her quick, forceful response caught him off guard, and he said that the titles would come to him sooner or later, reminding her that his acting days took place over a quarter-century ago. “You’re not going to tell me you were Othello or Hamlet, I hope,” she taunted. “Maybe I was,” he taunted back.

“Too far-fetched for me to believe,” she said, waving a hand dismissively in the air.

“I could easily have played Othello or Hamlet, but I didn’t,” he said, waving his hand next to hers, as if he were challenging her to a sword fight.

“Lady Macbeth?” she said.

Her last comment particularly annoyed him and he stood up: “I think I’ll go upstairs and get Micah.”

“Give him another couple of minutes,” Gail suggested, but Reginald walked towards the stairs.

“Your ankle seems to be fine,” she said, almost as an accusation, and he took a single hobbling step back towards her. “For walking it’s okay, not for running,” he said, and bent down to rub his ankle. “I am experiencing pain.”

“Then sit down and rest your ankle,” she said, and he straightened up, telling her that he was going to get their son.

“A person needs their privacy,” she said, and he told her that Sunday was their one family day a week, not a day for seclusion.

“Darling,” she said softly, “Micah’s not like us. He’s extremely cerebral.”

Reginald took two more hobbling steps towards Gail, stopped and stared at her for a moment: “We’re talking about a twelve-year-old boy.”

“He’s advanced and intelligent,” she said.

“And we’re not?” he said. “Cerebral, my ass.”

“Cerebral is not the best description,” Gail conceded. “What do you say to studious?”

“Not half the time,” Reginald said.

“Reflective? Introspective?” she threw at him.

“A possibility he’ll be an actor,” Reginald said, sitting back down, looking as though he had lost his way, and Gail said that their son was more into the sciences. “No law against a scientific actor,” Reginald said, and Gail replied, barely holding back a smile, “He could try acting in three plays.”

Reginald leaned over the table, a slight menace to his posture: “There was nothing stopping me from becoming a professional actor, had I chosen to.”

Touching her husband’s face gently, Gail said, “I wouldn’t mind being married to an actor.”

“Something wrong with a high-paid executive?” Reginald said, and she smiled at his words. “What are you smirking about?” he asked.

“Isn’t *high-paid* a little too...I don’t know...generous?”

“High-paid compared to people who are low-paid,” he said angrily.

“I make nearly as much as you, darling, and I don’t consider myself even moderately paid.”

“Okay, have it your way, I’m a low-paid executive,” he said, and she echoed the word *executive* with a slowness that he interpreted as contempt.

“Perhaps it was a mistake for me not to have pursued acting more seriously,” Reginald said, not looking at Gail.

“This is the first time you’ve told me you’ve ever acted,” she said.

“My stage career is ancient history,” he said, turning to face her. “But I was a sensational Lucky.”

“I’ve never known any Luckys personally.”

“We should have named Micah Lucky instead,” Reginald said, and called upstairs to his son. Shouted.

“Oh, let our dear Micah Lucky come down on his own,” Gail said. The anger on Reginald’s face distressed Gail, and she said, “I’d give anything to see you performing in a play.”

“How about another coffee?” he said, and she told him that would be three before noon.

“Live dangerously,” Reginald said, and Gail went to the kitchen counter and returned with the coffeepot. Pouring, she said, “This is all until supper.”

“Having four or five cups today would hardly be a major transgression,” he said, sipping appreciatively his third cup of the morning.

“You should do coffee commercials,” she said, and he held his cup up to an imaginary audience and endorsed his coffee as worth waiting a lifetime for, then drank most of it.

Placing the coffeepot back into the coffee maker, she said, “Break down your discipline – allow your resolve to weaken – and your entire willpower deteriorates.”

“I’m the one who runs every damn morning, not you,” he said.

“Does my disciplined runner want another slice of toast?” Gail asked, and Reginald said that he wanted another cup of coffee.

“I won’t pour it for you,” she said adamantly.

“I can pour it myself.”

“Once you get past cup number four, there will be no stopping you.”

“So what?” he said.

“So I thought you cared about your health,” she said, touching his chest.

Reginald picked up the coffeepot and poured himself another cup of coffee. “When I finish this one, I will haul our son down here,” he said, and repeated his words louder so his son could hear them in his room. A series of banging noises from upstairs responded to Reginald’s threat, and he stood up, holding his cup, but did not walk away from the table.

“If we had a surveillance camera in Micah’s room, we’d know what he’s doing,” Gail said, smiling to emphasize her joke.

“Spare me,” Reginald said, not detecting the humor in Gail’s words. “I have an office full of electronic contraptions. Makes me feel like one of them.”

“A tiny camera wouldn’t harm us,” she said.

“I don’t want anything that reminds me of work in the house. This is our oasis from all the crappy garbage out there.”

She accused him of overreacting – and overacting – and he became even more fervent in his denunciation: “Too many damn electronic contraptions in this world. I’m sick and tired of technology and the way people worship it.”

“Technology can be useful,” Gail said.

“You want robots? We could sit around and watch them,” he said.

“Robots would be great for the drudgery,” she said.

His rage became greater: “Technology! Technology will be our undoing.”

She attempted to subdue his tirade: “A coffee maker, a toaster oven...we are not without helpful electronic devices.”

He lowered his voice: “Those simple gadgets I can put up with.”

“Use technology, don’t let technology use you,” she said, in the tone she might deal with an unruly student.

“I’ve developed a fierce animosity towards my computer at work,” he revealed, as if saying, I am an alcoholic.

“I don’t mind the computers at school,” she said. “There’s a rather cute one I like using.”

“I can’t get rid of a feeling in my gut that my computer is using me, making me fit its world, making me dependent,” he said.

“It’s only a tool,” Gail argued.

“A *malevolent* tool,” Reginald shouted at her. “Who knows what they’ll invent next.”

“There will be an abundance of useful inventions in the future,” she said.

“Perhaps an electronic device that can bring our son to the breakfast table,” he said, then spoke into his coffee cup: “Too much happening too quickly for my good.”

“You’ve adjusted.”

“Out of necessity. Simply a matter of sink or swim.”

“We need to take a trip somewhere. A tropical, remote, non-technological little island,” Gail suggested.

“With my luck, we’d get lost trying to get there,” Reginald said, and looked towards the stairs: “I am going to conduct a thorough investigation into our son’s strange Sunday-morning behavior. Sabotage his computer, if I have to.”

Gail reminded Reginald that he bought the computer for their son, purchased a much more expensive model than she considered practical. When Reginald started up the stairs, Gail said, “Ask Micah if he wants me to bring him breakfast,” and Reginald immediately declared, “He will eat his breakfast at the kitchen table.”

At his son’s second-floor bedroom door, Reginald said, “Hey, sleepy head, you’ve missed breakfast.”

From the kitchen, Gail said loudly, “Lure him down with ice cream and pancakes.”

Reginald knocked at the bedroom door, and his son told him to go away. A month ago he had walked in on his son and caught him masturbating. Masturbating, the father had said through his embarrassment, was normal, he used to masturbate when he was young. Do you still masturbate? The son asked, putting his pants back on. The father was offering a convoluted answer when he saw an old photograph of his wife on the floor. In a bathing suit. He had taken that picture of her on their honeymoon. Recalled removing the bathing suit when they got back to their hotel room. In the last month he had twice had nightmares about his father driving to pick up his

pregnant wife, and seeing Micah masturbating in the back of the delivery truck and on the front seat of the taxicab that were about to crash into his car, but both times Reginald woke up and said to Gail that he had dreamed about the albino witch, and her eyes had been twice the size of normal and shimmering lavender, his mother was right. After the first nightmare, Reginald asked Gail if she still had the bathing suit she wore when they went on their honeymoon. That style went out with bloomers, she said.

“Get yourself out here, Micah,” Reginald ordered.

“Go away, Dad,” Micah said.

Gail called up the stairs, “Is Micah coming down?”

“He told me to go away,” Reginald called down the stairs.

Reginald knocked harder at the bedroom door, his words in rhythm to his knocking: “You’re missing one of the most gorgeous Sunday mornings in the history of Creation.” Then as the father attempted to open the locked door, his son shouted, “Go away!” You masturbating in there? Reginald wanted to ask.

Gail walked up the stairs, arriving at the bedroom door as Reginald said to his hidden son, “Please come out of there.”

“Come out, sweetheart,” Gail said.

“Later,” the son said to his mother.

“Now!” Reginald yelled, and Gail told him to leave their son alone. “Something’s wrong,” Reginald insisted, and Gail told him that nothing was wrong. “A child shouldn’t run a household,” he said, and she replied that little Micah wasn’t running anything. Reginald knocked repeatedly at the door, and Gail attempted to restrain him: “Darling, please, darling...” Reginald hit the door so hard that he hurt his fist.

“We’ll have another coffee, and talk about this,” Gail said, leading Reginald down the stairs. Looking at his hurt hand, he went back to the kitchen, and moaned, “I hope I haven’t broken a bone.”

“You’re not having a very good day,” she said, trying to sound as sympathetic as possible.

“When’s Micah coming down?” he said, flexing his fingers, satisfied that he had not broken a bone, and sat down at the kitchen table.

“One more cup, that’s it. Promise me,” Gail said, starting to brew a fresh pot of coffee.

“He better come down soon,” Reginald said, not promising to make this his final cup of the morning.

“He’s not hurting anyone,” she said. “There’s no point in forcing him to do anything he doesn’t want to.”

“I have to go to work tomorrow and I don’t want to – to a job I don’t like,” Reginald said.

Gail turned from her coffee-making, and said, “You enjoy your work.”

“Less and less,” he said, and she challenged him: “Then do something about it, Reginald.”

“Maybe I’ll stay in my room,” he said, and she told him, “I mean something realistic.”

“It’s a damn shame lighthouses have become so automated,” he said.

“I have a hard time imagining you inside a lighthouse, darling,” she said, soothingly, not a trace of sarcasm in her voice this time.

“I assure you I have the temperament to do that type of isolated work. Too bad I missed my calling as a lighthouse-keeper.”

“Perhaps you could tend mirages – like a master gardener, only with beautiful, exotic mirages.”

“A mirage-keeper, I like the sound of that,” he said, rubbing his chin in contemplation, and she mimicked his gesture, saying, “Hazardous work taking care of those mirages,” the sarcasm edging back into her words.

“I could handle the responsibility. I have a strong affection for mirages.”

“As long as you can tell when they’re mirages and when they’re not,” Gail said, and brought the coffeepot to the table. Pouring Reginald a coffee, but not for herself, she added, “Fresh coffee for my mirage-keeper. Give a change some real thought, if you’re unhappy with your job,” then returned the coffeepot to the coffee maker.

Bowing his head, he said, “It’s a little too late in the game for me to start a new career.”

“No, it’s not,” she said, joining him at the table, concerned with the sadness in his voice.

Reginald drank his coffee quickly, urgently, as if he were being coerced, and took his empty cup over to the kitchen counter, Gail a step behind him. “Your nerves will be unsalvageable,” Gail warned as he poured himself another cup of coffee. “I won’t have any coffee tomorrow,” he said, and took a defiant sip.

Even louder banging noises than before started coming from the second floor and Reginald said, “What is that boy doing up there?”

“Micah’s probably cleaning his room,” Gail speculated.

“Could be he’s using his cere-broom to sweep the floor,” Reginald said.

“Cere-broom? That’s awful,” Gail said, adding a playful groan of condemnation.

“I thought it was funny,” he said, and drank half his coffee with another few gulps in quick succession.

“Not your best pun ever,” she said, walking over to him, afraid that he was going to pour himself yet another cup of coffee.

“Let’s go for a drive, and when we come back, Micah will be sitting at the kitchen table, the world’s most wonderful son,” Gail said.

Turning his face away from her, and finishing his sixth coffee of the morning, Reginald said, “I told you I wasn’t interested.”

“You going to stay in all Sunday?” she asked, and he gave an empathic yes.

“A drive in the country will do us both good,” she said.

“I may stay in tomorrow also,” he threatened, and she told him that he would climb the walls at home with nothing to do.

“I can occupy myself,” he said, placing his cup down next to the coffee maker.

“Not counting your morning running, you don’t have any interests outside of work,” she claimed, and he said he would develop some.

“Your work is an inseparable part of your life, darling.”

“I’m staying in all day tomorrow,” he declared.

“Fine,” she said.

“And the next day.”

"I'm not staying home, Reginald. I hate missing work."

"That's your business. Me, I am retiring."

"What about your standard of living with one income?" Gail said, appealing to her husband's practical side.

"You make enough to support me. And now that Micah's gone into hibernation, he won't cost us much," Reginald said, daring her to refute his logic.

"Now I'm starting to get curious when Micah will come downstairs," Gail said.

Reginald looked at his empty cup and said, "I don't really care any longer. If he doesn't come out in a month or two, then I might start caring again. Loneliness won't be a problem. He has his computer for companionship." Reginald reached for the coffeepot, and Gail grabbed his wrist: "Enough already. You'll be peeing from now till next Sunday." He pulled his wrist away and poured himself another coffee, saying, "Peeing is a natural function. The inability to pee is a problem."

Gail walked angrily away from Reginald, and put on a jacket: "I'm going for a drive in the country myself."

"Enjoy yourself," he said, taking the first sip of this cup of coffee, his seventh of the morning.

"Reginald, I really do want your company."

"I'm never leaving this house again."

"Why don't you lock yourself in *your* room."

"Good idea," he said, and patted the coffee maker: "I have all I need."

At the kitchen door, Gail said, "Last chance."

"I'm not going anywhere, so go by yourself," Reginald said. The banging noises from upstairs resumed, and he shouted. "What the hell is that boy up to?"

Gail moved away from the kitchen door, and said, "I'm just going to say goodbye to Micah," and went up the stairs.

Reginald followed behind her, saying, "It will all be quite comical once we find out. When you get beneath the surface of things, there's more of the comical than the tragic or horrible."

"Life can get pretty horrible sometimes," Gail philosophized.

"On the news...in the papers...elsewhere," he said.

"That man down the street," she said.

"We didn't know him at all," he said quickly, as if the speed of the words would keep even his image away.

"His son and Micah went to the same school," she said.

"They weren't friends," he argued.

"I used to see him taking walks around the neighborhood with his son," she said. "The man seemed so pleasant."

"He was a psychopath...an aberration," Reginald said.

Gail knocked at the bedroom door, while Reginald spoke: "Hope you're decent in there. Your parents are coming to visit their son." He turned the doorknob of the locked door and then knocked, so that both husband and wife were knocking simultaneously.

"Come out of your room, Micah," Reginald said, forcing himself to deliver his words calmly.

“Why isn’t he answering?” Gail asked.

“Stubbornness,” he told her. “But stubbornness can be dealt with by smashing down the door.”

“Please, Reginald, let’s go for a drive in the country,” Gail pleaded. He knocked harder at the bedroom door. “You’re going to hurt your other hand,” she warned. Stroking her husband’s cheek, she said, “Let’s go to the kitchen,” but he refused to stop his knocking. “I’ll make you some more coffee,” she offered.

As Reginald started to pound on the bedroom door, he said, “I’ve had enough goddamn coffee to last a lifetime,” and continued to pound as if he would never stop.

Vancouver author, GEORGE PAYERLE, has published two novels, *The Afterpeople* and *Unknown Soldier*. His stories and poems have appeared in periodicals and anthologies in Canada and abroad. The following poems come from a manuscript-in-progress entitled *The Last Trip to Oregon: Poems in Wake of Red's Death*.

## George Payerle / Three Poems

### The Death of Charles Lillard

He had become translucent,  
 like an angel,  
 eyes dark that had been grey  
 and looking through us, now and then,  
 over the next hill to climb.  
 I'd never seen him do this before  
 but in the sixty days since I'd seen him  
 last, he'd dropped sixty pounds  
 and aged forty years –  
 a man fifty-three gone somewhere past ninety.  
 We agreed we needed to talk.  
 It could be done tomorrow  
 and the next day.  
 Now was a time to be.  
 "Weary," he said,  
 voice a whisper of angels' wings.  
 "You're weary?" I said.  
 "Yes." And a nod,  
 and eyes gone over the hill.  
 I didn't say, "What's on the other side?"  
 thinking, "Tomorrow."  
 And he died tomorrow, 4:15 of the morning,  
 angry that he couldn't get out of bed  
 to go to the can.  
 Contrary man gone beautiful  
 as Michelangelo's angel.  
 My friend  
 at the end of the trail  
 as always  
 simply going away.  
 A tough, gentle, outrageous sonofabitch  
 who always knew his time  
 and the next hill that's always



the other side of this one.  
 There was no tomorrow for talk.  
 We just didn't know  
 how close  
 that hill was,  
 and understood what I hope  
 I said to him,  
 that this last trip to Oregon  
 is going to be a long one

## Oyster River in Stuart Channel

in memoriam Ted Roethke

Strange beginnings,  
 like Roethke's Oyster River, its bridges shaking  
 at breakup.  
 Strange beginnings near the end of my 53<sup>rd</sup> year,  
 sitting amongst hummingbirds and beer drinkers  
 where Stuart Channel becomes Sansum Narrows  
 with all my bridges shaking because its finally  
 coming summer  
 after years-long winter,  
 like Shakespeare's Third Dick  
 praying to avoid butts of malmsey  
 and happy as hell in a survived-bitter sort of way –  
 which means faith, I guess.  
 Faith in the warmth tenuously here,  
 and the following wind driving  
 that ketch north under foresail only at full  
 hull speed,  
 and hope that the summer of 53 be  
 fuller yet and longer than the bleak  
 midwinter these past six years.  
 MV *Vesuvius Queen* thrumming due west from me  
 in oyster light.  
 I am grateful, Ted. Pray for me  
 in heaven thy dwelling place.

## Kensington Pub Thursday

i.

It is a day again

the gleam that isn't a mountain  
 this lateafternoon light toward the middle of November  
 quiet redhead posed in a perfection of sight  
 herself a study studying 10A St. NW  
 posed beyond the window glass  
 the houses winter gray & white, Mediterranean blue,  
 the gleam that isn't a mountain  
 the absence of waitresses who remind me of Lady Day  
 an ennui  
 looping back five years to Culpepper's on Tenth  
 and that other despair  
 looping through Oyster River in Stuart Channel  
 to this starker, more pellucid presence of 53  
 in which Old Ludwig's final sonorities  
 sing through the rock & roll of everyday  
 having replaced hope with dispassionate certainty  
 like the startled look of being seen  
 in her startling pale green eyes –  
 this ordinary Louvre in Calgary  
 as the light fails and the sky clears  
 for night.

ii.

The wistfulness of birth,  
 as though something simpler  
 might have been possible  
 informs us  
 that eternity is constant  
 and present  
 and thus unattainable  
 whatever that might mean.

The redhead leaves by an exit no one uses  
 unless they're local  
 and walks away in perfection in a camel coat,  
 clarity and certainty brisk with consternation  
 at being alive  
 that shines from her merciless eyes.  
 Her absence a vacant space around a polished table

into which pours  
    the presence of an unformed universe  
for which we are grateful

as though god had said  
    I am patience I am space I am  
nothing

    substantial  
as the voices infolded into multifoliate flame  
    Old Ludwig heard  
when he heard the silence.

RUTH McLAUGHLIN is a native of eastern Montana where her grandparents homesteaded. Her stories and essays have appeared in twenty magazines and three anthologies. She is at work on a memoir for which she was awarded a 1999 Montana Arts Council Individual Artists Fellowship.

## Daughter

*memoir*

Ruth McLaughlin

TRAVELING THE narrow highway across the state, my family around me silent, numbed by long miles, I remind myself again that I've survived it: after my mother's death my father selling the farm overnight for a song.

Someone else's farm we'll visit, and I've survived that too: my father selling the farm to no one I cared for, just a young, ambitious guy to whom he'd occasionally rented crop land. A grinning member of the Lutheran Church and Lions Club, he popped in to visit my father while my brother and I packed stuff to haul to the tiny house in town. He watched us sweat awhile, then zipped away.

My brother and I together survived that, partly by grasping at little souvenirs as we boxed and moved; a collection of junk from the past to plug the twin holes of loss of our mother and the farm we'd always known. I asked for my mother's diaries, old post cards, a miniature working sewing machine she'd had as a girl. In the depths of a cupboard I found the wooden butter paddle. All those years of whirling cream inside the big glass jar churn! We kids spelling our mother at the crank till at last butter was formed. Then watching her press at the clots with the paddle, drops of buttermilk springing out. In the empty kitchen I lifted the darkened paddle to my face and inhaled a whiff of rancid butter.

After a long Montana winter that I'd hoped would smooth our troubles out, two weeks ago another trouble reared: my father sold the John Deere tractor.

It was all my brother had asked for at the move, one of a few pieces of machinery kept in retirement by my father. He'd used it to plow my mother's garden and to haul water to their "yard tree," an out-of-element blue spruce that has inched to maybe twenty feet in fifty years of dry prairie life.

I'd learned to drive the John Deere as a kid, a simple machine. Dwight had a dream of restoring it; toiling year after year in California till at last it ran like new, as none of our dad's marginal machinery on our marginal farm had.

So he asked our father. "Okay," Dad said. He seemed surprised. Dwight, after all, had flown the coop right after high school, not saying much to anyone but me: "I'd like to work for someone who thinks I've got brains."

My father followed the tractor around the farmyard as Dwight tried to find a place to store it, the tractor tall. My brother drove from shed to shed, a farm boy again, maneuvering the tractor expertly from the high seat. He would be back for it in a year he said, squeezing out beside the tractor in the big garage my father had used for his truck. My father popped a tin can over the exhaust to keep out mice, and together they drained the radiator.

Then two weeks ago when I talked to my father, just a call to remind him of my family's visit, he mentioned the tractor. It wasn't the first mention in five months since leaving the farm; a couple of times over winter he'd braved the snowy road to check on things. "No leaks in the truck garage," he'd said over the phone.

This time my dad inserted in conversation, a casual remark, that the tractor was sold. "He'll be out for it tomorrow," my dad said. "A fellow in town who restores them; guess there's money in it."

"Dad!" I said. I don't usually speak up on the phone with my father but listen while he vents; I know he's lost without my mother.

"Dad," I said again. "Don't you remember that's for Dwight?"

There was silence on the other end of the phone. It's hard to challenge my dad. Impossible, my brother says. I remind him that farmers aren't used to taking orders.

"Dad, I know he's counting on it," I said.

Finally my father spoke. "Oh, he can't be."

I heard the impatience in his voice; all my life his impatience bringing conversation to a premature close.

"He'd never get the thing to California."

I felt desperate. Actually, I couldn't picture, and didn't know if Dwight could, just how a tractor would travel to southern California, but I launched into a lie for my brother.

"He knows someone with a flatbed," I said. "He's working on borrowing it." I thought that Dwight probably did know someone like that. Visiting him I've been impressed at his contacts. Always fixing things himself, he seems to know others with car parts, appliance parts, roof expertise – a whole layer of people who evade my husband and me in our ignorant fix-up life. I know my brother is shocked at our stupidity, but he is tactful.

I tried to think of anything I could to convince my father the tractor was Dwight's. He and I are twins – not really – but growing up we thought of ourselves as twins and were sometimes mistaken for it; we're just a year

apart. We played mostly with each other as kids, town and neighbors distant. We've stayed loyal friends.

"Dwight really wants that," I said though I knew I was treading dangerously. I've always been Dad's favorite, something else Dwight's been nice about. I know, with Mother gone, I'm all my father's got. He and my mother spent all their time together, not taking the trouble for friends. I've tried to fill in some of the gaps she left. Talking over old days on the phone, making their kind of jokes. I know it's worked; sometimes at the close of conversation he's slipped and called me "wife."

"Oh, heck, he better get a tractor there," my father said. I heard his end-of-conversation voice.

I called Dwight who seemed to go into shock over the phone; I tried to hear him breathe. "You've got to call Dad," I said.

On the other end of the phone I felt him hesitate. He's nice like our mother. I told him once that I'm like Dad, short-tempered and always right. He was thoughtful before his reply: "You're not as bad as Dad."

"Call him," I said again.

Instead my brother described the tractor. "It's a 1947 John Deere A, two-cylinder." I just know it's John Deere and green. His voice took on a fond tone others use to talk about their children – he hasn't any.

"It's hard to find a good one; when they sit awhile the engine locks. Even on this one I'd change the rings and pistons," he said.

A story my mother told was that one of Dwight's earliest words was *goggin*. Its meaning a mystery till one day he shouted it out as the tractor's racket began.

Traveling to visit our ill mother this year – my brother flying up to me and the two of us driving east almost to Dakota – he pointed out tractors to me. Even listening with half an ear I felt soothed by how it marked the farms we passed.

"There's a Steiger Cougar, two hundred and fifty horsepower."

Passing an orange blur obscured by windbreak he said, "Huh, an old LA Case."

My brother decided to call my father. He phoned back to say that my father concurred about the tractor, though we agreed that Dwight was not yet out of the woods. There's a remoteness about our father – something my brother the pessimist judges different from me. Dwight has always seen my father's dreaming, the brooding silences as family life swirled about, as evil; defining our father as out of sympathy with everyone but himself. Five months ago my brother said that the sale of the farm, giving away our inheritance, was final proof.

But I've always argued that glimmers we saw of another self were the real thing: a part of our father that was real, regularly awoke. There were the family vacations, two in our childhood, all my father's idea. Overnight, whisking us to the Black Hills in South Dakota where he beamed at my brother and me in awe at the giant faces.

And I've reminded Dwight of the Christmas Day we awoke to see a ladder leaned against the roof of our house; snowy footprints (a blurry version of our father's overshoes) leading away.

Just a day after the tractor crisis seemed settled, I picked up the phone to hear my brother's voice. He'd just talked to a stranger, he said, a man who called him from our father's house. "I don't want to get in the way of family," the man said. "But your father seems to want me to take the tractor."

Dwight said to me over the phone in the disgusted tone he used when leaving home: "I give up."



It is late afternoon when we reach our destination ten miles short of the farm. I slow to a crawl as I enter town; despite the all-day drive through soothing prairie hills my heart still isn't in this. But the trip is long-planned; each year we've visited my folks at the break of spring, this time my father alone. "No more big meals," I remind the kids as we halt in the muddy yard outside the house.

My father pulls open the door at first knock, looking expectant. He stands tall, broad shoulders filling the doorway. For years he's seemed the same, just his thick hair whitening. Today he's swapped his overalls for dress-up wear – Levi's and a western shirt.

Inside, he makes his usual greetings: nodding toward my husband and teenage daughter, then reaching to shake the hand of my son. My son, eleven, is sobered by this; I think no one else shakes his hand.

My father's single embrace is reserved for me, but when he looks my way I feel myself harden – I can't forget the tractor – and say, "The roads were good." My father blinks. If he is disappointed he doesn't show it.

We prepare a supper together in the cramped kitchen. Mashed potatoes, bread and butter, canned beef stew; just the basics. I think of the cheerful rattle of my mother crowding dishes at the table.

It's the next afternoon before we head out to the farm. The owner isn't around of course; merely adding the land to other holdings.

A few months ago my father mentioned over the phone that the place is being looted; tools and odds and ends of household stuff whose fate we hadn't determined being removed.

He mentioned it as an aside, his tone casual, but I felt my guts clench.

My father drives along the highway slowly, all of us packed together in his car. I look at familiar fields and pastures; at other farms empty like my father's, reduced to just a farm part.

I know this visit our farm won't look the same. Time will be rolled back – the mobile home my parents bought in retirement and placed an arm's length from the house is gone. Sold to another entrepreneur who has already set it up as a rental in town.

What's left is the house I grew up in; we turn off the highway onto the gravel road that leads to its door. It sits on a hill, a squat white house built chockablock by my father. I'm surprised again, as every time since college when I've returned, how small it is.

I'm reminded of one of the phone calls to my brother about the John Deere. Dwight diverting the conversation at the end to his favorite tractor, the huge Big Bud.

He said: "The Bud 500 is bigger than our house."

My father pulls into the yard and parks as always just outside the door. Another thing that's upsetting is how easily he refers to the farm as something past. "I went out to the old place," he'll say on the phone. You'd think it had been five years instead of five months that he left it behind!

I stare at the house before stepping out; it's always the same, unfazed by some forty years of occupation. I don't know the rigors of my father's carpentry, but I have guessed. Once he placed a birdbath in the yard using a heavy one-way disk as the dish and mounting it on a railroad tie that he buried a foot in the ground. That summer my mother snapped a picture of Dwight and me beside it, the post's wide shadow darkening the grass. For our picture we could have perched on the birdbath itself.

The house as always gazes at me with its giant eye of kitchen window, but when I step outside the car something is different. I look around the yard, then my eye is snagged. Cow pies everywhere. My father sees me staring. "The neighbor's cows broke in, the first big storm. No one to see it happen."

The kids and my husband scatter to peek in the outbuildings and I follow my dad to the house, walking gingerly. "Don't step on the Republican platform!" he calls back. I look up to see the merriment on his face. A glimpse of another self, what I call his real self, but today I don't know what to think. His wife is gone, his life's work a shambles – next year the neighbor's cows may make it into the house itself, rubbing their hides in the doorways my father carefully measured and squared. And my father smiles.

But maybe it's me that's crazy. I am carrying a camera and extra film. I am determined to take a picture of every room, perhaps every wall, of the house. And I have brought a steel tape, newly purchased, to measure the rooms.

I step inside and the first snapshot is easy; it's the elaborate kitchen cupboard built by my father along with the house. The white paint, chipped from use, still gleams; as a child I imaged the cupboard to be a miniature house itself, the little drawers and shelves its rooms. I poke inside – in jars and in the swingout flour bin are remnants enough of staples that a last scanty meal could be made.

Next I take a picture of the washstand, something nice once; perhaps when my father's father owned it before layers of paint clogged the delicate whorls. Always my father washed in a basin on it, dripping behind him a darkened trail when he stepped outside to hurl the water out.

I look above the kitchen sink to the tiny cupboard – also built by my father – where I spy a bottle of my father's Aqua Velva; always appealing in its foreign, ocean blue. My father shaved at the kitchen sink before a tiny mirror. The cupboard is empty except for the bottle of Aqua Velva; his other shaving things removed. When I squint I see why this was left; it's the Aqua Velva for ticks, a brainchild of my mother's. Ticks are impossible to kill, flat and hard as seeds; but then my mother thought of aftershave and slipped ticks to an easy, fragrant Aqua Velva death.

I see maybe two dozen ticks in the bottle; I don't take a picture. I wouldn't have noticed the aftershave at all but the little cupboard doors are opened wide as if – I feel my stomach tighten again; someone has poked and



prodded through our house. Did they intend to steal the Aqua Velva, picking it up, then rejecting it when they saw it was a mausoleum for ticks?

And that's what I mind, I think. Not a stranger laughing at us – my parents a little eccentric in their isolation – but the touching and lifting itself. I think of the caution with which Dwight and I occasionally explored the shaving shelf. Tickling ourselves with the little brush that we carefully balanced on its handle again; daring to touch our fingertips to the long straight razor that we believed dangerous even at rest.

I pass to the tiny living room which seems a shambles. A storage place for my mother after their move to the mobile home. Along one wall are catalogues and magazines in stacks, a dozen ice cream buckets in a tilting tower. A single piece of furniture remains – the sagging couch my parents elected not to move next door. My father crosses to it and sinks down; I hear him sigh. In a minute he has retrieved his pocketknife and fiddles with it, snapping the blade. He could have just come in from the fields at noon, recuperating while my mother, noisy at the kitchen cupboard, readies a meal.

Nothing to take a picture of, but then my eye is drawn to the wall opposite the couch. It's the same bland green of my childhood and begrimed, but I remember – and can see by a faint clean square – it is where the piano stood.

A dark upright; seated beside it my father played his banjo expertly, urging my mother forward through their Scandinavian songs. *Styrman's Valsen*, the Norwegian river pilot's song; and especially the delicate *Livet i Finns-kogarna – Life in a Finnish Garden* – that even under my mother's pedestrian fingers managed to sing.

Growing up I played duets with my mother – *Chatterbox, Flying Doves* – tattery music from her childhood. We played loud and fast. Both of us self-taught, our triumph was ending a piece together.

But I can't photograph the wall. Suddenly the whole idea of my camera and the tape measure seems foolish. On the couch my father is silent, drowsing or lost in thoughts of his own. From outside I hear the shouts of my children making some discovery in a shed.

I think of my brother and the John Deere tractor – the blank of the garage outside where he had carefully maneuvered it in fall. His desire for the tractor no crazier than my measuring empty rooms.

It's the holes in us, I think. My brother imagining a tractor can fill the hole in him, but I think his hole is big enough to drive a tractor through.

Always my father and Dwight were distant – I think of the glue between my mother and me, pounding out our songs in tandem on the piano.

My father and brother worked together, all day long in summer. But my father liked animals as Dwight didn't, fascinated instead by the machinery my father, cursing, worked on in summer heat. According to Dwight our father has maintained the John Deere badly, skimping on parts.

I step back and seat myself beside my father on the couch, dust rearing. There's still the shouts of my family outside. My father, who has not been sleeping, glances at me questioningly.

My mind skips back to an early memory of my brother and father together. Dwight and I had been helping our father – Dwight officially helping him; me standing near. We've watched as our father managed on horseback

to haze the neighbor's bull into the corral. Then our dad's in a hurry, anxious to phone the neighbor before the bull, agitated, gets an idea about breaking out. "Here," he says, tossing the reins of the horse to Dwight, "tie him to the corral." My brother and I are still small; Bud quibbling with his bit far over our heads. "A half hitch," my father calls, already making long strides to the house. Dwight hesitates.

"Can't you tie a half hitch?" My father halts in the dusty path to stare at my brother in disbelief. Even very young I hated these moments; I grab the reins. "I can."

And I do as my father continues to the house, looping the reins securely in the knot my father hasn't taught me either, but I soaked up hanging at his elbow whenever he saddled the horse. I prefer animals too, and reach to rub Bud's long black neck, not minding the lather. I am surprised to notice my brother's face looking at me from a little distance; furious as the bull's.

Besides me my father rises, jiggling his keys. "I'll round everyone up," he says, heading out, though I know there's nothing waiting for him in town.

Another time – my earliest Christmas memory – my father built my brother a horse. Secretly, bringing it out at last on Christmas Eve. Small and blocky, built of lumber from the scrap pile, it was a horse my brother could rock on, though imperfectly; my father's tools crude. The triangle head had dotted eyes and painted mane; leather strips controlled it. But right away my brother saw the horse had no tail. It was something he liked to watch in the pasture: entire squadrons of shiny flies roused to flight by Bud's flicking tail.

My brother, four years old, became teary. My father donned his overshoes and chore coat and went outside, though it was dark and a blizzard brewed. He came back with a fistful of bristly hair which, applied with a fence staple, became a tail. Then my brother settled smiling on his horse, leaning back at intervals to whisk the tail. My father stared.

For months whenever we glimpsed Bud in the pasture we saw the jagged hole cut in his mane.

When it came time to ride a real horse my brother declined. He traveled by bike and red wagon on our tooth-jarring roads, sometimes coupling the two together.

I took his place, impatient as my father shortened the stirrups on the worn saddle he'd had since a youth. I finally clambered aboard. I had watched my father handle Bud and knew what to do, guiding him in a smooth circle; I saw my father beam.

Outside where I expect to hear the car revved in impatience it is silent. I try to image the scene: my father pacing the yard hoping the family will get the hint and load up for home. Or just the opposite: deep in conversation with my children. On another visit he led them to the granary where he taught them how to operate the old feed grinder, a relic from his father's time. In the granary is a grindstone, also belonging to his father; a large whirling gray tablet that fascinates my son. My father has turned its crank and promised that someday he'll sharpen my son's knife; I tell my son he shouldn't count on it.

My erratic father! Though he was a loyal companion to my mother. In this living room they'd talk each night as I listened from my darkened bedroom; the low voices propelling me toward sleep.

I am startled by voices close outside the house. For a minute I can't think whose they might be. My God, I've become my father: lost in convolutions of thought as life goes on!

I step outside and see them at the far edge of the yard: the family I have left minus my brother. They stand in motley formation, my children shoulder-to-shoulder, a little shrunk from my father who gesturingly speaks. My husband, too, stands at a little remove from my dad, though leaned politely forward to listen.

What's missing of course is my mother who would have bound us together with her smile; her fluttering worry over the visit.

I'm angry all over again that with her gone my father hasn't slipped on a little of the mantle she cast off: inquiring about the kids' activities at school, laying in a supply of food for the visit. There's nothing sheltering about home anymore.

Then I see at my son's side a newly sharpened knife, and in front of him the yard tree – cut down.

I walk over as fast as I can. "What happened?" I say to my dad. Of course my son didn't do it. But the tree has been cut, I see from the trunk's clean edge.

"Oh, they had to cut it down to pull the trailer out," my father replies. At least he doesn't joke.

The tree looks like a fallen giant on its side. In its infancy it was once my brother's height. In a glossy gray photo in our mother's album Dwight stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the tree, his smile broad.

Now, as if the tree itself can't quite believe it, some of the branches, tucked against the trunk, look fresh, thought it was months ago the trailer was removed.

Everyone stares at the tree. Still carved around the stump is the circular ditch that my father in summer would fill with water hauled behind the John Deere. I'd done it a time or two myself: pulling the barrel on skids to the weedy dam where bucket-by-bucket I filled it to the brim, enjoying getting soaked under the heat. Then turning the tractor around to drive home slowly, big drinks of water slopping out onto prairie grass.

Finally I say, "You hauled a lot of water to that tree."

I expect my father to brush me off or form a joke. Instead he looks straight at me:

"Yes, I did."



My father drives home slowly, and back at his house in town is another surprise. I discover it accidentally, following him into the garage to locate a broom (I don't think he's swept out his place since my last visit). On the floor of the garage is – I can't think of anything else – my mother's coffin. The rich brown surface gleaming even under the dim light.

But it's not a coffin at all I see when my senses return, but her large cedar chest.

Her hope chest acquired as a teenager; its veneer still smooth, only a handful of scratches in its long life. At my father's move my brother and I carried it to the basement, perilously down the steep pitch of the steps. I try to picture my father pulling it up again.

My father returns from the corner of the garage with his excuse for a broom, its edges curled like the fluffy bangs I yearned for as a child. I point to the chest: "What are you doing with that?"

"Oh, I'm going to varnish it; get rid of it. It takes up space down there."

I take a breath. "You can't get rid of Mother's cedar chest!"

Of course I knew I would own the cedar chest some day, though I wasn't in a hurry. Inside was treasure that we kids were occasionally allowed to finger through, handed to us by our mother. Valentines from her youth with their crabbed signatures. Her piccolo; in an accompanying photo she holds it smartly, surrounded by her high school band. A sheaf of greeting cards, all congratulating her on marriage. And a ribbon-tied box of baby clothes whose names we liked to repeat: *kimono*, *soaker*. Two pairs of booties inside the box, one each for my brother and me.

I release the catch and lift the lid of the cedar chest. Then I can barely contain a panic: "Where's all her stuff?"

"Oh, there wasn't much of anything," my dad says. He strolls away to the darkest corner of the garage. "It's here and there around the basement," he calls back.

I was irritated when my brother gave up on the tractor too soon, but now I feel it myself and turn away: If he doesn't care that I have the chest, forget it.

I fix supper for us all my dad's style, opening cans of things. My kids pick at the pork and beans, Vienna sausages and creamed corn, appalled. My father doesn't seem to notice – does he notice anything? I've been deliberately cool toward him since discovering the chest in the garage. I'm formulating a plan of survival, cutting myself loose from him. What my brother did when he left home years ago. I'll pretend I'm not his daughter. It's what he calls me over the phone – *daughter* – when he doesn't slip and call me *wife*.

Well, I won't be. I feel it as a divorce. No more comforting calls on the phone; just an occasional letter, polite. In my suitcase I've packed an extra phone from our house, and the wire and tools to extend it from the kitchen wall to his bedside; I'd planned the chore with my husband following our meal. No more. Washing the dishes, rattling them in their pan at the sink, I see my father waking one morning gripped by heart attack or stroke. No phone to call for help; no one to check on him. He'll die alone, neglected, as he's turned his back on my brother and me: our revenge.

That evening when my father's gone to bed – eight-thirty on the dot – my husband tries to comfort me with words he's said before. His field is mental health. "Remember your father's background," he says. "It's hard to give what you haven't yourself been given."

I know the stories, mostly told by my mother. My father's father a tyrant, throwing over a job as superintendent of schools to homestead land;

largely failing. When my grandmother went off to support the family, teaching in country schools, my father was left behind though only a child. Beginning at nine years of age he stayed alone when his dad made overnight trips to town; commanded to feed the livestock and cook his own meals too. The homestead shack was far from neighbors; at night the prairie black. My mother said my father slept with a gun.

I know the stories and pity my father's sufferings. But it's time for me to make a clean break.

The next morning we leave as scheduled. The abbreviated visit was planned; in the tiny house my kids have had to arrange themselves on the living room floor to sleep.

My father fixes for breakfast again a huge amount of cooked cereal; apparently refusing to believe that my children turn up their noses at it. The kids pour stale Cheerios into their bowls – bought by my mother on a previous visit – while I try to eat a share of their Cream of Wheat. I look at their blonde heads bowed over cereal and think how spoiled they are.

I wonder how they'll treat me when I'm old.

Then my teenage daughter, as if gaining courage from stirring her cereal, looks up to ask my father: "Can I have the cedar chest?"

My father looks startled, then his face seems to slowly light. His clear blue eyes – his best feature and one that I have inherited – gleam. "Why, sure!" he says.

After breakfast, while we pack the car, he measures the cedar chest and decides a single sheet of plywood will make a crate. He's excited as if he thought of the idea himself. I say I'll call a freight company at our arrival home, the one that travels across the state from North Dakota.

I ride away in the car in wonder – at my teenage daughter so often sunk in self-importance who confides that she had done this for me. At my father who has somehow been roused to the role of grandfather to her.

On the trip home I feel myself turn back to him, somewhat against my will. It reminds me of a theory about the failure of dieting: the body has a "set point" in weight toward which it always struggles to return when pounds are shed.

Of course things don't go smoothly with the chest. The next day when I phone my father he balks. The price of plywood has gone up (I've said I'll pay the bill).

"Couldn't you find a chest cheaper there?"

I call the trucking company. The woman allows as how a crate wouldn't have to be built, just the surface of the chest protected. Feed sacks or a strip of insulation would do. I call my father back, pushing him; he seems a little peeved. Impatient, he says he'll find some feed sacks left behind on the farm.

What I have to go through! I spend the next day unpacking – including the extension phone which goes back on the shelf – and wonder if the chest will arrive at my door.

I yearn for the chest, though I can't think what to put inside it and don't even know where it can fit in the house.

I'm reminded of a Big Bud story of Dwight's. He was traveling on a visit home, not hurrying. Soon enough he would feel again the gulf of his

leaving: our parents always silent towards his California life. He was taking the time to cruise through tractor dealerships fringing small towns when suddenly he saw a 500 horsepower Bud, something he'd only seen in pictures. The silver giant bigger than our house.

He slowed the car, then stopped. He got out, and found himself mounting the steps to the railed deck, then trying the cab door. To his surprise it was unlocked. He entered and sat down.

"It was like a big beautiful room," he said.

He wasn't interested in examining the buttons and knobs, the two-way radio and tape deck; not even the electronic screen displaying tire slippage. He just sat there.

He kept waiting for someone to shoo him out. He saw faces staring at him from the dealer's window but no one came.

"I just sat there the longest time," Dwight said. "I don't know why."

The next day the chest arrives at my door. But not looking at all like itself with a green blanket around it; one I remember from childhood. The blanket is not tied on; my father has unbraided a length of rope and woven its skeins through slits cut carefully along the blanket's edge. As if sewn on; snug and protective except for a gap, several inches wide, across the top where the blanket ends don't meet.

Something he just didn't see?

But I'm so glad to have my mother's cedar chest; I hug it at the door. I discover a wooden hinge is broken; it's had some banging around.

I can fix the wooden hinge with clamps and glue. What I can't fix, and I see every time I look at the chest is a scratch it suffered from the blanket's gap. It's a deep scratch, odd-shaped, reminding me of Chinese characters or hieroglyphics. Something – like the years of my childhood and the years with my father remaining – I can't translate.

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## The Swanfly

A Dream in One Scene

May 23, 1999

Steven Michael Berzensky

I AM visiting someone in their house, a family. Daytime. I am reading my poems aloud, seated on the left side of a sofa. A flock of very small “swanflies” appears. They are as small as houseflies, but they look exactly like swans in miniature.

One of these swanflies, in particular, seems to be drawn to me. It hovers in front of me, flapping its wings in slow motion before my face. Its wings are not transparent but as white as the full moon – and they are made of the smallest feathers I have ever seen. Nor does it have the conventional body of a fly. Its alabaster neck is long and arched. Lacking the six legs of an ordinary fly, its two tiny feet are webbed. And instead of a pair of red beady turrets for eyes, its head swoops delicately into a pointed beak. I do not doubt what I am looking at: a swan reduced to the size of a housefly.

I seem to be in communication with it, because eventually I realize it can read my mind, what I am thinking about it, what I would like it to do. I want it to fly as close to me as possible. There’s no reason to be wary of me – I would not harm it in any way. Finally, it seems to realize how much I admire its beauty and flying skills. After hovering in place, like a hummingbird, just a few inches away from me, now it floats somewhere directly above my head. I cannot see it but I know it is there, and I am deeply moved by its trust in me and by its closeness, which seems very much like a sign of love, the kind a dog would show to its master.

I cannot concentrate on my poetry at this point. I am not sure if anyone else in the room can see what is happening. Finally, I cannot keep silent about this wondrous swanfly. (In my dream, I call it a swan, only now am I giving it a correct name.) Although no one else can see it, I ask for help: I want to locate this magnificent snippet of a swan. "If you find it," I instruct, "don't hurt it!"

I am hoping it did not get tangled in my hair. Someone looks: it is not there. And someone looks on the floor. "Here is something," he says, and he scoops a small dark object into the palm of his hand. When he uncups his hand, I see what looks like an ordinary housefly. "No, no, that's not it," I say. "It was white and it looked exactly like a swan." Everyone looks but none of us can find the swanfly.

My emotions are mixed. I am glad it's not dead, so it's good that it cannot be found. But it's possible it was accidentally killed, either by me or the other searchers. We can't locate its corpse among the dust.

Then other thoughts come to me. Perhaps the swanfly dissolved in the air after it came into direct contact with my head, my body. Perhaps it even became invisible and flew inside of me. Yes, perhaps this is where the swanfly flew. Deep inside my skull, my brain. That would be fine with me.

I don't really know what happened to this amazing insect with a swan-like shape. I am trying not to feel sad about its fate. But I am grateful for its existence.



STEVEN MICHAEL BERZENSKY was the Featured Poet in Vol. 1, No. 2 of *The New Orphic Review*.

## The Day They Buried the Poet

Steven Michael Berzensky

all his unfinished poems  
 rose up in a display of anguish  
     a flurry of silent protest

and scattered themselves  
     through his curtained windows  
 carelessly left open

    by the mourners who said  
     “we are the poet’s good relatives”  
 but who had no more respect for poetry

than they had for any scribbles on paper!  
     Oh, the day they buried the poet

they chose not to bury with him  
     his estate of unfinished poems

and so the horde of incomplete scraps  
     traveled far across the city

to cling to the cast-iron barrier  
     outside the graveyard

and there they grasped the black fence

    those bony paperthin fingers  
 pale petals of broken flowers

[1981 – 1999]

HILLEL WRIGHT is the author of *Single Dad* and *Welcome to the Below Tide Motel*. His stories have been published in *Big Valley*, *Black Cat*, *Event*, *Expression*, *Island Life*, *Minus Tides*, *Tongue Tide*, *Westcoast Fisherman* and *Wordworks*. His manuscript *Zen Coyote Stories* is seeking a publisher. Hillel teaches in Japan.

## The Black Cat of Yamato Machi

August 14, 1999 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Jorge Luis Borges

### Hillel Wright

“We should find our heroes in the bathroom mirror...”  
Bill “Spaceman” Lee, *The Wrong Stuff*

“...your name is Jorge Luis Borges. I, too, am Jorge Luis Borges.”  
Jorge Luis Borges, *The Other*

“To quote my own hero, ‘I, too, am Jorge Luis Borges.’”  
Hillel Wright, *A Borges Trilogy*

IN CANADA and the USA, the laundromat has become an urban icon. Not only a place for students, yachties and marginals to wash and dry clothing, it has lately become an art gallery, a singles’ club and a cappuccino bar. In England it became a movie star in the 1985 punk-rock classic *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

But in Japan, for whatever reasons, laundromats are rare, and when by chance you find one, it’s usually small, unkempt and out-of-the-way. So it was while searching for the elusive laundromat in the hot humid summer of 1997 in Niigata, Japan that we discovered the Nuttari Library and its incredible English language collection.

When I left Vancouver Island to teach English in Japan in July 1997, I had very little room in my luggage for books. For poetry I took Ferlinghetti’s *A Coney Island of the Mind* and *Starting From San Francisco*, Gregory Corso’s *Gasoline* and Brautigan’s *The Pill vs. The Springhill Mine Disaster*. For fiction, J.D. Salinger’s *Nine Stories*, Herman Hesse’s *Siddhar-*

tha and a little-known personal favorite, Les Galloway's novella *The Forty Fathom Bank*. I also took Gary Snyder's *Earth Household* and from my collection of the works of Borges, only *The Aleph*.

So I was thrilled and delighted to find an extensive collection of Penguin Classics at Nuttari, this out-of-the-way branch of the Niigata Municipal Library, including not only British and American writers, but also translations of Proust, Sartre, Tolstoy, Eco, Mann, Genet, Sagan, Marquez, Tagore, Kafka and many other modern international authors including Jorge Luis Borges.

We cannot underestimate the importance of the library in the life and works of Borges. "If I were asked to name the chief event in my life," he tells us in *An Autobiographical Essay*, "I should say my father's library. In fact, I sometimes think I have never strayed outside that library."

Borges' first regular full-time job, from 1937-1946, was at an obscure, out-of-the-way branch of the Buenos Aires Municipal Library. In 1946, because of his anti-fascist sympathies during WWII, Juan Peron ("a president whose name I do not want to remember...") "promoted" Borges to Inspector of Rabbits and Chickens at the public markets. Since rabbits, as well as chickens, are symbols of cowardice in Argentina, Borges resigned from the civil service and began a new career as an academician, teaching English and American Literature in Argentina and Uruguay. In 1955, following the revolution which deposed Peron, Borges was appointed Director of the National Library of Argentina.

Although Borges was often bored or depressed by the tedious routine and trying co-workers at the branch library, he was able to read copiously and to write some of his greatest stories, including "The Lottery in Babylon," "Death & the Compass," "The Circular Ruins," and "The Library of Babel," which he described "as a nightmare version or magnification of that municipal library."

Recently, in one of my Japanese EFL classes, I was giving examples of concrete and abstract English nouns. "*Friend* is a concrete noun," I began. "*Friendship* is an abstract noun. *Book* is a concrete noun; *literature* is an abstract noun." *Library*, I am convinced, for Borges, was an abstract noun.

My job at the language school in many ways resembles Borges' job at the library. His colleagues, he tells us, "were interested in nothing but horse racing, soccer matches and smutty stories." Replace horse racing with football pools and soccer with hockey and my fellow teachers are described to a T. Like Borges, I go on with work of my own during the long breaks between morning and evening classes, and more and more of my time is now spent at the Nuttari Library.

It was in that library, which by the way measures a mere four by seven meters, that I recently borrowed *Labyrinths*, which I had left behind in Canada two years ago, and read, perhaps for the first time diligently, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," which many scholars and critics have called Borges' greatest single work. (Borges himself preferred "The Intruder.")

It was in that story of an alternative world that I found the following quotes: "The concept of plagiarism does not exist: it has been established that all works are the creation of one author who is atemporal and anonymous," and "All men, in the vertiginous moment of coitus, are the same

man. All men who repeat a line from Shakespeare are William Shakespeare.”

Although I had probably read “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” prior to writing *A Borges Trilogy* in 1992, I do not remember being conscious of the above quotes. In fact, I originally found the story rather impenetrable and, to use one of Borges’ phrases, I was defeated by it. But perhaps, unconsciously, its precepts were absorbed. I was first attracted to Borges by *A Universal History of Infamy* and I share the master’s enthusiasm for “The Intruder,” in spite of what today would be called its lack of political correctness. I also number among my favorites “Death & the Compass,” “Ulrike,” “Streetcorner Man,” and “The Lottery in Babylon,” all far more accessible than “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius.”

In conclusion, I should report that I recently discovered a small, unkempt laundromat on an out-of-the-way street in my own neighborhood, several kilometers from Nuttari. I was walking along my usual route from my apartment to the downtown area, when a black cat crossed my path. Being the superstitious sort (this same superstition exists in Japan), at least of the better-safe-than-sorry variety, I detoured down an out-of-the-way street and, lo and behold, there was a laundromat. None of my colleagues in the neighborhood knew of its existence. If they had, I may never have discovered the Nuttari Library, nor carefully read “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” nor composed the memoir you are now reading but, like an image in a mirror, has slowly receded into nothingness.

“A Little Death” is the fourth installment of HILLEL WRIGHT’S novella *All Worldly Pursuits*, begun in Vol. 1, No. 1 of *The New Orphic Review*. The title of the novella comes from the sayings of Milarepa, Tibetan Buddhist Bodhisattva and “father” of Zazen. The full quote: “All worldly pursuits have but the one unavoidable and inevitable end, which is sorrow; all acquisitions end in dispersion, buildings in destruction, meetings in separation and births in death.”

## A Little Death

Hillel Wright

“– love is bitter, death is sweet.” Jack Kerouac, *Maggie Cassidy*

LAURA AND Wiley were having another fight. As usual, it concerned the amount of time he was prepared to spend with her while he was in the city. Wiley was now back on Pitlamp Island, about five hours by road and ferry from Vancouver. He came to the city about twice a month and usually stayed three or four days. He had other friends in the city, mostly in the East End, and he wanted to spend his days visiting with them – fellow writers or fishers mostly; islanders forced into the city for jobs.

He still represented the stripper’s agency in Vancouver, and booked a few acts in the North Vancouver Island bars that served as R & R for loggers just out of camp or fishermen in harbor. His circuit included Courtenay, Campbell River, Ucluelet and Tofino. He was able to work part-time as an agent and spend most of his time writing and parenting his teenage daughter Marie on Pitlamp Island.

Laura was now beginning to support herself as an artist. Most of her friends lived in Kitsilano where she lived, or in the West End, where she worked. Laura worked at a gallery which didn’t open until noon. She liked to lie in bed until eleven and then rush off to work and grab a cappuccino and a croissant at a little bakery near the gallery. She liked sex in the morning too, liked the tension that followed penetration, liked daydreaming about a final consummation later that evening. In this way, Laura was able to draw out the sex act all day, at least in her imagination.

Wiley, after years of country living and single parenthood, was an early riser. He liked to get up about seven, walk through the neighborhood and

cut up an alley to 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, where there was an early-opening café. After a coffee, a refill and perhaps a cheese and spinach brioche, he liked to walk back toward Laura's apartment, stopping at a discreet nook in the alley between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> to smoke a morning joint. When he arrived back in the apartment, Laura would be stirring impatiently in bed, and they would have sex, very slowly, with much foreplay, and finally he would have an orgasm. Then he would cuddle with Laura for as long as he could before rising to go to the bathroom to urinate.

Laura enjoyed the afterplay as much if not more than the foreplay or actual intercourse. As she rarely experienced orgasm through foreplay or intercourse, it was the warm feelings of the afterplay, the little kisses and caresses, as well as the tingling of the penetration, and the liquidity of Wiley's orgasm that she took to work with her and nurtured through the day, until she returned to the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue apartment in the evening to consummate her day of sex.

In the years of her marriage to fisherman Holgar Larsen, a man nineteen years her senior, and a workaholic in an intense and competitive occupation, Laura learned the liberating practice of masturbation, and it was on this practice that she could depend for her orgasm. In the evenings, after work, after a light dinner – a Caesar salad or tabouli, after a walk with Wiley around Kits Beach or, if the weather was bad, an hour or two of PBS, she liked to tease Wiley into a high state of excitement, with coy language and lingual foreplay and then be penetrated from behind while at the same time dexterously manipulating her clitoris.

The years of solitary pleasure and fantasy had taken a strong hold. She knew the pace, the degree of pressure, the exact image, the exact spot. She could trust her orgasmic enterprise to no one but herself.

Wiley had some reservations about her sexual proclivities, but her voluptuousness, her enjoyment of all things erotic and sexual, her ability to arouse his passions with her teasings, all collaborated to make him, in a sense, a slave to her masturbatory practices. At the worst of times, he thought of himself as an object, a cleverly designed robotic dildo in the hands of a woman indifferent to his emotional needs, one bent simply on satisfying her own needs in the only way she knew how. It was for this reason, this need of hers to set the scene and control the action that he most felt his independence threatened, his choices and actions restricted, his freedom denied and his inner being enslaved.

And any slave, even lying in the literal lap of luxury, will feel the urge to escape, the need to run free.

So this was the basis of their arguments, although they took more superficial forms. She hated to come home from work and find the apartment empty. She hated looking for him in his smoky, noisy, macho East End haunts like Grandview Billiards or Joe's Continental Bar. She hated his dislike of technology, which translated into refusing to leave messages on her answering machine. So she attacked him for caring more about his male friends than he did for her.

Both of them, at heart, knew these accusations to be false, but both became attached to their positions. He would cite his business needs. As a writer and agent he needed to talk to other writers, to see exotic dancers

perform. As a budding editor (he had started to publish a literary magazine) he needed to make contacts with contributors, advertisers, printers, distributors. His forays into Vancouver gave him access to his professional needs. He needed to make hay while the sun shone.

She would point out that since her job limited her travel, his relative freedom in this respect should oblige him to make himself available to her during her free time. What was the point of his visiting her if he was somewhere else when she came home? She was not, she argued, monopolizing his time. She was simply desirous of making the most of their time in the city together.

Today was a Sunday and they had slept in late, as Laura wanted, and had made love; he to orgasm, she not. He was now irritable, wanting his coffee, his breakfast and his cannabis, but did not wish to appear restless in her company, did not wish to reveal his desire to break out of the cocoon of the drape-darkened apartment, the heavy bouquet-scented quilts, and to fly down the windy, sun-drenched streets.

She was also distressed, hoping to keep him another night, to stave off his boredom with her romantic orchestrations, to hold him as a living proof against her auto-erotic needs.

He had never, of course, been bored in the early days of their romance, which had begun about a year and a half ago in a Vancouver art gallery, the Cosmic. There had been a portrait show by Michael Dunsmore, a well-known Gulf Island painter famous for his skillful technique and his tongue-in-cheek sense of humor. All of his paintings had a punch line. Some of the jokes were subtle like the old tropical plant quietly worked into a temperate rainforest landscape. Others were more obvious, like the gloved epoxy hand with beer can reaching out of the portrait of the manager of the island's recycling depot, or the black cast iron cook stove frying pancakes, worked into his copy of figures on a beach from Picasso's blue period. One time, he'd copied a Rembrandt self-portrait on a metal shower drain.

But the show at the Cosmic in early 1989 consisted of original portraits of island characters, and while the humor might be more clear to the locals, like Wiley Moon, who knew them, the good-natured portrayal of their personalities shone through the paintings and could be readily apprehended by any viewer. The portrait of "Lucky" Singleton, a successful and popular island salmon troller, revealed an outgoing nature and ingenuous character utterly diametric to Holgar Larsen, the fisherman Laura had been married to for nineteen years. She had been staring, unable to pull her gaze or her thoughts from this picture, when she was first approached by a strange man about her own age, Wiley Moon.

Wiley Moon was not only a stranger to her, but he was also a strange man for a fisherman. He wrote poetry, which was perhaps not so eccentric, as many fishers at times turn their callused hands to verse, but usually it's filled with forced rhymes and careless, if not downright sloppy meter. Wiley's poetry ranged from skillful haiku on West Coast themes to long, free verse narratives with personal or political agendas.

He was a believer in environmental causes, and while not an outright activist, he'd written articles and editorials supporting various protests and demonstrations, even while still engaged in the fishery. And while not ef-

feminate or bookish, he preferred to stroll around a gallery or read a novel to hunting or gambling or hanging around in bars, the recreational occupations of most of the fishermen she knew. Shooting pool was the main exception to this rule.

Laura gathered a lot of this information on their date later that night. She had been a little surprised when, after some small talk about the portrait show, he asked her out for the evening, especially when he suggested the poetry reading at the new Harbor Center.

The next week she asked him out, to a fund-raising dance to save the Stein Valley, in the province's western interior, from clear-cut logging. It was there that she discovered the number of native rights activists and environmentalists he knew. She was pleased to learn that he was an enthusiastic, if somewhat less than graceful dancer.

Their third date had been a mutual decision, the new Wim Wenders film, a fantasy love story called *Wings of Desire*.

But it was not until their next date, after she had returned to Vancouver from her week on the Gulf Islands with H el ene Boisvert, when he came to her 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue apartment for dinner with red roses and a bottle of almond liqueur, that they finally fell into bed. He was most assuredly not bored then. He woke her up twice during the night, explored every orifice, rounded every curve with eyes, fingers and tongue. The third time, still half asleep when he entered her, she neglected to touch herself, clinging to his hard angular shoulders to keep his hard stiffness inside her while she screamed herself awake with the orgasm.



It was 2 p.m. when Laura and Wiley descended the three flights of stairs from her top floor apartment in the old wood-frame house, now a city-owned apartment, to the late springtime sunlit street. On the sidewalk, in front of a budding white rose bush, lay one of her neighbors in the building, Herbert Wing. Wing was not a drinker, but a quiet man, a former priest who worked with addicts and alcoholics in the Downtown East Side. Laura was amazed to think of him lying drunk in broad daylight in front of his house.

Wiley could see that Herbert Wing was dead. He lay on his side with his knees foetally bent, his skin bluish-gray, his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth locked half open. Laura screamed as she saw Wiley put his hand on Wing's mouth to feel for breath and then to his heart to feel for a beat. The O'Riley's, Paul and Gwen, who supervised the building and occupied the ground floor, heard Laura's scream and opened their parlor window.

"Call 911," Laura shouted. "Call an ambulance! Mr. Wing's in trouble."

"Mr. Wing's out of trouble," Wiley thought, but said nothing.

"We should give him mouth to mouth," Laura shouted to Wiley.

Wiley looked at her blankly. Although he had once learned this technique as a teenager in a Red Cross Lifesaving course, he had never practiced it and really had little idea of what to do. The idea of covering the mouth of a dead stranger on the sidewalk with his own was repulsive, enough so to overcome a vague sense of guilt he associated with their inaction.



“The rescue crew will be here soon,” he said as evenly as he could. His body was beginning to tremble. Laura had turned white as a sheet and had now sat down on the grass beside the rose bush. The scream of the ambulance siren could be heard rushing down 4<sup>th</sup>, now turning up Maple. Wiley breathed a sigh of relief and felt the guilty trembling begin to subside.

The ambulance drove right up onto the curb. The two paramedics leaped out carrying their equipment. They tore Mr. Wing’s white shirt open and attached suction cups to his chest. Wiley could see that his skin looked sal-low and dull.

Suddenly Wing’s body trembled and shook. The lifesaving apparatus had been activated. The body relaxed into inertia and then kicked and sput-tered, like a car with the clutch released suddenly while still in gear. Once again Wing’s body lay gray and still.

The rescuers tried a third time and a fourth. Wiley conjured up an image of a prisoner in an electric chair as Wing’s body leaped and shuddered in response to the voltage. Finally, the ordeal was over.

The attendants brought out a gray blanket and a stretcher. Wing’s legs were straightened out and an attempt was made to close his mouth. Then he was covered with the gray blanket and the visage of mortality was removed from public view.

By this time a small crowd of onlookers, mostly neighbors, had gathered in front of the house. The O’Riley’s, who obviously had been drinking for an hour or two already, invited Laura and Wiley into their apartment for a drink. Although he’d been visiting Laura for more than a year now, Wiley had never been in the O’Riley’s flat nor been formally introduced to Paul O’Riley. He knew Gwen O’Riley, a matronly, slightly boozy neighbor to whom, he figured, it paid to be polite. Now they were sitting around her kitchen table drinking Napoleon Brandy. No one knew much about Herbert Wing. He lived quietly and alone on the second floor. He went to work regularly and paid his rent on time. He had few visitors, no parties. There was a vague rumor that he was writing a book. No one knew the subject.

After two drinks and a decent interval of abstracted conversation, Wiley and Laura were able to extricate themselves from the O’Riley apartment. It was about three-thirty in the afternoon. They both felt numb, as much from the brandy as from the shock of Wing’s sudden death, and empty of all emotion. The argument was forgotten, as was the noon-hour love-making, and a feeling of ennui pervaded. They stood in front of the house for a moment and silently decided to walk together to the beach.



Kits Beach was sunny and windy. The sun seemed to burn off the mists of sorrow precipitated by their close encounter with death, and the wind seemed to blow away the desperation of their own stalemated relationship. On their way back up the hill a few hours later, the couple felt renewed, fresh, innocent, enthusiastic. They made dinner together in the apartment’s tiny kitchen. Laura made pasta from scratch and Wiley cut up mushrooms, vegetables and spices and set a sauce to simmering.

They ate their meal with gusto and shared a liter of red wine. Wiley proposed going out after dinner, perhaps to a movie at the Hollywood or the

Ridge, but Laura declined, saying she preferred to see what was on PBS. She'd been out enough for one day, she said.

While Laura looked for something politically and intellectually acceptable on TV, Wiley went out on the fire escape and lit a joint. The sweet fumes of the indica permeated the atmosphere and created a sensual feeling in Wiley. As the sunset turned the bright tones of the day mellow through the warm-colored curtains of the apartment, Laura's voluptuousness was enhanced in his eyes as she moved around the apartment arranging pillows on the sofa.

At the moment, he was reminded of what he first saw in her, eighteen months ago at the Cosmic Gallery, and for the next half a year as they built the relationship which had now, apparently, developed cracks along its seams.

It began to bear strains about a year go, when he found a small beach-front cabin for rent up on Pitlamp Island and began preparing for his children to spend the summer with him there. He remembered, at that time, a saying he'd overheard his grandmother telling his father when he was about thirteen and one of his older cousins was having relationship problems: "When a divorced man marries a divorced woman, there's four in the bed."

And, as he soon began to find out, when the divorced man has three children, the house overflows with presences, real, spectral and speculative.

The summer, for the most part, had been fun. George was sixteen and the island was his kingdom. He and his friends roamed the back roads in their beat-up Chevies, or Fords or Cornbinder half-tons, fished the lakes for trout and the Channel for Coho and cod, played pool evenings on the secondhand plywood table they found at a garage sale and set up in the living room and, at weekend dances at the community hall, drank bootleg beer and smoked homegrown reefers with their high school girlfriends and their summer visitors in the playground or the parking lot while the adults, like Wiley and Laura, danced to the music of the local R & B band or groups like the Shuffle Demons, Rare Air, The Hard Rock Miners or Spirit of the West, on summer tours around the islands.

His daughters, Marie and Camille, fourteen and twelve, were, of course, more dependent and so more demanding of his time and attention. Marie worked as a day camp counselor and evening baby-sitter and Camille had a best friend, Annika, who was spending the summer with her grandparents who lived next door.

Laura came up on days off twice a month and began to make her own friends among the artists and environmentalists who, in disproportion to the rest of the country, populated these once wild and remote islands, hoping to somehow stave off the twin forces of industrial logging and real estate development.

In August, Marie went to Oregon to visit Wiley's sister in Ashland and Colleen's brother in The Dalles. So if George was camping on the beach with a gang of friends and Camille was spending the night next door with Annika, Laura and Wiley could once again allow their passions free rein in the small, romantic cabin on the beach.

In September, after a family reunion at the annual Labor Day Island Farmers' Fair, Camille returned to live with her mother Colleen on the Sun-

shine Coast, and George began his year as an exchange student in Costa Rica. Wiley and Marie set up the cabin for winter, getting in the firewood, fishing for the freezer, harvesting potatoes and drying herbs from the garden. In return for her help, Wiley promised to teach Marie how to drive. Laura visited once a month and Wiley began his twice monthly weekends in Vancouver.

Their love affair, along with Indian Summer, lasted well into October, but with the onset of the winter storms, cracks and leaks started to appear. And now, after weathering Laura's belated period in February and a fight about his parenting style in March, their romance was still afloat but, like a ship whose engine has thrown a connecting rod, was drifting perilously toward the rocks.



Suddenly, the languorous mood of the evening dissipated, and Wiley felt a seething of energy as the cannabis sent stimulating chemistry through his veins. Laura also felt a stirring of some unknown vitality and as Wiley returned inside he met Laura approaching him through the kitchen. They rushed, fell, into each other's arms. They kissed furiously, tearing at each other with teeth and fingers, pulling off each other's garments, buttons flying, the hooks of Laura's bra strap snapping in the wild impatience to expose their concupiscence, each to the other. Wiley's mouth found her stiff and extended nipples and Laura's hot hand cupped his sweaty balls even before he had time to knock his shoes off or free his pants from around his ankles.

At once they were lying together on the kitchen floor, Laura's wetness slickening the linoleum, her legs raised in lewd and lustful invitation, as Wiley's grasping hands raised her plump white buttocks off the floor and he entered her forcefully, but easily, she was so slick and wet. She scissored and locked her legs across his lower back and squeezed, pulling him toward her, deeper and harder inside her, at the same time biting, kissing and licking his ears, neck and teeth.

He heard her characteristic cries as she reached orgasm, and his mouth opened too, but instead of relaxing as she usually did, she rolled them over and emerged from the ball of their flesh astride him, her breasts bouncing around his eyes and ears and lips as she drenched his thighs with her sudden, sustained ejaculation, and the air became sweet and sharp with a scent like warm pineapple, and resounded with their shouts and moanings.

How long they thrust and shook and shuddered in sensual ecstasy, neither of them knew. How long they trembled in the afterglow of their voltaic comings, neither measured. Darkness had fallen upon the city, a streetlight from 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue was the only glow through the thick amber curtains, and a shroud of emotional emptiness settled over them, like a little death.

# The Last Rites Hotel

Ernest Hekkanen

Here in the dark of the Last Rites Hotel  
doors swing askew on hinges,  
keeping time to the rock of bedsprings  
where joy is had for quarters, even pennies.

Hotplates perform daily miracles,  
and everywhere grease is rife.  
There is the bottle which will hold off  
the night. There is the crack in ceiling plaster  
where despair seeps through like a stain.

I have had my fill of spuds and gravy,  
I have drunk the red glow down into my guts,  
and now I am back in the streets,  
holding firm my course in the jostle and sway.

What I want is a fair day, and no more  
voyages on the Polar Bear which breaks the ice.  
I want embraces which will never let me go,  
and to wag until my sorrow's wagged out.

But what I am left with is this: a souvenir  
from the Isle of Man, one that ripples  
like sail or scar on the sea of my heart.

*Featured Poet*

Catherine Owen



**Starvation Landscape**



CATHERINE OWN now resides on Victoria Drive in Vancouver. Her poems have appeared in many literary magazines and in the anthology *Chasing Halley's Comet*. With her own press, she published her first three books *And the Silence, Stone, Wearing the Yellow Jacket* (with the Stray Dog Poetry Project) and *Her*. Exile Editions of Toronto recently published her latest book *Somatic – The Life and Work of Egon Schiele* which was nominated for the Gerald Lampert Award. Upcoming books include *Starvation Landscape* (from which the poems in this issue were selected) and *The Wrecks of Eden*.

## Motes on Poetry

Catherine Owen

“Those who speak for the inhuman are an endangered species.”  
Robinson Jeffers

POEMS DO not have to be peopled. Or people can reside in the margins of the poem, ousted from their false position as centerpieces. Poems may displace people, but not to render them refugees; to offer them, instead, a heightened sense of recognition. As Oriental art features the human as minuscule script set against the immense epic of the mountains, so the poem too can restore proportion. It's an endless struggle not to humanize everything – perhaps it's impossible – apart from the brief glimpse a haiku presents. The poem can offer another channel through which to “know” things, resistant as it is to simple categorizations, rejecting understanding through the control and closure of names (whether it be “wolf” or “canis lupus”). From the solitude of Walden Pond, where he was trying to “be” with the essence of other species without immediately reducing them to food, lucre, experiment, or, yes, even metaphor, Thoreau wrote, “As soon as I begin to be aware of the life of any creature, I can at once forget its name.” An awareness of life, and life in all its imagined abundance and diversity, is a prerequisite for the writing of a poem. The bottom line, in any meaning of the term, is anathema.

Simplicity, not the lowest common denominator approach of accessibility, is what draws me to poetry. The opportunity to be uncluttered. Fiction is often awash with pop-culture particulates “signifying nothing” beyond the trivial moment. Many poems are too, unfortunately. This glut, so prevalent

in other media, has infected poetry to an overwhelming extent. Why? Part of the reason might be a need to prove topicality, relevance, while another might be the mistaken assumption that the poem is merely a compost heap full of “stuff I’ve seen.” Look through any Canadian literary magazine and you’ll smell the stench of sameness. Narratives, anecdotal and colloquial, are easier to peruse for the publisher after all, not to mention more accessible to the dumbed-down public, and simpler to “teach” in creative writing departments, than the rhythm and mystery-driven lyric. Perhaps when I speak of the unpeopled poem, I am referring only to the lyric, a form which refocuses the lens through which we look at life, a collaboration with the unknown in the transcription of a moment of epiphany. Both the contained shape, and the rhythmic intensity of a lyric enable an imagery of a different order than can usually be found in any other genre. This order – whether you call it the inhuman or the transcendental – is endangered in this homogenous, technical and cynical age.

“Poet and painter alike live and work in the midst of  
a generation that is experiencing essential poverty in  
spite of fortune.”  
Wallace Stevens

The much-hyped resurgence of poetry among the masses is a myth. “Popular” poetry is a contradiction in terms. Hordes of people didn’t swarm into Russian football stadiums to hear Yevtushenko’s poetry; they came to hear rants, chants and slogans in praise of their country. It’s not poetry lovers who fill spoken word venues; it’s people seeking another brand of fast-paced sensationalistic, competition-driven entertainment. While there’s nothing wrong with that *per se*, it does not support a claim for poetry’s renaissance. Poetry is an intimate art form which tends to affect people in intricate and secret, rather than common and blatant ways. The fierceness of a poem’s diction, the compactness of its content, and the imagination inherent in its imagery, not to mention the likelihood that a poem will offer layers of allusion or metaphor, combine to make it unlikely that the masses, especially in any western society, will connect. Why is this so? I believe that it is due to an illiteracy that goes far beyond the inability to decipher written language. Many people who can read adequately enough to peruse newspapers, and even novels, are incapable (to their own minds) of reading a poem.

Perhaps they have developed an aversion nourished by the school system and its methods of “dissect and conquer,” or they have closed themselves against the emotion a poem may arouse, or they simply don’t see the significance of this ancient genre. Or perhaps they cannot read a poem because they have been so bombarded with the blaring sound-bites of countless screens that they have a societally-inflicted attention deficit disorder. The rhythmically-charged, condensed language of a poem is sealed to them because it asks for a stillness and a listening that they are no longer able to provide. It may also ask for the awakening of a child-like imagination, the possibility of which almost everything in our culture conspires against. We can become “pre-mature” if it means we’ll spend our money on video



games, but not if we intend to invest in an innocent sense of reverence and wonder in a manner contrary to economic mandates.

The strangest part about all this “illiteracy” is that even poets themselves seem to be afflicted with it! I’ve encountered too many who claim that they have difficulty concentrating on the reading of poetry, or who admit with a misplaced pride, “I don’t read poetry because I’m afraid it will influence me.” Who are one’s teachers if not the books one reads? Just think of the possibilities if even only all the so-called poets became literate and chose to purchase even one meagre book a year! What a flourishing industry we’d have – and there’d be far fewer poets who’d have to add an extra wing onto their houses to hold their accumulating boxes of unsold books! However, a byproduct of a gain in comfort often seems to be an unfortunate turning from what keeps us truly alive – the arts. As we drown in a slough of materialism and haste, a poverty of spirit and nation becomes entrenched until even the poets are no longer immune.

“Familiarity is the long enactment of surrender to a place.”  
Wendell Berry

This is a time in which a lack of commitment is mistaken for a surfeit of freedom. Having lived in one neighborhood since the age of two, I find the idea of attachment to one place compelling. Sometimes, it’s as if the inhabitants of this locus are characters in my own private play. I accord them names to describe their idiosyncracies or their physiognomies. Some of them I’ve been meeting for over twenty years and have heard all about their gall-bladder operations, their daughters in Denver and the rising price of deli meat. They are an integral part of my daily walk about the streets. No poems, however, have emerged from my encounters with them. They are the life I leave just that, unsung. Conversely, it is the inhuman aspect of this neighborhood that has claimed me so irrevocably as its denizen.

For the past two and a half years, I have written hundreds of poems about a piece of land that is all but lost to memory. This ten acre forest at the end of my street, once home to hawks, trilliums and countless, unnamed insects, once a haven for blackberries, salmonberries and fiddleheads, once a niche for firepits and children’s forts, but now metamorphosed into a multi-million dollar factory for the virtual, has fed my poetry more thoroughly than any other subject that has chosen me. Often a crisis precipitates poems. In this case, the crisis of losing a place that epitomized the real to me, has extended itself indefinitely. Through the rhythm and form of poems, I have funneled my grief and anger, in the end hopefully producing elegies that others can enter, even without a personal connection to the place. Everyone, after all, is intimate with some moment of loss. The book that emerged is a tribute to this irrecoverable terrain that I, and my neighbors, dubbed *Trillium Trails*.

Surrendering to the presence of an absence, I have been able to travel inward on the successive layers of memory, circling within on the spiraling tacks of a stump. Sometimes I fear that in these days of “fast and fun,” my

singular obsession appears monotonous. Then I think of Hesse's book on all the facets of homesickness or of Wendell Berry's many sequences on the takeover of his family farm by generations of carelessness, and I receive a sense of reassurance. Books of poems affect me most deeply when they are not about one-night stands with either a place or a person, but detail instead a long struggle with surrender to a life force that is beyond a writer's momentary choosing.

"Be it life or death, we crave only reality."

Henry David Thoreau

Poetry, somehow, makes the real that much more real. Ever since I was a child, I've had to write down my life to find it tangible, multifaceted, meaningful. Much of this life ends up in a journal (my purge-atory), occasional letters, or lists. Some of it seeks form, a persistent rhythm or a central image, and contorts into a poem. Lately, my life has tended not to land directly in a poem, but has been transmuted through the life of another, like the Viennese painter Egon Schiele, or has metamorphosed into an extended preoccupation, like the plight of extinct species. Particularly when dealing with incidents of loss or death, I never fully feel their impact or heal from my grieving, until poems have emerged to put erratic, chaotic life in its place. Not to fossilize it, seal it hermetically against further exploration, although that can become a dangerous assumption, but to memorialize, in the beauty of language, an irretrievable moment.

One's poetics are merely the meditations of a phase of growth. A searching for sense, pattern, in what often emanates from a mystery. Contradictory? Yes. But a necessary process of self-definition in these flimsy, fearful times in which any attempt to side with one's beliefs of what is "right and good," whether ethically or aesthetically, is met with resistance or suppression. Serious poets are scoffed at. In fact, seriousness in any pursuit, unless it be making money, playing sports, or keeping fit is derided, trivialized. As poets, we are denigrated to reading at the "Fool's Banquet" (whose logo is Bozo with a microphone), joining the Really Awful Poets Society, contributing to the Journal of Contemporary Literary Stuff, and participating in Slams or Magnetic Poetry Fests. In this country, another kind of gag is used to silence our real poets. Reduced to irrelevant jesters, bereft of critics to maintain our standards, and lacking a considerable, considerate reading/listening public (due to illiteracy, poor marketing and competition from screens), the poet who wishes to keep a song going today must be brutally self-reliant.

The task is to be tough against indifference.

The task is to be tender towards an infinite number of life forms.

To be an embodiment of these two acts is the real poet's calling.

Are you up to it?

## Trillium: recovery

a trembling, earth's upsurge of root  
and rock, a circuitry of worms,  
ragged ambit.

*it is against the law  
to uproot the trillium  
:trinity of sepal, leaf,  
three phases petals turn  
as they fade, white to deep  
violet.*

*it is not against the law  
to destroy their habitat  
if they should seed  
on private land.*

as the shovel darts in with sharp purpose, roots  
scramble to the surface. how many entanglements  
do we sever?  
I must strike blindly here, never knowing the circumference.

a child's lip, the earth  
quivers, a flowering erect in the center, erratic roots  
beneath, laced with grace and moss.

urgent, I cup the mass of it, press  
it inside an icecream bucket. stem's umbilicus,  
brief brightness, travels.

at the close of an hour,  
a dozen cluster  
in the dented refuge of a wheelbarrow.  
the rain begins its ablutions.  
I fill the craters I've formed  
with leaf mulch, slow loam  
to return an innocence.

*can we recover all we need to of childhood?*

the forest's dusk endangers aftersight  
:relinquished trilliums, at risk within secular plans,  
trembling.

## Trillium: transference

in the tenuous wood, you grow  
 unexpected  
 white, for an infancy, a time  
 so easily missed before purple  
 breaks  
 from your stamens, veining, then deepening  
 to a dark shrivel of age  
 all this in a matter of weeks  
 :visitation.



why this faithless attempt at rescue?  
 instead of writing this inevitable loss,

I scabble frantic in the earth,  
 packing root entrails like organs, hoping

to release them safe, suburban.  
 Are there such museums, immune from the future?



mission complete.  
 a dozen trilliums in the garden, exotic amongst  
 daffodil and tulip.

(I at turns heroic, anxious)

what can you teach me now, damaged by intervention?  
 trees, fiddleheads, streams,  
 even the silence which swelled around your divinity  
 will all die at home.



you do not anticipate the future's machines  
 but give of your white, unyielding  
 amid new bees, the ancient sound of pollination.

I fear the mockery of feet, too imminent.  
 Lend me your pure, whirring form to counter them.  
 Press your witness to my eyes.

## Trillium: submission

Because you believe in mastery,  
the white bloom has no sway.

I saw how you tried to reorder  
the lovely meander of growth

which spread in groups  
through all those parts of the woods

you hoped you would plunder. A gesture,  
nothing more, for those whose feelings

run shallow for the flower. The place you chose  
has no moisture, steeps in light like a wound

and is unkempt with humanness. How could your fingers,  
numb from keyboards, even bear the touch of soil?

Much less the stem, so green and sheer, the tri-petalled,  
tri-leaved crown, its augury of seed.

Is this why they have been planted so carelessly  
inside your plans, forms collapsed,

each flower capsized against the next? Your fingers  
soft with the age, yet too rough, roots straggled

upon the surface; the juice of the wild drying.

## The Crane

In the center of my childhood,  
a yellow shoot of steel,  
sterile eruption from still clay.

The insurmountable visual  
clings to the inner eye,  
counters human denial

with undoubtable presence.  
Not the thick, tangled thereness  
of the once-woods

but a spare, searing isness  
that is stark reminder.  
Metallic and towering

as a new form of child.



The wound is created,  
widened, and inside,  
insects work. Round & round like rings of a vacant theory, trucks  
are filled, exit, pass waste,  
return emptied.

Machines revolve on narrow freedoms.  
The crane swings  
around again, shapes its long salute over the site, spills  
a fluid of subterfuge.

Its rhythm enabled by our awe  
:the man-made intricacy  
which is effigy  
of another order.



At night,  
the red beacon  
on the crane's apex  
is cynosure  
for the new pioneers.

Floodlights at the base

soften edges, shroud the machine  
 like an apparition.  
 There is religion in its form.

By day,  
     it is a cross,  
                     thrusting towards me  
                                     from the periphery,  
 a corrugated intent  
     to call devoutness  
             from my anger.



A sparse web of remaining trees  
 through which one trail threads  
                                     awkwardly  
 A fence of metal joints encompassing  
                                     the flurry  
 A stave lodged in the core, enabling the transference  
                                     of memory  
 : all that persists  
                                     upon entry.



Twinned with the shrill wail of the crane  
 as it spins – the frail trill of winter birds.

Counterposed.

Left ear    left eye  
 receive the rôle of measurements  
 blueprints

while the right contains song  
     scrim of moss  
     tiny pubis of ice.



Once everything is erected  
     around it  
 the crane is dismantled  
     from the inside  
 :vegetable gifts, mineral donations  
     assimilated.



a desperate nest,  
     woven in the crux of the crane's cold angles  
 testifies.

## **Eating Salmon, knowing un-need**

The scene we have set for demise  
 is simple: a table laden with the immortal  
 spices of Egyptians, the endless viands  
 of Englishmen, the Native's copious salmon (so  
 thick with leaping as to seem a bloom  
 beside riverbanks). A table fashioned from  
 the far-reaching sweep of forests, eternally  
 green, fragrant and fellable. A scene played  
 out by supermarkets and their replenishable  
 shelves, aisles stocked with more myths  
 than can ever be sold. To our minds, this  
 table is infinite, and though not all humans  
 may sit, there will always be beasts for our  
 dishes, unextinguished and seasoned to taste.



## One idea of Togetherness

When our wound in the land  
causes fruit to ripen, do we then  
call it good?

When our waste in the streets  
causes scavengers to fatten, do we then  
call it right?

When our ideal of cohabitation  
is a parking lot full of pigeons, do we then  
call it wisdom?

(One asphalt hovel for humans which we dare  
to deem a hostel for all...)

HELEN BORRELL, a single (never-married) woman of seventy-five, worked as a secretary for most of her life. She has had several articles published in the *British Columbia Historical News* and is now working on a biography of Dr. Walter Gage, a professor of advanced mathematics, who devoted his professional life to his Alma Mater, the University of British Columbia.

## The Good Fortune of Michelline

Helen Borrell

“SHE SAID, ‘Kathy Holmes, you grabbed all the TV spots, to make everyone think you’re the whole Committee to Aid Vietnamese Orphans.’ And I said, ‘Hilda, if you hadn’t walked out and formed the rival Committee to Rescue Vietnamese Orphans, people would know where to donate.’ And she said – “

Michelline Bailey, President of the Aid Committee, mentally checked its funds and projects until Kathy’s hiss ran down. Then, with her best chairwoman’s smile, proud of her French accent, she replied, “You are right. I shall tell Hilda, ‘We need you – the orphans of Vietnam need you! Will you share with Kathy the TV spotlight?’ That should repair the alliance.”

Michelline pictured Hilda Thompson in the glittering evening dress whose price would clothe a dozen Vietnamese orphans; her smile glittering at Kathy as Michelline praised “our devoted workers.” They *did* work hard – to outdo each other in catching donors. The Vietnamese orphans couldn’t know that their rich Canadian friends used them to get ahead socially.

“Sorry, Michelline dear,” Kathy said sweetly. “I heard that your hubby’s trying to get the Thompson & Paton account. But Hilda should apologize, not me – if you can ever make her admit it.”

“I will reason with her,” Michelline replied. “She will return to us; a second committee cannot get TV time.” Arthur, she felt too bored to protest, didn’t explain to her his sales battles for Spalding’s Kiddies’ Choice Breakfast Foods. Only scrappy hints, and his grouchy, abstracted moods, told her

of his merciless strategies against his business rivals. Unlike her diplomacy on behalf of fashionable good causes.

“Kathy, will you read our appeal, on the French TV? I must assist the Red Cross that day; Mrs. Wilson refuses, and everyone I have phoned is busy.”

Kathy looked flattered. “Yes, if you’ll rehearse my French. I’m not sure – but did France rule Vietnam?”

“Until 1954,” Michelline replied. Vietnam, she feared, was only a name to the Aid Committee. Did they picture the orphans: thin, dazed, faceless – some literally so? Children with no childhood; they would not have recognized the dainty sandwiches and cakes she served for tea.

“Do give me this recipe!” “I shouldn’t break my diet, but –” The ritual chatter; Michelline gave the expected responses. An elaborate fantasy, it seemed to her, as the guests put on velvety furs and drove away in sleek cars. Michelline relived the startled delight the letter from Paris had brought, that morning.

*Dear Starling:*

*Your old Resistance comrades always remember our Starling, at our yearly reunions. Does your husband ever call you that? The Air Force navigator is now sales manager for a large Canadian business – so Denise Ferrier was told by her cousin in Toronto. How glad we are for your good fortune, although it took you away from us. Each of us had to find his small place, after the war. Alas, for our children “the war” means years in the Vietnam mire. Not what we lived for, as Resistant Fighters.*

*After Liberation I worked on farms in our village for two years; then I clerked in a bank, studied Accounting, and worked up slowly to become branch manager. My respected Director chose me for a business trip to Toronto. I will stay at the Park Plaza Hotel, the first week in March. Would you be as pleased as I would be, to meet a friend from those who did their best for France? To tempt you, I will keep the news of our wartime comrades for our visit.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Robert Ducharme*

Michelline had summoned to memory the faces of that youthful band before she recalled Robert – yes, an awkwardly polite lad, silent in their tense meetings. Crossing the years, she saw the bare, hidden room, the blackout curtains; heard the quiet orders. “Obey, but don’t think what they can mean,” she had always told herself. Always she had been nagged by the cramps of slight hunger and leashed dread.

Her minor part in the Resistance would have made a dull movie. She had typed ineptly on a stiff machine, and delivered messages on a wobbly bicycle. No Resistance hero, no handsome, escaping Allied flyer had fallen in love with her. She had resolved to marry one of the R.C.A.F., on that joy-drunk day when they marched into her town beside the glowing Free French, and the captured Germans had glared in sullen disbelief.

Escape! Michelline had prayed, escape from neighbors vanishing to *Address Unknown*; from concocting disguises for dull rations, and cycling miles to barter; from years of wearing mended, faded clothes. She had escaped to the comforts of Toronto. “A salesman earns so much?” she had marveled, when Arthur Bailey had spelled out his prospects in phrase-book French. “Our apartment had the magic!” she had written to her mother. She had accepted Spalding’s demands on its junior executive – late meetings, leadership in the Rotary, the Legion, and the hospital board. Not until her lonely evenings had she realized the bond of her Resistance team. They had been obliged to mature, to be unselfish; they had had dogged faith that this would continue in Free France. Their Starling had been – what were the English words? – groomed and gilded into the executive’s wife, the director of charity committees. But she had shared that youthful hope with the dimly-recalled Robert Ducharme. Warmly grateful, she had replied at once to his letter, smiling as she thought of the French idioms.

Now she was reviving from the Aid Committee meeting. She looked out at the wide lawn, the trees and the crocuses of her suburban home. Her dishwasher, stacked with tea cups, ceased gushing, and her oven timer pinged softly. Magic slaves, which I accept indifferently, she reflected. The self-cooked dinner was a feast for the eyes as she set it against the sheen of the walnut table. She expected a rare pleasure. Arthur would be home early, though *the office* had released him only because of the Thompsons’ cocktail party. Michelline kept her mind fixed on a relaxed meal for the two of them. The children now lived their own lives – she must stop calling them children. Laura, married to a Montreal store manager, had two of her own. Marianne was executive secretary to an advertising agent, and would climb to his rank, her father said proudly. Andrew was in Engineering at college, where his grades were steadily good; so, his parents hoped, his shaggy beard and patched jeans were merely put on to be *With It*.

Arthur came home to the attractive comfort Michelline had given him for thirty-one years. He sniffed the savory dinner, and it had a short life. He had been gaining too much weight – too many dinners and drinks with clients, no time for golf – so Michelline had been gradually serving less gravy and more of his favorite vegetables and more colorful fruit desserts. She knew his surface likings and moods, but she also knew that he had sold his inner self to Spalding’s. She recalled once being lured to the TV by a favorite Mozart concerto – and there, unbelievably, Arthur had smirked and declaimed: “The choice of the boy musician would have been – nourishing Spalding’s Breakfast Foods!” All cereal brands covered the same starchy, papery stuff, Michelline was sure. Advertising tricks which the least informed housewife would ignore had taken her husband from her. Yet she couldn’t irritate him with a female, “Slow down, dear,” because she realized he was trapped. If he didn’t continue selling more breakfast foods than his competitors did, some efficiency watchdog of Spalding’s would eventually replace him. And at fifty-two years, with no other experience, what job could he find?

Because Spalding’s sent him home wearied and drained, Arthur and Michelline had little to talk about. Her bright voice sounded a bit stagy as

she said, over the dessert: "Can you guess who wrote the letter I received from Paris?"

"Er – who?"

"Robert Ducharme, a man of the Resistance."

"Resistance to what? Oh, of course, the Nazis in France. Sorry, dear, the war was so long ago. Who was this Robert Ducharme?"

"One of our boys. Quiet – I do not remember him well. But we both remember how our people fought, when no hope was known. Robert will travel to Toronto for his bank and so he wishes to meet a former comrade."

"Well, how nice for you, dear. When does he come?"

"The first week of March."

"That's the week of the Hamilton convention. I'm sorry I won't meet him."

"Too bad." Childish, but what else could she say?

"He'll be company for you, Michelline. Have a long visit and catch up on how your friends succeeded, after the war. Too bad I've never had time for a real holiday in France."

Michelline felt slightly reproached for her discontent. Arthur was a model husband, by his values. He had provided his children with the right education, the right friends, and the right training for success. He had given Michelline everything that she had longed for, during her war-deprived youth. He was kind and considerate – perhaps, she ungratefully suspected, because he was not curious about her inner life. He valued her much as he did Mrs. Streeter, the widowed secretary who, for twenty years, had kept in harness with Arthur's work load, ruled his office and pruned out all top-producing staff.

Michelline rehearsed the pleas which, she hoped, would end the Thompson-Holmes feud. At least she had a worthier reason than Arthur's for going to this cocktail party. She would wear his birthday present, the evening dress created by an international house of fashion. Back went her memory to Liberation Day in her home town, when each Resistant Fighter had given a present to a comrade. Someone had lovingly sacrificed a length of silk to make a dress for Michelline.

"But I can't accept this, when none of you have new clothes," she had been about to say; then, seeing her friends' happy smiles, she had looked at the carefully sewn dress, and said: "It's beautiful, and suits me perfectly. And which of you gave it up, for me?"

"We agreed not to ask who gave what!" she had been reminded.

Arthur had been billeted with her parents; so, naturally, he had escorted her to the dance held to welcome the R.C.A.F. She had blossomed in the new dress, a spray of roses, and the pre-war makeup she had saved. She and her girl friends had danced and sung and flattered their adoring airmen, while their own men gladly approved. The girls had been loyal and uncompromising, in the drab, danger-filled years.

Michelline switched to the here and now, cleared away the dishes and dressed for the executives' rite. She glanced at Arthur, wondering why men's evening suits were like penguins'. He did not remind her of the young Air Force navigator whom she had loved. His Air Force service, in his mind,

had been an unpleasant waste of time before his real war with Breakfast Food firms.

She looked at herself in the gold-framed mirror. Youthfully slim; silver-lined, dark brown hair set in sculptured waves; gray-glue eyes matched by her dress; daintily pinked face a little crêpey and, yes, a little hard, but concealing her thoughts as well as it concealed her forty-nine years.

Her polished surface was Executive Wife design. In the Thompsons' assembly, nothing individual was in discord with her smiles and casually correct greetings. She waited patiently until Hilda said, "I couldn't stay on your Committee for the orphans, after the way Kathy acted. But I hated leaving you, Michelline."

"We miss you; but, if you choose the hard work of another committee, we hope it will succeed."

"We can't get any free time on TV. You'd think the announcers would gladly donate it; but they all say, 'We can't compete with other stations.' An agreement, no doubt."

"Very practical. You want to rescue the Vietnamese orphans, Hilda. Two committees cannot compete."

She listened calmly to Hilda's defense of her hurt pride. The conclusion was, "Kathy will never admit she was wrong, but I can sacrifice my feelings, to help the poor Vietnamese. Will you tell her I'll appear on her TV ad? I can't, and I shouldn't, lower myself by asking her."

"I shall tell her," Michelline said briefly. Arthur took his wife to a sofa.

"Smart diplomacy," he approved. "It will help me get Cyril Thompson's account. He's wavered about buying, and Bill Spalding has pressed me to secure sales to his store."

Michelline's non-committal smile didn't thank Arthur. She noted that Mrs. Streeter, who had joined them, was a simply-dressed model of the company matrons. Michelline asked for news of her children. Talking of things real to them both passed the time, while Arthur convinced Cyril Thompson of the superior assets of Spalding's products.

"Nelson can't prop up Kick-Offs For the Day much longer." Arthur's official voice behind her intruded upon Michelline, but he was conferring with a colleague. "He carries faithful incompetents on staff; packaging doesn't catch the shoppers. Top quality cereals, though; I checked them before suggesting we bid for the plant."

"When do you think we should tackle Nelson?" the Spalding's chief asked.

"In three or four months he'll be bankrupt. Then we can buy the factory at our own price."

Mrs. Streeter's eyes addressed Michelline. Both were ashamed of the business piracies of their man. But the profits paid them well-to-do security, and they could continue with jobs to which they were indifferent because – because they had to.

Michelline strolled up to a square, heavy woman whose retreat was blocked by a group, and said, coolly sweet: "We need fund-raisers for the Handicapped Children's Center – so I thought of you."

"At the benefit dance, I was stuck in the kitchen while Agnes did nothing except sell tickets and collect compliments from the press."

“Everyone complimented your bread and cakes. Your baking – the smell is a feast!”

“I didn’t hear the praise; and Agnes knew I wanted a change from cooking. I’ll take it. She let me think I’d be secretary for fund-raising.”

Michelline decided to file the complaint until the meeting. Robert Ducharme’s letter had made her realize why she crowded her days with work for service agencies. Lonely for Arthur’s companionship, she wistfully hoped to recapture some part of what had been instinctive, in the French Resistance. Her comrades’ devotion, the worth of their goal, had made their drab hardships unimportant, though she had been too young to appreciate that. If she had married one of her own – but their France had not been freed from erratic post-war politics, from cruel, wasting wars against her colonies. Another disappointment which the strangers she had chosen could never understand.

She had used the correct caution to limit Arthur’s drinks: “You will have much work at the office, tomorrow.” But he took her advice too seriously, perhaps; for when they were home, he said little, except “Tired, dear? I said goodbye in my sleep!” He sank heavily onto the bed, turned his back to Michelline and snored more loudly than usual. Between them, Michelline thought, was not another woman, but a briefcase of sales reports and figures and packages of Kiddies’ Choice.

Next day – and the next, and ditto – she moved, well-trained, though slightly absentminded, through her treadmill of committees. She felt embarrassed by her delight when an unknown voice phoned her in the language of her youth.

“Speak more slowly, Robert,” she replied, chuckling. And she arranged to meet him in the Park Plaza Hotel, on her next free day, and to drive him to her home. She relayed Arthur’s polite regrets for his absence on business.

As she entered the hotel, she was tempted to laugh again, at herself. The thin, large-eyed girl of the Resistance had gone with the Occupation years, and so, of course, had the shy young man she hadn’t noticed much. But she did want to hear of her people and her country –

“Starling? Michelline?”

The vague memory changed to a squarely built, gray-haired man in a neat and ordinary business suit, whose face would have been ordinary except for his happy smile. So sincere, Michelline thought.

“Robert Ducharme!” Impulsively she held out her hand to his firm grip. “So kind of you to remember me after – but it can’t be thirty-two years since France was freed!”

“No, only three or four years, one would think, from seeing you.”

“Never mind the French gallantry! I’ve been a Canadian all this time, and I have two grown-up daughters, two grandchildren, and a son in college.”

“Annette and I have seven children and six grandchildren. You never met my wife,” he added. “She worked on her parents’ farm during the war. We married two years later.”

“Did she come to Toronto?”

He made a comic gesture of shock. "She would not leave our three youngest, nor consider paying such high airline fares! She makes the best use of every franc, although we are now comfortably secure."

"I noted that, from your letter." No pushing, no high-rise luxury, for a French bank manager, she inferred.

"Here are Annette and our younger children," he said, showing her a family group photo. Annette was a plain, tidy, dumpling-shaped housewife, seated with two plain, tidy, slim models of herself on each side. The boys had their father's pleased smile. Glimpsing at a family life unlike hers, Michelline wondered what to say, but Robert seemed not to mind.

"Would you like some coffee, or tea?" he asked.

"Thank you, Robert, but I've just come from the Red Cross lunch meeting. No doubt you'd prefer to talk in my home," she said, glancing at the crowded Coffee Shop. "In one of the new suburbs."

"Delighted!" he agreed, and evidently he was.

She wondered if Robert sensed her distaste for her car, which was too large and ornate for two people. She had suggested to Arthur that they replace it with a small, compact car, easier to navigate in traffic. Arthur had regretted that the wives of rival Sales Managers weren't so practical.

Michelline drove up Avenue Road, pointing out whatever might interest her guest, and glad, as always, when they reached the green hem of the city. Robert was almost boyishly approving of her home and its furnishings.

"So artistic!" he exclaimed. "Simple, but all is of the best." Michelline felt the renewal of seeing with the eyes of a visiting friend. She had been the home decorator.

"Ah, your handsome family!" Robert said, admiring their photos. "How well you have prospered, Michelline."

Surprised by his delight, she realized her long parting from the lively warmth of their homeland.

"Choose the most comfortable chair," she said, "and tell me about our ex-Resistance friends."

"*Méchante femme!*" he teased her. "You sent us no letters."

"I was thoughtless," she sighed. "I did write, during my first two years in Canada; but some of the group moved, and some girls married and I didn't know their new names, and – and – I was settling into a foreign life, and bringing up my children."

"We all felt rather let down, after the war," he said. Then, as she checked off remembered names, he told her what he knew, from annual reunions. Elise and Suzanne had married their childhood boy friends; Lucille and Marguerite had become nuns – Lucille was now a teacher; Marguerite, the beloved Superior of an orphanage. Edmond, René, and Georges had inherited their family farms. Pierre and Philippe had also followed their fathers' trades; and so the account of average lives went.

"We meet on, or near, the anniversary of Liberation," Robert said. "And we send cards to Cecile's parents."

Michelline looked decorously grave. Merry Cecile, who, her Chief had feared, had thought Resistance service was no more than adventurous sport. Reckless Cecile, who had delighted in baffling the Gestapo – and had been



captured. They had flung her hideously battered body onto the street, outside their door.

“And then,” Michelline recalled, “my nerve broke.” For many nights she had lain awake, taut as a bowstring, listening for the jackboots. But no one was arrested, and in time she had dared to believe that poor Cecile had revealed no one’s name. But she, Michelline, had been silently desperate to escape from her imprisoned country.

Now she would not speak of Cecile. “What of Martin?” she asked Robert Ducharme.

“Poor Martin couldn’t accept the narrow struggles, the dull jobs he had, after people ceased thinking of him as a Resistant Fighter. He needed to give himself to something challenging. So he volunteered for the Indo-China war, not knowing how futilely it would drag on. He was killed in Dien Bien Phu.”

“I read all the reports of Dien Bien Phu,” Michelline said, “wondering if any of our group were there.” She did not say that Arthur, when he had guessed at last that she was following the battle, had said indulgently, “You have no brothers; why worry? Anyhow, the place can’t be French, with that name.”

“We understood how Martin felt,” Robert continued. “One government after another collapsed in Paris, in the 1950s. They evidently forgot that differing factions had united against the Nazis. And we who had helped defeat the Nazis – perhaps Lucille and Marguerite found, in their convents, what we could not build.”

His face creased into a heartfelt smile. “I didn’t mean to lecture! Tell me about your son and daughters.”

“Laura – that is her wedding picture – married the Head of Purchasing in a department store.”

“But, yes, his position has the rank of your husband’s?”

“Yes. Marianne is a secretary, and Andrew will be an engineer – we hope! At present he calls himself a Rebel against the Establishment. It won’t continue to support him, his father has warned, unless he grows up a little.”

“Ah, these hippies – they need real goals, such as we had! But your Andrew’s silly notions will pass, with such a father to admire. I see that your husband has given you all that you hoped for, when you married.”

“Yes,” she replied. She thought: That is the literal truth – and the irony. If only, when I was young, I had stayed with my own friends, with whom I shared so much. But, of course, I do love Arthur.

“I am a forgetful hostess, Robert,” she said. (That would have barred her from Arthur’s moneyed set!) “I have kept you talking. I’m afraid we can’t match the French quality of wine, but will you have some sherry?”

He selected a glassful, his expressive eyes taking in the gleaming kitchen. She served coffee in her delicate china.

“So you have time to be useful outside your home,” he remarked. “I note the appointments on your calendar.”

She told him of the community work she did.

“All this makes me very happy, Michelline.”

“Happy – why should it?” He was almost a stranger, save for a bond that was thirty-two years in the past.

“You look completely puzzled,” he said, his eyes sparkling. “Now I shall tell you the true reason why I crossed the Atlantic to visit you. When we were young Resistant Fighters, Michelline, I loved you.”

His voice did not change, and she thought she had not followed the French.

“You never guessed it, at that time? I thought not. I was very shy when I was a boy – one smiles at it now! – and I adored you so much that I didn’t know what to say to you.”

“But – why not – “ she floundered, too amazed to summon the easy friendliness of their afternoon.

“Also, while we were in constant danger, and had to eat every food scrap, I couldn’t ask you for marriage, or love; I couldn’t provide for you, nor let you fear for my safety. I would wait until Liberation. We exchanged presents – do you remember the silk dress?”

“You gave me that?”

“I asked my sister to make it; she had saved the silk. And then you wore it to the Canadian Airmen’s dance. I watched you laughing with your airman, saw how charmed he was. You were like a bird set free. Your comrades realized how starved you brave girls had been. But I could expect *no joy*, as those flyers would say; only long working days on the farm. I saw you would soon love your Canadian – how natural!”

Of course I loved Arthur, Michelline recalled; but I also wanted the luxuries, the position, I could catch with him.

“For a Resistance hero, you gave up without much spirit,” she said, taking refuge in teasing. He laughed good-humoredly.

“My sister dictated all the persuasions I should urge. Arthur and you were feeling the romance and the strain of wartime; you’d soon be lonely in a foreign land, you couldn’t speak English; you should marry someone you knew well. All of which would have won you, probably, if I’d spoken.”

“You might have complimented me by trying!”

“I heard that your mother had written to Arthur’s family, and he’d satisfied your parents about his prospects. And, I thought, if I truly loved you, would I let you guess that I wasn’t as pleased as you and your friends? At your wedding, Michelline, you were radiant; no longer thin from short rations; and you had the silk dress. Your Arthur, in Air Force uniform, was so handsome, so different from me. When you came to the reception, under his comrades’ archway, how delighted everyone was!”

“But later, Robert, you married.”

“Oh, yes!” Again his face rippled with the infectious smile. “Eternal heartbreak for a lost love is most impractical. I’ll confess Annette’s attraction was her cooking. But everyone said that a girl who took such care of her parents would be a good wife. She made sure that I saved what I earned in the bank. So we married, and she is a devoted wife and mother. We rarely talk of anything except the children and household affairs. But we’re very content.”

“Why are you telling me all this, Robert? We’re two different people from those you were remembering.”

“I’m a little selfish,” he said, eyes twinkling. “I wanted to know if I’d acted for the best, and I wanted you to know how I’d loved you. So, when

my bank needed someone to travel to Toronto, I pressed the Director to send me. It seemed, over the years, that the hopes of the Resistant Fighters had been forgotten. But my little sacrifice was worthwhile, and has been rewarded.”

His eyes praised her well-cared-for good looks, her perfectly chosen dress. But she was trying to think of the right words to say.

“What you did – for the young Michelline – was most unselfish, Robert. You were too good a man for me; I envy your Annette.” She stopped, feeling nervous; but Robert evidently perceived no mixed meaning. She hurried to a safe topic: “Your children are fortunate. Tell me about them.”

He did so, at considerable length; but Michelline felt they merited his fond pride. He had proceeded to the charms and intelligence of his grandchildren, when the afternoon sun cast a chestnut glow on the coffee table, reminding him that the visit had to end.

“Tell our old comrades how glad I was to hear about them; I promise to write,” Michelline said. She directed him to the subway, and managed her best smile as he left. She looked around at the living-room, whose furnishings she had, as Robert said, planned like an artist. “Zeidman’s – For the Executive’s Home!” Arthur had said. She looked at her appointment calendar, and knew that, if illness or accident should take her, the committee cliques would promote someone else and soon not miss her. But, as she indulged their childish bickering, why should they respect her? She phoned Hilda Thompson.

“So you and Kathy are friends of the Vietnamese orphans – on TV. I hope you were not acting?”

“I showed her I would act, for those poor little ones. Good of you to tell her that I would share TV time.”

“I was a fool! *You* say to her that you will return to our Committee.”

“Well, mine is falling apart. We’ll slip in quietly, at your next meeting. No need to – to prepare Kathy for seeing me.”

“I don’t know why you quarreled, but one Vietnamese child is more important than all our excuses for the green eyes.”

Hilda laughed sheepishly. “Why we quarreled? I’ve forgotten.”

Michelline laughed too, and then phoned Kathy, who said, conscientiously forgiving: “We must all work together. I like helping those in need.”

Begin by helping those you know, Michelline thought. Her past separated her from Hilda and Kathy; but she would look below the fashionable surface of her committees for those who could become friends. Some, perhaps, were as bored as she was with gilt masks.

The phone summoned her, and Arthur called:

“How’s everything, Michelline?”

“Oh, very well.” How long had it been since she told him what she really felt?

“Your friend, Robert, came? What is he like?”

“A – a good man. He built his life happily, after the war. Your convention goes well?”

“Yes, but there’s so much business, we’ll have to stay another week. I called to tell you.”

“You mean, business to grab from your rivals? If yes – Arthur, do you need it?”

“Eh – what?” he said blankly.

“Does Spalding’s need so much? And are you their slave?”

“What’s got into you, Michelline? Do you want me to be demoted?”

“Ask Spalding’s for an easier job, or for a helper.” She knew that Arthur risked driving himself to an early heart attack, or, worse still, the maddening helplessness of a stroke. But she would not mention that, unless other tactics failed. “I want you at home,” she said.

“So you’ve been lonely,” he replied, sounding awkwardly kind. “I thought I’d given you everything an executive’s wife should have. I never questioned your valuing it. Maybe I’d better have a talk with Spalding; get doctor’s orders to slow down a bit.”

“Yes, now you are sensible, dear.” She wanted the comfort of his presence. Comfort was the best one could expect, in middle age. At least someone who had chosen as she had done, long ago.

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## The Name of the Rose

R.W. Stedingh

### I.

Stardust refined and stirred. Hybrid  
Seed. Essence sculpted into abundance  
Like a red statue in the gardener's hands,  
You are an endless chore of fertilizing  
With bone meal and manure, watering,  
Weeding around, a careful cutting  
Of the buds of audience  
That the central bloom of summer might overflow.

In autumn, you are the mindful pruning  
Of thorny stems, the mounding of earth  
And dead leaves around your stocks  
That will warm you in solace through winter.

In spring, after you lance the earth  
With the barbed swords of your new shoots  
And find leaf, chemicals are sprayed like lies  
About your green stem and bud.  
But all insects home to your fragrance  
Like errant knights: pale green aphids,  
Whole armies of them, turn black and die,  
And drunken beetles dive past your red edges  
To disappear in hunger's orgy, tearing  
Till sated and gloating, they dip in flight  
Heavy with your treasure and your poison.

To all this labor your high breed yawns  
As if in the air of elsewhere, ancestry unknown,  
Yet evolved, into this red delicacy  
It is agreed is love.

### II.

Deaths never seemed to die like this  
Nor love seem ever so unrequited,

But journeys taken begin and end in you  
Like the dreams of sleep undreamt at waking.

*Tabula rasa* waiting for the pen to write  
And write on, you are all metaphor,  
The elements forming like petals in the mind.  
Yet in tight bud shaped like a green tear,  
You fall for no one.

Unseen light charmed from the unseen,  
The black matter of darkness forming your center,  
Your green calyx peels back like a star  
Revealing a red giant that explodes  
To form again a black singularity  
Swallowing whole stars till sated  
It evolves, a universe  
Blooming farther than a man can see.

Thus, you become an exercise in hope,  
Intricacy chipped, charmed into elegance,  
A natural faith, a red fountain of charity  
Whose petals caressing memory as outer light  
Loosen one by one and spread  
Drinking from their center the infusing song  
Like a solar storm at its height,  
The androgynous, molten core.

### III.

Logs collapse under the weight of a flame;  
A flame, under its own weight,  
And clearly you are a circle of flames,  
The pure heart of the garden like a cross,  
A four-petalled rose, like an "X," inexorable  
As zero.

Rose of fire, you grew black in Egypt,  
Or so your history goes, and disappeared,  
Returning everywhere among men, wild, innocent,  
Yet to the false immune, your red crown  
Stemming from one white light  
Itself a turning thread, a circling skein,  
Like the globe which frays and vanishes  
At the horizon at night.

Or like the brain, a flaming hive  
Where the mind is a halo, a red aurora,  
A round cluster of thoughts crazed as bees

About their queen.

How like the atom you grow, a carpel surrounded  
 By anthers, both surrounded by red petals;  
 A center of androgynous protons and neutrons  
 Opposed to circling electrons;  
 How like the flight of the charmed quark,  
 Its helix of disappearance into itself;  
 How like you flowering into absence,  
 A stirred presence ever-changing,  
 A flame that never dies of inventing itself.

#### IV.

All night, mist cooling  
 Falls to its knees  
 And clings to the red edges  
 Of your petals,  
 It's pools swelling up on your surfaces,  
 Embracing your pollen and dry perfume  
 Till it trickles, a spring of diamonds,  
 Gems of the dark's inner light,  
 And my rose-tongue talking rose  
 To you is gold with the carpels  
 Emerging from the lips of your corolla,  
 The unfettered heart of you rising to touch,  
 Deep song being entered and sung  
 By a shaft of light in the sudden afternoon:  
 Your petals against petals press argument  
 Like an urgent mouth honeyed  
 After the first sweet kiss.

And yet, you are wise enough  
 To be nothing but yourself,  
 And caress yourself aglow  
 To find in space your own image  
 In a man.

Like an eyelid closing, curling upon itself  
 So tightly to prevent the light's androgyny,  
 You subdue both inner and outer sight,  
 Keeping darkness within, distilling it  
 Until your petals are engorged with blood  
 And you throb again  
 Condensed as a cloud in red twilight,  
 Raining nectar and sweet attar.

## V.

Stocks and stems strung out like barbed wire,  
 A rutting bramble of green above which you grow,  
 And with which I contend, incontinent.  
 Still, it is your green dark that I love,  
 A new place of perpetual surprise  
 Where blood blooms in wounds of the flesh  
 And is everywhere stifled into season  
 Like a song that lives from constraints  
 And dies of freedom.

Brimming with being  
 And bending into the wind, you offer  
 Yourself like a fulcrum  
 Of the unnamable god  
 In silence pronouncing the unknown name.

Never able to give of yourself but yourself,  
 You are a gyring presence  
 With great spaces  
 To fill emptiness as well,  
 For all around you and because of you  
 The garden is lost:  
 The trees hide in their shadows,  
 And around this park, the traffic races  
 And stalls on the black asphalt road  
 As slick as an eel in the rain:

All are diminished, for nothing  
 But inwardness blossoming triumphs  
 Like a dormant anther aroused  
 Splitting open as it curls  
 Under the faint web of distant gravity,  
 The influences of dying stars.

## VI.

Sweet attar, a mirror of floating  
 Tea leaves and temple incense  
 During a study of the fire sermon,  
 The broken women want to wear you  
 As talisman and lure,  
 As healing air,  
 To bring back the swagger  
 Of intoxicating light.



## VII.

You continue to spin your petals  
 Around green carpels and golden anthers,  
 And in a tight sheath love is fused.

There, only tender touches fill you  
 With hesitant happiness  
 Which between two lovers thrives  
 As it was at the beginning,  
 And rarely, even now.  
 Each rendez-vous with the wind  
 Is a new marvel blooming  
 In longing eyes  
 To flush the face.

Every day  
 You are a heart struck  
 By the sudden brilliance of the sun.

## VIII.

In cross-section, rose,  
 You are curved like the turtle shell butt  
 And arching antlers about the strings  
 Of the lyre  
 Which is nothing without love.

Plucked by the plectrum  
 In left hand or right,  
 Your ancient silence  
 Before timed number,  
 Before speech,  
 Nods in a gust of wind  
 And spills its petals  
 Over its roots in the earth,  
 A silent, hermaphroditic center  
 Itself singing  
 All mandalas, all fractals,  
 The still point of the pirouette  
 When the dancer becomes the dance.

NICOLE TATE-STRATTON lives on Vancouver Island. She is the author of five juvenile novels in the *StableMates* series, dozens of non-fiction articles for markets in Japan, the USA and Canada, as well as original material for storytelling performances. "Pink Delight" is an excerpt from *Crazy Spoons*, a novel in progress.

## Pink Delight

Nicole Tate-Stratton

LIKE USUAL, Marco dropped me off in the van. I was babysittin' for him at least once a week, sometimes twice now. Mostly we went to Railroader's, or we jest drove around on the bike and one time he rented a video an' we stayed at his place. Every time I seen him, he paid me jest like I was lookin' after kids, 'cept of course his wife and boys was long gone. Sometimes, he slipped me a little extra, jest for me. "Fun money," he called it. Mama never cared to ask 'bout how things was goin'. She jest took the babysittin' money and it disappeared into her black handbag and I didn't see none of it.

"Good night, Sweet Cheeks." I climbed down out of the van and waved to him through the window. He touched two fingers to his lips and gave me a little wave. It was the same way he said goodbye every time he dropped me off.

The street was quiet. The windows of the house was dark. That was good 'cause it meant I could jest leave the money on the kitchen table and then go to bed without talkin' to Mama. I climbed up the four steps of the front verandah.

"Tammy. You's late."

"Daddy."

He was sittin' in the old armchair smokin' a joint. The thin, sweet cloud was like a wall between me and the front door. If I hadn't of been in such a hurry to git inside, I would've noticed the smell and I could've gone around back and in through the kitchen door. As it was, my heart started thuddin' an' I froze there.

“Give me the money.”

I didn’t say nothin’. Mama would kill me if she knowed I gave Daddy any money.

“Hey, you little bitch – I know you got money in there. Give it to your Daddy, now.”

I licked my lips and grabbed onto my purse. Nothin’ moved inside the house. I didn’t dare call out for Mama – she’d be pissed if I woke her up.

Daddy stood up. I still couldn’t move. I didn’t have no time to git in through the door, couldn’t turn and run back out to the street. Marco’s van was long gone. Daddy reached out his hand and I handed him my purse. He flipped on the verandah light and sat back down on the chair. Right away the bugs started coming. They pinged and clicked against the light and strange shadows flickered over Daddy’s face.

He found the babysittin’ money right away and put it in the front pocket of his shirt. I held out my hands but he weren’t ready to give the purse back. I swallowed real hard. I thought of the extra money zippered into the little pocket inside. I hoped to God he didn’t find that or there’d be hell to pay.

“What’s this?”

We both stared at the lipstick he held up in front of him.

“What the fuck are you doin’ with this shit?”

I glanced at the door. He stretched his legs out so I would have to step over them to get inside.

“C’mere.” He took a long drag on the butt end of the joint and squinted at me. He let his breath out slowly. “You hear what I said?”

I nodded and took a step forward.

“Kneel down.”

“But, Daddy, the neighbors...”

“You think I give a flyin’ fuck about no neighbors?” He handed me the lipstick. My hands was shakin’ when I took it back. Pink Delight. I couldn’t stop starin’ at my handbag sittin’ in his lap. I wanted to grab it and run out into the street. Run and keep runnin’. I kneeled down in front of him.

“I’m sorry, Daddy. It ain’t mine. I found it in the ladies bathroom at the café. I was gonna give it to Mama. I swear. I...”

The words couldn’t come out fast enough to save me.

“Put some on.”

I looked up at him. “What?”

“Don’t sass me. Put the fuckin’ stuff on. You gonna spend your nights out whorin’ – you may as well look like one.”

“But I can’t see what I’m doing...”

“Shut the fuck up and do it.”

I pulled the cap off and pressed the tip of the lipstick to my lips. Daddy stared at me with a kind of angry softness. He threw the stub of the joint over the railing and I heard its tiny noise as it bounced off a leaf in the bushes and then disappeared. Daddy’s hand went to the zipper of his pants.

The sick feelin’ in my stomach pushed up and burned at the back of my throat. Daddy reached his hand out and grabbed my wrist. He guided my hand so as how the lipstick drew on my mouth. My hand didn’t feel like my hand any more. He drove it around and around and around, pressing harder and harder. I held my lips shut tight together. Daddy pushed harder.

“Open your mouth.”

I clenched my jaw and stared straight ahead.

“Open your fuckin’ mouth.”

He was pokin’ the lipstick at me, tryin’ to force it in. He squeezed my hand harder and harder until finally I cried out and twisted my head sideways. The Pink Delight skittered across the floor of the verandah. Daddy’s hands were on either side of my face, his little fingers digging into the soft place near my throat, his fingers on my cheeks, his thumbs pressed hard against my lips. Real slow, he smeared his thumbs from side to side, back and forth. Then his hands were behind my head, pullin’ me down and my knees were grinding into the hard wood of the verandah floor. Somewhere behind and above me I could hear a moth smashin’ himself to death against the white hot light.

ANDREW PARKER was born in Liverpool, England, in 1969. His poetry and short stories have appeared in publications around the world.

## The Fighterpilot

Andrew Parker

1

LET ME tell you about the time an old famous English viscount gave me permission to camp by a lake miles from anywhere in the vast emptiness of his estate. His thirty thousand acre estate which was so fucking immense it may as well have been the whole country for all you knew when you were lost in its hugeness. Woods so thick and spicy smelling you'd need a chainsaw to get through. Streams and rivers and lakes so cold and so deep you dare not even attempt to swim in them. Wild deer prancing through tall scratchy grasses and owls at midnight bringing back the prey in bloody talons, no mercy for the pain inflicted. Let me tell you how in the darkest part of the night, a strange calmness seized my nerves and how in the glaring, vulnerable noon sunlight my anxieties returned so I couldn't even raise my head for the panic racing through me. Let me tell you how the viscount's wife seduced me on his orders, fucked me in my tent as he sat far away in his castle, drinking his mead with his drunken young mistress, and when she returned the next morning, having picked fresh flowers from the forest glade and arranged them in an antique vase on the window ledge, she slipped into bed with her viscount husband and her viscount husband kissed her on the nose and all was well. Let me tell you about when I awoke to the sound of summery twittering finches and was suddenly sad to find the viscount's wife had returned to her fat hairy husband, so I bathed in the shallow pebble-bottomed part of the lake and washed away the smell of two people and

emerged from the waters single again. Let me tell you about the time an old famous English viscount gave me permission to camp by a lake miles from anywhere in the vast emptiness of his estate.

## 2

Having been granted permission months earlier by the viscount I drove through the splendid entrance which was a sort of stone portcullis affair just off the main public road, onto a shitty gravelly private path which was rutted and eroded by time itself. I had been told under no circumstances was I to approach the castle and there it was in the gray misty distance, its power and solidity sitting sound on its hill. Its castelated turrets guarding the main gate at which I was not welcome and a huge oval moat sitting stagnant and fetid. I continued along the path in my puttering old car wondering which way to go and the path took me away from the forlorn power in the distance into a landscape of solitude. As I was driving along I noticed all of the huge trees in a nearby wood, their massiveness and age was rather overwhelming, so I stopped and walked over some marshy grass and smoked a cigarette under one. Its bark was all jagged and chipped in places so the bare wood was peeping through and it was moist to touch. I realized the huge tree was crying, maybe it was lonely among all the other trees, whose veinous branches seemed to lurch over this particular tree where I now sat on its flared-out trunk and root growths. The air inside this little wood was so thin, it was as if I was fifteen thousand feet high on a mountain plateau and it was all organic and earthy smelling because all the leaves and all the fallen branches and all the lost dead birds and everything else that had fallen and disintegrated in this wood had rotted away into indistinguishable atoms and left this scent as an epitaph. I walked around for a bit and pissed on the biggest tree and it was a loud gushing piss. As I got back to my car I noticed it was covered in moisture, like a cool glass of water on a July afternoon. I drove at a snail's pace for a further four miles until I found my majestic lake where I was to make my campsite.

## 3

The silence at the lake was profound. It spewed out of my ears in a great Sh-hhhhhhhhhhhhh, and although I could hear my heart and blood and mind I knew it was all biological electricity and so the eeriness passed. After a bit the noises stopped or I forgot about them because I found myself hypnotized staring at the water, I could feel its energy and had to drag myself away, so I started to unload my tent and stuff. I set my tent up a few feet away from my car and got a small fire going just for the hell of it 'cos that's what you do when you go camping even if you've got little gas stoves like I've got in the boot of my car. That first night I didn't bother cooking any supper, I just got set up and stared into the red embers of my pointless fire and got that hypnotized effect again that I'd got earlier and realized that it's only when you wake up to the fact that you're staring do you stop and all the time you spent

staring is dead time and you've lost that time. I got into my sleeping bag and tried to nod off but I was so hot, the fucking sleeping bag was graded minus twenty and it was a mild summer's night so I slept in just my jeans and T-shirt, with my head on my jumper outside the tent, looking up at the celestial carpet, clean and clear looking back at me, and when I finally fell asleep I slept a deeper and dreamless sleep state than I had in the whole of my life, and in the morning I put that down to the forest air and the power of the lake beside me.

## 4

In the morning I cooked bacon and eggs on my little stove thing in a frying pan that was as thin as thick tin foil, if there's such a thing. I had about a week's supply of food and bits and bobs and had arranged for one of the viscount's many housekeepers to drop me off at my campsite a basic box of grocery items every five days or so. At a little shrubby glen about half a mile from the lake I made a latrine which is basically a two foot deep hole in the ground to shit in. I covered the hole in the ground with some foliage I'd ripped off a fern tree I think it was, and while I was attempting to have a crap in the most amateurish and hilarious-looking way I was staring at the fern's leaves which are like fractals, big jaggardy edges which have smaller jaggardy edges, and smaller and smaller this edge shape keeps repeating itself until your eyes go out of focus, but I bet if you looked at it under a microscope it still carried on until there were jaggardy-edged molecules and then atoms and then jaggardy-edged sub-atomic stuff. I used to wander back from my alfresco loo in my bare feet splish-splashing in the shallow edges of the lake, sometimes singing as loudly as I could and not a soul could hear me and I don't think I'd have given a fuck if they did. That day I spent just doing nothing and to tell you the truth I was a bit scared of having to cook and shit in a hole and wash in a painfully cold lake. I rolled up a huge joint and blasted away on what was meant to be weed from South America but in all probability was grown in a loft in Manchester. It done the trick, though, and I watched the colors of the sky change from cool blues to warm peaches and then, as the sun fell away, purple patches and darker bits turned the sky-canvas into a scary underworld and finally all color drained and the dependable blackness appeared but not unwelcomed by any means, as it brought with it the calmness, the calmness I have sought all my life for, so I sat and reveled in the still and static sensations made even more heightened by the Mancunian marijuana.

## 5

When I was twenty years old I knew nothing of the world and cared even less. I forgot huge spans of time, months would vanish and do you know why? I drank, drank down that sweet wine as quick as it was poured and reveled in obscene debauchery, the likes of which would have put Dionysus to shame. Wet stinking orgies that twisted mind and emotion into unfathom-

able madness and with the ever present brain-bending alcohol it produced a fatal combination of hedonism to leave you climbing the fucking walls, and I lived like this so utterly and completely I became unbalanced, unhinged, bats in the bastard belfry. During my pissed nights and days and afternoons I'd long for solitude and sobriety, to let my mind at least partially recover to the magical lucidity it once had until I hit the magical age of twenty. In my lucid teenage clearness I could breathe clear air and be thankful for that, I could appreciate walking on the beach with sand in my socks and the sea salt smell in my lungs; my lungs, gateway to euphoria, and as I made my slow and bitter mind recovery I had glimpses of my mental past. Sometimes I felt calm and tranquil and accepted and before I had time to realize my sane state I'd be back to bedlam. It's only when you realize what you had, do you appreciate what you've lost. I've lost the blue sentient being that slept in my skin, it's gone forever and I'll live for eternity mourning its loss.

## 6

The morning after my stoned sleep I awoke with a glorious pot hangover. I gingerly crapped in my hole and partook of my ablutions in the lake. The day was fibrous and dank and misty a bit and looking around gave me the impression that I was on another planet, so strange and alien-looking the place was. An old wise man who's dead now once told me about standing on your head for a clear perspective of the world, so that's what I did and with my jumper for a pillow I executed a perfectly-balanced headstand and waited for enlightenment. Now the lake gripped the earth differently, it hung and wobbled and the hills in the distance tried to escape the gravitational pull and bellied outward, towards the gray skies and dark foreboding, secretive clouds; clouds which now supported me and I was holding up the whole earth and everyone in it, and the lake and hills, and I was wondering if those thin clouds could support such a colossal weight and what was holding up the clouds anyway? With the world above my head and marshmallow cirrus for a mattress I did feel strangely clearheaded and in the upside-down grassy hills in the distance came a vision of ecstasy with blonde curly ringlets of golden hair, long flowery dress fluttering in a gentle breeze and walking directly to me as I carefully put down our fragile eggshell planet and stood upright on slightly unsteady cold legs and awaited the approaching vision.

## 7

Now, of all times you reappear  
in my dreams, a starring role  
inside my neurochemistry  
always leaving me chasing  
my original goal.

Last night you left somebody  
for me, I took your hand



and planned a trip to London  
 your father didn't say no  
 in my dreams, in our bungalow.

Still the same you were to me  
 lovely, though in my dreams  
 you would agree to my proposal  
 and the pain in my side  
 would be two years gone.

In my dreams of which I awake  
 and shake off the warm contentment  
 that blankets my heart, verisimilitude  
 fights with the dawn, until the sun  
 has no choice but to part.

If you arrive tonight  
 in your serotonin limousine  
 we'll cruise in my dreams  
 to a crystal palace  
 full of each other's memories.

Just before I wake up  
 unless you contact me  
 loneliness hits me hard in the face  
 in my dreams you've parked yourself  
 embroidered into place.

## 8

We slipped and slept and the fun and sex we had together that balmy day was as loving as a nightingale in the shade of a willow tree. Your legs as smooth and as fat and as white as white daffodils, my legs tough and rough and hard, and together they entwine like the braided hair of innocence. Only time pulled us apart in the end, time; bringer of disorder. You left happy, you left me happy, you skipped away, beaming on the grassy path back to your home and husband and you never looked back, not once, which made me a little sad but put me in my place, but actually I carried on looking at you and just as you were nearly out of sight you stopped and picked those flowers, white daffodils, and I knew what you'd do with them when you got back so I blotted you out of my sight with my thumb because you were so far away from me, that's how small you had become to my wet eyes and in my estimation. I laid back down in my tent and laid there forever, time brought no disorder, only lasting joy and pain combined and this dirty mix of mad emotion I had to untangle before dawn if I was to start the day as I wanted to, afresh. Jitterbugging all fucking night I slept only briefly, I may not have slept at all, but I did relax and eventually decided that my experience with the vision was good and loving, I'd rather it had happened (and it

did happen!) than not, and my sadness was only due in part to jealousy and this would work itself out internally in my dreams.

## 9

I had fried potatoes for my breakfast that morning. Sizzling and spitting away in my paper thin pan and they smelt wonderful and hearty. I'd decided to roam around today, so after washing in the lake I put on my boots and whistled myself off into the woods. The viscount had had his merry men make pathways in some places and I was very impressed. Nice wide tracks covered with bark and wood chippings etched their way through the most beautiful parts of the woods – through, up and around various hilly places, and past tall pines where red and gray squirrels fought over food and territory and the grays usually won. Most of these paths were brand new and I was the first person to adventure through the trees on them as I left behind me a bit of a trail 'cos the chippings were so deep and untouched and I got to thinking that maybe the viscount had had them made especially for me or at least refurbished for me as they were so immaculate, but then I thought, no way, why would he do that for me because he didn't really know me at all, in fact I was a stranger, very nearly. At one bit the trees became sparse and I could see the edge of the lake and as I approached, I realized I was opposite my tent and car and was exactly halfway 'round the huge lake and I'd walked miles on those fucking chippings which although were nice on the eyes were a bastard to walk on for a distance. My car and tent were two spots in the distance, one red, one yellow, and they were so small, and I got to thinking about how I'd read somewhere that the horizon, no matter where you are, when on or at an expanse of water, is always fourteen miles away from you because of the curvature of the earth and gravity, and I believed it and thought it was a pretty fucking clever but useless piece of knowledge to have, unless you were a mariner or such like. I walked on.

## 10

With my back to the lake now (which was strangely hard in itself) I went back into the towering trees and sort of got lost for a while and in all honesty got a bit frustrated and panicky, so I sat on a big clump of pine cones someone had gathered and ate some chocolate and smoked a fag. Because the air was so haunted and still, blowing smoke rings was amazing, almost mystical, they seemed to hold their position for ages and the blue smoke was turning and ululating into itself and as they rose they caught sunbeams that I hadn't noticed spearing through the branches and then they exploded into many tones of blue. I realized suddenly that when I felt panicky I immersed myself in my imagination and thoughts, and because I was so intrigued by whatever I was thinking, the panic passed. Maybe this was an unconscious way of coping with my fears, because it always seemed to do the trick and as I lit another smoke, I walked away from the pile of dry, rotting pine cones

that the ogres of the wood had piled up, and strode on through and passed out of the trees into a much brighter and open grassy hillside.

## 11

There was a drystone wall running along the tops of those grassy hills and I walked alongside it, sometimes on top of it where it looked robust enough, and I could see for miles and miles and miles up there, oh yeah, and I could also see the public road that I drove in on because the quartz they use to strengthen the surface was glinting in the sun. I was the only person around these desolate parts, so I started to sing, but amazingly I was still self-conscious and started looking around in case anyone could see me and hear me and touch me and judge me, but I persisted and sung louder, trying to keep in tune and time and rhythm and eventually I was belting out Beatles songs at the top of my voice. When I get to the bottom I go back to the top of the slide, where I stop and I turn and I go for a ride till I get to the bottom and I see you agaaaaaaiiiiiin Heh Heh Heuh. And in the end, diddle um, the love you take, diddle ee, is ee-kwul-tu the love you make dadadada daa daaa. You tell me that you've got everything you want and your bird can sing but you don't get me you don't get meeeee! The wall was a bit fucked up in places, obviously the viscount's merry pranksters weren't as efficient at dry stone walling as they were at bark chip paving and occasionally I stopped and picked up some of the bigger chunks and put them back up, but realizing I didn't know what the fuck I was doing, I thought it best to leave it to the experts wherever they were. Some sections were completely covered in moss or some sort of bouncy fluffy vegetation and actually looked quite funny as if some joker had turfed the wall for a laugh. In fact, I was so happy and jovial and singing and smoking that I just walked and walked and smoked and sung and observed, and it wasn't until I saw the Plough just above the hills to the north that I thought Jesus I'm fucked and where am I, I'm starvin' and bollocks I've got a major walk back to the tent, that I decided to kip down in the shelter of a fallen section of wall so I rearranged some of the slates and bricks a bit, put on my homemade itchy-as-fuck woolly balaclava and dreamed a lucid dream.

## 12

*I'm walking around a garden center in Cornwall. It's built on a steep hill. I go inside but someone pushes me over, trapping my arm. I am worried in case my arm comes off. I'm fishing with my uncle and he catches a pike. It's pregnant and starts to give birth so my uncle disembowels it and its guts spill out. They stink and I throw up. My friends are driving me around a slum, hundreds of disused and derelict buildings and houses. The roads are actually paved with flattened cars. I keep giving my friends tips but they give me them back and drop me off. Another friend picks me up in a red car and we drive off on a red road. He is driving stupidly, skidding around corners and speeding. I get out and go to work. I work on the top floor of a*

*tall building and the floor is split into three levels. I do general jobs for people. I've got to mend somebody's boots with glue so I wear a mask but when I use the glue, the boots melt. She's not happy with me because I keep going to the toilet. I see some friends on the way and steal their pencils. I see a girl I fancy sitting in the distance. I throw her a note to say I still fancy her. I teach her how to ride a bike around the office. I'm off to the toilet again but I get lost on the way. I meet the boss, he wants me back on level one. On the way back I meet an old friend and tell him I was talking to his sister a few days ago. It's Friday afternoon and after a few beers I invite everybody to the pub but none wants to go so I say all back to my house because I've got a swimming pool but be quiet 'cos I don't want to wake the wife. In the morning my wife asks me if I had a good time. I say it was great but some friends have stayed over, though. She's OK about it until she meets them. They're all female. The women can't believe how beautiful my wife is and how generous she is offering everyone bacon and eggs. When everyone has gone home I tidy up hundreds of empty bottles and glasses and take them to the kitchen. My wife offers me a job in the kitchens, cash in hand, so I accept.*

I woke up and it was five a.m., the clouds had dispersed the sunlight into a dark gray hue, and quite surprisingly I wasn't cold at all. I immediately sprung up and slashed on the wall and started to make my way back, though I wasn't sure exactly which way that was. I had a funny feeling in my head and chest but I put that down to sleeping outside on the floor and reckoned that in some part of the night it had got really cold. The route I took back was different than the way I came as I could see the castle in the dank distance at one point. I tried to imagine what it would be like to own the castle and all this land around and be married to a woman like that and would I let some stranger camp by my beautiful lake and I decided that if the land was mine, I probably wouldn't let anyone camp on it but maybe I'd have a different view if I did actually own it. The pathway I was on became a bit more familiar now and what do you know, there's my lil'ole car and tent in the distance. I visited my lavish lavatory as I passed it and when I got to the tent I saw a box of stuff the housemaids had left me as I'd asked. There was bacon and eggs and a loaf of sliced white empty nutritionless bread and loads of tinned crap like fruit cocktail and boiled potatoes and beans with little slices of carcinogenic salami and such like. No fresh fruit like I'd asked for and I was a little pissed off at the stupid bitch considering I'd paid in advance for all this stuff but anyway what did she care, she had to walk all the way out here with the heavy box and it wasn't like she got paid any extra for that. Anyway after all my whining I rustled up quite a nice little feast with eggs and thick bacon nearly gammon shfluping in my pan and also hot coffee made with goldtop milk.

A deer keeps nosing around my camp. At least I think it's a fucking deer. It's young I think because its head is tiny, much too small for its body, and it's covered with dark brown patches not unlike those on a dairy cow but a different color obviously and the rest of its hide is amazingly golden and immaculately clean. I was wondering if it groomed itself because it was always on its own and then I got to thinking that it must be some sort of pet deer because even its feet were clean, you'd have expected them at least to be caked in shit but this one was spotless and it was only about ten feet away sometimes. I decided to call it Risky because that was what it was being, not knowing that I wouldn't shoot it or anything. It must have been attracted by my little fire as it kept trying to get close to the embers, but then realizing how hot they were bolted away only to return minutes later and do exactly the same thing over and over again, the stupid bastard, and finally after about nine times I threw a stick at it, it was getting on my wick so much and it legged off this time. It started pissing down so I got in my car which I'd promised myself I wouldn't do and I looked at the lake in the rain, a different type of rain, fucking big droplets and the lake was getting hammered by it. I lit a smoke on the car fag lighter personal attack weapon for deranged hitchhikers and inhaled a long drag of ultra mild down to my deepest alveoli cauliflower-looking thingies. In fact I couldn't even see the lake now because the car had steamed up absolutely and completely and I was sealed in and it was getting fucking loud now, the rain and phew, I'm glad after all I got in the car and I don't think my tent will stay up it's so heavy coming down now and I smudged a little clear porthole in my window to see how my tent was doing and what do you know, there's little Risky nosing through the sodden remains of my fire so that's how you get clean you pesky varmint.

## 15

I stayed a while in the car watching Risky. It was nice and tranquil in there, a strange color change outside with the pressure and weather I presumed and for quite a few hours I sat simply stunned by nothing in particular but sort of catatonic nevertheless. Maybe it was because I'd put the car radio on and the first few bars of Flamenco Sketches had invaded my senses and because it sounds so nauseatingly beautiful and relaxing I turned it up quite loud and what do you know, it's jazz hour and here's Uncle George and his blue rhapsody masterpiece and boy did that change the mood 'cos there goes prancing Risky back to the boys. As the rain dried off and the wind blew less and less I found myself longing for the company of the vision and wondering if maybe I could go over to the castle and sort of pretend I was lost and just turn up feigning ignorance and maybe just maybe she'd be there all alone and once more we could be happy for a while together but who am I fucking kidding. It was early evening by now and peaceful weather-wise and suddenly rather warm so I stripped off bollocko and waded into the lake and splashed 'round a bit, got soaped up and clean and everything and thought fuck it to the castle, I'm going, and after drying off and settling into my

sleeping bag which was distinctly unfresh I decided to do just that in the morning, go and get conveniently lost by my lover's husband's ancestors' castle and cross its moat and have a look-see inside.

I could see it in the distance, pale and beige. It was misty again and the trees were so still. I walked over a damp-from-the-morning-dew chamomile lawn and the huge smell was so overpowering like I'd imagine a poisonous gas to be that I had to run off it coughing and overcome and the harder I ran the stronger and more potent the smell became and I just about made it off there, I can tell you. Nearer now. The chimneys were smoking and I could see huge open fires in my mind, masses of orange crackling snapping heat filling the immense roomed, high-ceilinged castle home. I walked past a sign that was hammered right into an aging oak tree with a big rusty nine-inch nail and it said *private property* in hand-painted white lettering and I thought fuck you, you greedy twat, and pulled it off the punctured screaming tree and kicked it to pieces and then pathetically started to pick up the bits of wood and mess I'd made but then thought fuck this and lashed it all everywhere and the whole scene looked like one big tantrum. Lights on in the upper rooms of the castle, maybe they were just getting up, that's what it was the housecleanerkeepers get up in the cold dark of dawn and get some life in the place for their master while he rises in electric light and sees to himself and the day ahead. Fuck all this sneaking around, I head straight for the place now and within what seemed like seconds I was swamped by the hulking mass of stone, I'd not been this near and it was so high and how the fuck was I going in there without an invite and over the moat and over the spindly gangplank bridge I went right up and opened a little latch on a door four hundred years old and in I went dead easy, piece of piss.

Empty and dead-sounding and as much stone on the inside as there was on the outside. I walked through a hall as big as someone's street and sort of played dumb in case I was suddenly leapt upon but in all honesty I was so in awe of the stature of the place I was almost dumbstruck. The ceiling was at least twenty feet above my head. Twenty fucking feet! There were chandeliers and candle holders and it was all a bit timewarpish, medieval and odd but I strode on undaunted, looking for my vision in this unreal avarice hell. I could hear roaring fires somewhere and now and then giggling and fuck can they see me on some sort of camera security system and then it was silent. After passing through some more rooms and halls everything started to look a little more lived in. Carpets suddenly, thick luxurious maroon tweeds and surprising contemporary oil paintings so out of character as to widen your eyes and raise your brows and walls of books in one particular hallway that smelt like an old book shop and that's what we had here, an old book shop in its entirety, lock stock and barrel bought out and shipped in and rehoused.

I didn't stop to peruse through the books, I just went forward on and on, go west young man, but eventually I came to a dead end. I turned and walked back through the musty pseudo-library and bang, fear hit me like a fucking comet out of the sky and do you know what I did – I'll tell you but hold on to your stomach 'cos I shit there and then on those library floorboards. Pants down, squat and laid one in about five seconds flat and the whole dirty deed was done and dusted and I was walking away to find my vision and what a strange and insane thing to have happened.

## 18

I walked through more corridors, I was lost, lost in mind, body and soul, and I could feel my very existence withering away, drifting off into the air. I am unhinged by fear and as I float through these halls of power I hear a moaning in the distance, a guttural but somehow ecstatic dreamy moan beckoning me forward. Tunnel-visioned and blind with anxiety I sought out this orgasmic shine and found it behind a latticed door in a cool room overlooking a courtyard. What an unexpected sight I saw. My vision, the viscount, his works and a great bag of brown in front of me and I felt my knees weaken at the sight of it all and while my vision closed her sweet eyes in an opiate heaven the viscount invited me in and asked me to close the door behind me and asked why I'd taken so long to visit and started to cook up another shot, this time for himself, and I sat down on the huge cushions that were lobbed about seventies bohemian-style and I held my vision in my lap and wrapped my cold, bloodless arms around her warm potbelly and watched the viscount and noticed the amazing tin he kept his works in, silver and etched with art deco motifs and little sections for his bits and bobs and I wanted that tin badly and he offered me a nod and I accepted of course and he cooked me up a shot and I was whisked away to a warm buzzy place with my vision in my arms, I kissed her face and ear, a place with no anxieties ever, absolutely no fear never and I sat like that for a while.

## 19

In the depths  
     of habituation  
     with skeletoid fascia  
 the gangly man  
     curls up  
 in a warm opiate  
     huddle.

Craggy looking  
     Van Gogh-esque  
     Euphorically detached  
     happiness  
     unmatched

Twated.

Years and years  
 he kept this up  
     a punishing regime  
     of banging nails  
 his body  
     the hammer  
 his life  
     constipated  
     controlled by a plant.

20

I'm not certain how long we sat like that, the vision and I, but it felt timeless, physically and emotionally timeless because that's what heroin does to your spatial awareness, it blocks human consciousness and so returns your spirit to primordial unflowing unrecognizable timelessness. In other words we were loaded to the lid. The viscount had disappeared during my last nod and so I got a bit confident, nosing around the room at all the antiques and stuff. Funny little carved wooden men with long beards and pipes lined one of the stone window ledges and the vision explained to me that they were Mongolian opium smokers the viscount had his dealer ship over from the far fucking east! She also told me that she'd been taking heroin, along with the viscount and some of his wifelets, for as long as she could remember and fuck me did she look like a junky no not one bit in fact she looked precisely the opposite of a street junky, I'd go so far as to say she radiated health, even now while she's twated she's glowing! And I've heard of this before, when you've got unlimited funds and unlimited time to yourself and unlimited junk then a habit as such does not develop no sir and no obvious health problems occur though this does seem unbelievable but here is the proof, lying her in front of me, a picture of health and I cooked up another hit and I just can't contain this feeling that remains.

21

I have returned to my camp. I'm cold and depressed and want to be off out of here. For two days and nights I have been a guest in the castle and I was made to feel very much at home. But now it's all over and as I sit pathetically stirring my dried noodles on my fucking stove in the perishing early evening red sky stripy glow, a Tornado dips its wing and hugs the hillside about a mile away as the crow flies, two magenta exhausts staring right at me like the devil's eyes as the pilot makes her way back to the American air base where her continental colleagues will say good job Bob to Sally and Sally will smile and wonder how the fuck she came to be a fighter pilot when what she was really interested in was physics and that's why she got her degree in nuclear studies but her parents just pushed and pushed and



wouldn't stop please stop but she couldn't resist their controlling presence and here she is and howdeedoodee yessireebob. I envy Sally and Sally envies me. Let's do a swap, girl. My noodles are overdone, the pan's nearly dry, the light's almost gone, in fact the only glow is from a red sky and my blue-flamed stove. There's not much point in going on really; shall I die and disintegrate or plough on. That's what it feels like this life sometimes, like I'm a working old worn out beat shire horse pulling a huge weight through dirty fields on unsteady legs. Come on, Sally, let's do a swap. Eject, eject, eject.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. The following poems will appear in his forthcoming collection, *Straying from Luminosity*.

## Ernest Hekkanen/ **Two Poems**

### **I Did This**

Who crushed the infant's head  
with a blow so mighty  
eyes popped out of sockets?

Who raped the women,  
young and old alike,  
not once but a thousand times?

Who burned the houses  
but left the clothes hanging  
on the line?

Who dropped the bombs?  
Who unleashed the missiles?  
Who murdered the villagers  
as they crossed the bridge  
to market?

Who looted? Who beheaded his neighbor  
and left him there to gawk  
bodiless  
beside the city gate?

I did.  
I and my comrades did this.  
I, your good neighbor  
who went to mass  
who prostrated in the mosque  
who donned his skull cap  
who genuflected, who prayed.  
It was I, I who used the correct word  
for bread.

I eviscerated the young woman.  
I disemboweled the young man.  
I disgorged the heavy bombs

which blackened the sky.  
 It was I. I did this.  
 I let my bitterness  
     be used like a tool.  
 I listened to the demagogues  
     who promised me more of this  
     and more of that  
     if I got rid of my neighbors  
     over there.

I fed like a dog upon the lies.  
 I let my rancor be used.  
 I, a civilized man  
     who once wrote poetry  
     who once played the classical guitar  
     who once attended soccer matches  
     who once went to theater  
     who once shouted bravo at operas  
     who once played chess outside the tavern  
     who once held a flag high  
         at political rallies.

I did this. I stuck my neighbor's head  
     atop the stanchion  
     for all to see.  
 I flung the baby against the wall.  
 I held down the village girl  
     while my comrades in arms  
     took turns  
     plowing  
     that which wasn't theirs to plow.

It was I. I did this. I let myself  
     be used  
     by those who said  
     I would be better off  
     without my neighbors  
     down the street.

I cheered on my compatriots,  
     who were as vicious as I.  
 I let myself be employed  
     like a machete  
     like an anti-tank gun  
     like an Uzi  
 and now,  
         now I can't trust my neighbors  
     not to act  
     the same way

as I.

I listen. I wait for people  
 to betray themselves  
 each time they utter  
 the word for bread.  
 Bread tells me everything  
 I need to know.  
 It tells me who can be trusted  
 and who can't.  
 It tells me who to break a crust with  
 and who must be denied a crust.

I did this. I made it impossible  
 to endure my neighbor. It was I,  
 a civilized man  
 a man who didn't have enough  
 a man whose fields grow the grain  
 that's ground and baked  
 into bread  
 I now sell at this stall.

I made a battlefield of this earth,  
 right here.

I fenced it off with corpses.  
 I did this, I who sang in the choir  
 I who attended mosque  
 I who went to temple  
 I who believed my cause was right.

It was I. I did this.  
 I, a civilized man  
 well-versed in literature.  
 I let others use my hatred.  
 It was I. I did this.  
 I brought to ruin  
 that which was best  
 in me.

## What My Heroes Did to Me

When I was ten I tried to emulate my hero  
 Davy Crockett. In store-bought coonskin cap  
 and hunting knife strapped to hip,  
 I fled to the woods below my father's house,  
 steel leg-hold traps dangling by chains  
 from left hand, a rifle crooked in my right arm,  
 and there I trapped the lowly mountain beaver  
 to the point of extinction.

I smashed in the beaver's head  
 with an eight-pound sledge,  
 for it was ugly enough to deserve that fate.  
 I removed pelt from still-warm body,  
 and to show my friends the sort of hero I was,  
 I stabbed the carcass until entrails hung,  
 until peristaltic waves caused the animal to shit  
 even in death.

When I was twelve I became Audie Murphy.  
 I assailed a string of enemy fortresses  
 throughout Europe and South Pacific,  
 using rifle, machine gun, bazooka and hand grenade.  
 I rat-tatted my way up Iwo Jima Hill  
 and there I planted Old Glory  
 for all to see.

By fifteen, I was riding high in the saddle  
 with John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart and Gary Cooper.  
 I was conducting flights over Korea,  
 dropping firebombs on Dresden,  
 unloading an H here and there in the Orient,  
 referring to that person as Kraut,  
     that man as Jap,  
     that fellow over there as Spik  
     that guy as slant-eye  
     and those South East Asian bastards as gooks.

By the time I was twenty the Vietnam War  
 was looming like dirty gossip on the horizon,  
 and I was no longer quite so sure. My heroes became  
 Ché Guevara, Fidel Castro, Stokely Carmichael,  
 Eldridge Cleaver, Karl Marx and French Resistance Fighters;  
 that is, anyone who preached  
 the philosophy of power

exploding from the barrel of a gun.  
At university I stood atop tables,  
waving clenched fist, engaged in verbal battles  
with foes who wanted to send me  
like fodder  
into steaming jungles  
overseas.

By the time I received my second draft notice  
my heroes had pretty much melted like butter  
left on a plate in warm sunshine. I feared,  
in addition to being killed  
for something totally worthless,  
that I might enjoy the act of killing  
a little too much.

I was reminded of those mountain beavers  
I had skinned alive, the neighbor's tomcat  
I had shot in the dump, the dog who had wandered  
unintentionally into the sights of my rifle  
and the trembling excitement that comes  
when you kill. I was afraid of what  
my heroes had done to me.  
I was afraid of the monster  
I could so easily become.

JÜRGEN JOACHIM HESSE was the Featured Poet in Vol.2, No.1 of *The New Orphic Review*. A former staff writer with *The Daily Colonist*, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Vancouver Sun*, he prepared dozens of documentaries as an award-winning broadcast journalist for the CBC. His latest books include *Visions in Black*, *Waiting for Zero Hour*, *Voices in Mexico* and *The Word: An Adventure of the Mind*.

## Hero Worship Elevated to an Art Form

Jürgen Joachim Hesse

Hero-worshipping is a juvenile affliction, dampened later on in our lives by more mature considerations. We begin to see the warts and the wrinkles in the shining, unblemished faces of our heroes and role models. However, by then it is too late. Our heroes have made their impact on our collective psyche, and this impact is of lasting value. We cannot undo the influences exerted upon us by our heroes, however fallible these idols may appear in retrospect.

What is important as we grow older and remember the theoretical and practical lessons our heroes have bequeathed us, is what kind of heroes these men and women were.

So much for deep analysis. Instead of assessing the sterling – or otherwise – moral character of our heroes, we must look at ourselves and gauge the level of benefits we have derived from our heroes. Did we choose well, or did we select flawed heroes that imbued us with all the wrong notions, a detrimental-to-others set of ethics and moral behavior?

Let me offer my own set of heroes that shaped my intellectual identity and the kind of values that guided me, for better or for worse, through seventy-five years.

All my heroes, without exception, fall into three categories: 1) literate and literary shit-disturbers, 2) philosophical anarchists, and 3) uncompromising rebels against authority *per se*.

That short list leaves out most of the commonplace heroes in the areas of sport (yecch!), politics (*horribile dictu!*), economics, science, academe, and

from any other ruffraff nomenclatures. My heroes, by default, are writers, men and women of ideas, literary icons or lesser-known (even unknown) luminaries in their specific literary art form.

Are writers, throughout history, valid and valuable role models, the stuff from which heroes are made? It is my contention that they are, that writers embrace such writing and literate subspecies as philosophers, moralists, revolutionaries, in short, men and women who, all too often at their own peril, throw themselves recklessly into a determined battle for the betterment of mankind.

There is one danger I wish to pinpoint: When we adulate someone we have never met, who has never written about his or her beliefs, we run the risk of depending on someone else's judgment, i.e. journalists who present this newest hero to us as a putative role model. But *quis custodiet ipsos custodes* (Juvenal in his *Satires* poses this vexing question), pray tell? Eh? For my part, I trust only my own judgment when I read what someone has written. When I was given *Mein Kampf* to read at age fourteen, I could not get past the first few words – *quod erat demonstrandum*.

So-called heroes who have gained any kind of notoriety by dint of negative (or retro, if you wish) achievements such as conquering battles to the detriment of resident populations, no matter how seemingly noble their quest might have been deemed at the time – such anti-heroes do not qualify. Think back, if your history lessons remain extant despite your personal pursuit of acquiring money, status, power, family, and other such questionable goals, think of all the battles fought to subdue savages, noble and crude both, under the banner of western civilization and Christian faith.

The men – with the occasional woman thrown in – who went out to conquer new territories and inhabitants to be ruled by the allegedly benevolent Holy Roman Empire, for example, were, without exception, piss-poor examples of manhood. They were not hero material.

So here comes my second hero, Saint Francis of Assisi, born to a life of pleasure, leisure and the pursuit of the upper-class lifestyle centuries ago, a man who threw it all away and devoted himself to a life of voluntary poverty, doing nothing for himself but everything for his suffering fellow man and woman.

*Who are you,  
O my most sweet God,  
And who am I,  
Most vile worm  
And your worthless servant?*

When St. Francis was overheard repeating these words endlessly in the year AD 1224, Brother Leo asked him why. St. Francis responded, "I was shown two lights and realized who the Creator is and who I am. I saw the depths of the infinite goodness of God and the deplorable depths of our own nothingness." Looking at our current world in AD 1999, soon to be 2000, how can we argue the point of our own nothingness?

Where, you ask, is my first hero? Why, it's that socialist carpenter, of course, who took the sins of mankind upon his shoulders and let himself be



crucified for his wondrous deeds. None better, none more important, than Jesus Christ, Superhero of mine.

As we are still in the area of religion, so to speak, let me mention my principal latter-day literary hero, the late Cistercian (Trappist) monk and author Thomas Merton. I have read almost all of his books, especially the stupendous autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Thomas Merton was an extraordinary monk, a literary savant. He wrote and prayed, went to mass, read books voraciously, corresponded by letter with dozens of his contemporary intellectual friends, and yet led the life of a monk. But his was sometimes a troubled life, and temptations visited him. One such temptation came in the persona of a woman only identified as M.

Merton, too, suffered from skin eruption – whether for similar reasons as did Kazantzakis, no one will ever know. What did, however, become clear was that, one day, temptation overcame this Kentucky-based monk. If we are to believe one of his literary executors, the temptation was only consummated once, then he retreated into his voluntary life of sexual abstinence.

That story, if true, makes Merton even more of a hero to me. Perfect heroes scare me too much. I want them a little flawed, here and there.

But onward, fellow readers, in our quest for heroes.

Throughout my very long life, I have read voraciously to the exclusion of many other real (or imagined) pleasures. I cannot even approximate the number of books devoured for hours and hours on end. But many books stand out as beacons of truth and example, recipes for decent behavior in the face of adversity, temptation, violence, and everything else the restless and mean-spirited human mind can devise to make life a misery for his fellow man.

In my early years in my native Germany, I would forego roaming through the picturesque hills of southern Bavaria and, instead, sit in an armchair, sipping black tea, dead to the world. My reading habits began with adventure fiction, and one German writer stands out, a legend in his time – Karl May. But slowly I added more serious literature to my reading, and since my mother kept a well-stocked library full of classics – mostly German but also all of John Galsworthy, although I never read the *Forsythe Saga*, and all of Charles Dickens. Goethe and Schiller, curiously enough, left me almost untouched, but I delved deeply into Lessing, Herder, Gottfried Keller, Novalis, the *Edda* and *Das Nibelungenlied*. I mean, Siegfried is the perfect fictional hero, and who hasn't hankered after the luscious Kriemhilde?

In those teen years no literary hero, read role model, emerged; my attention span was fickle, and only after the Second World War ended, and I was stranded intellectually without political focus, did I begin to plan my reading habits. By 1948, at the age of twenty-four, I met literate Americans who had come to do volunteer work in Germany, Quakers with university degrees. They lent me books, and I recall how, in 1949, reading *1984*, my intellectual future became solidified – now I had discovered my own focus through Eric Blair (aka George Orwell). His own distrust of government (so blatantly evident in *Animal Farm*) corresponded with my own instinctive rebelliousness against the just-defeated Nazi regime (I have described my adventures

of growing up in that environment in my documentary novel, *Waiting for Zero Hour*).

Then came a fortunate breakthrough. I became a librarian at the U.S.-run Amerika Haus in Mannheim, where I began to read systematically, according to plan: Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, John O'Hara, John Steinbeck, William Saroyan, Thomas Wolfe, Scott Fitzgerald, and, of course, every new issue of *The New Yorker*.

The German authors came next: Franz Kafka affected my emotional equilibrium with a force that penetrated deep into my soul, if you will permit me this extravagant simile. Especially two short works, and two novels did it: *The Penal Colony*, *Metamorphosis*, *The Castle*, *The Trial*. But Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, his brother Heinrich Mann's *Der Untertan* (*The Subject*), Kurt Tucholsky's biting satires on the German bourgeoisie, Stefan Zweig, Franz Werfel, Carl Zuckermayer's incomparable farce about German militarism, *The Captain of Köpenick*, the Czech writer Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schwejk*, Remark's *All Quiet on the Western Front* – all of them left a residue of admiration for the authors, and affection for their fictional creations.

You see, without access to university education, I needed, wanted to, educate myself, and so I did. Along with literature I studied art history in books, visited gallery exhibitions, and sought the company of painters, sculptors, writers, philosophers, intellectuals and anyone who was inept at making small talk – as I have always been – but preferred, instead, to discuss matters of life and death, i.e. the arts. When the war had ended, I was twenty years old, and now there was no longer restricted access to the world of knowledge, as there had been under the Nazis.

Clearing out the emotional-intellectual debris of Nazi propaganda took no time at all, and I felt like a dried-out sponge which was now soaking up culture through the eyes.

This was also the time when I first visited Paris and saw a production of Sartre's *Huis Clos*, a play so powerful, so disturbing, that it still disquiets me when I think of the three people, two women and a man, condemned to be together for all eternity. Gruesome, but necessary. So Sartre – chiefly because of his powerful novels and plays but also his philosophical masterpiece of existentialism, *Being and Nothingness* – became my literary hero, although later on, when he turned into a cantankerous and pitiful old man who had, in my opinion, lost his marbles, I relegated him to the bin containing dethroned heroes. Let us not forget his writer/companion, Simone de Beauvoir, and her own books.

Albert Camus, the dada anti-art movement, Jean Cocteau, Rimbaud, Jean Genêt, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin – the list goes on and on, but several writers occupy a special place in my memory. First comes B. Traven, aka the elusive German anarchist Ret Marut who fled Germany and began a literary career in Mexico. *The Death Ship* left me spellbound, as did his later work, especially the six so-called jungle novels (among them my two favorites, *La Carreta* and *The Bridge in the Jungle*). Traven was not a brilliant stylist, but the power of his images and his deep, compassionate love for the downtrodden, made up for it.

In 1976 I produced a long radio documentary on Traven for CBC Radio and in the process learned a lot about his life. One's literary heroes tend to solidify their emotional hold on us hero-worshippers whenever anecdotes are connected to their oeuvre (the pretentious term for "output"). When you dig into a writer's background and interview his friends and relatives, anecdotes come to light, always too good to miss.

B. Traven, the writer with many aliases, was hired in 1948 by Hollywood film director John Huston to act as a script consultant during the filming of the novel, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. Traven never admitted he was the author, but Huston told me he was certain the consultant was also the book's author.

While the film crew was camped in the desert, one of the technical staff – known as a merciless prankster – once induced some of his buddies to grab Traven, hold him down, remove his trousers and underpants, and paint his genitalia a violent purple, using, if memory serves, the ever-present bottle of mercurochrome. Traven, Huston told me during my interview with him in the Puerto-Vallarta villa formerly owned by the Taylor-Burtons, struggled valiantly and violently, but to no avail. After he was let go, Traven remained seriously pissed off and wouldn't speak to them anymore. Huston, thirty years later, still chuckled when he volunteered the story.

Traven, on his deathbed in 1969 in his house on Rio Mississippi Street in Mexico City, wanted to see, for the last time, his old friend and collaborator, the famous cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa. Figueroa, whom I interviewed in his sumptuous villa in Coyoacán, suburb of Mexico City and not far from the famous Trotzky house and even more famous Diego Rivera/Frida Kahlo house. This kind and dignified gentleman recalled that Traven was in bed. "I cannot support this pain," Figueroa quoted his friend Traven as saying. "Here, take this." He then handed a slip of paper to Figueroa. On it was scrawled, "Get me poison!"

"Well, did you?" I asked Figueroa.

"Of course not," he said, but who knows? A few days later, Traven died at age eighty-nine.

Nikos Kazantzakis is another powerful writer, and two of his works stand out, in my opinion: the autobiographical notes known as *Report to Greco*, and his monumental sequel to Homer's *Odyssey*, with its 33,333 lines of verse; a powerful onslaught on our senses. I made his literary oeuvre into another long radio documentary after visiting Greece and his widow in Geneva.

The anecdotes connected with Nikos Kazantzakis are legendary. During the Second World War, his widow Hélène Kazantzakis told me over tea and biscuits in her elegant apartment in 1973, Nikos was writing the aforementioned sequel to *The Odyssey*, tucked away in a shack on the beach of a small Greek island. "He would write naked there," the widow said, "because that particular summer in the mid-forties it was very hot. One day, a German *Wehrmacht* patrol was shooting off their rifles in the neighborhood, and my stark-naked husband stormed outside, shook his fists at them, and nearly was shot. He was fearless, and he loathed the German occupation troops."

Kazantzakis lived in Vienna when he was in his early twenties, a very shy man. A strapping woman had invited him to her boudoir one day, and he

said he would come and partake of her offerings. But two hours before his tryst, the writer's body broke out in many festering sores that oozed pus. The condition abated somewhat after he decided not to visit the lady. But the condition recurred when he again wanted to visit her. In desperation, and covered in bandages, Kazantzakis went to see a famous psychiatrist – in those days in Vienna they were called *Seelenarzt*, soul doctor. The psychiatrist knew something about psychosomatic cause-and-effect symptoms and advised Kazantzakis, whose festering sores never healed while he lived in Vienna, to take a train to Munich and stay there for some months. Kazantzakis went home to pack and, while en route to the train station, noticed that his sores began to disappear. By the time he rolled into München's *Hauptbahnhof*, his skin was healed.

When I visited Holy Mount Athos in Greece, where Kazantzakis and a friend had spent several weeks decades ago, I retraced his steps. At the monastery of St. Panteleimon I encountered an *archimandrit*, a monk, outside his bakery. I mentioned Nikos Kazantzakis to him, hoping for a gleam of recognition in his eyes. Instead, the rather stout *archimandrit* spat copiously on the dusty ground, then stamped his sputum, full of rage, ordering me to get the hell out of his sight. You see, Kazantzakis had been touching the collective nerve of the Greek Orthodox church hierarchy with many of his novels that questioned the validity of faith. He was almost excommunicated, and after his death, the church officials refused to give him a burial in sanctified ground. Hate carries a long memory: Kazantzakis died in 1957, and I was on Mount Athos in 1973. He has never been, as far as I know, accepted by the Greek Orthodox church as Greece's greatest writer.

At this point I realize I haven't even begun to make a dent in the huge pile of books I read during my sixty years as a serious reader. It was a colossal adventure of discovery and an engagement that shaped my own life forever.

Does any one writer stand out among the many? If I had to choose, on pain of being relegated to social chit-chat for the rest of my days, I would choose my fellow German, B. Traven, who stubbornly clung to the conviction that his own identity didn't matter, and therefore he managed to obfuscate his origins and real identity. Even his widow, Rosa Elena Luján de Traven Torsvan, whom I visited several times in Mexico City in the seventies, would not divulge his true identity, even half a dozen years after his death.

Traven, the radical anarchist, was likely the only one (this is my, flawed perhaps, judgment) among many other fellow anarchist writers who honored the denial of ego in practice. His literary work is often artless, awkward, tainted by too much bullheaded opinionating, yet it rings still true today. His phenomenal worldwide success throughout the twenties into the sixties is exemplary, and his books were read everywhere. People thirsted for the truth according to this German-born (or Polish-born) political activist and founder/editor of the anarchist periodical *Der Ziegelbrenner* (*The Brickburner*), a publication that got him into trouble with the postwar (WWI) German authorities who promptly arrested him on charges of sedition. He escaped, made his way to Mexico and became a political and literary legend.

It is now time for me to rest. I no longer require literary heroes to shape my destiny. The words which once entranced and motivated me are now fond memories. And yet – and yet, when a new book comes along – these days I prefer nonfiction, because much mainstream, or literary, fiction has become redundant, repetitive, and too blasé for my taste – I am always tempted to spend money I cannot afford rather than waiting for the public library to lend it to me. I realize I am leaving myself wide open to cries of “Shame!” or “Who the hell does Hesse think he is, to judge literature?” I invoke the oldest prerogative in the so-called free world, to say what I damn well please, and to hell with anyone who wants to curtail my opinions.

However, you out there are invited to rebut, to offend, to attack – that’s why we use words, right?

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## A Handmade Life

Jane Covernton

Ten years

I finally self-published my third novel ten years after I started writing it. I used money my mother gave me from an unexpected dividend. I had barely enough to publish two-hundred books and had to go out to do the computer part of the scanning and layout because my computer is ancient and balky and I couldn't afford a layout service. One afternoon, after frustrating hours a Kinko's trying unsuccessfully to get the computer to accept my work, I walked outside and they were towing the van – at least the guy was starting to hook it up. I crossed six dangerous lanes of traffic and ran down Broadway crying, "Please don't tow it please." He grudgingly unhooked and I drove around the corner panting and sobbing to cry it out. I felt I would never get my novel published.

Disjointed

I just turned fifty. I'm suffering from depression. I can't make sense of my life. I'll write this as therapy and maybe someone else will find it useful too. My method will be to write disjointed pieces – that's how my life feels – all in little pieces.

## Herbalist, autodidact

If I'd gone to school and taken one of the many courses I've looked at in calendars maybe I could get paid for it. But I don't. I grow my own herbs and make herbal medicines. I make a killer cough syrup out of angelica, elecampane, and echinacea roots. To make this syrup, I go out into the garden with a shovel and a knife and lift the roots and cut off pieces, then tamp the plant back into the ground with some fresh compost. It's best when the ground isn't frozen. Wash the roots with warm water. It's sensual: cold soil, fingers numb, warm water, the smell of the different roots, a taste test of echinacea tingling like electricity on the tongue. Cut roots into small slices, put in water with sugar, boil fifteen minutes. Strain, bottle, and use. It's very effective, but not cost-effective. I give it to my children and my children's teachers. I was going to market it and call it Teacher's Choice. Frayed end: I took a Small Business course thinking I'd do something with my herbs and learned mostly that I don't have the courage or the capital, or the courage *and* the capital

## Driving

I do a lot of driving. I drive smoothly, carefully, obediently. I curve around the city from house to school to Grandma's Bible class, to aquafit, to the library, to school, to Sky Train to pick up the snowboarder. I drive mindfully, but sometimes I think driving is another depression-masking activity, like taking drugs or playing Nintendo.

## Many gardens

Last spring for a while I had responsibility for the care of four different gardens: Mine; my parents' sunny garden with its sandy soil on the Sunshine Coast a ferry ride away; the herb plot at the school garden just off Kingsway where I went once a week with a small group of kids and weeded and oohed at the worms and picked cherries and grew peppermint which we eventually made into peppermint ice cream; and finally, Garden #4: a brief paid gig at a housing co-op where I was hired by an elderly disabled lady who didn't have the authority to hire me and really needed someone to talk to. She was at war with almost everyone in the Co-op. I weeded that whole garden once and planted one bed. I listened to the lonely lady as much as I could and tried not to charge the Co-op for listening time. But I feel guilty because since then I haven't called her and I'm sure she's just as lonely now as she was then. If I was a proper Christian I would.

## Spiritual life

I'm not a proper Christian. That's obvious. Though I'm some kind of Christian. I went to a United Church for three years, drawn by the fine, sen-

suous and deep sermons of the minister and the justice-making of the church leadership, held by the sense of amazement at being with others who believed in Something. While I was there, I was writing the novel in which the main character was a United Church minister and studying theology without going to school.

### Writing practice

My writing practice used to be that I would make myself available to writing between nine and three when the kids were at school. The discipline was that I would not do housework. Then there's Aquafit, grocery shopping, mother-in-law driving, volunteering at two schools, fighting education budget cuts. I know what a good writing practice looks like. My life scrapes away at that.

### Rule

Any herb grown or harvested at home is going to work better than any herb bought in a store and way way better than any herb in a plastic pill in a plastic bottle.

### Counseling

I do a lot of unpaid counseling or reflective listening. Reflective listening is when you restate what a person has said, naming the emotion, affirming that you've heard. It's not rote; it requires attentiveness. I try not to give advice. I sometimes re-frame a situation, to cast it in a more positive light. When I can, I point out strengths. I got into it easily now, so that many people talk to me. The sales clerk in the health food store tells me about her daughter off the deep end with drugs. I do it with my kids. I do it with friends. And now I do it by e-mail. Sometimes I think I should go back to university and get a degree in counseling and get paid for it.

### The discipline

The book launch was great. I found a little de-sanctified church that was run by the Legion. John and I picked up ten pounds of dog poo from the small lawn in front and did our best with candles, flowers, and lamps from home. I made all the food. My Mum paid for the wine. I read for about fifteen minutes. I was flying. One person took a call on his cell phone while I was reading, one of my kids couldn't sit still, and someone else had to leave to catch a flight, but most people thought it was fabulous. The discipline is to listen to the compliments and not worry about the woman who got up and left in the middle.



Da da da da da da da. Get a job.

Once every six months or so I think I should get a job. I sing that song to my kids when they ask for expensive things. Shopping for a dress because I actually having nothing I could wear to a job interview. What job? I don't imagine a good job, just a job. I know I am too old for most good jobs. Fifty. Are you kidding??? But I figure since I am depressingly reliable and not stupid there should be something they would pay me to do. So I sit across from my husband in some restaurant and bring it up again and by the end of dinner we decide, money worries aside, how could I get a job? I have too many responsibilities. I'm grateful to him because this way I'm able to keep alive the delusion that I am a writer.

### Handmade

Being this kind of herbalist is a slow thing. Planting, weeding, composting, watering, harvesting, drying, bottling all take time. On peppermint farms they harvest by machine and that's why you sometimes get pebbles in your bulk peppermint. By hand it's sensuous: the heady smell of peppermint, the sun on my head, the smell on my fingers for the rest of the day. My Echinacea Spearmint Schnapps this year was smooth, sweet, and tasty like a fine liqueur, with a tingling finish.

### Teenage hair

I have two thirteen year old boys (six months apart – both adopted). One spends a great deal of effort looking like everyone else in his school (shiny black tear-away pants with a white stripe and a dark T-shirt with a shiny white or black jacket). I know he looks like everyone else because I do Safe Arrival there Friday mornings and I see the kids: girls and boys all dressed in shiny black, most of them with shiny black hair like his. There are twenty-six first languages at his school. The other day I gave him money to go up to Kingsway for a haircut but he asked if he could get his friend's mother to cut it. When he came home, he had his jacket over his head hiding his hair. It wasn't a bad cut. It just looked ridiculous. The next day he went up to school and came home a few minutes later. "Oooh I have a stomach ache. I need a hug, I fell on some stairs. I'm so sick. Some kids made fun of my hair." He spent the day moping and considering his options. At three-ten his friend phoned to find out why he wasn't at school. He hesitated before he picked up the phone. He told his friend he was sick. He didn't tell him about the hair crisis. At four o'clock we went up to the local hairdresser to see about getting it redone. But when we looked at the glossy photos in the hairdressing magazine, there was his haircut: a ball of fluffy hair over a shaved bottom. "So why did the kids laugh at me?" "They just weren't used to it." He decided to keep his hair the way it was and not hurt the feelings of his friend and his friend's Mum.

### Teenage hair 2

My other son constantly pushes the limits: an earring when he was nine, three pierces by the time he was ten. Now he has green hair and wants his lip pierced. His hair crisis: his alternate school was having a Valentine's dance and he needed Red Hair, but he had no money. "Nick's Mum would just give him the money. Why don't you believe in lending money?" He agreed to cut the ivy. Twenty minutes later: "I'm allergic to ivy." Then he agreed to wipe and organize kitchen cupboards. Finally he had enough money and went off on the bus to get the red dye. At his school he doesn't take classes so the lesson for today was: work to earn money. The cost for me was a day of concentration.

### Got no expectations

I come home from my expeditions out into the world eager, optimistic. I expect to get a phone message, a letter, or now, an e-mail. I stalk the mailman. I come home quickly to see whether the world wants me or not.

### Autodidact 2

These are the herbs I have in my garden or have wildcrafted: Alkanet, allheal, aloe vera (in the house), angelica, Balm of Gilead (buds collected from fallen branches after an autumn wind storm at Trout Lake), bergamot, betony, boneset, borage, burdock, burnet, calendula, catnip (gone thanks to rampaging cats throwing themselves at the hanging baskets), chamomile, chickweed, chives, cilantro, cleavers (gathered along the top of the beach), black cohosh, comfrey, cornflower, daisy, dandelion, echinacea, eleanore, evening primrose, fennel, feverfew, garlic, goldenrod, heartsease (johnny-jump-up – it comes and goes), hollyhock, hops, horsetail (a scourge), hyssop, lady's mantle, lavender, lemon balm, licorice, linden (gathered after a spring wind storm up by the school where the trees grow in fragrant groves), lovage, marjoram (two types), marshmallow, meadow-sweet, mints (several kinds), motherwort, mugwort, mullein (one plant appeared in a crack in the sidewalk beside the back steps and grew seven feet tall and skinny with buttery yellow flowers and soft gray leaves. My guardian plant), nasturtium, nettles, onion, oregano, parsley, plantain, poppy, raspberry, roses, rosemary, rue, sage, St. John's Wort, skullcap, strawberry, sweet cecily, sweet woodruff, thyme, valerian, vervain, wormwood, yarrow, and yucca.

I know the Latin names of these plants and the medicinal uses.

### Dream – celandine

There are flowers in my bed, a flower bed at the head of the bed where the pillows would normally be. Dirt there and the flowers struggling because it is winter – snapdragons with frost wilt, blooming in brilliant yellows and reds, despite the cold.

Allen Ginsberg

Allen Ginsberg says you should write without expectation. Fame or no-fame. Money or no-money, it doesn't matter, just write.

Be mindful

My family has a family crest. The motto on the crest is *Memor Esto*.

Spiritual practice

On the long questionnaire I submitted to the publisher for *The Way of the Parent*, I said that my main spiritual practice right now was being present to anyone who crossed my path.

Self-help

I went to the library to see about getting a list of libraries to which to sell my novel. There are over 6,000 libraries in Canada. To get a mailing list I'd have to spend at least \$375.00. I'm daunted, overwhelmed. Instead, I check out a self-help book about middle age spirituality and spend the rest of the afternoon in a funk, speed-reading. The book annoys me. The one thing I take away is there's a difference between not knowing and confusion. It's okay to be in not knowing, waiting to know better. I'm cross with myself for reading another self-help book. I'm tired, weary to the bone of "working on myself." The book says middle age is a time for discarding old beliefs that aren't helpful any more. I am terrified that the belief I may need to discard is the belief that I'm a writer.

Mending chairs

After launching my book I needed to calm down and re-group. So, a period of time mending chairs that had been piling up in the lawn mower corner of the basement. No one ever just sits in this house – they tilt, rock, twirl and sometimes hurl the chairs. On a couple of them, the wood was shattered. The chairs had to be thrown out. Mostly it was working with glue, fitting the cross pieces back in. Very satisfying. Some have come apart again already. Actually it is a process of chair elimination – fix it for a while then when it breaks again discern whether it can be fixed again, maybe throw it

out. Similar to what the self-help books say we should be doing with our old beliefs in middle age. I have a sentimental attachment to some of these chairs and besides what will we sit on if we throw out all the old chairs?

### Gulf Wars

During the first Gulf War, I organized a group called Kids and Grownups for Peace. We held a rally at the Art Gallery Square with performers; a Family Dance; and a Valentines for Peace event to make and send Valentines to Iraqi and Israeli children through the Red Cross. This Gulf War, they're bombing Iraq again and I scarcely hear. I'm chopping organic vegetables and hardly absorbing the fact that Bill Clinton is killing people while the Senate is trying to impeach him.

### Selling

After my novel launch there was the expected crash and much housework long neglected. There's selling. How different my life would be if I didn't have this uptight attitude about selling. Maybe the idea that I can't sell is one of the false beliefs I'm supposed to drop now that I'm fifty.

### Caring

My parents used to drop in for tea and I'd find it easy to drop whatever I was doing and have a visit. This year, now that they are eighty-three and eighty-four years old, they're finding it harder to drop by. So I have to make it part of my work to drop in on them. That hardly qualifies as extreme elder care.

My mother-in-law lives with us. I give her dinner every day and afternoon tea most days while I'm working in the kitchen. I drive her to her Taize service Tuesday nights, her Bible group every second Wednesday, and church on Sunday mornings. She takes the handidart to stroke club on Thursdays. She used to take the bus home from the Bible group but since the night she fainted and ended up in hospital the day of a Bible group, I've felt I should pick her up from that too. I take her to the bank occasionally and I do her grocery shopping. She pays a bit of rent and lives in a jumble of possessions, plastic bags, and milk cartons in two rooms in the basement and is not allowed to import her stuff upstairs although she can always sit in the sun in the kitchen or the garden. She takes up psychic space. She doesn't interfere with the kids. She sometimes takes the dog for a walk to the park and she's stopped doing dishes since the fainting spell. She had a stroke three years ago but seems mostly recovered. She's eighty-three.

### A theology

I left the United Church. I wrote a book about parenting as a spiritual path. I try to meditate. I believe in healing hands, prayer, that there is a spiritual realm. I'm looking for a theology that incorporates ghosts, the fact that my father-in-law's spirit scored my lips as he passed from this world, the possibility of other life in the universe, a not-male deity and practice, a way of dealing with the problem of suffering, and my wonder at how the world of plants is so finely meshed with our healing needs.

#### It flows

All this life stuff has been circling and circling in my head. The kids take a stick in the sand in the playground and scratch a channel for the puddle they've been swirling round and water flows down with gravity.

#### Spiritual life

Shopping or seeking, puffing along my spiritual path, uphill.

Why not just follow Buddhism – try to develop that lovely straight back and the peaceful eyes from sitting discipline. I sometimes suspect I'm just lazy. Discernment: what is laziness and what is “No, that just doesn't feel right.”?

Slowly discarding the idea that spiritual life should do something for me – feel nice, be pleasurable, like some kind of drug. Trying to find the balance between “healthy skepticism” and blindness. Buddhism talks about “ordinary mind.” But what on earth would enlightenment be like? Would I know? Surely there should be some inkling. But I'm just down here in the clouds.

#### The dark forces of capitalism

Mary Jo Leddy, the Catholic writer, talks about “the dark forces of capitalism” that say if you have nothing, you are nothing. I've felt this being nothing. I haven't worked for fifteen years. I only spent five years in the news business and still I dream about it – I'm working on news stories and can't get back to the station. I can't make the phones work to call in. The typewriters won't work. I dream about my long ago bosses all the time – powerful men. I do nothing, I am nothing. I am an “artist.” Vincent Van Gogh toiling away unrecognized, ready to cut off an ear to see if anyone will notice. I am nothing, I do nothing. I have nothing.

this constant feeling that I could do better  
that I could be better  
that I am a failure

#### The search for community

In the United Church I felt “community” when I came early on Sunday morning and there was a purposeful buzz of activity and I was part of it. Women fixing flowers, men getting ready to gather money, the choir humming with pre-song noise. Or at a Church Board meeting, thirty people singing a hymn, all there with a common purpose. But I was always the most radical person in the room, always “leading.” So much energy went to upholding the building, maintaining the structures. I wanted to tear down the structures. When I left, no one called.

At my son’s alternate school, there’s a “community” which I don’t yet feel part of. There, I feel like one of the most conservative people in the room. I find myself talking about setting limits. I don’t feel very comfortable there either.

Is a community somewhere you feel comfortable? Where the hell would I feel comfortable? I dreamed I was going to Paris and I had a beautiful red coat. I was wondering whether it would be warm enough. In waking life, I decided to buy a dress with my fiftieth birthday money. I haven’t worn a dress for years. I have in mind a black dress with long sleeves that I could wear with boots and scarves to look as hippy or straight or suburban or dressy as needed, a changeling dress. I’ve looked and found no such dress. There are no clothes in the stores now that I want to try on, much less buy and I feel nausea shopping, hypnotized. In Safeway I was almost hypnotized into buying chocolates for the kids for Valentines. We don’t celebrate Valentines. It’s the Hallmark curriculum. At Safe Arrival I learn that the Jehovah’s Witnesses keep their kids home on Valentines and Halloween. I should too.

## Books

I have time. I don’t have money. That’s why I could only published two-hundred copies of my novel. That’s why I did the cover myself (with Claudia’s beautiful drawings) and the layout and the proofing. That means it’s practically a handmade novel. I believe in books. I believe in the art of making books. I believe there is some goodness in holding a beautiful book and reading it. In the novel the narrator says she’s writing “for the survivors if any,” which turns out to be pretty much what I produced a book for.

## The Zen of Publishing

I found a publisher for *The Way of the Parent*. I had a draft contract. I was reading the Writers’ Union handouts on how to negotiate. I visualized. I phoned. The Publishers had decided to redirect publishing resources to their web site, so my book was cut. Tom Wayman, the poet, said that you must learn to treat acceptance and rejection the same. And I’ve been trying. Working on it. Doing it. But this was a blow. If they’d gone ahead, I would have been working on the book with an editor in the spring and summer of 1999. My life as a writer stretched out into the future with clarity and certainty. Then nothing, back to making it all up. I’ve been practicing as a writ-

er for twenty years. I have a small stack of magazines with my work in them. My list of publications is getting quite long. I tell people at parties and on chairlifts that I'm a writer. But...the end frays.

### Pain comes up

I went to a Zen Buddhist retreat. Nice people, wise counsel, incense, and lovely gonging bells. However, my legs do not naturally bend that way and it was agony to sit for forty minutes at a time with images crawling on the concrete wall. I asked the Rōshi whether pain was meant to be part of practice and he said no, we don't go out of our way to seek painful experiences and it's okay to sit in a chair. However, pain comes up and we shouldn't try to avoid it. Just sit with it.

### The search for community 2

There's the "writing community." I joined writers' organizations and unjoined. I'm left with a few precious writer friends and some Writers in Prison to try to get out.

### Scarification

I stand in Blockbuster video, waiting for the kids to choose, with my eyes swiveling to avoid the images of female beauty, daydreaming about scarification. The cult of female beauty is all pervasive despite worried articles here and there about how it damages people. The photos come back from my launch and I see that there's a gap between the image I carry around of myself and how I really look. My kids say (knowing I'm depressed), "You don't look fifty, Mum." This is how fifty looks. Get used to it.

### The search for community 3

My friend Mark says a community should be like paths in the snow between houses. We've been cringing, waiting for a snowstorm for two days. There are no paths between the houses. When it snows we talk to our neighbors who are also out shoveling their walks and find out who has had a car stolen and who has had a break-in. If I was a better person I'd organize block parties or a Block Watch committee. I try to build community by harassing politicians about education funding. If I was a better person I would work on settling refugees, supporting native land claims, writing letters about the appalling situation of women in Afghanistan who are forbidden to work and stoned to death for letting a little piece of arm show while driving. Perhaps I could find community in the people who do this kind of work. But

for the moment it's just a fantasy and again I must remind myself that community is not necessarily going to be for my pleasure.

### Selling 2

If I could sell I would be a herbalist, selling my calendula cream and my cough syrup.

### Dervish

I've been reading about Sufism and looking at Sufi sites on the Internet. Sufism, if I understand correctly, is either the mystical version of Islam, or the mystical practice that pre-dates Islam and underlies all the world's religions. It's possible to stay in your life and practice. Many accomplished artists and academics are Sufis, including Doris Lessing.

### Problem-solving

My son begged to get a hamster. His friend gave him a cage. He said he'd buy the hamster food and totally take care of it. So I waived the no-rodent rule. Next thing I knew he'd bought a second hamster. Mistake. My husband saw them one day "doing something" but then thought nah they were just playing. Soon we had six more hamsters. Problem: no one wants our hamsters. Do the math. Next thing you know we'll have fifty-eight hamsters. I don't know when baby hamsters start breeding but after they got grown-up eyes and their fur fluffed out I started to get worried. My son assures me he can tell the boy hamsters from the girl hamsters. So I spent one day trying to find a cheap used hamster cage to separate them, then went and bought a new cage plus some more food. Problem solved. The boys are in one cage and the girls are in another.

Trouble is: I know that nice feeling of having solved the problem, that satisfaction from a job well-done, that nice glow, is all illusion.

### Compassion

I like Buddhism. I like the ideas I understand or think I understand, like the need for Right Livelihood, the discipline of practice, and especially the attitude of Compassion. I feel like I should stop here, but something drives me along, like the recycling box scooting along the street in the wind.

### Teacher

The tradition is that Sufism is passed by a teacher to a disciple. I'm attracted by this idea: that there'd be someone who would know what I should



do next and would guide me. But I'm afraid. What if I don't know how to recognize my teacher, what if I'm sucked in by a charlatan, or, more likely, my cynicism and distrust of flowery language means I miss a real teacher. I have a phone number of a Sufi group in my city but I haven't called. Frayed ends and frayed ends.

### Fantasy

The scarification fantasy is that I would scar my face and go about covered in ashes to protest against this cult of female beauty (or at least do a performance piece or something). I would be an indigent nun, begging for food. If I didn't have two thirteen-year-olds, a husband, a mother, a father, a mother-in-law, a dog, a cat, and seven hamsters dependent on me, I would go in a minute. I guess this is my performance piece.

### However

When I was young I dreamed that across the dance floor at the boy's school some budding man would recognize my inner beauty and cross to me. Now I'm apparently blessed to have a husband who sees my inner beauty, who thinks I am beautiful, but I'm superstitious about announcing my blessing to the world.

### Fantasy 2

The other fantasy: at Porpoise Bay a woman comes and goes in a little power boat. We see her when we're fishing off the splintery dock. She raises goats up the inlet. She dresses like a man, a hermit, and apparently does not care what anyone thinks of her. What a blessed life it must be, to not care what anyone thinks of you, to be in nature, to not worry about the world, just live. I'd give up writing or purify it so that I was really writing just to write.

### Connections

Okay, I actually feel better. As therapy this has been helpful. I see there are connections, some integrity, possibly even meaning, in my life.

### Loyalty

I have a certain loyalty to my depression. If, through a miracle of St. John's Wort or publication, it became not necessary, would I be able to put it down, like an ugly suitcase that I lugged this far already?

## Hamster lives

I was sick, coughing in the night, so asleep on the couch. I woke to my son saying, "Omigod, there are thousands of hamsters." I was right, we hadn't solved the hamster problem. This time I got on the phone to the owl and eagle refuge. My husband and son drove out with one box of teenage hamsters and the mother and babies in another box, leaving two hamsters in two cages at home. At the owl and eagle place, the young woman receiving the hamsters looked into my husband's eyes and said solemnly, "Their lives will have a purpose."

JOY HEWITT MANN'S work has appeared in several publications including *Whetstone*, *Beneath the Surface*, *Event* and *The Fiddlehead*. She was the second place winner in the 1999 Kingston Regional Arts Council Literary Awards (sponsored by Quarry Press). When not writing, she runs a junk store.

## A Hot July

Joy Hewitt Mann

JULIA FOUGHT to get the images of long male tongues and fingers the size of sausages out of her mind. Five-year-old Emily was pounding on the bathroom door.

"Mummy. I gotta go pee. What you doin' in there so long?"

It was past nine and she should have been asleep, but Emily wasn't sleeping through the night, anymore. That was Mark's fault. He'd taken Emily's security along with the two hundred bucks from Julia's bingo winnings. *And I'd been goin' to buy you a new typewriter, you ungrateful bastard*, Julia thought.

*I hope you spend it on some whore and get a good dose of clap, or...* No, she wouldn't wish that on him, no matter how bad he'd treated her. It had been good at first, she had to admit that. Real good...

She began to touch herself again.

"Mummy. Mummy."

*Shit.* "Okay, Emily. Mummy's comin' out now. Just hold yourself, hon." *Just hold yourself.* She had to laugh. *And who's holdin' yours tonight, Mark baby?*



Two years ago he'd been pumping gas at Herbie's 401 Truck Stop when she and three-year-old Emily had walked hand in hand up to him. It had been the middle of July and very hot. Julia's arms ached from carrying Emily part

way and she could feel sweat trickling down her inner arm. She held up the red gas can.

“Can you fill that, mister?”

He looked her up and down. “Your father run out of gas? Send you and your little sister all the way by yourself on a day like this?” His smile was big and warm.

He looked close to thirty, but still good looking in his white T and bleached jeans. Kind of like Sting. Ten years along, she could see he’d still look good.

“Ain’t no daddy,” Julia said. “Emily’s mine. It’s us run outa gas.”

He gave her a surprised look that quickly turned teasing. “I’d never have guessed. And you...what? All of fifteen?”

“Eighteen...almost.”

“*Almost* could get me in a lot of trouble, what I’m thinking.”

Julia couldn’t help smiling back. There weren’t many guys looked at you like that once you had a kid.

He bent down to Emily and held out his hand. “Hi...Emily. I’m Mark.” Emily stuck both thumbs in her mouth and looked down at her dusty shoes. Mark glanced up at Julia. She laughed.

He began, “Look...I...”

“Julia,” she offered.

“Nice. I like that...Julia. Jewel. July.” He straightened up and held a hand over his heart. “Oh, sweet Julia. Oh, jewel of July. Might I offer you coffee and fresh apple pie?”

She made a face, thinking, *Some weird guy.*

Mark said, “I mean...would you like something to eat...on me?” He smiled at Emily, “Cold glass of Coke?”

“I don’t allow her no Coke. It’s bad for her teeth.”

“Milk?”

Emily shook her head happily and tugged at Julia’s shirt.

Julia smiled. “Okay, okay. It was a long walk.”

Mark yelled toward a man half visible under the hood of an old pickup. “Hey, Uncle Herbert. I’m going to take a break.”

The man peered out and squinted into the July sun. “Okay. I’ll watch the pumps. Who’s that with you?”

Julia called, “Just me an’ Emily, Herbie.”

“Oh, hi Julia. How’s your Mum?”

“Same as ever. Won at bingo las’ week.”

“That’s good. Dad okay?”

“I guess.”



Emily was on her second milk. God, but that kid could belt ‘em back. But she’d get strong, and women needed to be strong.

Julia picked at her pie and speared a small piece of apple, putting it in her mouth as she spoke. “So, Herbie’s your uncle, eh? So...why you pumpin’ gas at your age?”

Mark laughed. “Direct, aren’t you?”

Julia stared at her fork, “Well, I just wondered, is all,” and licked the tart jelly off slowly with her tongue, watching as Mark squirmed, making her tongue work more than was necessary.

“I’m a writer,” Mark said.

Julia looked across at him and saw how pleased he was at her stare. “No shit! Wow! I’ve never talked to a real writer before. Books and stuff, you mean.”

He blushed. She kind of liked that.

“No books...yet,” he said. “I’ve had poems and short stories in a few university magazines. *Whetstone. TAR.*”

Emily cut in, “You breathe in tar and it’ll make you better.”

Julia shushed her, “Don’t talk while the man’s talkin’, hon. And tar don’t cure nothin’.”

Julia looked over at Mark. “Somethin’ my Mum told her. Wives’ tales and stuff. Get warts from toads, wear copper for arthritis. All that kinda shit. Breathe in tar fumes, you know.”

Mark said, “It’s an *acronym.*”

“What’s a *what?*”

“TAR. It stand for *The Antigonish Review.*”

“Oh.” She forked a big piece of pie into her mouth and swallowed. “So...you never said why you’re pumpin’ gas.”

“I’m helping out Uncle Herbert. The summer kid took sick.”

“Oh. So...you live round here then?”

“Do now.” His face took on a mock-serious look. “My name is Mark Jeremiah Turnbull. I’m twenty-eight years old. I tutor part-time at Grenville Christian College. Live in a two-room log cabin near Crystal Rock. And write every chance I get.” He smiled warmly. “And I’ve so little money, I look up to those living at the Canadian poverty level with a great deal of jealousy.”

Julia bristled. “I don’t find that funny. Try livin’ on mother’s allowance. A measly six hundred a month. I’ve gotta pay rent and feed and clothe Emily with that. And drive a rust bucket that burns gas like there’s no tomorrow.”

“There’s always a tomorrow,” Mark said, and touched her hand.

Emily’s small voice cut in again, “More milk, please.”

For a second Julia had almost forgotten her daughter was there. “No more, hon. You’ll spoil supper.”

Mark said, “I don’t mind her having more.”

“Well, I do.”

Mark held up both hands, palms out, and laughed. “Okay, little mother. I bow to authority.”



It was July again, a year later, early in the morning. Emily was asleep. Julia lay on the bed, relishing the breeze from the partly opened window blowing across her naked, sweat-beaded body, cooling it. Mark lay on his stomach, head sideways, staring out the window.

Julia gave his ass a gentle smack. “I better get breakfast. You lay there awhile. I’ll call ya.”

Mark pushed up onto an elbow. “I’d better get up, too. The blank paper is calling.”

“It’ll wait,” Julia said.

“It won’t wait, July. You always say that, and somehow we get...Oh, hell! I’m supposed to be a writer and I haven’t written diddly lately.”

“So...you’re blamin’ me? I didn’t ask you to blow your brains out fuckin’ me. You seem to like it well enough.”

“It’s not that, July. I do...I mean...I can’t explain it to someone like your —“

“Someone like *what!*”

He sat up, holding his palms out in that placating way he had. “Whoa! Let’s not get into *that* again.”

“You don’t think I understand you’re bein’ a writer, right? You think you got the worse troubles, right, just ‘cause you can’t put a few fuckin’ words down.”

“Those ‘words,’ as you call them, come from somewhere deeper than a good screw. Screwing’s physical; writing is heart and soul. And mind.”

“Heart and soul and mind. Big deal. Try bein’ a single mother for a few months. And...” she pushed her hands into her hips and glared down at him, “I put more than my cunt into a good fuck, Mark Turnbull. I happen to love you with my heart...an’ mind, as if you give a shit.”

“Hey.” He held up his arms. “I’m sorry, okay.”

Julia sat down on his lap, wiggled a little against his prick until it stirred, reached down an eager hand, thinking all the time, *He’s gonna be mad after, ‘cause I kept him from his writin’ again. But what the hell!*



The big blow-up had happened the next year, in May. It was Emily’s fifth birthday party with ten little girls laughing and running around the small house she and Mark were now renting.

Mark was screaming something from the back room, what he called his *writing room* — a closet with four small shelves and one large window.

Julia yelled back, “What?” just as one of the little girls fell, knocking over the coffee table. Julia ran over. “You okay, hon?” Her shin had a bright pink mark, but no skin was broken. “You’re gonna be okay. You’ll have a little bruise, is all.”

The other girls swept by laughing and dragged the injured party member with them. Julia heard Mark yell again. She walked to his door and put her ear against it.

“I can’t hear you. Whad you say?”

She almost fell as he pulled open the door too quickly. His face was flushed red.

“I said, Can’t you keep those brats quiet! I’m trying to write, damn it!”

Julia’s hands flew to his hips. “Don’t you fuckin’ well scream at me like that. The...*brats*, as you call them, are just little girls havin’ fun. This is Emily’s day, not yours.”

“And just when is it *my* day, Julia?” He had stopped calling her July at Christmas. “It’s either your day or your kid’s day. It’s *never* my day. Is it?”

Julia spread her legs and gripped her hips tighter. “What you mean, *my* kid? Wasn’t it you ast her to call you Daddy only two months ago?”

Mark pushed his chin down, breathing deeply, supporting his weight against the door frame. “She has a dad. Why doesn’t *he* acknowledge her?”

“I told you, already. It was a one shot deal. We screwed; I got screwed. I don’t want nothin’ from him. I don’t think he knows, anyways.” She threw back her head. “We was only fourteen years old. What do you fuckin’ expect from me, Mark?”

“I expect you to care about what I care about, and you don’t. You don’t care that I can’t write. As long as I’m here to keep you and Emily happy. I’m nothing but a humping Daddy machine to you. Turn him on, he fucks. Turn him off...he’s off.” He pushed his face into hers. “I’m *off*, you hear. Turned completely off. Bone dry. Nothing there.”

He ran back into the room, grabbed his Olivetti and sent it crashing through the window.

“Mark!”

“I don’t need it, Julia.” He slammed the door shut. She could hear him emptying the shelves, throwing his books across the room, and from the sounds of tinkling glass, out the window.

He was gone five days later. And so was her two hundred bingo money.



It was late June and getting hot. Mark had been gone for almost a month.

Julia opened the bathroom door and stepped back quickly as Emily’s plump naked body dashed by. She closed the door quietly and walked over to the window, staring out. Stars were beginning to wink on, but still the June light clung to the sky.

She missed Mark, she had to admit that to herself, and it was more than the good fucks she missed. Just having him around had made things nice. They’d been like a family, or like what she imagined a family would be like. They’d been fixing the small rented house up. When they weren’t fucking or Mark wasn’t trying to write.

That was the whole problem, he’d said. He was always *trying*, but never getting anywhere. Julia couldn’t understand any of it. Just look at the sky, she could have told him. Or those trees. Look at a chair. At me. At Emily. There’s stories everywhere. There’s poems you could pull out of the air, Mark Turnbull. But she’d never said any of that.

Emily was tugging at Julia’s sleeve, one finger hooked into her tiny mouth. “I’m sorry, Mummy.”

“What, hon?”

“I wet my bed a little, ‘cause I waited so long.”

The bed was more than a *little* wet. Julia threw the pillow onto the floor and started stripping the twin bed.

God, she’d turned into a slob. The bedding hadn’t been changed since Mark left. As she pulled the fitted sheet, a piece of paper fluttered out and drifted onto her bare foot. She picked it up. It was a fifty dollar bill.

“Emily?”

Emily stared at the money and started sucking on her thumb.

“Where’d you get this, Emily?” Julia’s hands made their way to her hips.

Emily said, “I wanted to buy Mark a present. He was sad, Mummy.” Tears started to wet her eyes. “I only took one. There was...” she counted on her fingers, “...one, two, three, left.”

“You shouldn’t have done that, Emily. Takin’ what don’t belong to you, is wrong. You’re gonna have to get punished for that. No TV tomorrow.”

Julia’s hands slid from her hips and she knelt down near Emily, so she was at eye level. “Where’d the rest of the money go, hon?”

“I put it back. In your drawer.”

“I looked, Emily. It’s not there.”

“But it is. Honest. I pushed it way back.”



After the sheets were changed and Emily was asleep, Julia pulled out the top drawer of her old dresser as she had the first time she’d looked for the money. She shook out her panties and T-shirts one at a time, as she had then. Still, no money. But what if...?

Julia pulled the bottom drawer out completely and reached her arm under the dresser, groping around in the dark. Her fingers touched paper, gripped, and pulled it out. Two fifties. She tried again and found the other bill wedged in the corner.

*Damn it.* “Oh, Mark...” God, but she felt shitty.

She phoned the truck stop.

“Hey, Herbie. It’s Julia.”

“Hi, Julia.” There was a pause. “Sorry ‘bout you an’ Mark.”

“Yeah...well...” she swallowed hard. “Listen Herbie. You got his number? There’s somethin’ I gotta tell him.”

“He tol’ me not ta, Julia. Not like I wanna mess in his business, but he *is* fam’ly.”

“I was *almost* fam’ly, ‘member that.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Aw, come on, Herbie. What’s it gonna hurt? I don’t want nothin’ from him. You know that, Herbie. You know me. You known my fam’ly for years. Longer than you known Mark, I bet.” She took a deep breath. “That means something’ round here.”

He gave her the number.



Mark answered on the fifth ring. His voice was breathless as if he’d been running.

“Hello. Mark Turnbull speaking.”

“Hi, Mark.”

“Julia?”

“Yeah.”



“Julia...how have you been doing? How’s Emily?”

“She’s great.”

“And you? Shouldn’t ask, should I. You’re always fine. I’m the one who screwed up.” The phone was silent for a while. “I’m writing again, you know.”

“Yeah? So...it’s goin’ okay then? No more bein’ *off*?”

“Hell no!” She could feel his smile over the telephone line. “I’m writing more than I did before I met you.” The phone went silent again, but the excitement in his voice clung to the receiver.

“You know, I wised up to the fact that I hadn’t done a whole lot of writing before I met you. I’d just convinced myself that I had. But now...damn but the words are just springing out. I can’t market the stuff fast enough.”

He laughed, and Julia could see his face laughing down at her as he held himself back a little, teasing her. And she knew that she should have felt happy that he was doing so good, but she didn’t.

Mark said, “I just had my first acceptance. From CAR.”

“That one of those argo things again?”

“Acronym. Stands for *Carleton Arts Review*.”

And Julia remembered the first time she had seen him, looking like Sting, and the apple pie, so tart against her tongue it made her eyes water.

It had been a hot July. Emily had said that breathing tar made everything better.

Born in Seattle, Washington in 1947, ERNEST HEKKANEN moved to Canada in 1969. A poet, short story writer, novelist, essayist, playwright, journalist, printmaker, painter and carver, he and Margrith Schraner co-curate the *New Orphic Gallery*.

## Inducing Millennium Psychosis

Ernest Hekkanen

BY NOW, I have gotten rather weary of hearing about the Y2K threat. Each time someone brings it up, I am reminded of a friend who shows up unexpectedly at my door – to torment me, it seems. On being served a cup of tea, Mike will talk *ad nauseam* about his perceived problems. They are legion, by the way. When he doesn't properly take his medication, he believes that the CIA is out to get him.

Mike is a firm believer in the coming Y2K catastrophe. He can recite verbatim all the reasons why we should feel anxious about the close of the millennium, because of everything that will fail when the digits, 99, refuse to become the zero-zero shorthand version of 2000. The hoopla surrounding the Y2K problem is perceived by him to be further proof that his paranoid delusions are substantive.

"You might be too thick-headed and deadly earnest to discern what the heck is going on, but not me. I'm tuned in, Ernest. I *know*."

My friend Mike is an intelligent, well-educated loony. When he fails to take his medication, things such as washing his socks and vacuuming his apartment are beyond him. Chopping wood and carrying water are concepts that pale next to his extrapolations. I think Mike is harmless, but sometimes I am given cause to worry, because he can become quite emphatic, sometimes unreasonably so.

It is difficult to know when Mike's discerning mind is about to go off the rails. During his manic phases, I feel like a younger, dull-witted brother

who must be led by the hand to certain conclusions. After an hour or so in his company, I find myself getting exhausted and impatient for him to leave.

Finally, I am moved to ask, "Listen, Mike, have you stopped taking your medication? Is that why you're in a state?"

This preamble is a roundabout way of saying that there might indeed be a Y2K bug but that we should examine why we are so enthralled by it. Because Mike's world view completely encapsulates him, he finds it difficult to perceive things accurately – which is probably why he invites himself over to my house. For him, it is comparable to a reality test.

In an attempt to persuade me that his world view has substance, Mike has referred me to David Icke's *The Robots' Rebellion* and Art Bell's radio program. Icke and Bell are big into conspiracy theories, *Illuminati*, black helicopters and UFOs.

Toward the close of 1998, I tuned in to the Art Bell program and heard the host talking to two men, David Oates and Richard Høglund. Apparently, at one time, Høglund worked for NASA. On this occasion, Oates and Høglund were talking about a new research technique called *speech reversing*.

*Speech Reversers* take a news clip featuring an authority like Bill Clinton and run it backwards in an attempt to *discover* hidden messages that have to do with upcoming world events: weather experiments about to be conducted by HAARP scientists; the ever-imminent take-over by *Illuminati*; earthquakes; the advent of the anti-Christ; and the world shifting on its axis. You name it, and the magic of *speech reversing* can predict it.

What struck me most of all was how reasonable, logical and quietly persuasive both Oates and Høglund could be. When they spoke of the absurd research technique called *speech reversing*, they managed to make it sound quite normal and indeed valid. By the way, this Høglund chap is also big into the coming Y2K catastrophe and depictions of the Sphinx that have apparently been spotted on Mars.

Any budding sociologist or psychologist who is thinking about doing a doctorate on mass-psychosis should check out the Art Bell program. However, when you check it out, don't neglect to listen to the advertisements as well, in particular the ones promoted by Art Bell himself. Many of them advertise survival equipment and food products that will allow his listening audience to survive the upcoming Y2K catastrophe; these products range from hand-cranked radios to dried foodstuffs. By the way, Art Bell recently appeared on the TV program *Millennium*. That in itself should tell you something about the mass-psychosis he is helping to propagate.

When I listen to Art Bell's radio program, alarm bells go off in me – however, they aren't the bells which Art Bell would wish me to hear, I don't think. I have run into his sales approach on countless occasions. Many of my generation (the same generation as Art Bell's, by the way) went to university to get degrees in the sort of techniques he so expertly employs. Those techniques are based on *behaviorism* and they are used to sell everything from deodorant to life insurance to the upcoming Y2K catastrophe.

Behaviorism became the preferred approach to psychology in the United States. In psychology departments across the nation, a little-noticed coup took place in the '50s, '60s and '70s. *Walden-Two*-thumping Skinnerians

began to systematically drum Jungians and Freudians out of psychology departments.

Scientific materialists saw in behaviorism a way of shoring up the shaky “science of psychology.” They ran rats through mazes and subjected them to different types of shock therapy, and they managed to get verifiable results. Moreover, behaviorist techniques could be employed quite successfully in the larger arena of daily life – from the raising of children to the selling of cigarettes.

I’m sure most of you have heard of Pavlov and how he managed to get dogs to salivate by tinkling a bell. It was discovered that Pavlov’s techniques worked equally well with human beings. The results were verifiable and were useful to anyone wishing to manipulate behavior. You could turn a bad, misbehaving child into a good Junior Achiever – which, by the way, quickly became the hidden agenda.

Behaviorist techniques fit quite nicely into the greater designs of the industrial state. By holding up the carrot of reward and threatening punishment if the subject failed to take it, behaviorists could get subjects to jump through just about any hoop. Furthermore, behaviorists soon made the discovery that their subjects would put up with extraordinary amounts of discomfort (i.e. electrical shock) in order to reward themselves. By putting an electrode in the pleasure center of the brain, behaviorists could get a mouse to electrocute or starve itself to death while stimulating its pleasure center – in other words, engage in paradoxical behavior.

Does this sound at all familiar to you? Does this recall our modern-day society? If you are unable to make the connection, well, there is little hope for you. You are encapsulated by your world view, much the same way my friend Mike is encapsulated by his. Mike, you see, is riddled by anxiety that is of psychotic proportions and he would do just about anything to alleviate that anxiety. Put an electrode in his head and give him a pleasure bar to press and he would die a happy man, quite probably.

The reason North America, in particular the United States, fell in love with the therapy techniques promoted by behaviorists is because those techniques fit so well into the economic design of the society. Our culture is a highly manipulative one. Economically, it is necessary for it to be that way – for, as economists are so willing to tell us, the Gross Domestic Product must expand each year in order to avoid economic stagnation. That means we must sell, sell, sell. We must get people to buy everything from toilet-bowl cleaner to life insurance, from cosmetics to diet products, *et cetera*, until we reach complete and utter satiation.

Our fear and pleasure centers are located in what is called the limbic system or reptilian brain. In human beings the elementary responses of fear and pleasure can be shaped and indeed reshaped by associations formed in the cerebral cortex. What behaviorists discovered and found very useful was the fact that we human beings desire relief from cognitive dissonance as much as we desire relief from actual pain. Equivocalness, or mental indecision, is something we try to find relief from – sometimes through impulsive, irrational acts.

Cognitive dissonance can be created by presenting a subject with two equally attractive (or for that matter, equally unattractive) choices and forc-

ing the subject to choose one of them. Such situations create indecision, an inability to make up one's mind. A behaviorist can then provide relief from mental indecision or cognitive dissonance by offering the subject something that will alleviate the resulting anxiety. (It's a lot like taking an aspirin to relieve a headache.)

This is where the tinkling of Pavlov's bell fits so nicely into the design of things. By tinkling the appropriate bells, behaviorists found they could produce both pseudo-anxiety and pseudo-relief in human beings. To verify what I am saying, simply attend a disaster or ripper movie and observe how your reactions are being manipulated. Such films might have horrendous, improbable plots, but nonetheless they manage to push your buttons – a technique that filmmakers learned at the knees of behaviorists like B.F. Skinner. By using such techniques, we can even create false memories in people.

America fell in love with behaviorism because, on the one hand, America has a high regard for manipulation and because, on the other hand, behaviorism could advance the economic aims of the industrial state. By creating fear, anxiety and insecurity in people, behaviorists could then offer relief in the form of a product – be it a 4X4 monster vehicle, deodorant, life insurance, toothpaste or Prozac. The greater the anxiety, the greater the number of products that can be sold to alleviate the anxiety.

There weren't enough psychology departments in the States to absorb all of the behaviorists being churned out in the '60s and '70s, so they were absorbed by media outlets, advertising firms, life insurance companies and so on. Some of these behaviorists even became speech writers for politicians.

After forty-odd years of practicing their techniques, behaviorists have become quite good at inducing mass-psychosis in the population. The citizenry is riddled with fear, anxiety and insecurity – most of which is *perceived* fear, anxiety and insecurity. Behaviorists have mastered the technique of keeping the mouse pressing the pleasure bar while at the same time electrocuting itself. We, the subjects of this ongoing experiment, joke about *being on the treadmill of life*, maybe out of a sense of irony or perhaps to lend credence to the phrase “the best laid plans of mice and men.”

Briefly, this is how the system works. One bell is tinkled in order to produce anxiety and another bell is tinkled in order to provide relief from anxiety. However, what is important to understand is that the tinkling of the bell is once, twice or even three times removed from anything real. This ability to elicit responses has been created by building up associations, a cognitive ability that can eventually result in habitual responses.

With the advent of television and now the Internet, the use of this technique has become rampant and almost out of control. People sit at their computers for interminable lengths of time, pressing the keys of their keyboards, exciting their pleasure centers while at the same time enduring extraordinary amounts of physical and mental discomfort, reacting to metaphorical circumstances rather than real-life circumstances. We have learned to voluntarily tinkle the bell (or click the mouse) that produces fear, anxiety and insecurity in us but ironically, we are getting less and less in the way of relief. Maybe our pleasure centers are simply wearing out. Who knows.

This brings me to the following question: what would we do if we were subjected to a real-life disaster rather than a virtual-reality disaster?

Virtual-reality disasters are the types of disasters indulged in by the *new bourgeoisie*. The *new bourgeoisie* is made up of individuals who live relatively secure lives but who envy the disasters suffered by people elsewhere around the world. Honduras might suffer a devastating hurricane that results in a tremendous loss of life, Turkey might be struck by a catastrophic earthquake, Kosovo might be ethnically cleansed and Serbia bombed back into the Stone Age, but, hey, we've got the Y2K bug and when it strikes, well, we won't be able to use our ATM cards and, hey, the embedded chips in our cars might fail, with the result that we might careen off the highway or get into an accident.

The question is: why do we envy the catastrophes suffered by others? Is it a case of Freud's *death wish*? Is it a romantic longing, a type of nostalgia? Is it the result of humankind's history, which is one of overcoming one catastrophe after another? Is it because we envy the renewed sense of community that disaster victims apparently experience? Or, are we the subjects of mass-manipulation?

Quite probably, the *new-bourgeois* desire to experience a catastrophe is made up of all of the above motivations, and then some. In an almost inexplicable manner, the *new-bourgeois* nerds of several decades ago have managed to engineer the *fatal flaw* we now refer to as the Y2K bug.

A *fatal flaw*, if you will recall, is the flaw suffered by heroes. One such hero is Hamlet, who asks himself the question "*to be or not to be?*" Repeat that line often enough and I guarantee you it will cause cognitive dissonance in even the most stalwart individual. And like Hamlet, such an individual will then have to find relief from the cognitive dissonance he has produced in himself. Relief might be found by murdering someone or by drinking poison.

Human beings, especially men, are smitten by heroes. We aren't satisfied to simply believe in them ourselves, either. No, we must ask others to believe in them, too, because belief loves company just as much as misery does. When our heroes fail us, we rip them apart like rabid dogs. In the millennium-disaster movie coming to an outlet near you, humankind is the hero and its fatal flaw is the Y2K bug.

Largely, the Y2K bug is a male-produced problem (an impotence problem, perhaps?) and largely we men are the ones who are intrigued by what we *believe* will be its many manifestations. In Jungian terms, the Y2K bug might be viewed as our shadow. Ignore the shadow long enough, so the theory goes, and it will make itself known with disastrous consequences.

Looked upon objectively, it's rather humorous to observe how the male of the species has managed to orchestrate this situation. It gives truth to the assertion that if malekind didn't have any problems, he would damn well go out of his way to produce some, probably to keep himself entertained and involved in life. Men love to titillate themselves with disaster scenarios. In fact, malekind has created a billion-dollar industry based on virtual-reality disasters.

Simply contemplate for a moment all the catastrophe movies that come out of Hollywood each year, films like *Towering Inferno*, *Armageddon* and

*Titanic*. We in North America, particularly in the States, are in love with the idea of imminent disaster. It sells very well. It keeps the population in a hyper-excited state of tension or stress. When the population is in a hyper-excited state of tension, nearly anything can be sold to it in order to relieve the feeling of tension – be it a product or a war! We have, in effect, been programmed to behave in this fashion.

I'm not trying to say that the Y2K situation doesn't exist or isn't serious. What I am saying is this: we are scaring ourselves with what has become a worldwide bogeyman and this bogeyman is particularly frightening to those of us who haven't experienced any hands-on catastrophes of any magnitude.

Those who have been bombed, hurled down slopes by avalanches, tortured at the hands of tyrants, hit by devastating hurricanes or plagued by never-ending problems associated with poverty aren't terribly impressed by the *new-bourgeois* delight in virtual-reality disasters. Those of us who have experienced real disasters tend to view the *new bourgeoisie* the same way I view my friend, Mike. Mike loves to excite his imagination with perceived threats to life and limb.

I think, to a certain extent, the current media-frenzy surrounding the millennium threat indicates how dissociated we urban dwellers have become at the close of the 20th Century. We are trying to communicate to ourselves just how absurd modern life has become after decades of subscribing to the metaphor, *Time is Money*. The device that was supposed to save us both time and money, namely the computer, is now demonstrating to us that that metaphor is terribly skewed.

Shortly after the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, the *Journal of Commerce* published an article called "When Bad Things Sometimes Happen to Good Computers." It maintained that:

[the] attack on the WTC has highlighted the need for disaster recovery plans in major business and trading centers. The Association for Computing Machinery suggests that contingency plans should aim for the minimization of business interruptions, the limitation of damage and disruption, the establishment of alternate means of operations, the provision of rapid service restorations and the minimization of economic impact. Other considerations include system testing and the development of adequate information backups and security controls.

Does this pronouncement sound familiar to you? Doesn't it recall the synopsis of a disaster movie – anyway, how to protect the citadel from disaster? When we look at the Y2K problem and try to discover what it portends, I think we should examine it in terms of who has produced the problem and who is going to benefit most from it. We should also look at who is being subjected to the anxiety and why.

My feeling is that we should get off the economic treadmill. We should stop pressing the bar that is stimulating our pleasure center while at the same time killing us. What a relief it will be if on January 1st, 2000, everything comes to a dead halt. What a relief it will be to experience a general collapse of the economy. Somehow, I don't think that will occur. The Barons of Commerce require the energy of us slaves to keep everything going as usual

and with the help of behaviorists, they have pretty well perfected the means of doing so.

However, there is a certain amount of pleasure in letting the virtual-reality bogeyman frighten us. Mike gets a lot of pleasure out of it, anyway.