

The New Orphic Review

Editor-in-Chief
Ernest Hekkanen

Copy & Associate Editor
Margrith Schraner

Managing Editor
Michael Connor



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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of twenty-two books. The latest include *Man's Sadness*, *The Island of Winged Wonders*, *Sometimes I Have These Incendiary Dreams*, *Straying from Luminosity*, *Good Ol' Boy*, *Dementia Island* and *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*.

Taxidermy, and the Writer

Ernest Hekkanen

A FEW WEEKS AGO, my eldest daughter phoned to report that her significant other had caught a twenty-two pound trout. He was so proud of the fish – of having caught it, I should say – he decided to take it to a taxidermist and have it mounted. I don't question why people do such things, I just listen.

My daughter has chosen to keep her maiden name. Because the expense of preserving and mounting the fish, whatever that entails, was going to be put on her charge card, the taxidermist, a Finn, recognized that her last name was Finnish and proceeded to ask her if she was related to the writer, Ernest Hekkanen. My daughter conceded that she was – that, indeed, I was her father – for whatever that was worth. Well, said the taxidermist, it was worth twenty percent off on the taxidermy job.

I asked her the name of the taxidermist – just in case, at the age of fifty-three, I might have to avail myself of his services. I didn't recognize his name, although he claimed to know me. More than likely, he knew *of* me. More than likely, he hasn't read any of my books, let alone purchased one. Quite possibly, he had read about me in a Finnish-American or -Canadian newspaper and stuffed and mounted that morsel of information in a dark corner of his mind, to be brought out and shown off when the proper circumstances arose.

I find my daughter's anecdote both humorous and sadly illuminating. It says a lot about the worth of writers and literature in today's society. At one time men and women of literature were thought to be animated by the breath of various gods, their words capable of forking lightning, but nowadays their

lowly lot is worth little more than twenty percent off on a good stuffing and mounting job.

In my dictionary, *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, taxidermy is defined as “the art of preparing, stuffing, and mounting the skins of animals with lifelike effect.” Those of you who are sensitive to such things might have detected a grammatical error in the above definition and, no, it didn’t creep in because of my copying it down incorrectly. The definition should have read, “the art of preparing, stuffing, and mounting *with lifelike effect* the skins of animals.” It is the taxidermist’s art that seemingly brings life to that which is dead. It is because of his efforts that the skins of animals seem to recapture their *elan vital*, to regain their former animation. The skin of an animal that possesses a lifelike effect is likely to leave a taxidermist winded from running around the shop trying to catch and stuff it.

Had my daughter not phoned to tell me about the fish and, had I not looked up and pondered the meaning of the word taxidermy, it wouldn’t have occurred to me how similar the art of preparing, stuffing, and mounting an animal skin is to the art of writing. Each phrase, clause and sentence that a fiction writer scribbles on paper is a skin that he attempts to stuff and mount with lifelike effect – in an attempt to deceive the reader, to play upon his credulity, to make him believe that he is observing life unfold on the page. When a manuscript is accepted for publication, the text is then prepared, stuffed, and mounted between covers, whether hard or soft, and we call this animal a book. If you will allow yourself a moment of uninhibited thinking, the phrase *preparing, stuffing, and mounting* has a rather sexual feeling to it. The faint but putrid stench of necrophilia clings to the arts of both taxidermy and writing. Perhaps that is why the good fathers of the church were, at one time, so opposed to novels – why novels were spurned as works of the devil.

Writers of novels, plays, stories and, yes, even poetry are like that unintentionally comic taxidermist in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*; they are forever trying to catch an animal skin with lifelike effect so that they might stuff it with something meaningful and, in the process, they often get quite winded and sometimes even die from the exertion, at which point their renown is no longer willing with us or is vastly overstuffed.

In Ancient Egypt it was recommended that relatives of a dead female corpse allow it to ripen for four days prior to taking it to the embalmer’s shop, in an attempt to discourage the embalmers from defiling it by mounting and stuffing it with their instruments of love. This situation arose because of a fiction that was perpetrated by Ancient Egyptian priests, a fiction that had to do with the afterlife. Ancient Egyptian priests made their views of the afterlife so credible to the citizenry, an entire industry grew up around it; the funerary practices were comprehensive and replete with nuances of meaning. Many artisans were employed to prop up and give substance to this fiction. Provided with food, pets and literature – in general, anything needed to sustain a dead person on his voyage through the afterlife – the pharaohs sailed forth into eternity, content that they would reach one destination when in fact they reached quite another – namely, the museums and dinner tables of Europe.

Yes, I said the dinner tables of Europe. After feasting at a table laden with every kind of food, it was customary for certain French and English connoisseurs to unwrap a mummy imported from Egypt and to partake of it – usually after pulverizing and stirring it into either wine or spirits. Becher’s *Parnassus Medicalis Illustratus*, published in 1663, contained a recipe making use of mummy. Mummies found their way into ointments, balsams, tinctures and extracts. Properties distinct to them were thought to cure everything from epilepsy to bruises, from sexual dysfunction to athlete’s foot, due to the way the skins had been prepared and mounted. That is, a refined sort of cannibalism became fashionable in England and France. To meet the demand for these apparently delectable mummies, a system of transportation developed in order to make certain there was a continuous, unbroken supply of preserved human flesh for the elite of Europe to sink their teeth into. When mummies became scarce, a boy hanged by the neck until dead and then preserved for ten days with myrrh and aloe was said to do quite nicely.

Fate, it seems, had conspired to play a small but cruel joke on the pharaohs and sundry aristocrats of Ancient Egypt, by sending them to the museums and dinner tables of Europe rather than into the afterlife, the existence of which they had firmly convinced themselves of. If nothing else, it says something about humankind’s ability to deceive and delude itself.

The modern fiction writer might lament the fact that he can no longer concoct fictions as vast, intricate, all-encompassing, and credible-seeming as those concocted by the priests of Ancient Egypt and, in the process, get the citizenry to erect monuments to them, but I guess our existence is warranted, nonetheless – despite all the forests which are cut down and pulverized in order to prepare, stuff, and mount our texts, which, of course, we hope will sail off into a kind of afterlife. But who knows? Perhaps, in the future, it will become fashionable for people to remove the dust jackets of our books and partake of a few pages after thoroughly pulverizing and stirring them into wine or spirits, because of a perceived restorative effect.

Of course, the crowning achievement signifying a writer’s true worth comes when a biography is written about him. His literary or perhaps not-so-literary skin is prepared, stuffed and mounted with lifelike effect, and then we all stand back to ogle it, only to have someone come by at a later date and say, “Weren’t his eyes brown rather than blue?” Oh, well, it’s simply a matter of switching glass eyeballs, now, isn’t it?

Let's Not Play It So Safe: The New Orphic Short Story Contest

Ernest Hekkanen

IN A SHORT STORY CONTEST, what separates winners from losers is often a matter of subjectivity. After looking at how well a writer uses the language, what sort of command he has of the genre, or possibly to what extent he pushes at the genre's parameters, what standards does a judge employ? There are qualities to be considered such as originality, vision, freshness, what the author has attempted to do and how well he has carried it off, all of which are pretty subjective, really.

As editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review*, I have come to realize that there is a trend in fiction. Authors are playing it safe. Authors are choosing to err on the side of attempting to do too little rather than too much. They fish the shallows of existence rather than the depths. They settle for the veneer rather than the substance. In general, they decline to write stories that might challenge or possibly even terrify them. If they were trapeze artists, they would choose to work the low wire rather than the high wire. They would choose to risk less rather than more.

Over the past decade or so, writers have become conservative if not downright domesticated in their approach to fiction. They have deserted the outback tributaries of literature in favor of the big mainstream, perhaps because the shores of the mainstream have become so suburbanized, populated, and familiar, and writers have chosen *not* to venture beyond them for fear of finding themselves in uncertain territory. Or, perhaps, they desire to blend in with the herd. Sometimes I get the impression that writers are sit-

ting down to the task of writing with a contest entry judge stuck like an Oscar statue on their writing desks and that this statue animates itself every now and then in order to remind them to stick to what is tried and true rather than being adventurous and heading out into the hinterlands.

I assume this attitude or approach to literature is the result of what writers are reading, viewing at the movies, or watching on television. It's as though they have given up experiencing the tumult of life in favor of embarking on safe, polite careers with acceptable guidelines. Have all the frontiers of literature been explored and rendered thoroughly accessible, if not middle-class and mediocre? Perhaps literature has become too market-driven. Perhaps writers are writing with one eye on what will be acceptable to mainstream publishers of mainstream fiction.

What the hell has gone wrong? Have we all decided to scale molehills instead of mountains? Have we gotten to the point where we desire to remain safely inside the house of literature rather than going outside to explore the big world? I have nothing against literature that deals with the domestic scene, but must our domestically oriented writers always come to the same safe conclusions?

Stories that stick in my imagination are stories imbued with imagination, stories that walk the thin line between the credulous and the incredulous, stories that play me like a fish. That is why I prefer Flannery O'Connor to Alice Munro, and Joyce Carol Oates to Audrey Thomas. O'Connor and Oates risk a lot more.

In choosing the following contest winners, my biases have been formed by some of the above considerations. Next year, we will be running the contest again, with an April 1st deadline. Take the risk. Choose to enter.

CHRISTIAN PETERSEN'S first collection, *Let The Day Perish*, was published by Beach Holme in the fall of 1999. His stories have appeared in various journals and anthologies, including *The Fiddlehead*, *The New Quarterly*, *Grain*, *Prism International*, *Best Canadian Stories 97*, and *West By Northwest: BC Short Stories*. He lives in Williams Lake, B.C.

Nine Pound Lake

1st Prize Winner/ \$300

Christian Petersen

(The real name of the lake and its exact whereabouts will not be given. Word gets around, and in one or two seasons – goodbye big trout. Seen it many times. And while it's hard to believe this particular lake could ever be fished out, I'm not taking any chances. Thanks.)

WOKE UP, my head rattled like a can full of gravel. Mostly naked, but my jeans pulled down over my old snakeskin boots which I'd forced my feet into the night before, and couldn't get the damn things off come three a.m. or whenever it was. Half a bottle of scotch was left open on the night table. Worse than that was an almost empty pack of cigarettes, because I hadn't had a smoke for the prior year and a half. But the real tragedy was my almighty erection that would not go away.

Saturday morning sunshine, the kind I normally look forward to, torched my eyeballs.

Staggered to the bathroom, my jeans like a dog's tail dragging, and there I puked. Lay on the bathroom floor for about three hours, my face pressed against the cool pedestal of the toilet, along with my stubborn erection, and my ghostly conscience standing over me wagging his finger, telling me I'm a foolish, pitiful, middle-aged piece of shit.

Finally got my boots off. Took a shower. With water streaming all over me, I turned off the hot, forced myself to stand there till my scalp was tingling from the cold and my cock tamed right down.

Then I cleaned up the whole house. Collected beer cans and the remains of a mindless sandwich binge, put away all the old country records I'd

pulled out, stripped the sheets off the bed, tore up the dirty magazine, even vacuumed the carpet. Tried to imagine what different people would have to say about my behavior last night, waltzing around with the straw broom to old Hank's tunes, etcetera: my wife for instance, or my mother. Or my daughter, my sister, my son, our local minister, my sister-in-law, my boss. No way could I defend myself.

Found my smelly shirt on the floor in the kitchen. Disgusted, I opened the verandah door, to toss it out to air. Then felt something in the shirt pocket. And I pulled out a folded beer coaster, with that old man's map scrawled in pencil on the back.

Night before I'd got home to an empty house, with instructions on the counter: *Hon, don't forget to feed the cat, two scoops, radishes could use thinning and are good for you, raw, three meals in the freezer, tuna casserole in fridge, microwave 4½ min. See you Thursday, love Peggy.*

Got a beer out of the fridge and sat myself down on the couch, with my work boots still on. The kids had just finished their school year, and my wife had taken them south for a bit of a holiday, to visit her mom and step-dad in the city. I'd opted out, claiming I couldn't get the time off work, which was almost true.

House felt weird, being so quiet.

Turned on the TV, flicked through the channels, watched a few of those music videos that my kids are addicted to – with the half-naked girls leaping around. Finished off the first beer and got a second. My wife's instructions lay there in plain sight on the counter. I was hungry. But it seemed like a lot of trouble to haul that casserole out of the fridge and stick it in the microwave.

No one was stopping me for a change, so I had another quick beer. After that I was convinced I deserved a cheeseburger and fries at the neighborhood pub. Changed into a clean shirt and my snakeskin boots, combed my hair and away I went.

There was a new waitress there. She had a husky voice, red hair, wore a short, tight skirt, had her shirt undone three buttons. She brought me my burger and beer, and seemed so friendly and eager to please that it sort of jolted my ego. One thing led to another, that's pretty much how the whole night went. Doesn't happen as often as it used to, but whenever I start getting an erection at the wrong time, say in church or at the grocery store, I try hard to think of those films about Eskimos they showed us in school, and I pretend I'm riding a dogsled or a raft of Arctic ice in my birthday suit at about seventy below zero. This is not a guaranteed cure, but before I stood up to leave the pub it had been about half successful.

That waitress put me in mind of the untamed days, before I was married. So when I leave the pub it seems natural to drive across town to the old hotel bar, where I have not visited for a long time. Locals are all excited, kicking off the weekend, same as ever. But the bar itself has been renovated. There's a new CD jukebox flashing like a UFO, beer label mirrors, Budweiser blondes, tubular lights all over the place, TVs in three corners all

showing different ball games, plus a larger screen playing more music videos. And young kids in there! Girls and boys.

I move sideways through the crowd, toward the darkest corner. A little table tucked away behind the cigarette machine. Buy my first pack of smokes in a year, for no explainable reason, and reach for that empty seat.

Only then do I see the old man in the second chair, sitting in the shadow of the corner, with his head down on the table between us. Doesn't seem like he'll mind, so I join him.

Waitress brings me my mug. Uh oh. This one's pretty too. And there's a little tear in the butt of her tight faded Levis, showing black lace panties. Avert my eyes as soon as I can. Drink my beer, looking around the bar. Guys are shooting pool, one or two that I recognize, but none that I'd cross the room to bullshit with. Then all those kids, laughing their heads off. A few tourists also, including a nervous Japanese couple who seem to be wondering where the hell they've ended up. I sympathize. Wonder Waitress makes her rounds. Evening sunlight cuts the smoky air as newcomers enter the pub, more good old boys, and just as their eyes adjust to the inside light – *zing* – the waitress is there to stun them with her smile. She sells me another beer, and I tip her a whole dollar just to get a glimpse of those pearly teeth. In the far corner two kids shriek and wrench the computer game joystick. TVs and videos flash, noise keeps rising. A man could drown in it all.

Meanwhile, the old guy's snoring, so he's deaf I guess.

I've had enough to drink that I'm in a thinking mood, a bit *philosophical*. I'm no fanatic or anything, don't get me wrong. But the thought occurs to me that, in the course of my forty-two years on the planet, ordinary life has changed into something...

Suddenly the old man sits straight up in his chair and declares, "Man, you're damn right!"

My mug stops in mid-air, and I stare at him.

He stares back, eyes alert. So, have I been thinking out loud, or has this drunken codger read my mind?

"I'm far from deaf," he replies, winking at me, "and I'll have you know I'm not drunk neither, not drunk enough by a long shot."

I buy him a beer.

After the waitress leaves he glances around, leans over the table toward me and states in a low voice, "I used to be a Communist."

Then he sat back in his chair, giving me time to ponder what he'd said, and he sipped his draft. I didn't know what to think. Down the middle of his scalp was a sparse strip of hair, over the years the rest of it must've crept down into his eyebrows, which were bushy and wild, looked like big gray woolly moths clinging against the ridge of his face. Scars were notched on his nose and chin. Hadn't shaved for a few days. This man had seen spells of trouble in his life, and maybe they had taken him over. Yet he reminded me of a person I couldn't place, somewhere hidden in my memory, perhaps a relative I hadn't seen since childhood. He was grateful for the beer I bought him. Fixed those strangely familiar eyes on me, and picked up the conversation. "I was a card carrying member of the People's party, and do you know why?"

Don't have a clue, I thought. Before I could say so –

“Because they served soup and bread in their hall in Vancouver during the *Depression*, and that’s what I lived on, son!” Our mugs jumped a little, sloshing beer, when he banged the table with his fist.

“Worked for the CPR cleaning toilets for twenty-three years. They passed me over for promotion to management, time and time and time again, and do you know why?”

Shook my head.

He scowled at me, banged the table. “Are you thick between the ears or what? I got passed over ’cause I’d been a Communist!” The old guy sat back, took a big gulp of beer. Then leaned forward again and stuck out his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Blake, my name’s Walt.”

I shook his hand. But he was starting to make me nervous. I couldn’t keep one damn thought to myself. When I tried to make my mind go silent, he heard me fail, and grinned all the harder at my puzzlement. And he kept talking, telling me about his life. Filled me in on the homestead years, recapped the Depression, his frustrating career with the railroad, various other occupations, and then he got started on women, all the ups and downs of his sex life. Imagine an old barfly with the abilities to read your mind, and to talk circles around the average butter-mouthed politician. Just trying to follow him made me thirsty. We had more beer.

I’ve never been much of a conversationalist, but Walt’s talent made it easy on me. He’d react to my thoughts faster than I could speak them for the most part.

Eventually, the talk got around to fishing. To different lakes and rivers in this area, and a few of our finer catches. Didn’t look to me like Walt had done much fishing lately, but he knew of every spot I did, from earlier years, plus a few I didn’t. That’s when he told me about the little green lake full of nine pound trout.

Of course, he heard me thinking I didn’t believe that for a goddamn second.

“Well, Blake,” he grinned, that partial set of yellow horse teeth bared, “you been buyin’ the beers. And I don’t like owing nobody...” He rooted around in his pockets till he came up with a stubby pencil. Then he took one of those Budweiser coasters, flipped it over and started drawing me a map. This occupied Walt for a few minutes, and his talk proceeded between pauses, while he drew in details such as cattleguards and mudholes.

I turned to look around the bar again, and the evening’s noise almost made me dizzy. Couldn’t believe it when the waitress came around singing last call. We had one last round.

When he’d finished his map, Walt slid the coaster across the table. Reminding me of someone I couldn’t name, his eyes looked right at me. Sol-
emnly he said, “Don’t lose this, don’t show nobody else.”

I smile. He knows well enough that I don’t believe in those nine pound trout, or even his secret green lake. But I tuck the map in my shirt pocket. Soon after, the lights come on. We stand, squint and stagger outside with the rest of the crowd.

A few steps down the sidewalk, I turn to ask Walt where he lives, can I give him a lift home. But he isn’t there. I check the bar, thinking maybe he’s got detained, but I can’t find him. He is gone.

Driving my Suburban along the back streets, with a sharp eye out for cops, those untamed, lustful feelings once more get hold of me. I imagine being with either one of those waitresses, then both at the same time. I drive past the *Trading Post Convenience Store* (open 24 hours), and circle the block. Then, like I do about once every two years, I park, sneak into the store and buy a *Penthouse* magazine from a pimply-faced kid about the same age as my oldest son. Like a real sinner I go home and tie into the bottle of scotch left over from Christmas, end up dancing with the broom and doing other things I won't mention.

Found myself sitting there ashamed next afternoon, looking at that crinkled beer coaster.

Like a little round book the map opened between my shaky fingers, and gradually my attention was drawn into the web of those lines. I hadn't been fishing yet this year. Not being as fanatical about it as some guys. Didn't expect the nine pound lake was much different than any old drunk's secret, the secret they tell anyone for the price of a few beers. But going fishing suddenly struck me as a harmless way to spend what was left of the day. That is, it seemed more responsible behavior than lusting after young females and killing another batch of brain cells.

So I went to the garage, rooted around, dug out my rod and tackle and canvas pack sack. The weedy water smell of it convinced me.

Hauled this gear out to my Suburban, which was parked cockeyed in the driveway. After much effort, given my hangover, I got the canoe on top and tied down. On the way out of town I stopped by the *Trading Post*, bought a submarine sandwich and filled my thermos with coffee.

Once headed north on the 97, with afternoon sun stretching over hillsides and horses grazing in stony pastures, Randy Travis on the radio, I started to feel like at least a halfways normal if not decent man again.

About twenty miles up the highway I found the west turnoff marked on Walt's map. I must've driven past it a hundred times before, and never really noticed or wondered where it lead. Now I was going to find out. The afternoon became more pleasant as I got further from the highway, following the old forestry road, one that hadn't seen much use in years. Former logging tracks snaked off here and there, offering me glimpses into the shadowy woods. Walt had sketched a few of these secondary tracks onto his map, not all that accurately, it appeared, but I drove on looking for the blue shale outcropping where I was supposed to make a turn, eventually came to this landmark and a trail overgrown with leafy alder. Branches brushed the truck. Most of the time I could not see more than twenty yards ahead. Came to a creek without a bridge, and forded it with caution, not wanting to douse the engine.

Now the track was winding and washed out. Followed it for another few miles. Maybe more. I'd forgot to check the odometer, and back in the woods distance is sometimes hard to judge. All at once, though, the woods thinned out. What was left of the track disappeared into shiny swamp grass. The ground might be soft underneath, I thought, and I don't want to get stuck out here. So I killed the engine and sat still with my arms crossed over the steer-

ing wheel, my eyes gazing ahead. There was a fringe of wild meadow, and beyond this, the lake.

Until that moment this little adventure had only seemed something to do, a bit of a trick to keep myself safe and sober. But while looking over the water, my pulse rose. The color stunned me. It was hard to tell just where the grassy shore ended, for the lake was amazingly green in itself, bright as the head of a mallard drake. What if the old man's story was true? Could there be nine pound trout out there? Poured myself half a cup of coffee, and just sat still another few minutes, enjoying the possibility, the peaceful view.

Going fishing always makes me feel like a kid again, as if I had nothing else to worry about, or fear. I untied the canoe, carried it on one shoulder to the green shore, and set it quietly in the water which was perfectly clear at arm's reach. When I pushed off, the canoe whispered through the reeds, and with a few pulls of the paddle I was out on the still water.

A partially cloudy afternoon, white clouds reflected in the water. Off to my left, a family of ducks paddled away. It was not a very large lake. Once I was fifty yards out I could see its outline, longer than it was across, with a couple of small bays off one end, the whole thing shaped a bit like a tadpole, or an amoeba magnified a jillion times. Passing between clouds the sun was still warm, and I knew it was a bit early in the day for good fishing, so, after drifting for a moment, I decided to paddle around the shoreline, which took me longer than I had expected. Little whirlpools curled behind my paddle strokes. I studied the water, the woods. There were no cabins, or campsites, or marks left by people that I could see. As well as ducks there were red-wing blackbirds and pipers, loons, and one pair of big white pelicans with their large, mounded nest set back in the reeds. It excited me to see the pelicans. I'd seen them once years before, but only from quite a distance, as they are rare in this region. Beavers had lodges in both of the small bays near the lake's one end, and I saw a muskrat sunning himself on an old windfallen pine. Several times on my first trip around I found myself sitting still, with my paddle laid across the canoe gunnels, watching the wildlife, taking deep breaths, smelling the water. In silence. I felt calm, yet highly aware of these new surroundings.

I tried to read the water, to figure out where the fish might be. The lake was shallow for a fair distance from the shore, for maybe fifty yards out the water was tinged that remarkable green, and in many spots I could see the pale sandy bottom. Beyond that, down the middle of the lake, there appeared to be a deep chasm, and the water was much darker in that unknown depth.

No fish had risen yet. And there were few flies about, I hadn't even had to put any Muskel on. I'd made a few casts, got no action at all. I speculated that it was maybe slim pickings for fish in this lake, and I'd be lucky if they ran to two pounds let alone nine. I was happy enough just being out there though, it wouldn't be the end of the world if I didn't catch anything. Then I noticed the insect that had crawled out of the water up the shaft of my paddle. Actually, it was no insect but a freshwater shrimp, and the biggest I'd ever seen. Darn near as big as one from a can.

While sitting still, watching that shrimp, I heard a sound. It seemed to pass by quite close to me, so that at first I took it to be a bird, although an unfamiliar one. But I saw nothing, for the moment. And really, when I tried

to describe the sound to myself, it had been more of a faint hum than a bird call.

The shrimp let go of the paddle, dropped its little self into the clear water beside the canoe. And as my eyes followed it under, I saw the fish.

A trout passed swiftly by, my judgment was blurred by maybe ten feet of water, but it looked like a sizable trout. Then it circled upward, taking the shrimp, rainbow colors flashed, and I saw for sure that it was upwards of twenty inches long. No nine pounder, mind you, but possibly five or six. Leaving a brief ripple on the surface, it was gone.

My heartbeat jumped at the sight of that fish. I let the canoe drift, and cast my line out. I waited for that big trout, or a similar sized one, to take the fly. Carefully, with my fingers, I inched the line in. But no luck. I kept thinking about the rainbow along the side of that beauty I'd seen, the colors were there in my mind. After a time, something else occurred to me: the sound. The sound I'd heard just before seeing that trout, it had come again more clearly for those few moments that I'd had the trout in sight. What's more, I kept hearing what I'd thought were echoes in my mind, of that high hum. Then I heard it again, as clearly as the very first time, and I happened to catch a glimpse of another beauty passing through the water underneath the canoe. It was impossible – but the hum seemed to be their sound. As if the fish were singing.

Before I knew it, dusk had fallen. Must have fished three hours or so, never got so much as a nibble. I'd lost track of time, and suddenly realized I had a fair drive home ahead of me. Decided I'd come back bright and early next morning.

Somewhere along the back roads, on my way out, I took a wrong turn, and the old logging track I was following petered out in a thick stand of young aspen. Turned my Suburban around, after a lost hour finally found my way back to the highway, and home.

I dreamed about the lake, and those fish. When I woke up early they were on my mind.

Also had an erection again, but I fixed that in a hurry with another quick, cold shower.

Made a cup of instant coffee, and ate some toast. What was needed to catch those fish, I figured, was a wet line as opposed to the dry line I'd been using, and a freshwater shrimp fly. Searched through my collection, but couldn't find anything that really resembled those shrimp. It being Sunday, the sporting goods store would not be open. And I've never acquired the knack of tying flies myself, so I had to go with what I had and hope for the best.

When I reached the lake, and first saw the green water again through the windshield, I felt even more excitement than the day before.

It was just about seven-thirty when I set out in the canoe. The last of the night's mist was lifting off the two small bays at the west end of the lake. A good hour for fishing. Once out on the water I began to hear those high-pitched hums from underneath again, sometimes passing near the canoe. In the green shallows I caught glimpses of beautiful big trout. Found myself

watching the water closely and, each time I saw one of those babies swimming by down there, a thrill went through me.

They paid no attention to the would-be shrimp-like hook I jigged through the water. But I didn't get frustrated. It was a pleasure just to be out on the calm lake, drifting slowly with some invisible current. I fished until the sun was high, reflecting off the flat water, and the day's full heat began to bake me. Then I put in to shore, fetched a blanket out of the Suburban, and took a good long nap in the shade. Which turned into the soundest sleep I'd had in about twenty-five years. I was submerged in a very long and gentle dream about the fish, their rainbow colors glimmered, their voices all hummed together like a girls' choir, and I swam after them breathing the clear, water-like air. There were few people in my dream, and their faces were blurred by the space of water between us, and when they tried to speak their words were lost in bubbles. I was naked and healthy, and swimming strong. At one point I arrived at a very large cave mouth, and someone informed me that God was inside the granite temple, and I felt the powerful rhythm of his breathing through the water but did not of course see his face. Surfaced from the dream, woke up starving hungry and ate the ham sandwiches I'd brought along, and drank coffee. Fished the lake from late afternoon to near dusk. Made my casts, felt the wet line between my fingers – but never even a playful tug from a trout, although I could see and hear them passing near the canoe. I didn't mind.

It was only later when I left the lake that the sense of everyday needs and frustrations came over me again. Again I got lost on my way out to the highway, this time worse than the night before. Two different tracks I took only led me in a circle, back toward the green lake. But I still had a hanker- ing to get home, which eventually I managed.

"Ah...hi there, Eileen, this is Blake. Listen, ah, I don't think I can make it in to work today...Must've caught some bug or something. I can barely stand up, plus there's other problems, hell of a headache, you know."

"Nausea, diarrhoea?" inquired Eileen, the sales manager at *Hardiman's Supply*, who is always very interested in unfortunate details of anyone's life.

"Yeah, some of that, too," I groaned.

"That's not like you, Blake, to miss a day of work...Sure you're not just having a wild party with some little thing while Peg is away? Ha, ha, ha!" she laughed loudly in my ear.

"No, Eileen, I'm serious...In fact, you know, it's a bit of a strain even talking..."

"Got to get to the toilet?"

"You guessed, I'm feeling awful..." Meanwhile, of course, I was sitting there with my sunny morning hard-on, not having got to the cold shower yet.

"Okay. Don't be a stranger though, we're short staffed, seeing as how you switched your holidays with Bob. He's gone, and without you now, there's no experienced warehouse personnel. Try some Pepto-Bismol, that sometimes works."

“You bet, sorry about this, thanks Eileen,” I said, and carefully set down the phone receiver. Then I hopped right up in the air and clapped my hands. I’d never called in sick in my life before. Well, only once when I had appendicitis, and okay, one other time when I cracked my ankle playing baseball. But I mean, I’d never cheated before, calling in sick without a serious reason. And this *was* a serious reason, in my mind, but maybe my employer would not see it that way. Suddenly I felt free as could be, like I could take off to anywhere in the world with a good head start, and no one would ever find me. Of course, there was only one place I was itching to get to.

I packed a whole box of food, coffee makings, etcetera, some camping gear, and while I was doing this, two separate voices were arguing inside me. One was asking: Just what the hell do you think you’re doing, Blake? You’re a family man with responsibilities to attend to, such as a job. The other was smiling, and said: Don’t listen to him, Blake, this is the best idea you’ve had in a long, long time. First voice: What’s got into you, man? You’ve never even liked fishing all that much! Second voice just chuckled to itself.

I was waiting in my truck outside *A-1 Sporting Goods* before Andy had opened the door. Soon as he did, I was inside quickly looking over his fly collection.

“Took the day off, did you, Blake?...Help yourself to a coffee if you like.”

“Thanks, Andy, but I want to get out there fishing, you know. I’m just looking for a few different flies, got anything like a shrimp?”

“Shrimp? Around here? Where you plannin’ to fish?”

“Ah...nowhere special, just one of those ponds out toward Dog Creek I thought I’d check out. Hey, I’ll take a couple of those little brown fuzzy ones, Andy, and one of each of those other three grub types.”

“Sure thing, Blake,” said Andy, rising, but clearly not used to doing business before he’d finished his first pot of coffee. After a minute he squinted at me, and said, “Say, whereabouts exactly is this pond? I can’t think of where you’re headed.”

“Well, I don’t have time to explain right now, Andy. I’ll take a few of those Sprightly Six Legs, too, and – ah, hell, tell you what, just give me one of each kind, okay. You take Master Card?”

“Usually,” Andy said, frowning slightly. “You sure you’re feeling all right?”

“Never felt better in my life,” I said, suddenly realizing that this was true, but unexplainable even to myself. I grinned at Andy, and laid down my credit card.

Kind of reluctantly, he did up my bill and handed me a large paper bag full of flies. “That’ll be three hundred and seventy-four dollars.”

“And a deal at that,” I beamed. Andy’s own face was perplexed as I was headed out the door.

Two hours later I was out on the lake, letting my line trail in the water, listening to the morning humming of the beautiful trout.

As in my dream of the previous afternoon, the sound was somewhat similar to that of a choir of young voices, then again it had a quality that was more than human, sometimes a bit eerie. It came only for moments at a time, as one of the fish passed near enough for me to hear. And not frequently, sometimes just once every hour or so. At first I was jittery with anticipation. Waiting constantly for the sound. But, after a while, after hearing the hum often enough to reassure me, I grew calm and accepted the sound like the smell of the water and reeds, the temperature of the air.

I made a few casts with the fly rod now and then, tried a half dozen or so flies, then gradually gave up the fishing business altogether. I couldn't think why on earth I'd bought any of those flies from Andy, let alone four hundred dollars worth – but this didn't worry me either, in fact, I grinned thinking about the look on Andy's face as I'd left his store. For the first time in my working life money didn't matter the least bit to me, and I was happy enough to contribute some to Andy's sales. When I thought about the town, the streets and stores, *Hardiman's Supply*, about the normal, yet unpredictable life that my family and I and many others live, it all turned into something like an enormous, electrified net in my mind. But somehow, I was now outside that mesh. I could look back at most of the thing, seeing it for what I'd never seen it for.

Above me there were high waves of cloud across the blue sky, and as the sun climbed upward these waves seemed to crest with gold light. I heard that clear humming, looked down into the lake and there saw the reflection of the sky, and at the same moment an amazing rainbow trout, so that the fish appeared to be flying between the waves of cloud in the sky, and a lone osprey passing over seemed to soar beneath the water.

What about old Walt, who had given me the map to get to this place? When had he been here? For how long had he stayed, and what had ever caused him to return to the world and the life in which I met him? Why are moments presented to us that contradict, outshine the way of life we're normally expected to live? So that going back to the grind seems quite a ridiculous option, as it suddenly did to me – although I still thought I *was* going back, and fairly soon.

One thought after another breezed through my mind, stirring up questions, blowing the dust off ideas I'd shelved long ago. All this mental activity and the midday sun tuckered me right out. So I had another nap which, like the one before, was continuous with dreams. When I woke up, I found that I'd stretched out and fallen asleep in the belly of the canoe, and that it had drifted almost the length of the lake in that time. I sat up, looked over the gunnel of the boat and saw a mother lynx and her kittens playing in the sun on the beach. It is a rare thing to see a lynx, especially for any length of time, and here was this whole family of four wild cats, playing. The sun was inching down toward the timber along the horizon. Not wanting to disturb the lynx, I just laid still for a good long while, as the canoe slowly drifted down the lake. Even after the cats were out of sight I did not pick up my paddle. Just drifted. Studied the shore, the bird life and the water, listened to the passing trout. Drifted finally into one of the little bays at the lake's far end, into the reeds. As the air cooled off in the evening, a bit of a breeze came up, which seemed to carry the dusk with it.

By the time I got around to paddling back up the lake, the daylight had faded. I could no longer make out details on the dark wooded shoreline. The night colors of the sky merged with the lake.

I had camped out four or five nights, as I remember, before it occurred to me that people might be wondering where I was. Peggy and the kids would be home by now, and I realized they'd be worried. So, next morning I packed up the Suburban, not without some reluctance, and then headed out for the highway, and home.

At least I tried. About two hours after leaving the lake, the back road I was traveling began to look very familiar, and sure enough, the truck nosed through the overhanging alders into the meadow by the green lake. Though this was frustrating in one way, I also had to chuckle because I was quite happy to be back. Ate my last chocolate bar for lunch and then, like a responsible man, decided I'd best try again. Altogether that day I made four attempts to find my way back out to the highway. It was the damndest puzzle. On the last trip the wagon ran out of gas and there I was, stranded. But I put some essential gear in my backpack and started hiking, and half an hour later I came to the lake. Next day, I retraced my steps to the Suburban, and lugged the canoe back here.

When the helicopters passed over, several times during the following week, I must admit that I hid from them.

No searchers or other fishermen have yet reached this lake. Sometimes I wonder how they'd react if they did. I like to think that some persons might understand what is here, and why I haven't just lit a bonfire and waited for help to come. I don't feel I need any help. I've still got provisions, at least six pounds of vacuum-packed coffee and a hefty sack full of rice. I've got a beard now, my hair is longer than it's been since 1976. And I feel about as young as I did way back then. I do think of Peggy and the kids, but I expect they're doing fine. It's seldom that I feel at all lonely. My dreams are truly miraculous.

The days drift one into another, as peaceful as can be. I paddle my way slowly around the lake, listening to the trout, observing the rare wildlife, the pelicans and the family of lynx. Most of the time I am silent. Once in a while I'll sing a song, or even shout nonsense out loud to recall the sound of my voice – it passes away into the air, like the call of a bird or an animal, and disappears.

Early mornings I swim naked in the cool green lake. Often I catch glimpses of the big beautiful trout passing underneath me, and I hear them so clearly then. Their humming sends slight sound waves through the water, and I feel this energy in my muscles as I swim.

FRANCESCA FRATI was born in New Delhi, India, in 1972, to Italian parents, and has lived in Montreal since 1976. In 1997 she received a BFA in painting, with a minor in photography, from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Throughout it all, she says she has always been a writer.

Photorealism

2nd Prize Winner/ \$100

Francesca Frati

ONE THING had not changed: there were no photographs on the walls, no portraits on the mantle, no albums tucked onto a shelf. The family had a primitive fear of being photographed. It was forbidden.

No one was home when they arrived, so while Harry took the bags upstairs she slipped quietly into the living room, feeling as though she wasn't really meant to be there. It was nice to be able to look around a bit, ease herself in, and not have to be a guest just yet. She could already feel that familiar sharp pain between her shoulder blades.

"Hey, Belle," Harry called from upstairs. "Come here."

"I'll be there in a sec."

She heard him pound down the stairs three at a time at least, and then he was pressing up against her back and spinning her from the living room, all the while she couldn't get the smile off her face.

"Come on," he said, insulted at the delay, and grabbing her by the waist pushed her not-so-gently up the stairs, holding her up when she tripped, mumbling into her hair something about what he was going to do to her once they reached the bedroom. "Hmm, you sneffle so ngdd."

"But Sweet One, won't they –"

"Hushhh."

"Aren't they –"

"Shhh."

He kicked the door shut without a pause and pushed her down into the blankets.

“This is our room,” he said as he pulled off her shoes, and socks, and jeans, and underwear. “Do you like it?”

“Yes,” she said, lying still on the bouncing bed, all goose-pimpled.

“No, I mean do you Really Like It?” he asked as he kicked off his shoes, and undid his belt, and struggled out of his pants.

“I really like it,” she said, trying not to shiver.

“Good,” he said as he climbed on top of her, and slipped inside her, and warmed her buttocks with his hands. “Me too.”

“Shh. Oh shit, they’re home.”

“Oh God.”

They clambered off the bed and as quickly as they could got back into their clothes, stumbling and making too much noise and not finding crucial things like socks.

“I knew this would happen,” she groaned.

“Don’t tell me you regret it?”

“No, but where the hell is my bra?” He was already making his way down the stairs. She heard Eric’s little-boy voice calling Harry’s name, Geoffrey barking excitedly, laughter.

“Where the hell did he throw it?” Under the bed. Under the dresser. In the corner. Finally she found it on the doorknob, did it up around her waist and pulled it into place under her sweater.

It seemed like she’d been in this situation before: not quite dressed; left to clean the mess, to walk out into the world alone. Sometimes she felt as though it was her own sloth that kept her mired while Harry ran off lightly on the balls of his feet. At other times when she had a certain, perhaps clearer perspective, she thought it was something missing in him, this inability to understand the weakness of others, their shortcomings. Was it lack of compassion? You can do anything if you really want to, that’s what he believed. But you can’t fly, can you? You can’t swim underwater for an hour without gear? Yes, you can, he had said. There are no limits. There is always a choice. It was hard to argue with someone who called down to you from the hundred-foot peak of a slick rock formation, having scaled it in sandals, with bare hands, your name floating down to you on the warm air currents of the desert while you stood rooted, cactus-like, to the canyon floor.

But she had taken a picture then, of him waving to her from the top, almost too small to see in the frame of the picture. While he climbed, she had been wandering about the canyon floor, looking closely at small, strangely snarled bushes, pebbles, crevices in the earth that looked like orifices. Striations marked the slick rock that rose up in swells from the red dust at her feet. Shallow mounds, gentle undulations. All this she had photographed. He had envied her these visions, commonplace as she had thought them. He said she could see things he could only try to feel out. What she wanted most was to touch, to become part of what she was seeing. Her lens enabled her to explore things in minute detail, and to translate what she saw into something she could, almost, grasp.

For this she was dependent on a machine. If only she could have climbed inside those crevices, twisted herself into the shape of those bushes, melted into the ground at her feet, she would be doing what Harry took so much for granted.

Guadalajara. Today I have the courage to wander the streets alone with my camera. I have to pay more attention than I'd like to the ground so as not to stumble. There are no pedestrians, and no cars. I have gone in the direction of the orphanage. The houses in this neighborhood are all surrounded by walls or fences. The walls have imbedded in them shards of broken bottle glass, the fences are mounted with spirals of barbed wire. In every yard there is a dog. The dogs are massive: Dobermans, Boxers, Alsatians; killers. They rush at me with snapping, snarling jaws. The walls and fences are not high enough, the dogs could easily leap over them. What prevents them? Their saliva sprays my arms as I pass. I walk faster, almost in the street. A loaded camera swings against my side, bruising it: there is no time to unsling, to aim and shoot.

"Hello, Isabelle. How was your flight?" His mother asked this with that lovely warmth in her voice that Isabelle remembered well. That honeyed voice which her son had inherited, that hid any discomfiture or displeasure so smoothly.

"Hello," Isabelle said as they kissed, smiling. "Your cheeks are so cold!"

Isabelle could not help liking Susan. It happened against her will, despite the extreme frustration the woman caused her at times. Isabelle wondered if all mothers had this much invested in their sons. Susan sometimes behaved as though Harry was her ex, and Isabelle the new bitch he had dumped her for. But then, Isabelle sometimes felt as though Susan was Harry's ex, the one he'd never quite gotten over.

Susan said, "We were just out tobogganing up on the Citadel. It's really quite beautiful out, the first snow of the year."

"I know, it's lovely, isn't it. I missed the snow down in Mexico. Although..."

"You didn't miss the cold, I'm sure. You're so dark and lovely," this last was uttered with that wistfulness that never ceased to surprise Isabelle, who could see Susan's face glowing with a healthy flush.

Mexico was not the paradise Susan imagined, it was not simply a place brightened by sunshine and ease. Sombreros, cold beer, white beaches, serenades, white smiles. Nor was it the place of revolution that it had been earlier in the century. There were no Diegos, no Fridas. Isabelle was not Tina Modotti. Guadalajara was as far removed from these things as Halifax was. It was a city so physically out of control that its exact population was unknown. Various guidebooks placed it anywhere between five and nine million people. Where is there peace in a city in which it is possible to give or take four million of its inhabitants? The city's heaving had caused its sidewalks to crack and split open as though there had been an earthquake. It never rained.

Isabelle could not speak the language, and consequently was totally dependent on Harry for even the smallest communication with the world around her. She had gone there to be with him, imagining that she would find her own vision. Instead she panicked every time he left her alone.

There was her camera. There had been a successful attempt to gain access to a darkroom. They had gone to the art faculty of the University of Guadalajara, in order to make a request. Though the man they met with spoke fluent English, he directed all of his questions at Harry. "Are you enrolled at the university?" he had asked. Harry had answered yes, but that it was not he who wanted access. "Does she know how to use a darkroom?" the man had asked, as if Isabelle was not there. "She will have to bring her own paper, but the chemicals are supplied."

But she had lost the ability to see through her lens. Nothing she saw through it had any connection to her eye, she could not process it. What she was seeing became so far removed from her that it no longer existed. The city overwhelmed her so that she could no longer focus on any one thing long enough to photograph it. In order to take a picture it is necessary for the photographer to edit what is visible, to distill the infinite down to the few essential elements that make up a meaningful image. Framing makes or breaks a picture.

What photographs she did take came out overexposed, underexposed, out of focus. Or what she had seen through the lens did not show up at all: one roll had been lost, another had never been loaded, a third she had re-wound and accidentally shot again. Experienced photographers did not make these kinds of mistakes. Eventually she gave up.

Without the camera Isabelle felt disembodied, isolated from everything against which she had learned to define herself, out of context. It was she who was exposed.

It's nighttime, and very hot. A mosquito whines somewhere in the dark. Harry lies next to me breathing heavily, so that I know he's asleep. I am awake. Someone else is in the room, I can hear their breathing too, although it's fainter, raspier. I hear the faint clicking of a shutter. This time I have the courage to whisper.

"Who are you?"

There is no reply, but a slight irregularity of breath tells me she's heard me. I don't know how I know it's a woman, but I'm certain of it. I also know she can see in the dark and that she's photographing me. The mosquito whines more insistently, close to my ear, but I cannot move my arm to try and swat it. Go away. I think this over and over in time to the blood pulsing in my ear, but cannot say it. Please go away.

Eric ran over and grabbed Isabelle by the hand.

"Let's play Lego," he said, "come on."

Eric was small and dark like his father, George. He possessed the kind of nervous energy that made you tired just being near it, unless you managed to catch it and go along for the ride. When that happened you were propelled into pure action, worries and thoughts falling away.

Susan was saying, "You made such wonderful things together last time. I think we still have one of your creations, a space boat, somewhere..." as Isabelle followed Eric to the piano. The piano was up against the wall close

to the kitchen entrance, so that without much effort, Isabelle could watch Susan go past her into the kitchen to where Harry was leaning up against one of the counters and explaining to George about the Spanish lessons he was taking while at the same time watching him make coffee. Still almost completely blond, Susan exuded a strangely deceptive innocence, and walked lightly, nimbly, as though she had wings for balance. Sometimes Isabelle thought she heard them beating slightly, keeping in shape for some future long-distance flight. “Hey, Mom,” Harry said, pushing himself off, and putting his arms around her. “I missed you.”

Isabelle caught herself indulging in a momentary pang of jealousy at the knowledge that Susan would always have her son, while her own ties to him were so much more precarious. She thought she saw a small cloud pass over George’s face as he stood by the sink holding his thermos. All the while her fingers nimbly clicked the Lego pieces in place. Click, click. She felt for more without looking, the distraction of her mind not affecting the concentration of her fingers brushing up against sharp edges, scattering pieces like rude pebbles. The only sign that she wasn’t paying attention to what she was constructing was that none of the pieces were matching in color, a concession she would never have made were she alert. Only she would notice.

“I hope you guys are hungry,” Susan was saying shyly, blushing like a schoolgirl at the attentions of her son. “We went to the farmer’s market this morning and bought a ridiculous amount of food.”

Susan was not known for her cooking. She was always putting in nuts and raisins where they weren’t appropriate, and cooking the meat too long. The more nuts and raisins, and the drier the meat, the more upset she was about something. It was often the sole indication that anything was wrong.

The summer before, Isabelle had sat on the couch and tried to read, while Harry was upstairs in his mother’s room. The only sound that had come down to where she sat, unable to concentrate, not knowing why her heart beat so quickly, was the soft click of a door being gently but firmly shut, like a shutter that was sticking.

Isabelle wondered what was going on in there. She knew it was nothing that fit into the framework of relationship as she knew it. Not knowing caused her to fill in the spaces, imagining the worst, the most perverse explanations. Before she met Harry she had never experienced this kind of unknown. Everything that happened in her family happened out in the open. There were no closed doors, not even when you peed. Her father had walked around the house naked until she was seventeen, as had she. Privacy had never before been a spatial concept. She longed to break down the door. To force everything into the open, no matter how shameful, or delicate, or complex.

When Harry told her he had had a huge fight with his mother that day, this frightened Isabelle far more than the overturned chairs and hysterical screams that accompanied her own family’s quarrels, though not as much as her own sordid imaginings. Her senses were not attuned to such subtleties of communication. Once she had thrown her nail clippers at Harry in a fit of temper, and seen his wince as they smashed against the banister. He had ducked quickly enough, but had taken a long time to recover from the shock

of such violence. She never threw anything at him again. Except silence. Silence, she discovered, worked wonders.

Isabelle was wakened the next morning by the sound of Eric running down the stairs and screaming "Die!" at the top of his lungs, or so it seemed in the wan stillness of early morning. Maybe he was screaming "Hi," voicing his absurd child's welcome to yet another new day. The radio was already on in the kitchen downstairs, tuned to the CBC, something involving fiddles, and she could hear the sound of typing coming from behind the closed door of George's study. It was so cold in the bedroom that Isabelle could see her breath, and she snuggled in closer to Harry who was still asleep. She wished the day would never begin. Couldn't they just stay here in bed, under his grandmother's heavy patchwork quilt? Couldn't they just order room service? Already her mind was running too quickly to slip back into troubled dreamland, and her limbs felt restless, betraying her in the desire to continue lying still. She kissed Harry on the temple closest to her, breathing warmth onto his face. She wriggled up against him so as to loosen his bond with sleep. She whispered I love you and watched his face wake into a smile. Today they were going to go get the tree.

After many delays, they piled into the old battered Volvo station wagon, and made their way out of the city. Isabelle had no idea where they were going but she was happy to be in the back seat of a car next to a window out of which she could project her daydreams. In a car full of people, one passenger's silence can go unnoticed.

It took them a little over two hours to get to their destination. Eric sat still for most of the ride, happy to listen to the stories Harry was telling about Mexico, and for the last half hour lay his head down in her lap and fell asleep while she stroked his hair and smiled at Harry who held his brother's small, stockinged feet in his palms. Isabelle found herself unable to relate to the stories Harry was telling. It was as if she had not been there with him, as though the memories he was relating had nothing to do with her. She had nothing to show for her time there, no photographs to accompany her stories. She did not have what she called her 'visual journal' and without it she was unable to recall experience. She focused outside the window.

She knew this landscape well. Its colors pleased her. Dark green firs silhouetted against a white winter sky; gray rocks flush to the ground. The surprising deep orange, luminous in the dampness, of twig-like bushes, set like filigree beside the turquoise lichen which spread itself over the rocks, and another kind, azure, which grew in windblown tufts on the white branches of spindly birch trees. Occasionally there were glassy black pools of salt marsh, or at least she imagined it salty, which spread between rises, reflecting everything and intensifying its brilliance.

Another time, long before she had met Harry, she had gone walking from the road to the sea. It had taken her a long time because she had stopped so often to crouch and take pictures of the tiny plants that grew between rocks, or out of cracks. She had her macro lens with her and it enlarged everything to monstrous proportions. There was one plant, or flower that looked like a red mouth growing up out of the ground, open wide to

collect the dew. She had shown pictures of it to a friend who explained that it was one of those carnivorous plants that lay in wait for insects. She was glad then that she hadn't stuck her finger in, the way she'd been tempted to, even though she knew it couldn't have harmed her.

When she had reached the coast, high up over the waves above a course of tumbled rocks, she had sat down out of the bite of the wind, and for a long time gazed at what lay before her. She had sat for so long that she had begun to feel the spinning of the Earth beneath her, and her own weightlessness compared to its terrible mass. Perspective.

When George stopped the car a few meters from an old fisherman's shack, Isabelle was surprised to see they had come to a place so forsaken that it seemed no one living had set foot there in a very long time. While everyone piled out of the car and stretched their stiff legs, Isabelle stood still, observing the shack before them. Its unpainted clapboard was the silver of driftwood. Piled up against it were some well-used lobster traps, shrouded with a torn, old net. The few gnarled fruit trees that surrounded it served less to shelter it from the elements than to complete the illusion that the house had been fished long ago from the sea. Lichen shrouded their coral branches like fine-spun seaweed. Isabelle half expected to see fish swim out of darkened windows and dart into the intricate nest of brittle branches. The shack appeared so clearly to Isabelle that she wished, for the first time in ages, that she had her camera.

"Come on, we don't have much time before dark," Harry joked. It was no later than noon, and even at this time of year they had over four hours to find a tree. Still, there was an urgency to their quest. They all felt the importance of finding a perfect tree. Bundled up warmly, Harry, Isabelle and Eric set off to the right of the shack, while Susan and George set off to the left with Geoffrey bounding delightedly behind them.

Occupied as she had been with the shack, Isabelle had not noticed that off to one side of it, opposite to the sea, was a forest made up of well-spaced pines that grew no higher than two meters in height, and seemed to go on forever. Each one was perfectly formed, wide and bushy at the bottom, and tapering to a single spire at the top. The glittering snow which covered some of their branches seemed so artfully placed as to have been composed with the view to pleasing the beholder.

"This is for us," Harry whispered, and Isabelle nodded, smiling.

Eric ran ahead, in and out and around trees.

"Hey, Belle, where d'you think that little guy is?"

There was a rustling behind one of the trees to their right.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him in a while."

A giggle escaped from a spot slightly further away, but all they saw was a bouncing branch, as snow slid off it to the ground.

"Shh. Do you hear something?"

Another giggle.

"No. I think it's just the wind. Eric! Where are you?"

Silence.

"No answer. I guess he decided to leave us to our own devices."

"I guess so."

They were now speaking loudly enough for someone to hear from further away than a few trees, and still no sound came.

“Wow. He’s good.”

Then Eric called out that he was going to go look for Mummy and Daddy, whose voices could be heard not too far away.

“OK,” they answered in unison.

They looked at each other and both knew the other was thinking how nice it was to be alone right at this moment. This time it was Isabelle who pushed Harry up against the bushy resistance of a tree. For a second he was surprised, since in all the time they had been together he had always been the one to begin. She was always resistant, at first out of shyness, and then it had become a game, part of their foreplay, each time a seduction. But this was a new game, and Harry plainly liked it, judging by the passion with which he returned her kiss.

Warm lips against the bite of cold air. Nibbles. Cold tips of noses against cheeks. The taste of breath condensing on flesh, melting on tongue. Harry slid under Isabelle’s weight and they burrowed under prickling branches. Sounds both hushed and echoed enveloped their embrace. Harry winced as snow slid down his back, and Isabelle kissed him harder. Then she stopped suddenly, leaving him breathless, and pushed down with her hands on his shoulders, with all her weight so he wouldn’t think to rise. Keeping her weight on him she slowly moved her hands down to his chest, and down still further to his hips and down still further to his thighs. She paused then, and they held each other’s gaze for a long moment. Without looking down she undid the button of his pants, staring hard into his eyes as if defying him to resist. There was doubt behind his blinks, but he made no motion. She slowly unzipped his pants, and as she did so uncovered his belly and placed a mittened hand there. With the other she freed him from the flannel of his boxers, and smiled to see him gasp at the roughness of wool and the pain of cold. Still he did not move, so she released his gaze and bent down over him and took him into the warmth of her mouth. Another gasp, but this one at quite another sensation than cold. She could feel the movement, up and down, of his belly under her mitten.

Suddenly he pushed her off him, too roughly, saying something about how they had to find Eric, make sure he hadn’t got lost. Quickly, too quickly, he did up his pants and walked off calling Eric’s name.

Isabelle didn’t follow. Instead she walked alone through the trees, following the footsteps she and Harry had made back to the car. The doors were unlocked, so she got in and settled down to wait for the others to come back. She remembered a time when she had snuck up on Harry when he was sleeping and taken a picture of him. He was an angel caught at rest. A single ray of sun from the window behind him cast a soft light on his features, smoothing the sharpness out of them. One arm was flung over his head, the hand relaxed, tangled in golden curls, defenseless. This was when they had first become lovers, and he had not yet learned that she was not attempting to take anything from him. He had woken with a start to find her standing over him with the camera, and had silently gotten up, gotten dressed and left

her apartment. It was weeks before she saw him again, months before he allowed her to do a portrait of him. As she sat in the car feeling shame course through her veins, it began to snow and the shack sank into oblivion. Isabelle fell asleep and had a dream. The dream turned into a nightmare from the stillness.

We break out of the woods, and there are George and Susan standing next to the car, perfectly composed, looking right into the lens but not smiling. Behind them is a tree strapped to the car's roof, behind that is the shack. The subjects are centered. No part of the image is cut out of the frame. Everything is in perfect focus, and has the surreality of a picture taken with a pin-hole camera. We move towards them and it is a series of quick staccato shots. As we get closer, the pauses between shots get longer and slower as if the photographer is getting tired, until finally we stand before them. My throat is so dry I will choke if I try to speak.

Harry says simply, "We can't find Eric, Mom."

She says, "He ran away." By way of accusation she tosses a stack of black and white photographs onto the dirt at her feet. I already know what they are before they scatter and land. From various angles every shot shows me bending over Harry in the snow. His face is not in any of them. They are graphic. Pornographic.

I have lost Harry.

I turn and without a word make my way back into the warm inviting spaces between trees, leaving him facing his mother. Out of sight I wander aimlessly, brushing powdery snow off laden branches as I pass, causing sparkle showers, and the branches bounce up, sometimes stinging my face. Each tree looks exactly like any other. They grow just high enough to hide a tall man from view.

Where such fantasies stemmed from was a mystery to Isabelle. She never shared them with Harry who, she knew, would be too disturbed to help her figure them out. Worse than the fantasies themselves was the way they infiltrated her actual relationship with the people they involved. Like waking nightmares, they colored everything she heard, everything she saw, until the boundary between reality and imagined reality was blurred. Yet another symptom of her inability to focus.

Isabelle is awakened by Geoffrey's barking just as Harry opens the car door beside her and kisses her closed right eye.

"There you are. Come see the tree," he says tenderly, by way of apology, pulling her from her cramped position. The air outside the car is strangely warmer than it was inside. George is holding the tree up beside the opened trunk while Susan pulls a rope out of a tool bag. The tree is the most gorgeous pine that Isabelle has ever seen. She gasps at the sight of it, almost just a silhouette in the dusk light.

She hopes that her appreciation of the tree has masked her inner turmoil, the fact that she can look nobody in the eye. The vision has left her so shaken that she fears she will not be able to get back into the car, the seat of her

horror and shame. While the others are busy tying the tree to the roof of the car, Isabelle walks over to the shack. Its door is unlocked, but the hinges are rusted, so she forces it open with her shoulder.

It is like being inside a shipwreck. All of the furniture is still there, but most of it has been broken, overturned. The cupboards have been emptied, their contents spilled onto the floor. Flour mixed with dust covers the counter, clogs the sink. Everything made of glass has been smashed. Dented cans of food lie in corners, under the single bed, its mattress overturned, blankets and pillows flung to the floor. Shades of gray in the bleak mote-ridden light: the black and white picture of vandalism. The humiliation of a home.

One chair has been spared.

Isabelle pulls it to the center of the room and sits down. Physically surrounded by the mirror of her emotional state, she becomes calm.

When they arrive home, tired and sleepy after a long day outdoors, they quickly set the tree into its stand and then run off to bed. Isabelle, having taken a nap, stays up to do some reading, she says. But once the house is still, she unearths her camera and tripod. She sets the shot up carefully with the tree to the left, the couch next to it beneath the window. Those are the only three elements in the frame. They are all bare: the tree is undecorated, the couch free of clutter, the window curtainless. The only illumination comes from outside: the moon, the street lamps. The exposure is a long one.

PEGGY HERRING lives in Victoria, B.C. Her work has been accepted for publication in *The Saanich Review*, and by jury for participation in this year's BC Festival of the Arts. She has worked for CBC Radio, the United Nations and other international development agencies. Peggy reports that she has lived in Bangladesh, Nepal, Japan and England.

Road Kill

3rd Prize Winner/ \$50

Peggy Herring

"HELP ME WITH THE SHED on the weekend, will you?" Gerry talks into the back of my head, drags a finger down my spine.

We are lying in his bed, his and Marlene's.

"Mmmm," I say. It means, yes, I will help him with the shed on the weekend.

The green government truck is parked on the gravel shoulder of the highway where I usually sell my blueberries. It's early, and hot already. A man in work clothes stands there. I stop my truck, turn off the ignition and see he is standing beside the body of a big deer.

"Morning." I slam the door. He looks my way. Because he doesn't tell me to stay back, I take that as an invitation to get a good look at the animal.

It's a buck. Stiff. And there's gravel in its bloody, matted hair. The rack's been sawed off so the head looks naked. Eyes are red and glazy like that gelatin you get in Maple Leaf tinned ham.

"He's big," I say. Cars hiss past. Most slow down long enough to take a look-see. Reminds me that I better get the stand set up. Not waste time looking at some dead buck. Better to get rid of the berries early in the day.

"Shame," the fella says. "Musta done some damage to the vehicle that hit him." Shakes his head.

Berries can spoil pretty quickly in the summer sun. Best to sell them as early as you can. I walk back down the gravel shoulder to my pickup and get out the gear for the blueberry stand.

I've got two old saw horses and a slab of plywood. Shelley, my daughter, made me a sign. Fancy letters. They say "Blueberries for sale." That's all. I told her not to put the price in case I change my mind.

It's hot, real hot, for so early in the morning.

Ninety-nine cents a pint is what I'll ask today. It's a fair price. And my berries are clean. Not like Edie Kasper's. She's got stems and leaves in every handful. She's not a careful picker like Shelley and me.

Ninety-nine cents is a good price. But it still can take some time if there aren't enough tourists around. No one who lives here would pay one royal cent for berries. Not when you can get your own for free. But the tourists, they're crazy. They'll slam on the brakes, go from sixty miles an hour to a dead stop on the highway, just to take a look at a basket of berries. And it don't matter to them if there's a logging truck barreling down on top of them, or one of those wide motor homes that can barely fit on the highway anymore. They'll pull off into the gravel, fling open their car doors and walk across the highway like they was in the middle of the city.

The government man, he's trying to move that buck toward the back of the truck. He's pulling it by the legs, dragging it in the gravel. But it's heavy. I can see that.

I can't complain about the tourists too much. They may be crazy. But they pay for my wood. For the food I put away in the fall to get us through the winter. I couldn't get through the year without them. Shelley and me, we'd be scrapping even more'n what we do about the money. And social services'd be breathing down my neck again about Shelley. They pretty much leave us alone now. Think they mighta given up, I don't know.

Shelley is the one that brought them round in the first place. It's her fault. She sees that now, she's not a stupid kid. You can't go round the school talking about what happens in the house like it was everybody's business. She knows that now.

"Hey, you want a hand?" That government man has dragged the buck to the truck. But he won't be able to lift it in without help. I already got my table set up, and the sign propped against a rusty old Maxwell House can. I'm ready to put the berries out, but no tourist's gonna buy from me while there's a dead deer just ten feet away. May as well help. It's for my own good.

The fella, he looks at my arms. Anyone can see from my arms that I can lift as good as a man can.

"Sure," he finally says.

We lift the front end onto the tailgate. It's a heavy one. We jostle the body, back and forth, side to side, push it back as far as we can.

"Okay, now the back end," he says. And we get our shoulders under the haunches and push. The body is dead weight, the hair a wire brush.

All of a sudden it's easier. The weight has shifted. And the buck's on board.

It's hot and I've worked up a sweat.

"Thanks." The government man pushes one of the buck's legs into place and slams the tailgate.

"No problem." I brush my hands off on my pants. "You're doin' me a favor to get that thing outta here."

“How much you want for the berries?”

“Ninety-nine a pint.”

“Not bad.” He’s climbs into the truck. “I’ll let the wife know you’re here.”

The government truck, with the dead deer in the bed, spits gravel, grabs onto the tarmac and leaves me with my blueberry stand beside the road.

It’s hot. Friday before the long weekend, so there’s steady traffic. The berries sell fast. I got almost twenty-five bucks now. I need a new jar of instant, but it’ll have to wait. I buy a mickey of whiskey instead for me and Gerry to drink after the shed is torn down tomorrow.

Shelley is waiting for me on the front steps of the house.

“Mom, can I have twenty bucks?”

I slam the door to the truck. It’s hot, real hot, and she couldn’t wait. She’s like that. Always thinking about herself. Always ready for a squabble.

“No. What for?” I open the screen door, she catches it before it slams shut on its spring. Follows me into the kitchen.

“Paper – and stuff for school.”

I’m out of sorts now. It’s the heat, it’s Shelley, it’s the coffee I never had this morning before I left the house, it’s my neck, I think I pulled something when I lifted the buck.

“I signed up for art this year.” She’s picking at her face. I told her not to do that.

“There’s plenty of paper there by the woodstove.”

“That’s not the kind of paper I’m talking about. Paper for writing. You promised.”

I promised? She’s a bloody tape recorder. A bloody tape recorder that thinks money grows on trees. “Shut up, Shelley. Not now.”

“Mom, you promised. I picked the blueberries all morning. Like you said. You promised.”

I pull what’s left out of my pocket. Throw a five on the kitchen table. “There. That’s all I got.”

Shelley swipes her hand across the table. The five drifts to the floor. “That’s shit to me.”

“You watch your mouth, young lady. I didn’t raise you to be no tramp.”

“Like you, you mean. You slut.”

Shelley knows how to get down in the dirt every time. She don’t know how to behave respectful-like. I tried to teach her. But when someone can’t learn a lesson, there’s only one way to teach ’em.

I slap her across the mouth with the back of my hand.

“You piece of trash. You watch your mouth in this house.”

Shelley cries out, her hands lay against her cheeks, but they don’t stop the blood that trickles out between her lips.

“I hate you! I hate you, you bitch!” This time, the screen door slams on its spring.

Shelley is gone off again, maybe down to the lake, maybe back in the bush, I don’t know, I don’t care. She’s a teenager, what do you expect? Okay, I do care. I shouldn’t a slapped her like that. Shouldn’t be slappin’ her at all, I suppose. But she just don’t know when to stop. She don’t know when to leave things be.

“How you gonna get into town anyway, Shell?” I talk into a jar of Kraft smoothie. It’s nearly empty, been scraped down so good, there’s nothing left but the smell. I chuck it in the garbage can.

She’ll come back. She always does.

There’s a tap at the door. I jump. Over my shoulder I see Gerry, fuzzy on the other side of the screen.

“Can I come in?” He opens the door. Stares at me. “You been cryin’ again?”

“It’s nothing,” I say. “Just cuttin’ onions,” but it’s pretty obvious to anyone there’s no onions anywhere in sight.

“Hey, baby.” His hands are round my waist and he is pulling me toward his hips. “Gerry’s here, you lucky girl. Want me to kiss it and make it better?” And he nuzzles deep into my neck, kisses me down there, pushes his hips into mine, in a way that is so familiar to me, I almost forget about Shelley. Then he is bent over, his mouth is on my tit, and I feel something drag down the backs of my legs, yank my heels into the earth.

“Gerry...” I push him away. I want him. But I’m in a mood about Shelley.

It must be too hot. He gives up. Easy. “Later then, baby. I’ll get you later.”

He tugs on his belt loops, drums his fingernails on the glass window of the barometer. “Barometer’s falling. Hope this storm holds off until we pull down the shed.”

Marlene runs the handicraft shop. She sells small lacy things that smell and are only useful for gathering dust so far as I can see. They’re mostly the color of fresh peaches and lilacs. And she sews ribbons and beads on them. Like the berries, they’re the kind of thing no one who lives around here would ever pay for. But tourists seem to like these foolish things.

I went in there once. It was before Shelley’s birthday and I had to get her a gift.

Marlene was stitching something behind the counter. No one else was in the shop.

“Morning,” I said when I saw her. She nodded. “Good place to catch up on your mending,” I went on.

“It’s not mending,” she said. “It’s a sachet.”

I looked over the counter. “What’s that?”

Her needle stopped. “A sachet?”

“Yeah. What is it?” I was feeling real stupid. But I honestly didn’t have a clue what she was talking about.

“It’s a sort of – pocket.” She held it out to me. “You put dried flowers inside and it freshens the air.”

It was lacy and stiff.

“Sachet. It’s French. Comes from the same word as ‘cacher.’ That means ‘to hide.’”

I felt my face go red. “Don’t know nothing about French.”

“Too bad.” She went back to her stitches, her needle jabbing the lace. “You should learn. You might be real good at it.”

I left the shop then without buying anything.
 “Have a good day now,” she sang to me as I left.

On the shed day, Shelley and me are at Gerry and Marlene’s by two o’clock. It’s awful hot and sticky. The storm’s coming closer, you can feel it.

The Parkers are already here, with their boys, and I see Anton and Nick from the feedmill circling the shed with Gerry. Ferdie Kasper is chipping away at the putty around windows, while Edie, his wife, she’s over to one side with Marlene, talking up a storm.

The shed had been slapped together a dozen or so years before. A couple of winters ago, the year we had the heavy freezing rain and that warm spell, the roof had partly collapsed. Gerry’d taken anything he needed out of there long ago.

“Afternoon,” I say.

Gerry grins at me, and I watch his mouth. “Good to see you.” Marlene and Edie stop talking. Marlene watches me. Shelley watches Marlene watching me.

I laugh at all this watching. “What are you all standing around for? Let’s get to work.” I take my sheepskin work gloves out of my pocket and put them on.

With crowbars, mallets and hammers, we poke, pry and pull the planks off the walls of the shed. They’re dry and half rotten. Most of them crack into pieces. We toss the wood, piece by piece, into a pile a few feet away, rusty nails and all. Shelley and the Parker boys are taking everything out of the shed. Rusty paint tins, handles of shovels and axes snapped in two, plastic bags of pink fiberglass insulation. And garbage. From who knows where. Everything goes into the same heap.

Gerry takes his shirt off. His shoulders are shiny with sweat. I can smell his skin. Feel the edge of his shoulder blade on my fingers.

Marlene goes inside to make tea. Comes out with a tray of cookies and matching mugs.

“Shelley, would you mind going inside and fetching the teapot? It’s on the table by the door.” Shelley heads for the house. “And take your boots off before you go in, dear.”

Such a priss. Nothing on Shelley’s boots but good, clean soil. From her own yard even.

We have tea. Marlene serves sugar in cubes.

We study our work. All that’s left is the frame, and part of the roof that’s not collapsed.

“We’ll pull it down,” Gerry says to Anton. “Hook it onto the back of the truck.”

Gerry gets some ropes and chains. We loop them round the beams, tie them to the trailer hitch. Nick drives.

“Okay, go!” Gerry is the man in charge, calls the shots. We watch.

Nick puts the truck in gear and guns it. The tires chew up the lawn, dig into the earth, spin out of control, spit soil into the air.

“More gas, give it more gas,” Gerry shouts.

Nick floors it. There's a creak, then a groan from the old shed. Crack. And then it collapses. Falls into itself, with a thud, a cloud of dust.

And a cheer. Nick waves from the truck. Turns off the ignition.

"We are gonna have one helluva bonfire tonight," Gerry says.

Sparks spiral up into the sky. The wood crackles. And it all disappears into the blackness overhead. Gerry drains his beer, throws the can into the flames.

"Gerry, honey, take it easy," Marlene says. "That's enough."

Gerry looks over at me. "We are having one helluva bonfire tonight."

I laugh. Can't help it. He's a clown, it's the beer, we're all having a good time, except for Marlene, and it's the last long weekend of the summer and stinkin' bloody hot.

"I said that's enough."

"Didja hear that? That's enough, everyone," and he reaches into the pile of wood, throws a plank into the fire. Marlene's so uptight. No wonder he can't take it.

I still got my mickey of whiskey in the truck. Am saving it, in fact. For when Marlene goes to bed. When the others head home. When Shelley disappears. For me and Gerry, to chase away these beers. Down at the side of the river. Or in the back of the pickup. Don't matter so much where.

Marlene leaves the side of the fire. Heads for the house. She fades into the darkness, then back into sight as she gets closer to the porch and is lit up by the lights in the house. She closes the door. Gerry tosses two more planks onto the fire. Opens another can.

"Didja hear that?" he says again. "That's enough."

Flames lick the sky. We lounge around, drawn to the fire, even though there's no need for the heat. It's plenty warm enough. But the smoke keeps the mosquitoes down.

The storm is closer, anyone can feel that.

I watch Gerry, Gerry circling round the fire, popping in on this conversation, telling a joke, making sure everyone's got a beer, teasing Shelley and the Parker boys, throwing more planks on the fire.

He finally sits down beside me.

"Whaddya think? A helluva fire?" He holds a stick in one hand, a beer in the other. The stick is charred at one end. He's using it to poke at the fire. He lets a knee fall against mine.

I let it rest there for just a moment. Then shove it away. "Later."

He looks into the flames. "You stickin' around for awhile?"

I copy his casualness. Drain my beer. Everyone's chatting, no one's paying attention.

"Yeah. Stickin' around." I look at his arm, then his muscles, fingers wrapped around the stick. "Got a mickey."

He raises his eyebrows. "Good thing, a mickey." We smile.

Then Marlene is by the fireside. She has a sweatshirt draped over her shoulders.

"I'm going for a walk," she announces. "Do you want to come with me, Lois?"

Where did she come from? When did she get here?

"Uh, no thanks." Good thing it's dark, she can't see my face is red.

"Come on," she coaxes. "Why not?"

I laugh. She doesn't. "Well, I'm real comfortable here, thanks."

"But it's a beautiful night for a walk. Come on." The others stop talking. Look at me, look at her. "It's just down the drive a piece. Nothing out there to be scared of, you know."

"Marlene..." Too many beers. My mind is not as sharp as it should be. And I don't know how else to say no. Everyone looks at me. So I get up. Too sudden, and I stumble a little.

Marlene smiles. "It'll do us both good." And we head off down the driveway.

It is hot and still. The storm is about to break, you can feel it in every bone, in every pore of your skin. The heat of the fire, the sound of everyone talking, these fade as our feet pad along the earth ruts of the driveway.

Everything round us now seems bigger than normal. It's the alcohol, yes, but not just that. Jack pine and black spruce line the driveway's edges, form a tunnel that sucks us along the path in the darkness. The mosquitoes shriek in my ears. The peepers are like jackhammers digging into my head.

These are sirens, alarm bells and warning buzzers. Where is she going? Where is she taking me?

We walk on.

"You tired?"

I shrug. "A little." I'm not really. I feel anxious. On guard. Drunk. But I can't tell her that.

"Then let's sit awhile, shall we?" And she pushes aside a branch, ducks between two trees, disappears into the forest, along a little trail that's barely visible.

"Marlene?"

"Come on. Over here." I follow her voice and a minute later, we are in a clearing. On the edge of a small pond. It's dark and beautiful. She sits down. Pats the earth beside her, like I'm supposed to sit down, too.

"Surprised?"

"Yeah." And I am. I had no idea this was hidden back here.

She laughs. "I wasn't, you know. Surprised. Rarely am. It was actually easy to find. Seemed obvious to me. The beavers dammed it up. They're all over the place. And that little creek that crosses the road over there," she waves her hand off toward my place, "it has to lead somewhere, doesn't it?"

I sit down beside her, look out over the water. A vein of lightning flashes in the distance.

"I think it comes from childhood," she says.

"What?"

"The thing about not being surprised. About being able to figure things out. I got it from my mother, I think." Marlene pulls her knees up into her

chest. Slow motion. Her sweatshirt is hanging off one shoulder, but she doesn't seem to notice. She's sitting so close to me.

"My father, he was a good man. Worked hard, paid the bills, took care of us, showed up for dinner most of the time. Was fairly nice to my mother. They seemed happy enough to me.

"Dad used to like to go fishing on the weekends. Mostly in the summer, but there were a few years when he got into ice fishing, and he'd be gone some weekends in the winter too. He didn't always catch something, but most of the time, he would. And he'd bring it home. Some trout, pickerel, a couple of bass, that sort of thing.

"My mother used to pack his bag for him when he'd go. He had a black vinyl satchel, almost like a doctor's bag, and she'd pack his clothes, his toothbrush, a warm sweater, some raingear if it looked like it would be a wet weekend. I used to love to watch her pack. She'd leave his case by the basement door, so when he woke up at four o'clock in the morning, he wouldn't forget it.

"I don't know what tipped my mother off, really. I suppose I'll never find out. But one weekend, it was summer, she did the strangest thing. After she packed his bag, she went down to the basement, found his tackle box, took all the tackle out, replaced it with stones and gravel from the backyard, latched it up and left it beside his satchel."

More lightning, and now, a little rumble of thunder. It's so sticky, so close. I suddenly notice the mosquitoes. Without the smoke to drive them away, they hover over my skin, looking for the best place to draw blood.

"He left the house at four, like he usually did. Mom and I had a normal weekend. We went to town to do the shopping. We watched the Saturday afternoon movie together. Had dinner. Played Parcheesi or Hearts, something like that.

"Dad came back on Sunday night. I saw Mom, looking out the front window when his truck pulled up. He stepped onto the driveway, went round to the back, pulled out his satchel and a plastic bag. He came into the house.

"'I'm home,' he said. 'Where's the gang that I love?' I ran to greet him, while my mother hovered behind. He hugged me, then held out the bag to her. 'Here,' he said. 'Look what I caught.'"

Marlene pauses, looks out over the pond, waits. There's another rumble of thunder, but I don't notice any flash of lightning this time.

"She took the bag from him, carried it into the kitchen, took the fish out of the bag, cut off its head, removed the insides, wrapped it up and put it in the refrigerator. The next day, she found his tackle box, took all the stones and gravel out, and put all the tackle back."

"And? What did she say?"

"Nothing. What's to say? She knew. But what could she do about it? He was a good man. A good father. She just – made a choice."

My armpits are damp. "She could've told him to stop foolin' around. She could've left him."

Marlene laughs and stretches her legs out in front of her. The heat is oppressive. There's no breeze from the water even.

"I suppose. But that wasn't her way." Marlene smoothes down the spiky grass at her sides, combs and pats it into place. "Anyway, what makes you think it's so easy, Lois? It's not like she had a lot of choices, you know."

"But that just sounds foolish to me. Puttin' up with that. Not sayin' a word. When you know, and all." I swat at a mosquito biting behind my ear.

"What's foolish about knowing? About finding out the truth? She faced it. Then she made a choice."

There's sticky blood on my fingers from the dead mosquito.

"You know, I saw you the other day. Was it yesterday?"

"Oh, really?" Where did she see me, where was I?

"By the side of the highway. You were helping that government man lift a deer into the back of his truck."

I am relieved.

"And when I saw you I thought to myself, 'There's a strong woman. A real strong woman.'

"Cause I'm not like that, Lois. I don't like things like that. I couldn't get close enough to a dead animal in the first place, let alone be any help to anyone wanting to lift it into the back of a pickup."

She stands up. "That doesn't mean I don't know the dead animal is there. Just that – I don't want to talk about it. And I don't want to be the one to have to deal with it."

She fixes the sweatshirt. Wraps the sleeves over top of one another, like she is folding two ends of a ribbon over a birthday present.

"That's the way I am. I'm no fool. I like to know." The air is thick. I need to get out of this swamp.

"Mom?" A voice calls out, a flashlight flickers through the trees, startles both of us.

I jump up. "Over here!" I shout. "I'm coming." I head back down the little trail to the driveway. Marlene follows.

We emerge from the trees. "Mom, I wanna go home." Shelley shines the beam at our feet. My leather boots, Marlene's white canvas sneakers. "Let's go."

Marlene's arms are crossed over her chest. She waits.

"Okay. Let's go home." I start back up the driveway to their house, to the truck.

"No way, Mom, you're too drunk. We're walking."

She shouldn't talk that way to me. But she's right. I am too drunk.

"Okay. You're the boss," I say. And Marlene exhales and her arms drop at her sides. "Thanks for the grub and the bonfire. It's good to get together with neighbors once in a while."

"Yes, it is, isn't it?"

"Come on, Mom!" Shelley drags on my arm.

Marlene laughs. "You're a good girl, Shelley." And she turns to me. "You know, I could use a spare set of hands in the shop on the weekends." She looks at Shelley. "Would you like to try, honey?"

Shelley is excited. "Could I, Mom?"

"We'll see." What else could I say? A few extra bucks in the house wouldn't hurt anyone, I suppose. "Say good-night to Gerry for us. I'll be back in the morning for the truck."

“We’ll see you then. Have a safe walk home.” And Marlene turns down the driveway, in the direction of the house, disappears among the trees, into the night.

Shelley shines the flashlight and we follow the rest of the driveway out to the dirt road. We turn left and head for our place.

There’s a flash of lightning, a rumble of thunder. A few sharp raindrops fall onto my face, my arms, the earth around us. A sharp chemical smell rises up from the ground.

“Here’s the storm,” I say.

“Finally,” says Shelley. “We’ve had enough of this heat for one weekend.”

And the rain pelts down around us, the thunder and lightning crash overhead. Trees tower along the sides of the road. Sway in the wind. Shelley and me, we break into a run. Head for home, out of the storm.

JOHN DITSKY, Poetry Editor of *The University of Windsor Review* and Chair of the Editorial Board of the *Steinbeck Quarterly*, has had over 1300 poems published by various major and little magazines, among them *New Letters*, *The Ontario Review*, and *Western Humanities*. His poem collections include *The Katherine Poems*, *Scar Tissue*, and *Friend & Lover*. He has also published critical volumes dealing with Steinbeck.

John Ditsky / **Four Poems**

Poor Tom

How to survive this terrible October?
The chill and cloudy afternoons:
sun, when it comes a moment,

too brief to warm or to cheer –
a tease, merely: like the “good
days” of a dying patient, hardly

a remission. (Wars famines earth-
quakes neither console nor distract.)
I huddle by the sunset window

– by the indoor plants, sighing
of Martinique; the Easter lily,
trumpeting its born-again renewal.

(– by the radiator, just in case.)
The grass outdoors glows basket-
green; hides eggs and chocolates,

probably. But the mums bloom
warily, girls from the office. I
sip tequila, anticipating snow.

The Maple's Leaves in Borning

The maple's leaves in borning
speak of death. Their lives
are stop and start, are red

and green and back to red
again. If in that much
there's little to surprise

(the oak's leaves, after
all, start yellow –
as they end, or start

to end), then what of these
small spheres of redness
that I rub and roll each

spring from new-green
maple leaves – not
for knowing what they are

by name, but knowing threat
on sight? For if I leave
them, miss them, where

they've been, negation
comes to be, non-maple
in form of holes in leaves.

Red balls of concentrated
life and death, they warn
of ending coming in the day

of dawning glory – adolescents'
skin that prophesies
cancer of old age.

Stripping Paint

*Apply evenly. Allow
To soak in. Then remove
Old paint by scraping
Gently, or by rubbing. Former
Surfaces will reappear
In all their glory!*

It's all too much!
Though fumes of restoration
Have already giddied me,
I want a drink. I think
Of alcohol, the way the fluid,
Evenly applied, pulls

Flesh away from muscle,
Bone. The sag of a paunch
Is like an old-base paint
Dried in the can. Down
To the grain! I toast – and old
Beauty stands there, naked

David. I love what the pool
Shows back, the glow
Of original things. But –
Hmm! – *Be sure*
To use only in
A well-ventilated place.

Mirrors 2

Watching them dying, I learned
How my face would go. I saw
In the gasp and the rasp of breath
They struggled for clear prophecy
Of my own ending. Where, after
All, had I come by such a jaw
And teeth, except through them?

And now, I rise to morning
Wakefulness, or catch me in love's
Rictus, as if outside myself
And standing staring pitying
At one I know's about to die.
We are reduced to parents' leavings
In the end. Our bones will out.

ARIADNE SAWYER, MA is a Neuroscientist and therapist who specializes in brain strategies and behavior. *The Lollipop Man* is the first in a series of stories about her unusual life.

The Lollipop Man

A Child's View of Big Sur and Henry Miller

Ariadne Sawyer

WHEN I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD, we lived at Big Sur, with a vast panorama of heights and ocean depths and of strange people. My personal life was centered around books, imaginary playmates and wilderness. I began reading at age three and by age seven, books had become the foundation of my life. I would often take four or five books with me and go for hours into the wilderness around our house, to play with imaginary playmates, often the characters who lived in the books I was reading. As I grew older, my expanded circle of imaginary friends included Gandhi, Socrates, Beethoven, Aristotle, Bertrand Russell and Madame Curie.

We lived in the beekeeper's house which stands out in my memory, because of a hole in the roof, directly above the stove. One day, while the pressure cooker was on the wood stove, my mom went off to play the piano. She was interrupted by a large explosion, when the top of the pressure cooker took off, intending to find its way through the roof. It succeeded and made an almost perfect circle right above the stove. When it rained we put a large pot on the stove and very often had warm water. My dad seemed to be very proud of the fact that we had hot and cold running water. I thought at the time that he had a funny way of looking at things.

My parents were pioneers of the back-to-the-land movement and simple living. During this time, my father wrote: *How to Live Forever on Your Last Paycheck*, and so we lived on \$5.00 to \$30.00 per month. This did not seem to affect me much except when it came to my interest in sweets.

When I look through the endless files of memory, certain memories surface and present images, smells and sounds, almost to the point of existing in a parallel universe unfettered by the perception of past reality. These memories include those of a man who lived in a tree, of walking one mile to the school bus stop and of bolting into the bushes to hide when the rare car came along. I recall waiting for the High School bus, which took me twenty miles down the coast on a road that hugged the coastline and offered a terrifying glimpse of a car that had plunged to the ocean far below. The crumpled car looked like a ghostly wreck, lying there, helpless, as the waves licked its shiny surface.

I remember a weekly celebration which we called a “weekaversary.” Our family gathered to share poetry, writings and drawings. It was a candle-lit ceremony during which we shared our lives, love and commitment to one another. I was proud to bring my creations to the family group.

I remember the Lollipop Man, known by that name because of the brightly colored lollipops that he had in his coat pocket. Whenever my folks and I met Henry Miller, he would tell us not to visit him, which seemed to mean that he would welcome company.

One day, when my father had finished telling him about our hot and cold running water, Henry reached into his pocket and brought out a shiny colored lollipop. This was a special treat, since we never had candy at home, sugar being something akin to the devil and known for its bad qualities. My mother has said that Henry Miller and his wife used to come and buy geese from us in the beekeeper’s house. We were mentioned in his book *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, which some people regarded as an extended gossip column about Big Sur and its inhabitants. It seemed to me that this was the worry of grown-ups. I focused my attention on the issue of lollipops, what color I would get the next time and what it would taste like.

There are other memories, too, ones that live in their own encapsulated worlds waiting to be visited. I remember sleeping outside in the garden at night to protect it from deer. I once saw a large buck, with his antlers aglow in the moonlight, dining on our vegetables. Sleeping outside at night to protect the haystack from the aforementioned deer, I would wake up and hear them crunching hay on the other side from me.

There was a chance encounter on the small bridge in front of our house, between our Toggenburg mama goat and a mama deer, both with babies about the same size directly behind them. They inched their way across the bridge, touched noses, leapt into the air and took off running in opposite directions.

There was the mystery and sadness of death when I ran across that bridge and fell holding my baby Angora bunny rabbit. When I got up, it didn’t move. I wondered where it had gone to, for there was nothing left but a bit of white fur.

There was the eternal roar of the ocean waves as they rose up tall and splashed across the rocks, the portal rock that looked like an entrance to another world that I was not allowed to enter.

Looking back or perhaps sideways in time, I wonder at the strength and weakness of memory, how some memories seem to exist in full Technicolor and are quite alive, while others are weak and pallid by contrast.

My memories of Henry Miller are brief and are tied to the gift of several lollipops. Perhaps the color and taste of those lollipops are the only link I have to that man.

ERNEST HEKKANEN has published two books of poetry, *The Wedding Cycle* and *Straying from Luminosity*.

Reaching for Words

Ernest Hekkanen

Today reaching for words is like reaching
for sunlight. I would like to contort my way
out of this darkness, with a phrase so incandescent
it would make me feel immaterial, if only for a moment.

I would like to polish myself until I'm so bright
I would illuminate every dark corner of this city.
I would like to shine from one side through to the other,
like the most faultless crystal imaginable.

But today I can't find the words that ignite.
I can't see through this cloying opaqueness
which the sun flutters against like a dying moth;
and my mind, God help me, is like cold, dense clay.

Featured Poet

R.W. Stedingh



Sidewalks Deal Out The Cards

R.W. STEDINGH is the author of three books of poetry: *Faces of Eve*, *From a Bell Tower*, and *The Stanley Park Suite*. A former Managing Editor of *Prism International* and Founding Editor of the *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, he lives in Vancouver, B.C. His fiction, translations and poetry have appeared in major literary magazines in Mexico, New Zealand, Great Britain, Canada and the U.S.A.

Here And Now: Canadian Poetry

R.W. Stedingh

READING POETRY THESE DAYS can become mere drudgery. When poets fail to stimulate the sensitive reader and make no attempt to engage him or her intellectually or emotionally, something is seriously wrong. When poets produce unreadable, confused texts in which they fail to control their material and feign genius, the situation is intolerable. Having just completed my endeavor to read all of the Canadian poetry holdings in English at the Vancouver Public Library, I have come to the conclusion that 99% of contemporary poetry since 1970 is crap, and the other 1% aren't doing that well either.

One might object that since 1970 there has been a great burgeoning of interest in poetry as well as a plethora of new small presses that publish poetry in Canada. While this is true, the quality of the poetry being produced is poorer than ever, and no one seems the wiser, especially the poets and their camp-follower critics who have no criterion upon which to judge a poem as a work of art. "Throw a stone in Vancouver, and you'll hit a poet!" a friend of mine facetiously said back in the seventies. The situation, then and now, is true of any city in the country. But this popularization of poetry has meant the disappearance of aesthetic standards and the new social phenomenon whereby everybody considers himself or herself an authority on the subject of poetry because he or she also writes the stuff.

One of the grossest manifestations of this popularization, this poetry for the masses, is "performance poetry," a formless derivative of "rap music" without the deafening bass. While the efforts of performance poets may be closer to the lyrical origins of the art in that it is oral, it does not have the

lasting quality of the poems in *The Greek Anthology*, which were written as well as performed; it does not have the lasting quality of Homer, his predecessors and successors whose poetry existed in manuscript if not written in stone. But this common oral character of performance poetry and classical Greek poetry is the only fact of comparison between the two, unless one considers the element of rhyme. However, there is a great deal of difference between rhyme employed as music to complement the sense of a classical Greek poem and the use of rhyme for the sake of rhyming, in the absence of any other form of coherence, and emphasizing sound, more often than not, at the expense of sense of the performance poets. When performance poets aren't rhyming, they claim, as a kind of justification, that they are still expressing themselves in emotional ways. But it should be clear to any discerning person that expressing one's self is not necessarily a poem. In addition, performance poets more often than not imbue their spoken words with body language and voice modulation rather than depending on the power of the words themselves to convey meaning. And, again, more often than not, the proponents of performance poetry consider their spoken words to be superior to the literary poetry that appears in books. But it is a ridiculous argument. Both camps, the performance poets on the one hand and the literary poets on the other, have no real conflict in that both are incompetent. They are incompetent in that for them quality and form are never a question, and the same effortless doggerel, undisciplined as it is, is passed off by both as legitimate, the true work of genius.

But aside from the watered-down, often superficial, though well-intentioned, supercilious efforts of performance poets and literary poets alike, there are three major reasons why what we are getting from Canadian poets is crap. The first is the haphazard manner in which poetry has been taught in English classes from junior high school to university courses in creative writing; the second is the dominance of post-structuralist-deconstructionist theory and the abandonment of rhetoric among serious university teachers and literary critics; and the third is the incestuous nature of Canadian publishing.

As for the first of these, the teaching of poetry in English classes in the public schools since 1970 has always been a cursory, hit-or-miss affair. In the seventies, when I taught English in the public schools of Nova Scotia, Ontario and British Columbia, most of my colleagues expressed a great horror of teaching poetry. They felt themselves extremely limited by inadequate textbooks which contained very little poetry. In the typical textbook there were only one or two poems by Bliss Carman, Charles G.D. Roberts, Archibald Lampman and F.R. Scott without suggested questions on the poems, without a teacher's guide as to how to approach the subjects of the poems in the classroom.

Not only were English teachers hampered by inadequate textbooks, they felt insecure when approaching the subject of poetry and did not feel academically qualified to teach it. And they weren't, because most English teachers in those days had no qualifications to teach the subject other than the fact that they spoke the language, regardless of how poorly or how well. As a result, most English teachers in the public schools avoided teaching what little poetry appeared in their textbooks, or they gave it only cursory

treatment which gave rise to the egalitarian but preposterous notion that in poetry anything goes, because a poem means whatever you think it means, and it may mean anything.

This unsatisfactory situation changed somewhat in the ensuing years. By the mid-seventies, provincial departments of education required that units of poetry be taught in junior high schools and throughout senior secondary school, and in Ontario and some of the larger cities of the country, Poets in the Schools Projects were initiated. The result was that more and more teachers were making an effort to include poetry as an important part of the English curriculum. But even then, the approach to the teaching of poetry had not significantly changed. With rather misdirected curriculum guides, English teachers were encouraged to teach "poetry appreciation" rather than critical acumen. Even this approach often failed, because fostering a student's appreciation of a poem requires that the teacher in the first instance be not only appreciative but enthusiastic. This was not usually the case. Instead, students were often taught that whatever they thought about a poem was fine, and any reaction was preferable to none. This resulted, once again, in the now widespread belief among high school teachers and their students that when it comes to poetry, there are no rules, no limitations. And, to add insult to injury, when students were asked to write poems of their own (instead of learning their grammar), they were taught that as long as they were "creative," they couldn't possibly fail. What "creative" meant was also anybody's guess, but generally it was confused with expression. It certainly did not include a high sensitivity to words, printed or spoken, nor did it include a study of poetic forms and rhetorical structures. Approaches to poetry in the classroom, even today, are not in themselves structured, systematized, or in any way ordered, and mistaken attitudes have resulted in an army of Canadian poets who speak or write a confused nonsense where anything does, in fact, go, and where any emotion or thought, no matter how poorly expressed, is accepted as poetry. There is no attempt, even in creative writing classes at university, to study prosody and the elements of style, no attempt to explore a poem on that basis. In fact, critical approaches of this nature are avoided, discouraged, shunned. Effectively, it has meant the encouragement of poor reading habits as well as incompetent writing approaches.

The second major reason for the proliferation of poorly-written poetry in Canada is the critical phenomenon known as post-modernism. By post-modernism I mean the bulk of post-structuralist-deconstructionist theory as proposed by such writers as Bakhtin, Foucault, Lacan, and especially Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, who unsuccessfully argue, among other things, that a text (a poem) has no meaning beyond itself or may, in the end, have no meaning at all, that meaning in language is impossible since a word is not the thing it represents, that the word "tree" is not a tree. Furthermore, there are ridiculous notions of "the death of the author" stressing the general unreliability of authors to explain their work and the ultimate expendability of the author since most post-modern texts are "writerly" and depend more on the reader's understanding or multiple interpretations of a text. Collectively, these, and some of the other notions of the post-structuralist-deconstructionist writers-cum-critics were based on poorly written texts and the comments of authors who were not consciously aware

of what they were doing with language and meaning in their work. The effect of these notions on both poets and literary critics has been that post-structuralism-deconstructionism has become an excuse for bad writing.

And what kind of writing is bad writing? And how does this apply to contemporary Canadian poetry?

Bad writing, and bad poetry, is disconnected, uncommunicative, formless and lacking in responsibility, the responsibility of the writer to communicate, to make clear what he or she means in a form that is aesthetically pleasing and recognizable without being overly obtrusive. There is a great deal of difference between an imperfect block of Carrara marble and Michelangelo's *David*. The rough stone lacks all the *qualities* of the finished work of art. It lacks form, structure, shape, texture, depth; it lacks any attempt to say something of value to an audience. By the same token, a lump of clay on a potter's wheel says nothing. It is the raw material out of which a statement is made, and that statement is the finished pot. The same thing is true in distinguishing the difference between noise or disconnected sound and a musical composition, the finished work of art. The best poetry is also a work of art. Using a common language, the poet arranges words (and meaning) in such a way that the poem's parts add up to a statement or related statements about reality that have *meaning* for both the writer and the reader(s). There is a conscious effort on the poet's part to give definition to words, to give form, structure, shape, texture, and depth; to synthesize, to *compose* his or her thoughts and emotions – thoughts and emotions which are only the raw material of poetry. Unfortunately, these days, we have instead of poetry a lot of rough stone and lumps of clay and noise being put forth as finished works of art. And what is lacking in them is any degree of work, any degree of skill or control over subject matter. We have, in short, a lot of “feelers” and “sensitive” people who are ironically insensitive to language, but few, if any, “seers” or individuals with the emotional control characteristic of a clear vision of reality or some aspect of it; we have automatic writing and other writing “experiments” consisting of disconnected, meaningless doggerel begging acceptance as legitimate, finished poems. Such are the misbegotten wares of charlatans, literary poseurs, poetasters, hangers-on; it is not poetry in the best sense of the term, in any sense of the term.

The third reason why Canadian poetry is in the sad shape it is in, is the very nature of literary publishing in Canada. Without getting into a great deal of historical detail, it is quite clear that literary publishing is economically inviable and always has been, though the worth of publishing excellent poetry is undeniable and manifold. The enormous cultural contributions of McClelland and Stewart, Canada's foremost and largest publisher of serious literature is, for example, underwritten by the fact that as a publisher it has had to be bailed out of its economic woes several times by the federal government. Even though M&S publishes some of Canada's leading, established writers – some of whom are known for shoddy writing, for their crap – it also publishes new writers of merit such as Lorna Crozier and Robert Bringhurst. But M&S is really an atypical example of literary publishing in Canada in that it is a large house, the largest, and is, with help, financially getting by. Others on the literary horizon that seem to be succeeding with

their publishing programs – with the help of The Canada Council – are the House of Anansi, Thistle-down Press and Porcupine’s Quill Press, but they also publish relatively little poetry and rarely of the best quality.

Aside from the above-named publishers of poetry, there are the small presses which account for the bulk of contemporary poetry published in this country. Often, these presses, like Fiddlehead Books, Black Moss Press, and Nightwood Editions, are regional in scope and for the most part accept poetry only from writers living in the provinces in which they are located. While they do occasionally publish poets beyond their geographical boundaries, the poets are usually well-known and quasi-established.

Other small presses consist of what amounts to writing co-ops, where poets assist financially as well as physically with the production of their books. They are little cliques consisting of closely-knit friends who are incestuously interested in each other’s work, often for social reasons, rather than basing their interest on literary merit. They all have their own “stable” of writers, which means they only publish their friends with only a token regard for literary standards, and if one is “lucky,” if one conforms to the group, one might see his or her work under their imprimatur. This is another way of saying that these small presses are more interested in being considered movements than they are in being considered for the substance of the poetry they publish.

A third kind of small press exists. It is an execrable species in that as publishers they have a hidden agenda. They are interested only in publishing “house organs” or books that subscribe to their particular bias. They are, in short, only interested in publishing propaganda, be it overtly political (partisan or otherwise), of a specific sexual orientation, ethnic or racial orientation, or propaganda in the form of poetry that is politically correct; which is to say, it is far from original and nothing but pap for the unthinking masses.

In addition to these types of small presses, there is a great deal of self-publishing going on in Canada today. While there is much to be said for it – in that serious writers like Benjamin Franklin, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Anaïs Nin and many other notables first published their work in this manner – this kind of publishing, like that of so many of the small presses, is started by poets who can’t get their work published in any of the existing houses. More often than not, this amounts of vanity publishing, and the results are execrable to unreadable, as my readings of Canadian poetry in the Vancouver Public Library have revealed. But to go on, the incestuous quality of many of the small presses and self-publishers in Canada is revealed in the professional back-patting of these publishers as a group in that careful study finds them publishing each other – an unwritten agreement among them being that Publisher A will publish a book by Publisher B if Publisher B agrees to do the same for Publisher A.

This generally corrupt “industry” of Canadian literary publishing means that a truly skillful poet with a clear vision and who knows how to write often goes ignored and is rarely published unless he or she is financially, or in some other way, incestuously connected. Additionally, it means that whatever is popular, whatever is likely to sell, gets published, and that rarely has anything to do with quality.

But when it comes to that, what do I mean by quality? What are the characteristics of the best poetry written in English, or any other language, historically and in the present? What is the nature of the 1% of contemporary Canadian poetry that isn't crap?

The word *poetry* in English is derived from the Greek *poiesis*, which means a bringing-forth, and is related to another Greek word, *aletheia*, a revealing of truth. It is clear that for the ancient Greeks a poem was a calling-forth or a naming of truth, the summoning, demanding, instructing, directing of someone or some thing into presence, into conscious reality. The characteristic of the best in ancient poetry is as well characteristic of the best in modern poetry. It involves a showing of the sounds of the voice (spoken or written) in a music that complements the sense. And it is of great importance for contemporary poets to note that this bringing forth ancient Greeks required of their poetry was not a mere saying, for the words employed in a poem must resound with meaning, or, if you will, significance. That is to say, a poem is the embodiment in the appropriate language of beautiful thought, imagination or emotion, the language being adapted to arouse the feelings and imagination. To bring a poem into being requires of the poet, then, a well-versed rhetoric, a familiarity with the forms of discourse in prose as well as the devices or techniques of saying, of bringing forth, that insure clarity, and thus the comprehension of a poem. It is, in short, necessary for the aspiring poet to know the basic characteristics of good prose writing such as unity, coherence and emphasis, as well as the rhetorical and poetic devices he or she might use in creating a poem as a work of art. And let me be clear beyond all doubt that a poem is an artifact, an art object that allows, through language, being to breathe and announce itself as an entity independent of other entities, including the poet. Characteristically, a poem in the best sense of the term is a dramatic statement having structure, a clear beginning, middle and end, though not necessarily in that order, and uses figurative language, be it symbolic, imagistic or in other ways metaphorical to bring about a single effect. Lastly, while tension and release characterize the greatest poetry, there is as well a rigor of meditation, a carefulness in saying, and a frugality with words.

Looking back, it is clear that contemporary Canadian poetry since 1970 rarely exhibits these qualities, if at all. But when it does, we are assured that the poet has diligently studied his or her subject, and by carefully amassing detail, makes a valuable statement about reality as we know it; that he or she speaks emotionally and intellectually for us; that what he or she says is archetypal and timeless, and we are less alone for it. Unorganized, undisciplined, chaotic "poetry" accomplishes none of this.

MAIN AND HASTINGS

The sidewalk deals out the cards
 Telling me where to walk
 To arrive absolutely nowhere like the traffic
 At a cross-street.

Here foul air finds its way into nostrils,
 Grows warm in lungs, is changed
 And expelled while a steady stream of pedestrians
 Eddies around the heart of the intersection
 And crosses in its own walk,
 Eyes full of gravity gravitating
 To the dealers dealing overdoses
 Of prescription drugs
 By the public toilets.

And the hair grows gray out of ears
 Listening to the tintinnabulation
 Of the young on ghetto-blasters
 Fill the coffin in the white hearse going by,
 Honking its horn into the silence
 Of every day growing shorter.

Of course it is winter,
 And the eye sees less and less, blinking
 Into the temperature that always is falling
 Like a rug pulled out from under the addict
 Who revolves like the earth
 Around his needle.

Here the only touch is the shove
 Of the enterprising poor as they cross
 Against the light into traffic,
 Hoping for a little accident to cripple them
 So the insurance will be enough
 To set them up for life.

Still, I go on watching and watching out
 With the taste of apple cores on my tongue:

On the east corners
 The banks take their toll
 As the living invest their money in the dead

Promises of accruing interest;

On the west corners,
 The library baby-sits the bored,
 Tired, and dissolute with games of chess
 Monopoly and Scrabble without a book in sight,
 And in front of the pharmacy
 A pusher peddles his rocks to a girl
 Out to smoke herself to death.

Everywhere from here
 The sidewalk leads to churches,
 And at the funerals of the murdered,
 The masses aid for the raped,
 The services for the beaten or mentally ill,
 When the collection plate is passed,
 The dead in the pews take their coin,

And I laugh

Figuring, "O what the hell,"

For I see what the lemmings
 Outnumbering me accomplish,
 Sometimes together but always apart,
 As the wilderness comes over them.

Once death was all I was good for,
 But now that I see where the pavement
 Keeps running in square circles,

And my betters insist they're surviving
 (Getting on after the camel's back is broken
 In a labor of love),

I climb the cracks in the darkness
 To take my place in the light

With the few

As Time, the spider, triumphs
 In the palms of my hands.

At 55

The hands of the clock
Put on their boxing gloves,

And with the passing of each hour
I grow dizzy
Till the time knocks me out,

Announcing that I am
The age I am,
As far away from where I was going,
As usual,
Standing my ground by lying down
And making myself an easy target,
Till the ground shifts.

And I wonder,

“What would it be like to be young
And fitter than I will ever be
Again?”

But then I was just waking up in the fog
And seeing nothing but the fog,
The protean peacocks color-armed
Behind sharp beaks and black beady eyes,
The pilgrims who broke the tablets
Flocking to the burnt-out temple
To break them again, the politicians
Selling the same old message to the electorate
That doesn't vote, the moles under the lawn
Looking for nightcrawlers intent on eating the earth,
The friends full of lies and doctors with bandages –
How it all clung to all I saw
Behind the eyelids where the real fog was,
Where the low blows came, in time,
When I least expected them,
For no one but me from whatever it was
I didn't see, and empty praises in the light
From everything visible.

I did somehow make it here, however,
From sheer momentum, a freak roll of the dice,
Or the brass balls of being

Something I thought genuine.

Still, there is nothing wrong with my age now
Probably. But I keep coming to it
Like my youth, a thing I had
Always put off.

And now that I am older than younger,
I look into the face of the clock,
And it becomes a mirror, a mirror that cracks,
And the crack is in the shape of a tree
I will always belong to.

The Sirens

The ambulance screams in the street
At nightfall the legacy of sirens.

The island in the dark sank long ago
But has arisen wearing the same foliage:

Never again will I crawl
On elbows and knees

Holding my heart out like an answer
In glass hands.

January 1, 2000

That morning
The darkness began to dance in its clothes,
Singing a song of love
And reaching out its hands,
Wanting to be paid.

By midday the money dangled in front of
The eyes of the saints
Who were watching and listening
And knew the debt
Could never be paid.

At sunset
The pure burned with their losses
As a great light was allowed to die
Of its own accord,

And everyone but the cold was gone for good.

Blue Riddle

*after a painting by
Carol Grige*

The woman in blue
Leading the blue horse behind her
Over a field of white
Drops the reins,

And the horse behind her
Keeps walking behind her,
Stops when she stops,
Trots when she runs,
Grazes when she eats,
Sleeps when she sleeps:

The woman and the horse are one
Or the greatest of enemies.

DICK BIRD calls himself not a writer of fiction but of experience, remembered both from live flesh and from dreams – by which he is visited vividly and plentifully every night. “Baby! Baby!” is one of his more experimental attempts to weave the two modes of memory into a narrative. He lives in Vancouver, B.C.

Baby! Baby!

Dick Bird

I SHOULD HAVE my head examined, going diving at this hour. Rust-colored waves breaking over the quay throw spray at his eyes as leaning back against the stones he squeezes his legs into a wetsuit. The sea is sullen, spiteful cold, the weak sun disappearing. Not even a buddy to go with. But his scuba gear and tank on the stones are set up like a tribunal or firing squad that cannot be appealed.

A hatless man in a dinghy running with the tide stands up at the oars to hail him: “Hunting for treasure? There’s some down there yet!” Leaning into the shafts, cupping hand to mouth – “Man o’war coming home from Trafalgar – foundered on this here shoal. None too deep but mud goes down forever. Wait till the wind drops and the bottom settles. Divers’ve brought up pewter, crockery, silver coins. Even an officer’s three-cornered hat! That’d fetch a good price in the market. Collectors come down from London –” His mouth still opening and shutting, the wind flings his words another way.

Staggering, wetsuit squeezing his thighs, he waves at the rower who sits to his oars and heads across harbor till the sunset dazzle swallows boat and man.

Think twice. Perhaps better not. See nothing in this gloom, never mind the mud. He’s peeling off the neoprene, wondering for the umpteenth time what in hell’s name he was doing here.

His legs are half in and half out of rubber when the girls attack. They take him absolutely by surprise. The ramshackle pier has been shut down, just a pile of debris fenced and posted DANGER KEEP OFF. But here’s a

gaggle of schoolgirls out for a giggle, sucking on cigarettes, squealing for boys. Leaping the rubble beneath the bent arch they scream at the sight of his orange-lit buttocks speared by the last dying sunbeam. One of the darlings catches his flap and tries to yank him over the edge. He grabs her and twists himself backwards, falling. She lands on top of him, smack on stone. The whole bevy bounces on them: ribcage, flippers, pantyhose, rubber. They wrestle in the wind-flung spray, gasping like fish as they slip over stones.

Head back over water, he falls limp, blinded by the last shaft of sunset, feeling the light drain from sea and sky as the will to fight and a sense of time drain out of him.

They run away and leave him stripped, taking his wetsuit as booty.

The chilling dark comes on with a lash of rain. He presses his back on the stones to get some warmth. He sits up with a jolt when he remembers he has nowhere to spend the night. He can't even remember where he's come from. Only the harbor seems familiar, as if he knew it years ago when it was in use. And Nelson's ship, he must have known about that, else why would he be diving?

Shivering wildly, he searches for clothes. They're nowhere, though he looks around the whole pier twice. Cursing the girls halfheartedly, he jeers more at himself, *I did the same at that age. More than likely did it to some girls.*

The stones are sharp and cold to his feet so he puts on fins, they're all he has left. He's got to walk though he can't think where and if he doesn't take them he'll lose them. He stands shivering, wondering whether to put on the mask and snorkel, though what the hell good would that do?

Didn't we come in a car, didn't those buggers take off and leave me 'cause it's so late, come again another day, but I dragged my gear out 'cause I didn't come all this way for nothing?

He feels so wet and cold ducking under the arch that maybe he did go diving after all. It would've been so murky there'd be nothing to remember seeing anyway.

He lays his hand on stones erected two or three hundred years ago against a French invasion. Napoleon, Hitler, William the Conqueror, they're not coming now, you can stand at ease, stand easy.

I can't stay here. Who do I know? Got to walk to warm myself or I'll perish of cold.

At the bend of the road he sees the black hill rising out of clouds. *Ada's place! She won't be there, she's up to town with the little girl. But she said we can use her place any time. Key under a pot of parsley on the porch.*

No lights to show the way but his feet must already know it, lifting his knees to slap down fins *flip flop flap* on gritty hard-core asphalt. Above the fins he's stark bollock naked, though there's nobody to laugh.

Someone's been camping in the rhododendrons. Abandoned their bed to the dripping leaves.

The wicket gate's nailed up but I can pry it loose. A wooden bar across that I duck under, fetch up short against a cold machete. Hold it, freeze in the nick of time. See the edge burn in the dark, too sharp even for rain. A bloody-minded booby trap! Who? Not Ada surely? Someone's camping

without leave, no friend of hers or mine. Thank my stars for good night vision or I'd be a stuck pig under this bleeding sky.

Didn't she say she was up in town? So who's got the light on in that window?

Part the rhododendrons for a shufti. Could be someone's broken in. Smoke from the chimney blows inland. Blowing so hard you can't even smell it, just see a wisp going to join the clouds. Maybe it's her. Would squatters have the cheek to light a fire?

Chickens screeching. Should be asleep. Well, here's the trouble: they're roosting on a branch: chicken wire round the bush to keep them in and foxes out: the wire got bent and they're tangled up. Three brown leghorn hens shoving on a perch just wide enough for two, no one wants to be odd one out. It's the sort of nonsense I can't stand, so I poke a finger through the wire with a growl to instill respect for order. Of course, I'm clawed and hen-pecked for my pains. Where the hell's the cock, to enforce discipline? Didn't she have one, when I was here?

When was that?

After the hens are cowed and quiet (that's the way to quiet chickens, cow them) he creeps up under the lighted window. He lifts his face above the peeling sash.

It's Ada. She's having a fit, and no wonder: the baby's got itself into the china cabinet filled with bric-a-brac she should have tossed out years ago but lacked self-discipline: sad souvenirs of seashores best forgotten: a cuckoo clock she won't hang up because it won't go *cuckoo*: and the shelves too tight and the baby stuck. He raps his knuckles on the windowpane. She looks up in terror. He presses his face to the glass so she'll know him – *please know me, call my name, I'll do the same for you* – but she backs into a corner, baring her teeth like a rat. The antique glass is wobbly as the bottom of a bottle, it must be distorting his image, clouding even their ancient friendship. Thank god, it's too thick to hear her scream.

He runs to the back door, knocks off the latch, stumbles through the glowing kitchen slapping his silly fins on stone, ducks his skull beneath the lintel, goaded along the passage by screams, trips on flagstone round a corner into the light from the door ajar. Shoves the door to unleash a chamber of horrors: shrieks and fingernails going for his face. He grips her wrist. A butcher knife clatters on the floor. Second time lucky so far tonight.

“Oh, thank god, it's you!”

She might at least say who. Because he's too proud to ask.

“There's a rapist on the loose, it was on the telly, they said lock the doors. How come you've got no clothes on?”

“I was going for a dive.”

“Well, you've got your flippers –”

“Some young ladies stole my wetsuit –”

“But you're not the rapist. Oh, it's good to see you. How've you been? Excuse the mess, it's the baby.” Ada's yelling to make herself heard.

“Why's she screaming?”

“I can't get her out.”

“You're not even trying!”

“She won't let me! Stop judging me! You don't understand!”

“Why’d you put her in there?”

“She crawled in when my back was turned. These early winter nights! That’s what does it, the long nights!” She unlatches herself from his arms and flops to the floor where her cigarettes lie open. She sucks the smoke for consolation, frowns because she doesn’t find it; still a widow: smoke is no substitute for a man.

The baby sees him through the fine leaded glass, stops crying and begins a coo that splutters into a choke. No wonder, with Ma puffing smoke at the open cabinet, her head tilted back to the wall, the whites of her eyes to the ceiling.

It’s an ancient ceiling, could have been Lord Nelson’s, plaster etched by wandering cracks that would have inspired his navigation.

“Come on, baby, come to Papa.”

She smiles as only a baby can at a face she knows and trusts.

But she’s wedged beneath the cuckoo clock, her face to the little door. Lucky it won’t go *cuckoo* any more.

“She’s quiet now at least.”

Ada blows me a faceful of smoke. It’s hard to tell what she’s thinking behind that smokescreen. I cough, and the little one resumes howling.

“Bugger! Won’t let me enjoy a cigarette in peace!” She butts out the ember on the floorboards, among many.

She struggles up and rattles the cabinet. “Come out of there, you little heathen!”

“It might be easier from this side.”

“I know what I’m doing, thanks very much.” She grips the baby’s foot. The screams hit a higher, piercing note that’s as close to intolerable as I can stand.

“She’s got her chest jammed under the clock. Let me try from this side. Let go, Ada –” firmly loosening her grip. I reach inside the cabinet gently, trying to make eye-contact before fingers, but her little cheeks are so puffed up that the baby’s eyes are closed. “I can’t budge the clock. Her chest keeps swelling.”

“Will you shut up about her chest! It’s the bloody clock that’s too big!”

“Will you look, Ada. She’s growing breasts!”

“Oh, christ, not puberty on top of teething and potty-training! Amy, love, will you give me a break –” She flops back down against the wall, knees invitingly spread, skirt riding up her sun-starved thighs. “Do what you like. I don’t give a fuck no more.” She must be addressing me. Her eyes are shut against the swinging light.

I have to blink as it seems to me a tremor shakes the cottage. The crying stops. Fire settles in the kitchen grate. Wind sucks and blows up the chimney and down. The chickens are sleeping. Baby Amy watches light and shadow play over her mother’s face. She catches my eye and grins.

Ada’s breathing evenly, her chest rising and settling. Scrawny, what there is of it. Always was her main attraction: scrawny body, frayed away to escaping strands of hair. Like the sun she’s all flaming periphery and no center. Her bronchial flues are moaning chimneys, laboring for a smoke.

I keep silent, respecting her wish for a moment’s peace and hoping something tangible will come of this.

In the cabinet Amy's grinning as if she's known me for years. Something suspected is being confirmed, I wish I could say what it is. This is far too wicked a grin for a baby. More like a grin of pubescence, on the brink of adulthood. Strike hood, make that adultery. It's in her voice, already formed: "For christ's sake, give me a hand."

I stretch my fingers through years of debris, generations of widows and orphans, sifting through the souvenirs to touch her mermaid's skin. Her touch is electric, nail scratching my palm. A spark of desire flies between us. *Wake up!*

Shshsh! She presses my hand. We watch her mother and nobody wakes. Ada's mouth falls open, hair blows lightly around her face. I know I have never seen her so shabby, never such flabby, withered thighs, never such wrinkles at her neck where the cares of her life break surface. Guilty of aversion, betrayal – because he was my friend and he never saw this – and I haven't remembered him for years – I look for solace from his daughter in the cabinet.

She stretches out fingers, not pudgy baby fingers but elongated maiden fingers squeezing mine. When she whispers – "Pull –" I feel her weight.

It's not so hard. Sentimental accretions of souvenirs come unstuck. The cuckoo clock face cracks. An unhandled teapot falls to shards. Photographs shrivel and give up the ghost. First her shoulders, then her head swimming in a shoal of gypsy hair, slide forth smoother than ever was baby born. Before her legs are out of the shelf, her chest is pressing mine.

"Give me a shoulder ride, Daddy."

"You're too big for that now, my girl."

"Never too big for it, if I help –" She was born with this coaxing voice, like a mermaid's in the old sea fables. Her feet are still caught, if they are feet not fins, thrashing in the wreckage of the cabinet. Ada brushes her face with the back of a hand. Amy murmurs, "Dream on, Ma –" as she climbs upon my shoulders. "Shut your eyes," she commands as her legs – that feel like a mermaid's tail – wrap around my neck, enclosing my face in a prime fishy smell.

The chickens mutter but the cock doesn't crow, neither does any dog bark. Light from the window gilds the wet rhododendrons. Rain falls hard, wind gusts and I feel more hypothermic now than ever in my life. *Whose life?* I try to rubber-fin it high down the lane, with the wind off the sea in my face. She's getting so heavy, as only someone else's daughter can weigh. And strong: her thighs – or is it a tail? – wring my neck like a christmas turkey.

I'm a wreck barely holding my head above spray. My shoulders, knees and ribs sunder like spars of a foundering ship. I faintly hear the breakers on the quay. "Not much further, Dad," she says as we pass barbed wire and the DANGER sign.

"Where are you taking us, Amy?"

"Don't you remember the harbor, Dad? Remember the fish boats dragging their nets, and the divers, they dived and they dived but they never found you."

"I'm not your Daddy, Amy."

"You didn't look hard enough!"

“We couldn’t see! It was too late, too dark, the bottom stirred with mud.” That’s when she starts to strangle me in earnest.

WENDY VARDAMAN lives in Seattle, Washington. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, and has taught at Penn, the University of Washington, and Helsinki University. "The Juggler," Parts I and II, makes use of material from a dance review of the juggler/choreographer Thomas Arthur's show, "Gravity's Ample Rain." The review, by R.M. Campbell, appeared in *The Seattle P-I* 3/31/98.

Wendy Vardaman / **Three Poems**

The Juggler

On a round ball
 A workman that hath copies by, can lay
 An Europe, Afrique and an Asia,
 And quickly make that, which was nothing,
 All.

Donne, *Valediction: of Weeping*

I. Gravity's Ample Rain

A marvel of individuality,
 graceful and subtle,
 occasionally
 witty, combining
 virtuosity
 with lyric
 meditation.
 Some bravura
 has disappeared –
 never more than three
 balls, instead of four or five –
 but none of the ingenuity
 or intelligence, charm
 or purpose.

II. Renewal

I walked with dogs
 and listened in a trance
 for pattern
 comfort, balance;
 less to display
 an entertaining shell
 than to emphasize

and create ritual.

III. Beauty, Feeling, Form

I saw his outline slip
between the loose
waving yellow grass
of the Palouse,

rising to meet the brightly
still blue sky.
He looked as if he
were taking up the gifts,

unaided,
creating an unexpected efficacy
for his trade.
(Many watched

the rising globes
and falling stars that interwove.)

IV. Empty Space

One ball is memory.
That one gives me

trouble. But I tell you clearly,
make no mistake, if he

were only launching projectiles
through molecules

of N₂, O₂, He,
etc., I would scarcely be

interested. I have nothing
against things – I collect them,

but things are only jumping
off places – it's the space between
that means
something and provides the outlines.

One – two – three –
are they still aloft?

Engagement

(for Herman and Emily)

Rhyming while I
sweep the dust away –
poetry writes itself that way.

My children scream,
another couplet forms –
Art's easier since they were born.

If Transcendentalists had wrestled children for an hour,
left Angels to their hectic sphere,
then Art might also clean – married to housework here.

Another letter (re: metaphor)

You know
(from Emily):
compose your soul
with poetry.

Take time –
sound oblique –
lest your sink
should leak.

Wash the dishes till you're blue –
that's nothing new.
Feed your kids (they need to eat),
back – forth – until you're beat.

Read a book – mark a verse –
we could do worse.
As plainly as you dare –
share.

Don't undress –
don't confess –
rhyme covers best.

LAURA TOEWS, a Saulteaux Indian, was born and raised in Saskatchewan. She was first published by NewWest Press in 1995, with a short story entitled “Voices of the Wind.” The following story is dedicated to her friend, Maxine. Laura reports that “She did not last long on the street...Our friend, as vibrant and beautiful as she was, had gone to a place of sadness. ‘Heels to Moccasins’ was written to offer a more comforting alternative to the emptiness in all our hearts.”

Heels to Moccasins

An Indian Ballet

Laura Toews

“FIFTY BUCKS,” I whisper to this aging regular as I seductively lean into the open window of his big, white car and give him a long, but sheltered look at my chest spilling out over top of my cotton dress. The cold of the January evening reaches out to touch me beneath my winter coat and I can’t help but lean even further into the warmth of his car in the hopes of encouraging his decision. But like all of them lately, he gives me “that” look...like fifty bucks is still too much. I realize he knows my small corner of this endless street has not been exactly busy over the last number of months; he and many of the others often stop further down the street where the younger girls work. But this evening it’s really cold. “Almost minus fifteen,” someone said earlier – so the younger girls are all inside the three bottom-of-the-barrel hotels. He will have no choices if he wants the benefits of my profession, because I am the only one working the street this evening. The little hairs that grow out of the back of my neck tell me he will do this deal but I just have to be patient and let it happen.

“God, it’s cold!” I say to myself, as shivers run underneath my clothes and down the entire length of my spine. He looks up at my face at that moment as if he hears or maybe feels me. He begins to search my face for some hidden answers to questions I believe only he knows the real answers to and again I recognize what I call the guilty stage that I see so very often...mostly in the married ones...and even sometimes in the ones that aren’t.

“Why do they look at us like that?” I silently question, as if I actually believe somebody here in this cold place might understand and be kind

enough to answer. This is our life here on the street and it is what keeps us in essentials like clothes, food and getting-by money.

My driver looks at me again, searching and searching my face and my soul even deeper for whatever he might extract in order to pique his interest and satisfy his needs. "Does he hear me?" I silently wonder. "No...Not ever!" I reassure myself quickly because he reminds me too much of my high school teacher, the one who liked to have me stay after school to hang art pictures above the chalk board at the front of the classroom while he watched. But I try not to think of that past. Instead, I find my prettiest smile – you know, to let him think that despite his preconceived ideas, I understand and appreciate his situation. After all, he is just another trick which makes me money and takes care of his needs. His eyes light up as though a sudden burst of electricity has entered his body and given him life. I know even before he speaks that we are on! I can see that lustful look in the dead, blue color of his eyes and it comes from deep within him, almost near his soul, just like all the others.

"Winnipeg and 11th," he commands. "Fifteen minutes."

I nod in agreement and squeeze his arm to let him know he has indeed made the right decision. Then I step back from the car and as he drives away into the dark sunset of the Saskatchewan evening, I can't help but wish I were somewhere else. A guiltiness comes to my soul at this moment. Thoughts of a warm fireplace, a good movie, a home, family...They are dead dreams, wasted thoughts, and wasted mind space. See, in my world, it's simple – like the colors of the *Money Mart* sign on Broad Street. Nothing good ever happens to me! I know survival is my purpose and most likely will remain so.

I hear the winter winds usher evening to night and as I look down the street, the one that leads to the police station, watching my trick head towards the rendezvous site, his license plate catches my eye. "God B with U," it spells out in traditional green and white colors so reminiscent of this particular, conservative society. I laugh out loud and as I do, the cold and bitter wind takes my voice like an empty echo down the barren streets, bouncing off every concrete wall, making me sound evil, hollow and without feelings. I remember the man's wedding band; he's forgotten or chosen not to remove it this particular night. "Yes," I exclaim, there is indeed a certain irony in the faithfulness of marriage, especially in this older generation that portrays itself as traditional. "Will it ever change?" I wonder. "Will my children see a difference?" Absolute, bitter silence is the only answer I get. It is the cold-hearted silence of a Saskatchewan January night where we walk as objects of pleasure, just so we can maintain our existence.

The stroll to 11th Avenue is only three blocks away but I know if I'm not there, my trick won't wait. A cop or someone with a reputation cleaner than ours recognizing them is a common concern. Reputation, I'm told, has ownership...I know if anyone cared to ask me about my reputation, I would have to say:

"Gave it up long ago so I could eat at least one meal a day. But I still dream. Yes, I do!"

I am very careful not to let my dreams wash away, though, at the end of the night, when the rest of the world sleeps and I shower away the filth and

dirt of this foreign society from my body. More times than not, my life makes me cry and...I am not afraid to admit it!

In the early hours of morning light, when all the normal, lucky people are just waking up to begin their typical days, I sit on the ledge of my only window, exposed to the winds, unable to sleep, and I remember. Then...I put my knees to my head and cry without tears, in hopes that just maybe, just this once, I might soothe my inner torment. My pain reels out of my soul and bounces off the gray concrete walls of my apartment, coming straight back at me. There is nobody to soothe the pain of this reality but me. I gave up long ago wondering whether I deserved everything wrong that seemed to come my way. Here in the HOOD where I live, someone has knowingly painted a sign at the MART down the street:

Welcome to the HOOD

Welcome to HELL!

I chose this way of life because I saw no other way to survive. I thought I could sneak by on the boundaries between right and wrong, unlike what I had been taught. It is, and of course, it was, a gamble of sorts and, like so many of my people, I lost. Now I'm here, stuck somewhere between reality and hell, with no map for returning to a better life. I am alone to find my way through this cloud of prairie dust that seems to shroud my life. Everyone I know has to fight his or her own struggle. I know my survival is only within my soul and there is nobody who can show me the way. My tricks offer to help me all the time. "Oh, babe, don't worry...we'll get you through this," they say so often I can't really put a face to the statement because the faces are all the same. When we have finished and I see the nameless faces again on the street, they pretend they don't even know me...All they want is sex, or love, or whatever they call it. I really don't know tonight where this particular sad reality begins or where my feelings end. Has all understanding left me?

Sometimes, I wish I could bring life to my memories, extract the reasons for my existence and so give me cause to go on yet again. He would be here, by my side, and I would not be out on this street *walking the walk* for a measly fifty bucks. We would not even be here in this concrete cage that they call the city. We would be out there, somewhere in the hills above the big lake in the valley where we used to run together when the sun was high and memories were created at the end of every minute of every day. We would go to the warm, healing waters of the lake and swim till the sun touched the big hill to the west or till my Kohkom called out to us across the valley.

He and I had a Till-Death-Do-Us-Part relationship, but in 1987, his drunken father thought I was taking too much time out of his son's life and after a confrontation, my dreams died on the kitchen floor of their little house on the Rez. His father – The Old One, we called him – vowed that night that he did not know the gun was loaded, but when he finally sobered up almost three days later, he told a different story. After everything was sorted out, The Old One cut his long, midnight black hair while in jail and let the rest turn to the color of winter, long before that season had come around...I guess it was to mourn the death of his son and for that show of respect, I give him credit and still respect him. People say, he now drinks to shroud what is left of his soul, and I guess it's easy to see that the heart

which gives him life to walk about this earth is almost all gone. Kohkom told me last year that their house on the Rez was empty and the kids I see sometimes on the street from home say spirits live in the house. Are there too many haunting memories, too much bad, to let others invade? Perhaps so...If tragedy should follow, who wants to have it come to their family. I can't help but feel sole ownership of all those memories because my first friend was my spirit-keeper and my teacher. He showed me how to dance with the spirits of the Saskatchewan winds. I loved him like he would always be the only one who would ever share my dances. Now when I can't go on, I take to the prairie winds from my little window above the city and focus my purpose on renewing my strength.

I join the winds and glide across the grass-covered hills above the valley, with the delicate steps of ballerinas I've seen on TV. I search for him still, and when the evening comes and the sweetest winds caress my face, I imagine it is him who will be my forever-partner in my prairie moccasin ballet. My feet barely touch the grasses that shelter the Saskatchewan hills and when I dance, casting a single shadow, I remember how he held me close so many times. There was just the two of us then...exploring and building an inseparable bond somewhere among the sage grasses of the prairie hills. I know he is out there, but I still dance alone.

It was the winter of 1987, with all the colors of my world gone, that I left the shores of the *healing waters* and moved up to the cold of the concrete city, hoping to forget and get on with my life. I immediately began to search out a job with all the innocence of my Indian youth, but soon it became very obvious to me that no one really had an interest in hiring a girl with what they called no employable skills. Most places said, "You simply lack experience," or "you are really young."

Sometimes I found myself wondering, as I looked up at the Employment Officer in her ritzy suit, if she might in fact know my dress was a Sally Ann's special, which I was extremely proud of because it was new to me and it fit so well.

"Are you Native?" people would ask, when I was able to get past the front doors of a company's Human Resources department.

"Yes!" I would volunteer, with a youthful smile.

I noticed it really seemed to make a difference to most people that I was Native because they never called again after that and I know my phone was working because I kept checking it. Kohkom taught me that no matter what, to always be proud. Nowadays, when people ask about my origins, I say I'm adopted and really don't know my history. It did not take me long to get discouraged and I was not in the city more than two months before I ran into some friends from home. It was a short-lived and costly comfort to spend those cold winter afternoons in the bar at the hotel with all of those discouraged people, the kind who can relate to you only when they see you down at their level. At the end of that harsh winter, I found myself pregnant with Dustin and then I realized exactly how much my so-called friends really cared. Many of them won't even look at my face when I see them on the street now.

When my son was born, I went on welfare for the first time. I knew I could not support him without a job. Now it would be even harder to look

for work, especially with a baby in my arms. When my first check arrived, it did not take me long to realize that the money would not cover all my bills each month. Five hundred dollars for rent, one hundred and fifty for bills, food, Dustin's formula, bus fare, baby-sitting, etc. There was no possible way I could bring up my son alone and give him the benefits that every parent wishes. Even with a good job, it would be hard to feel secure about being a single parent, knowing that good money comes with a career which, in turn, comes with a serious commitment that would take considerable time away from being a parent.

One Sunday, when Kohkom was up for a visit, she saw that I was struggling on both the inside and the out, with all my worries. She took me aside and offered to take Dustin home to the valley for a while.

"Just till you get on your feet," she said. "Besides, it will be good for him. He needs to learn our ways."

I was really unsure this was the right decision. But when I looked at my son playing in the middle of our barren apartment, I knew he deserved better than what I could offer. At least at Kohkom's house he would get three meals a day and family with him all the time. But when my little family left me that day, part of my spirit went with them, never to return to live in my soul ever again. I truly felt doomed to the concrete cage and the way of life that dooms all the weak to unremitting poverty and hell.

I was sure now that I was indeed one of the weak and even my wind-walks became difficult because my soul hurt and I could no longer find the spirits quite so easily. After Dustin left I found I didn't have a calendar or even the days to go in it. Instead, I tried my best to forget that I was a failure. The bar at the hotel by my apartment became my home and soon I became part of the bottom feeders' niche in this simple prairie society. Drugs soon followed my drinking binges. Whatever extra money I had I used to indulge in habits that helped me hide from the past and its horrible memories.

One night, somewhere in a void of emptiness just before my nineteenth birthday, a man came into the bar and made his way to our table. By the end of the evening he was acting like a best friend, buying drinks and offering us free drugs, and telling me that I was beautiful. I let the booze persuade me that his compliments were real, because I felt anything but beautiful. I took whatever attention I could get from him and the others, even though it came from the wrong type of people, the ones who you never want to accept anything from because of the costs. The man in the bar was definitely one of the wrong people. After we finished sparking up a couple of lines that evening, I knew in the back of my mind that this evening would cost me more than I had actually paid so far. I was right...After that night, I would come to call the man Shaun. I was the working property of a man I would always despise and hate. He did not care about me, nor was he concerned that I had a child whom I loved and hoped to be with someday. He sent me down to the street to make money for him while telling me he loved me. Loved me? I'll be damned!

Nothing could ever erase the horrible memories I have of my first paying sexual encounter and Shaun – well, he was nowhere to be found when I came home that morning. What I do remember about that evening was that I

took off the moccasins that Kohkom had given me because they were a real part of me and I replaced them with a pair of black, spiked heels not from my world. My moccasins, my heart and my soul stayed locked in the closet after that night and I'm not sure I even kept the key. I sometimes cried when I chose to remember that, because it was then that my world became like the prairie sky during a dust storm and I knew inside myself that I might never see the summer blue of a clear Saskatchewan morning ever again. That first night when I came home, I washed myself for many hours, desperately trying to scrub away the touches of the man who had paid me my first seventy-five bucks. When my skin became raw from the scrub brush and I could not scrub any more, I sat there in the tub, watching the water swirl around and around and around as it went down the drain, taking with it what was left of my soul. I placed my hands in the water, quickly grabbing and touching for one last moment anything that was left of my very being as it drained away with the grime from my body. Then as the gray skies grew lighter and noise from the cars on the street below my apartment got louder, I crawled out of the tub and over to my bed, covering my head with a pillow to close out the world.

For the next couple of years, I worked a corner of the street known to be the territory of my man. I counted so many ceiling tiles, so many nights, in so many different places, I ran out of numbers. Sometimes I would let myself be there in the room to keep myself safe but mostly I was running by the lake on hot summer afternoons. One night, a rather routine night, someone offered me two hundred dollars for something different. I was still there by the lake when I agreed to the request. When I got in the car, and back to reality, I sensed something was wrong. The next day when I called my old man from a phone booth and asked him to come get me, I was beat up so badly I knew no cabby would dare pick me up. My dress was torn from top to bottom, my face was beaten to the point that my eyes were swollen nearly shut and I was covered from top to bottom in my own blood. I did not work for almost a month. When I was ready to go back to the street, I told Shaun I would be going back alone. When I returned to the *walk*, I was still trapped, but now it was only by society and the unfairness it offers instead of because I was someone else's property.

I knew by now that the man who hadn't bothered removing his wedding band would be waiting for me. If I didn't hurry he would find someone else or give up on me for the evening and go home to his wife. Walking down the last bit of street toward the meeting point, I realize I do not want to work tonight or maybe not ever... Too old, too hurt, too tired, too sad, is all that seems to run through my mind and no matter how much I try, I can't push away the feeling that I want to give up.

Everything around me – this corner, that building, this tree – reminds me of my pain. I'm not safe anywhere, because I just can't hide and just maybe the time has come when I do not want to hide. Except maybe over there – that building, the one where I used to go when I was young and needed a safe place to hide from all the Bottom Feeders. "Yes!" I think, "there I will be safe." Quickly I make my way across the street to the big,

gray building with the window eyes and around to the stairwell at the back. As I push aside the wire that guards the entrance to the roof, I feel a soothing serenity spread through my body and I know the roof will give me the safe place I need above the destructive world below. I can make my plans and walk in my dreams without interruption there.

On the roof, I imagine I can see for miles and miles almost to the lake, almost to home. Dustin is there. As I look to the east into the star-sprinkled night sky, I believe I am there with him and Kohkom at the house, sitting at the little kitchen table, eating an evening snack of bannock and syrup. Afterwards, we will all go to the window in the porch and watch the spirits or what most people know as Northern Lights perform a prairie ballet on the sparkling ice of the lake in the valley.

“Kohkom, take me home, too!” I cry into the icy night air of the city, lost in my dreams and hopelessly consumed by my memories.

I wait, hoping somehow she hears me call out to her but instead my voice echoes across the frozen land below and comes back to me in a void of silence...unanswered. Reality comes back for a brief moment and then I realize, she cannot hear my pain because of all the distance and time. I need to cry. My icy tears come quickly and there is no hesitation as I cry with the spirits of the wind. “I must be dead,” I think, “all that needs to happen now is the physical act!” Then, as if it is meant to be, I silently wish for death to take me and end the enormous hurt I carry within myself. Now I sense the barren land rolled out for miles around me. It feels my pain. As a gentle but bitter breeze stirs the naked trees below my hiding place, I realize I am standing alone at the forbidden bridge between life and death. I must choose...I must decide, I must know once and for all if I am meant to be here or out there with him and the others that know this struggle. As I peer into the night, I notice an owl sitting silently on the top of the elevator shaft of my safe place. He’s watching me.

“Yes, finally I have my sign and I know what I must do,” I quietly whisper to those who might be listening.

Hidden beneath the black shroud of the January night, I climb to the ledge that surrounds this building and reach my arms out to take flight from my pain into the wind. I close my eyes and wait for the breezes to come again so my soul can take flight into the serenity of this January night. But then, as I wait there, a touch from the past upon my tired shoulders startles me. As I quickly turn to face the one who has dared to intrude on my pain, everything begins to make sense. I am not surprised to see that he is there with his long black hair blowing in the icy winter winds.

He smiles at me and hands me the moccasins that I discarded in my closet so very long ago. At this moment, I know what I must do. Quickly I remove my heels and put my soft leather moccasins on my tired feet. When I am finished with that, he reaches for me and takes me in his arms. I feel his warmth spread through my body and it brings alive the memories I thought I had forgotten. When the morning light comes to the Spirit Dancers’ plains, we step to the ledge of my safe place and begin the Prairie Moccasin Ballet. I instinctively look down for one brief moment and catch sight of a body lying in a pool of blood on the gray pavement below. I panic and look over at him, wondering if he sees the death below us. But quickly he signals that

we must go and I look down just one more time past the curtain of this reality. On the pavement, next to the broken body, is a shoe – a black, high-heeled shoe. I know that the time to scrutinize past realities – frozen by the bitter winter winds – is over for me. We will go on together now and dance in nature's theater where there is no audience and the roses grow wild beneath our feet.

“All Worldly Pursuits” is the fifth installment of HILLEL WRIGHT’S novella, *All Worldly Pursuits*, begun in Vol. 1, No. 1 of *The New Orphic Review*. Hillel 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*.

All Worldly Pursuits

Hillel Wright

Where historic battles took place and where historic people have lived, spirits linger. In their own way, the ghosts speak.

Mardell Plainfeather, *Ghosts on the Little Big Horn*
National Geographic, December 1986

I often asked my Grandpa Good Fox to tell me about the Custer Battle... ‘Grandson, I tell you, hundreds of books have been written by people who weren’t there. I was there, but all I remember is one big cloud of dust.’

Lame Deer, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*

EARLY IN THE MORNING of Wednesday, July 11, 1990, an elite Sureté du Quebec assault team, dressed in military-style combat uniforms, helmets, gas masks and flak jackets, armed with assault rifles and supported by a police helicopter and a diesel-powered front end loader, descended on the Mohawk village of Kanasatake to remove a barricade constructed and defended by the thousand year old Mohawk Warrior Society.

A roadblock had been erected four months earlier, after the Quebec courts rejected a Mohawk appeal to stop expansion of a 9-hole golf course to one of 18 holes, proposed by the nearby town of Oka. The expansion, the Kanasatake band asserted, would disturb an ancient tribal burial site. The roadblock stood for over three months, but on June 30th, the town of Oka won a court order to remove it. Negotiations between Quebec authorities and the Mohawk leaders went on for over a week, but on Tuesday, July 10th, Oka Mayor Jean Quелlette called out the Sureté du Quebec and the Warrior Society responded by building a barricade to reinforce the roadblock.

At approximately 9 AM on July 11th, twenty-four seconds of heavy gunfire changed the course of Canadian and Mohawk history. No one knows who fired the fatal shot, but at the end of the firing thirty-one year old S.Q. Cpl. Marcel Lemay lay dying in a pool of blood. The S.Q. retreated, the Warriors captured the front end loader, and the Oka Standoff, which was to last another seventy-seven days, had begun.

Escalation began at once. The larger Mohawk village of Kahnawake, thirty kilometers southeast of Kanesatake, blockaded the Mercier Bridge on the St. Lawrence River, a major traffic route in and out of Montreal. A week later, Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa called out the Canadian Forces Army. Two days later, one-hundred Native Chiefs from across Canada pledged solidarity with the Mohawks, and for the next six weeks Oka became a magnet for would-be peacemakers and troublemakers, gun shooters and trouble-shooters, holy men and holy hell-raisers – Native and White, American and Canadian, English and French.

After learning of the death of Cpl. Lemay on the CBC Radio Morning News, Wiley Moon took his deerskin and yellow cedar medicine drum out to Whalebone Point, a small grassy peninsula jutting out into Georgia Strait from the beach in front of his Pitlamp Island cabin. He had made this drum himself at a workshop given by followers of Johnny Moses, a traditional West Coast Native Shaman who, despite the objections of some of his Tribal Elders, had begun sharing *Sisiwis* (Sacred Breath) traditional medicine teachings with non-natives “of good heart.” Wiley had been attending Medicine Circles with Johnny Moses’s group, the Red Cedar Circle, for about three years.

Once out on the point, he began drumming a heartbeat rhythm, sang a powerful medicine song and prayed that there would be no more deaths at Oka. There didn’t seem to be much more that he could do.

The summer went by, stories of the Oka Standoff dominating the news. Wiley’s Red Cedar Circle friends, following the advice of Johnny Moses himself, took a non-political, non-activist stand, and devoted their energies to healing songs and prayers. Laura and her new eco-feminist friends on the islands kept out of the controversy completely and dedicated their efforts to saving the Walbran Valley, an old-growth forest and wilderness on the West Coast of Vancouver Island, threatened by clear-cut logging.

Laura also avoided the Red Cedar Circle, and joined a Wiccan group, consisting mostly of women, and for the last week of August went to an unannounced destination to attend Witch Camp.

With George still away on his student exchange year, and the girls visiting relatives in Oregon, an annual pilgrimage since the early years of Wiley and Colleen’s divorce, Wiley found himself alone and somewhat restless on Thursday, August 30th, when he heard on the news that Premier Bourassa had called off Peace Talks with the Mohawk leaders. Soon, the phone rang and Davy Moondog, a poet activist friend from Vancouver’s East End, called to tell Wiley that a protest rally was being organized, to be held on the grounds of the Vancouver Art Gallery, in the heart of downtown Vancouver. If he could get to Vancouver tonight, Davy told him, he could stay in Davy’s guest cabin and be ready to join the demonstration in the morning.

It didn't take Wiley long to decide to go. He packed his drum, a change of clothes, a notebook, some sweetgrass for smudging, or ritual purification, and some newly cured homegrown buds for his personal emotional purification. The ambiguities between orthodoxy and interpretation didn't bother him as he felt he was "of good heart," and with all his heart he wanted to see more death and bloodshed prevented.

He gassed up his International half-ton at the General Store, drove down the hill to the ferry landing, and smoked a joint while waiting for the ferry, watching clouds begin to darken and lower over Vancouver Island's Beaufort Range.

Two hours later he was on the Queen of Tsawassen ferry, crossing Georgia Strait. The trip took ninety-five minutes, so he found a seat at the stern and, still high on his homegrown cannabis, lapsed into a half-asleep dream time, lulled by the heartbeat throbbing of the ship's diesels and the rhythmic rocking of the big boat over the rolling waters of the Gulf.

As the sun set behind the mountains of Vancouver Island, lacing the cloud-strewn sky with gold and silver, followed by ragged streaks of smoky blacks and bloody reds, the memory medicine of marijuana took hold of him and as the vessel left the island in its wake, the past emerged out of the phosphorescent furrows and into his quietening and expanding mind.

Bronx, New York, June 25, 1957

Flies swarmed over the kitchen counter, trying to get at the chunks of meat. Baba Eva was cutting up beef from the kosher butcher's. She was going to make goulash.

Wiley always enjoyed visiting Baba Eva. Ever since his Bar Mitzvah late last year, Baba Eva talked straight with him. She was not like his parents who told him to read a book, or just changed the subject, when he expressed an interest in sex or in the family's history.

Today Baba Eva told him again about escaping from Russia in 1905. She was only thirteen. Her family left to escape the pogroms, when peasants, often led by Orthodox priests and followed by mounted Cossacks from the steppes, would plunder, pillage and rape in the Jewish shtetls of the southern Ukraine.

They'd had to bribe the guards at the Romanian border. After that, they had not enough money left to go to America. They made it as far as Liverpool. When they finally had enough money to sail, her younger sister Anna was quarantined for scarlet fever, although it later turned out that she was diabetic. Baba Eva was left behind to care for her. They were boarded with a middle-aged Hungarian woman who turned out to be the madam of a brothel for sailors. Baba Eva worked for her for a year. Her blue eyes burned cold fire when she told Wiley about her hardships.

"Feh!" Baba Eva snorted disgustedly as she swatted a dish towel at the clustering flies.

The last thing she told him that day stayed with him a long time.

“If you see a Jew with blue eyes,” she told him, “then you know that that one’s mother was raped by the Cossacks.”

Caucasian Plateau, June 25, 1227

Temujin kicked his pony into a gallop. A cloud of dust rose like steam from the horse’s hooves. Dry steam. Earth steam. The sharp particles stung the eyes of the officers immediately behind him and a cloud of dust fogged the eyes of the troopers riding half a mile to the rear.

A sharp, powerful cry exploded from Temujin’s throat – “Aiiiiieeeee!” The words of the Great Khan rang in his burning ears, “To trample your enemies underfoot, to burn their villages and enslave their women – that is a man’s greatest joy!”

Temujin drew his scimitar and swung it in an arc above his head. His cry had triggered the screams of ten thousand armed riders. Yet the words of his progenitor, Genghis Khan, drowned them out. Temujin knew there was no hope for the villages lying on the plain before them – his Mongol horde. Black smoke would mingle with their departing dust. Bodies would lie in the ash and dust until eagles, jackals and ants had picked their bones. And the women...

Only the old women and the crippled would join the men – corpses in the bloodied streets. The rest would live in camp, following the horde across the Caucasus and beyond, into the unknown. The most desirable, Temujin knew, would be brought nightly, one by one, to his yurt.

Temujin frowned. His answer to the Great Khan’s question, years ago, had been his own. Temujin knew, as he led the ten thousand armed warriors toward the doomed Caucasian village, that his life, more than any other in this vast and powerful army, depended directly on the favor of Genghis Khan.

Western Montana, June 26, 1970

Wiley poked the campfire with a stick from the riverbank. Sparks flew as the fire grew and crackled in the center of their little circle. Buffalo lay stretched out, drinking from a bottle of apricot brandy. Lorraine, in her ankle-length hippie gown, straddled Buffalo, the gown moving up to expose dark brown thighs, and her hands massaged his thick, knotted neck muscles. Buffalo used to pitch for the University of Wyoming baseball team. He once had a tryout with the Minnesota Twins.

Colleen, in tight blue jeans and a black leather jacket, was lying on her back on Wiley’s jacket, knees up, smoking a joint and watching the waning full moon rise over the Bitterroot Mountains, just west of Butte. The rush of the river filled her ears with a numbing sound.

“God is the sound of the toilet flushing. Awareness is the humming of the refrigerator.”

“What?” Colleen turned her white swan neck to look at Wiley.

“Poetry.” Wiley looked down intensely into the fire, his sea-water blue eyes intent on piercing the fire to its core. “From Missoula,” he went on, “from the house by the railroad tracks, down in the slums...”

“Hippies!” Buffalo snorted, “bringin’ the slums with them wherever they go.”

Lorraine dug her strong black fingers into the long hair spread out across Buffalo’s shoulders. Buffalo rolled to one side and recited: “This is what Manitou/ asks of you.../ only this/ act truly/ love tenderly/ walk humbly/ with your spirits.”

“Is that Lakota poetry?” Wiley asked.

Buffalo laughed loudly. “No!” he snorted, “that’s from the Book of the Prophet Micah – *your* people’s poetry.”

Wiley turned his thousand-fathom eyes to the moonrise. He could see the gulf green of Colleen’s eyes refracted in the moonbeams.

“If you want to hear real poetry, listen to that!” Colleen said.

The coyotes had started howling at the moon.

Caucasian Plateau, June 25, 1227

Jackals, smelling the horse dung, the sweat, the metal, gathered along the ridges, lying in the dew-dampened hollows, as the sun rose out of the plain. To the south, the snow-capped peaks of the Caucasus Mountains radiated prismatic auras of light, like the heads of the saints and martyrs. Above the jackals, eagles rose in the morning thermals. Armies of ants moved silently in the sands. Roosters crowed frantically in the outlying homesteads, announcing the day of death and plunder now at hand.

Temujin swept past the first homestead, noting with satisfaction, in a split-second glance, the peasant woman frozen in front of her hen yard, on her hands and knees in the dirt. He could see her husband fleeing, out of the corner of his eye. In abject terror, he had abandoned her.

The village itself lay utterly naked and helpless before him. It had no walls or fortifications, no intelligence that pillage and slaughter approached it mercilessly, only a mile to the east. Some, no doubt, had by now seen the distant yellow dust cloud, and had raised the alarm. What did it matter? None would escape unscathed.

Temujin’s ice-green eyes now focused on the onion-shaped spires of the village church. His pony’s black neck bulged with muscle and vein and gleamed with sweat. His body swelled with the chemistry of exhilaration, his sword arm whipping the light, peaceful breeze caressing the sun-drenched village buildings, and the running, screaming women who, only minutes before, had been busily drawing the day’s cooking water from the village well. He could hear eagles crying to each other in the air above him.

A final soul-piercing yell and the horde flooded through the village streets. The bloodshed and slaughter was immediate, ghastly and relentless. Men were hacked down ruthlessly in the streets. Others were pulled from buildings and impaled. A few were mobbed by dismounted warriors and

mutilated, their disembodied genitals stuffed in their gaping mouths, for their women to stare at as they were raped in the streets. The cries, the shouts, the flies, the blood, the smells – even the flash of Temujin’s whirling sword – were controlled utterly, like a puppet, by the mind and will of Genghis Khan.

Eastern Montana, June 26, 1970

They were all standing by the side of the road. There was little traffic. They passed the time reciting bits of poetry and talking about their ancestries. Lorraine was of the Absaroke or Crow; Buffalo of the Lakota or Sioux, the traditional enemy of the Crow. “Romeo and Juliet,” Buffalo liked to say. Wiley, in Baba Eva’s dialect, was a *Rusheshe*, a Russian Jew. Colleen, adopted at birth, could only guess at her ancestry. “I know only one thing for sure,” she remarked, “that I didn’t spring fully armed from the forehead of Zeus.”

They all chuckled. Colleen opened her notebook. A late model Cadillac drove past them, raising dust devils in its arrogant passage. A slight, ironic smile curled one corner of Colleen’s mouth as she began to read. ““All worldly pursuits have but the one unavoidable and inevitable end, which is sorrow,”” she quoted, ““acquisitions end in dispersion, buildings in destruction, meetings in separation, births in death...”” She paused. “Milarepa, Tibet’s Great Yogi,” she ended dramatically, snapping her notebook shut. “Poetry.”

Wiley stood up and stuck out his thumb. “Winnebago!” he said disgustingly. Sure enough, a Winnebago sailed by, a white mass made as big as a windjammer by the factor of its speed. A cloud of prairie dust stung Wiley’s eyes.

Lorraine and Buffalo got to their feet now, too. They all stood in the dust on the outskirts of Billings, Montana. They were hitchhiking to San Francisco. It was the summer of 1970 and young people still did these things for fun or adventure or, as they themselves would have it, for something to do.

They had started in Fort Collins, Colorado. They’d been staying in an old wood-frame house on the eastern outskirts of the town. In the morning the sun rose, a red ball out of the prairie, across the pasture just east of the house. In the evening it went down behind the Rocky Mountains, lighting Long’s Peak and Arapahoe Peak pink, mauve and magenta, outside the old framed windows in the western living room.

They had left yesterday morning and hitched to Laramie, Wyoming, where Buffalo had once pitched for the Wyoming Cowboys baseball team. “Glory days!” he snorted, laughing. Then off the Interstate at Rawlins and up to Casper, lucky to make it all the way in one ride, in the back of a Chevy pickup truck. Then back on the Interstate up to Sheridan, and on to the Custer Battlefield National Monument on the Crow Indian Reservation, near the town of Crow Agency, Montana.

Central Mongolia, June 25, 1218

The young lieutenant, Temujin, sat by the cooking fire with his young wife, Bortai, and their infant son, Ogatai. The sun was already up in the east, standing just a hand's breadth above the far horizon of the steppe. Dust from the hooves of the courier's pony rose in the morning's orange light. The sound of beating hooves overrode the rising cloud of orange dust. The courier leaped from his mount to stand at young Temujin's feet. He was, the rider told him, summoned to the yurt of his father, Genghis Khan.

Temujin's young heart pounded like galloping hoofbeats, as he stood in the presence of the Great Khan. His blood raced even faster than it had last night, when he had watched Bortai's glistening body in the moonlight, entwined with his in wild, abandoned ecstasy. But their cries of pleasure and joy were now drowned out by the quiet but harsh authority of the Kha Khan's words.

Temujin's young mind struggled with the Kha Khan's question. Images leaped from mind to eye to mouth.

"To wake in the hour before dawn, to mount one's swiftest pony, with a hooded falcon on the wrist, to ride out across the steppe and to return with game for one's family and fire, and then to see the look of love in the corner of your woman's eye. That, sire, is a man's greatest happiness."

"Not so!" The terrible voice of Genghis Khan drove all thoughts of joy and pleasure from Temujin's unformed mind. His soul became enslaved forever.

"To trample one's enemies underfoot, to destroy their villages, to take from them all their goods and to enslave their women. That truly is a man's greatest joy!"

Eastern Montana, June 25, the Moon of Making Fat, 1970

The battleground swarmed with flies. Buzzing, snarling black clumps of flies. Under the influence of LSD, Wiley was on the battlefield. It was 1876. A car zipped by on the highway. The big white cumulus clouds crystallized into pulsing prismystic buffalo herds, ranging across the flat cerulean blue of the big Montana sky. The acid was nearing the peak of its rush through the atomic structure of Wiley's nervous system. The flies swarmed over the stinking bodies.

Somehow the mountains off in the distance seemed different to Curly, higher for certain, than the familiar Big Horn range. And here on the plain there were buildings clustered around, like the ones that the *wasichus*, the white, made. Bodies lay strewn, even heaped in front of the buildings and the trails that led into darkness between the rows of buildings. It was the year of the Mouse. He was now a Mongol warrior, a descendent of Chief Temujin, *The Finest Steel*, known to the whole world as Genghis Khan. Another car zipped by, just a sound on the highway.

Now Curly was back on the Little Bighorn, where he belonged. The unfamiliar mountains to the south and the strange, clustered-together buildings were gone. Only the flies and the bodies remained. Bodies of wasichus and Lakotas and Shyelas. His own people – the Absa, Ravens, the Little Black Eagle People – had been scouts for Yellowhair’s cavalry. The Crow scouts had ridden off when they sensed the imminent doom of Custer and his troops. After all, the whites were only allies of convenience against the traditional enemies of the Absaroke people, the Cheyenne and the Dakota Sioux.

He, Curly, scout, whose father had been a white man, experienced this fact more intently than the other Crow warriors. He looked at the bloating bodies of soldiers and the clusters and swarms of flies. Then another car went by on the highway and the hallucination ended. Colleen’s fingers had found a pressure point on the back of his neck, and Wiley was beginning to feel an intensely pleasing joyful sensation; he was peacefully drifting in a herd of buffalo clouds.

A Canadian couple was also visiting the battlefield. The man and woman were driving a VW van. Lorraine asked for a ride. The couple dropped all four of them off in a little park in Billings, where they clandestinely spent the night. The Canadian couple drove off into the sunset, looking for a romantic place to park.

Northern Colorado, June 24, 1970

The sun stood dramatically framed by the dangerous-looking jagged peaks of the Rocky Mountains, the Great Continental Divide, framed in turn by the west-looking bedroom of the old farmhouse in Fort Collins. Colleen’s hand had again found that pleasure point in the back of Wiley’s neck, just above the spine. Her other hand, the arm grazing his ribcage, found the growing bulge in his blue jeans.

Wiley took a short drink from the bottle of apricot brandy. Colleen’s breath blended sweetly with the smell of Mexican marijuana burning in the ashtray on the dresser. Out on the front porch Buffalo and Lorraine were howling. Laughing and howling. The exuberant cacophony of their howls and laughter shook the old wooden frames of the farmhouse. A waxing full moon was rising, a giant golden disc out of the Prairie.

Colleen kissed Wiley full on the mouth, her lips loose but closed, wet against his. Her lips parted and her tongue slipped into his mouth. Their tongues met, circling, dancing. Her hand moved up his lower belly and pulled at his belt buckle. Wiley languidly let the bottle of apricot brandy fall to the floor.

* * *

Their juices glistened in the moonlight on the back of Colleen’s thighs as they rolled again in each other’s arms and legs around in the big brass bed.

The morning's first cock crow split the moonlit darkness, the hour before dawn. It had been a wild and ecstatic night.

"Aaaaah, aaaaah, aaaaah..." Colleen's voice rose in his ear. His own voice, he found, deepening. "Ohh, Oohh..." Wiley's moans harmonized with Colleen's quickening cries. "Ahh, ohh, aah, oohh, aaoohhhh!"

Visions of Colleen's glistening body glowed against the black of his retinas as Wiley's eyes squeezed shut with the onslaught of orgasm.

Caucasian Plateau, June 25, 1227

Flies had already begun to swarm over the bloodied streets. The men of the village were all dead or hiding, and a group of women were being herded toward Temujin's horse. Temujin reared and wheeled his pony as he leaped off its back to the ground. He nodded curtly in the direction of a buxom yellow-haired woman. Soldiers' arms immediately pinioned hers, and soldiers' hands pulled her clothing from her body. Her blue eyes bulged in terror. Temujin nodded to one of his close lieutenants, who dismounted from his pony, laughing. The woman's white breasts flashed in the sunlight as the soldiers spun her around.

As the officer advanced, his flint-gray eyes riveted on the soft white curves of the village woman's hips and buttocks, Temujin leaped back onto his pony, wheeled one more time, and rode off toward his camp.

A cloud of dust settled over the streets of rape and plunder.

Western Montana, June 26, 1970

They all joined the coyotes, howling at the moon. They passed the bottle of apricot brandy and the joints of Mexican marijuana around the campfire. Around midnight, while moonbeams silvered the cottonwoods and glittered on the waters of the rushing creek, Colleen began to dance.

She danced out of the circle and out onto the plain. Wiley and Buffalo followed her. She danced them out onto the plateau. There she whirled and wheeled and circled. Wiley and Buffalo did a shuffling dance up to her; she raised her arms. Her breasts rose under her shirt and she let Wiley and Buffalo strip her out of her shirt and jeans. She stepped out of her panties and danced naked in the moonlight.

Coyotes howled on the ridges. Wiley and Buffalo watched Colleen in awe. She danced alone in the full moon glow.

Lorraine stirred the coals with a stick from the riverbank and flames shot up from the dying fire. She piled on more cottonwood branches. She could see Colleen's dancing silhouette in the moonlight. Her black eyes sparkled in the firelight. She could see the hulking form of Buffalo returning to her across the plain.

Northern Colorado, June 25, 1970

In the morning, the sun rose again out of the Colorado prairie. The morning light was yellow and the sky was blue. Red-eyed, Wiley washed his face with cold water from the kitchen tap.

They all decided around the breakfast table that they would go to the Little Bighorn battlefield in Montana. The Custer fight was ninety-four years ago today, and tonight was a full moon. It was something all four of them felt compelled to do. After that they would hitchhike out to San Francisco. For Wiley, Lorraine and Buffalo, it would be a revisiting. For Colleen, a bit too young for the '60s San Francisco experience, it would simply be someplace new.

Anyway, it was something to do. Colleen and Lorraine took some laundry across the cow pasture to where there was a little shopping center, with a laundromat, café, grocerette, and liquor store. Wiley and Buffalo stayed at the house and began packing the sleeping bags and camping gear.

"I had a really weird dream this morning," Wiley said to Buffalo.

Buffalo looked up.

"Oh?" he inquired.

"Yes," said Wiley. "In the dream I was a villager. My village was on a plateau, north of a high mountain range. I lived in an apartment in a building near the center of the village. You were my neighbor. You lived in a smaller apartment in the same building. You used to visit me a lot. You always coveted my apartment."

Buffalo laughed. "You always coveted my lovers," he snorted.

"Not always," Wiley chuckled. "Anyway, in the dream, a woman is with me in the apartment when you come to visit. She's fair and blue-eyed, voluptuous, pear-shaped, with big tits and a big round ass, but she doesn't seem appealing to me. Her complexion is rough and a bit red and blotchy. Maybe that's what turns me off."

Buffalo snorted again. "Always the perfectionist."

"Yeah...well...in the dream she goes with you, to your apartment. Then the Mongols of Genghis Khan attack the village from the east. They soon overrun the village. Now I'm in a state of transformation. I run to see you, but it is my apartment you live in, you've taken it over at last. I realize then that I've been killed by the Mongols. Now I'm another villager. From my hiding place I watch the Mongols round the women up and strip them."

Buffalo sat, silent, listening.

"Now I'm one of the Mongols," Wiley continued. "I see the pear-shaped woman. She is naked. Then I realize she will be the first one raped. The Mongol soldiers are holding her for me. Her big white ass is turned toward me. The backs of her thighs glisten with sweat."

There was a long pause. A late morning cock crowed at the rapidly climbing sun.

"What happened next?" Buffalo asked.

"I got hard and I came. I had a wet dream. It was six-thirty this morning. Then I woke up."

Western Montana, June 26, 1970

Wiley was transfixed by the full moon. His eyes were riveted on Colleen, dancing like a ghost in the silver shadows. The outlandish howling of the coyotes rang through his ears and filled his whole body with energy and lust.

The star-strewn sky wheeled and spun above his head. He realized that he was very stoned and drunk. He had lost sight of Colleen.

He stumbled to the creek and vomited in the sand. The taste of alcohol, with a residue of fermented fruit, rose in his throat. He retched again. He plunged his aching head in the river, greedily lapped water and tried to swallow.

He staggered back to the campfire and looked around. Lorraine and Buffalo were asleep in a big double sleeping bag. Buffalo snored loudly and brokenly. Lorraine's braceleted arm rose and fell across Buffalo's barrel-like chest.

He didn't notice Colleen in the other double sleeping bag until he crawled in. She was slight and motionless, but he felt her warmth against his skin immediately, and they both reached out and caressed each other tenderly.

* * *

He awoke in the pre-dawn pearly moonlight. The high summer air was clean, crisp and cold, as he sucked it through his nostrils and into his lungs. He felt a growing hardness at his root, and felt Colleen's slick, sticky warmth cover it greedily. Her labia sucked him inside her. Above him, all he could see was the twin moons of her stiffened nipples, surrounded by their iridescent aureoles jiggling on their white cosmos of flesh – soft, firm, and filmed with sweat, reeking of ferment, damp leather and procreative juices.

Colleen rode him hard and steady, like a cavalryman. Their orgasms cut like a lightning bolt through the softening blackness. He reached up for her twin orbs, bouncing and rolling above him, but as the full impact of their climax exploded, Wiley Moon shuddered and his arms stiffened and suddenly dropped, like shot warriors, to the ground.

Vancouver, Canada, August 30, 1990

"It's you, Buffalo."

"Richard Standing Buffalo Bull, yes," the big man replied.

"It's me, Wiley," Wiley Moon said.

"Yes, yes, I would know you anywhere," the big man assured him. "I see you've brought some sweetgrass."

"Yes," Wiley gratefully spoke, "all that I could find. It's for the leaders here." He handed Buffalo four braids of sweetgrass.

"We only smudge the people once a day here," Buffalo told him, "in the morning."

The rain was cold today, for the first time since winter, and the mildewed canvas tent leaked and sweated and the floor was already mud. The marchers were readying their signs: NO MORE GENOCIDE. ARMY OUT OF OKA! The parade marshal held an electric megaphone to her mouth. “NO MORE GENOCIDE. ARMY OUT OF OKA!” she chanted. She wore a butch haircut, a tan trench coat, and a half-dozen gold and silver earrings in each ear. Her voice sounded like a young man’s.

“It’s been a long time,” Wiley said.

“Twenty years...”

“Lorraine?”

“Yes, Warrior Woman,” Buffalo snorted. “She left me ten years ago while I was a junkie and an alcoholic.”

“Left you...for another man?”

“No, for another woman.” Buffalo laughed a hollow laugh.

“And...and...”

“And now we run across each other sometimes at blockades and demonstrations...like this one. We had three kids...all teenagers now...all on her reservation, the Crows. You know the place. She works at the band office there...has for years...” Buffalo’s voice trailed off. “And you? Colleen...?”

“We had four kids. Two live with me now, two with her.”

“And you, did you ever discover your people?”

“I’m a Kazar,” Wiley said simply.

“The Thirteenth Tribe,” Buffalo answered.

“Still studying the Jews, I see,” said Wiley, chuckling. Then, more seriously, “And something of a Cossack, too.”

Buffalo smiled and, pointing to Wiley’s hand-drum, said, “Still studying the Indians, I see.”

“Yes,” said Wiley, “and I know what *Oglala*, the name of your people, means.”

“And Crazy Horse’s people, too,” said Buffalo, smiling, nodding, knowing what Wiley would say.

“They throw dust in their vaginas,” they recited together.

“And what better way to discourage rape?” Buffalo said. “And what about Colleen...her quest?”

“Nothing,” Wiley said, slowly shaking his head. “Maybe she did spring fully armed from the forehead of Zeus.”

They both laughed.

Buffalo got up from the folding chair behind the mud-spattered card table, in the damp gray tent. You couldn’t see the Art Gallery, on whose lawn the protesters were camped, or the city streets at all...only the muddy people, native, white, black, oriental: art students, activists, lesbians, rastafarians, winos and ex-drunks from the downtown Eastside, blue-mohawked punks from the East End pool halls and cafes. They shared only a couple of damp, lukewarm pizza breads and a solid, unsexy belief in human dignity. He walked around to Wiley and hugged him warmly. People continued to eat soggy pizza bread.

Wiley’s cheek rested for a moment on the beaded leather jacket covering Buffalo’s hulking shoulder. The smell of damp leather stirred old memories. The marchers, pizza breads finished, were beginning to file out of the tent.

"I'm with them," Wiley said quietly.

"Thanks for bringing the sweetgrass," Buffalo replied. "We'll use it for tomorrow morning's smudge."

"Thanks for being here," said Wiley Moon.

Richard Standing Buffalo Bull returned to the folding chair, after putting the sweetgrass in a battered yellow hound's-tooth suitcase under the card table.

Wiley picked up his drum and walked out of the tent into the cold and pelting rain. Summer looked to be ending early this year.

"NO MORE GENOCIDE, ARMY OUT OF OKA! NO MORE GENOCIDE, ARMY OUT OF OKA!" shouted the marchers and protesters.

Wiley's drumskin was wet and loose, but he beat the heart-beat rhythm the best he could as he marched. Eight hostile helmeted motorcycle cops on big Harleys accompanied the marchers. Occasionally they gestured provocatively. Several squad cars of uniforms or detectives cruised the area of the march like so many flies. Heavy rain was streaming down Wiley's face as he marched down Granville Street and turned east onto Hastings.

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the co-curator of the New Orphic Gallery in Vancouver, B.C. Together with Ernest Hekkanen, she has co-authored *Black Snow: An Imaginative Memoir* (1996). She uses her dreams as springboards to explore the imaginal templates that lie at the root of what is personal, instinctual, or sub-conscious. Dreams, for her, are pictographs commenting on the universality of human experience.

Dream Dig

Margrith Schraner

The Dream

ULYSSA SEGANTINI can hardly believe her eyes when, upon approaching her meticulously clean kitchen counter just after midnight, she sees a fleshy, crescent-shaped *something* lying there, all by itself, in full view. Upon closer inspection she recognizes the soft, fleshy, pink rim – lobe and all – as the outer shell of her own ear. She stares at it in disbelief. Upon turning it over, she discovers tell-tale signs of an abscess: two spots, the size of nail holes and approximately an inch apart. The holes have been filled with white putty; they make it look as though a hinge had come off.

Ulyssa realizes at once that she won't be able to have the earshell sewn back on; the deathly whiteness of the tissue communicates this to her with finality. She has never heard of doctors resurrecting wasted, dead tissue and sewing it back onto live flesh, and this disturbs her no small amount.

Facing the mirror to the left of the counter and resolutely lifting her shoulder-length hair, she courageously inspects the left side of her head. To her surprise, there is no blood where the earshell has fallen off. There are no signs of ripping or tearing. There is simply a stump, close to the ear canal. She looks down at the earshell on the counter. The awful, dead whiteness of the tissue reminds her of a vegetable that has succumbed to the ravages of hoar frost, making the tissue soft and breaking it down; it could be a cauliflower left in the fridge for too long. She looks back at her fleshy stump in the mirror. The small protrusion surrounding the ear canal is like a stalk and faintly reminiscent of a trumpet. It reminds her of the inner spiral of a mag-

nificent, pink conch shell, shattered by beating waves, the truncated remnant sadly unable to issue the faint murmur of the ocean she once heard as a child.

Flesh-eating disease! The thought rises spontaneously in her mind. Far from suggesting a possible cure, this self-diagnosis only serves to confound her even more. More dreadful consequences begin to suggest themselves; ghosts of fear begin to creep in and insinuate what is likely to happen next: first one, and then another body part – fingers and toes and such – might decay, soften, and fall off. A progressive disease, as she sees it, and incurable.

Still, she must try to get to the doctor, and quickly. Rummaging in the kitchen drawer for a piece of tin foil to wrap the earshell in, she notices with surprise that the underside of the foil is covered with silvery writing and that the silvery writing is her own letter to her mother, dated three years earlier, reporting the onset of a mysterious infection. The infection had resulted in an itch that made her scratch, first her neck, then her chin, then her cheeks. Finally the itch had mounted to a region behind her eyes.

Ulyssa realizes at once that these were the early symptoms connected to her present condition. She discards the option of using the tin foil, puts it back in the drawer and reaches for a shallow white soup bowl. She places the earshell in the soup bowl and puts a kettle of water on the stove to boil, thinking she should sterilize the earshell before presenting it to the doctor.

Her eyes are drawn to the postcard-size photograph affixed to the cupboard door above the kitchen counter. The photograph seems to have been taken early in the morning, because there are neither shadows nor sunlight. “Win a week in Tuscany” reads the caption. It depicts a 12th-century castle that has apparently been converted into modern rental apartments, situated halfway between Florence and Siena. The path approaching the castle is flanked by dark cypress trees, columnar and slender, which produce a feeling of hushed anticipation.

The Castle

No wind stirs as Ulyssa – soup bowl clutched at her waist – approaches the castle. Morning is on the verge of dawning. The castle sits on a large mound overlooking a town whose name has been chiseled into a boulder. The name is a strange mixture of hieroglyphics and Roman numerals; the odd script makes the name indecipherable and therefore unpronounceable.

A bluish-green haze lies over the middle distance and obstructs the view of nearby hills and mountains that Ulyssa instinctively knows are there. The cypress trees to her left – hundreds of feet tall and hundreds of years old – stand like sentinels, piercing the sky darkly. The road leading to the castle is extremely dusty. No rain seems to have fallen for a very long time. Beside the road, she spots the dried fruit of a conifer, a globe-shaped cone that magnetically draws her over to it. She holds the soup bowl with the earshell in her left hand and picks up the brownish gray cone with her right. The shield-like scales guarding the seeds are rough and slightly sharp to her touch. She is familiar with the species name, *sempervirens*, meaning it lives

forever. She puts the cone in the pocket of her skirt and continues to walk slowly and meditatively in the direction of the castle.

She has traveled most of the night to get here. The arched doorway of the castle is decorated with the same odd hieroglyphics she first witnessed on the boulder beside the road. The name continues to elude her. Undaunted, she pulls back the heavy wooden door and enters the castle. There are two vast stairways, one ascending and the other descending. Choosing the latter, she heads down the worn steps and finds herself in a vaulted stone hall. Behind a door that bears the image of Sekhmet, the lion-headed Goddess of Healing, there lies a large chamber which she realizes is an apothecary. The wall at the far end bears a larger than life-size reproduction of the painted sun barge that was said to have carried dead pharaohs to the next world. Two of the remaining walls are covered with various papyri bearing conjuring health formulas, tomb inscriptions and motifs from *The Book of the Dead of Ani*.

Ulyssa seems to be the only person in the room. Suddenly realizing how chill the air has become, her body responds by shivering. The large counter to her right is flanked by an impressive number of shelves displaying a systematic arrangement of various surgical instruments: knives, tweezers, chisels, blades, mortars and so forth, and above these are many kinds of resins, herbal powders, oils and ointments in tinted glass containers of varying sizes and shapes. The display is augmented by salve spoons, swabs, linen material and bandages.

A man who looks faintly like a butcher appears behind the counter and gestures to her. She turns around to ensure that the man is addressing her and not someone else. Approaching him, she proffers the soup bowl containing the earshell. No words are exchanged. The man, dressed in the usual pharmacist's attire, graciously receives the bowl and disappears with it into the shadows of a labyrinthine stockroom.

"Ulyssa Segantini," a sepulchral voice announces several minutes later over a loudspeaker, "your order is ready for pick-up."

She discovers that she has been absentmindedly gazing at her hands, as though in a trance. When she looks up she notices that the pharmacist has returned from the stockroom and is now for some reason wearing a jackal mask. He hands her a small, white delicatessen box around which some string made of knotted grass has been tied in a bow. Taking the box, she nods her appreciation. She notices that a label has been affixed to the box. The typed message says, "Illumination is the space between your ears." The word "between" is underlined in pink.

The Elevator

Ulyssa does not know how she has come to be in the elevator. During the ride, which seems to take an enormously long time, she looks at the peeling paint on the walls and the poster-like advertisements that were obviously designed to educate visitors to the castle. Her eyes are drawn to a quote attributed to Ramses II: "The past is never dead, not even is it past." Directly above it is an encyclopedia-style, full-color depiction of a sarcophagus. The

pictorial script labeling the various components of the sarcophagus is illegible; either her eyesight is dimming or the light in the elevator is too feeble to read by.

The largest of the labels, and one which she can make out by squinting, is the word *sarkophagos*, which has been playfully cut in half, with translations on either side: *sark*, or *sarx*, meaning “flesh” and *phagos*, meaning “eating.”

Flesh-eating! The word reminds her of something, but she can't remember exactly what. She begins to feel caught, as if in the machinations of a confusing dream. She looks down at the small white box in her hand. Did she feel something stir inside? Did she feel something shudder? She is not sure.

Directly across from the poster with the sarcophagus is a photograph of a newborn, three days old at most, wearing a tiny knitted blue cap; the hands of the mother are visible in the picture as they hold up the infant's head in profile. The picture reveals a remarkably large left ear that she recognizes as her grandson's.

“How odd,” she mutters to herself. “What is a photograph of my grandson doing here in this elevator?”

The Excavation Site

The elevator opens out onto a roof garden. The railings around the periphery of the roof are supported by stone pillars that bear stylized renditions of the calyx tubes of wild pomegranate flowers. She steps out onto a balcony-sized platform and looks out over the extensive herb garden below. Workers in dusty garments and painters' caps are digging in the garden, but for a reason she cannot fathom there seems to be an excavation of a crypt in progress.

Already a large part of the crypt has been laid bare. She looks through the tiny viewfinder of a spotting-scope that has been set up for purposes of observation: an amazing array of mummified birds, cats and serpents have already been unearthed from the burial site and propped up in a row on a rough wooden board. The mummified creatures sway slightly in the breeze that has begun to stir. The wind carries whirls of dry soil up to where she is standing. Sneezing, she must avert her eyes for a moment. When she looks again, the workers are taking a siesta. To her amazement, she discovers that the spotting-scope is now focused on hundreds of porcelain ears sticking out of the dirt sides of the excavation site and that the porcelain ears are glinting quite fiercely in the hot noon-hour sun.

She draws back from the spotting-scope, even more mystified. The sun has begun to set in slow motion. There is a sudden din of chirping that she recognizes as the sound of crickets. As the sun sinks below the hills, the insistent chirping is gradually reduced to a dull roar, like that of traffic on a faraway *autostrada*. This sound is succeeded by the whispered prattling of birds – or is it the buzzing of bees? She is worried, unsure. It might be the effect of tinnitus, a ringing sound in the ear that is the result of frayed nerve endings.

She senses it is time to open the small white delicatessen box. She un-knots the bow and unwinds the string from around it. Hesitantly, she lifts the lid. Inside the box, lying on a bed of cypress twigs, are two ears connected as though by a fleshy hinge. The ears begin to flap tentatively, much like the wings of a butterfly, slowly, as though rousing themselves from a long sleep. They proceed to flap more insistently, then with even greater vigor. Before she can close the lid, the ear-shaped butterfly has lifted itself out of the box and is flying off over the balcony railings. She tries to seize it in flight, but falls into a swoon as she tumbles over the railing.

The Acupuncturist

Ulyssa blinks once, then twice. She stares at the photograph taped to the kitchen cupboard door. For a moment, she thinks she has seen someone fling herself from the roof of the 12th-century castle, in pursuit of a butterfly. Now she thinks it might have been a trick played on her by her senses. She must have temporarily fallen into a daze, a reverie of some kind. Yes, that must be it.

A week earlier, she had gone to see her acupuncturist, a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Due to her extremely fragile constitution, he had decided to refrain from sticking needles into her body and experiment instead with an alternative method that involved affixing tiny seeds to strategic spots on her ears and securing them with adhesive tape. She could then activate these acupuncture points by pressing these seeds several times in the course of a day and thereby be in control of administering her own treatments.

The acupuncturist had pointed to a large color poster hanging on the wall of the consultation room. It depicted a very large ear. She recalls his explanation that the outer part of the ear mimicked in shape and outline the position of a child *in utero* and that the exact position of the organs could be charted accordingly. The earlobe, for instance, coincided with the head of the upside-down baby, and so on, up along the rim of the ear.

In Chinese Medicine, he had said, the ear was perceived to function as the window to the kidney.

“Large ear – large kidney – long life!” he had added.

She recalled the saying about eyes being the window to the soul and asked him if this analogy was correct.

“No, in Chinese Medicine, the eyes are the window to the liver,” he had responded, laughing politely.

The Soup Bowl

Ulyssa realizes that the ringing in her ears is actually the sound of the kettle whistling on the stove. Turning off the burner and removing the kettle, she takes it over to the counter. Seconds after pouring boiling water over the earshell in the soup bowl, she realizes with horror that she has made a grave mistake.

“Oh, God – now I’ve cooked it!” she utters incredulously, unable to believe her own stupidly. What had possessed her? What had she been thinking of? A growing feeling of agony rises in her chest as she contemplates the finality of her actions that have resulted in the irreversible loss of a body part. She thinks that she is altogether in the wrong life, and that it is all due to too much stress. Indeed, she has probably passed on some of this stress to her daughter and even to her grandson.

Suddenly, she feels as though her moorings had been lost. She feels adrift in the New World, no longer connected to her home in Switzerland, a terribly insubstantial and flimsy shell of a human being. She must nourish her weak condition and now drinks the water in the soup bowl, absentmindedly, sipping it slowly, like a broth. The earshell bumps up against her lips several times, forcing her to push it out of the way with the tip of her tongue. She spits out a small piece of cellophane tape that has entered her mouth by mistake. A small, dark seed – vaguely globular in shape – is stuck to it.

“My God!” she thinks. “It has come to this – drinking broth made of my own ear. How horrible!”

With a sense of sad inevitability, she takes both the seed and the scalded earshell out to the backyard and, by the light of the moon, proceeds to bury them in the loose, rich soil of a potted lemon geranium. In no time at all, the seed sprouts and begins to grow into a lovely tree. The roots wrap themselves down over the rim of the pot and twist themselves into the earth and the trunk shoots like a rocket toward the night sky. Her sense of sadness is replaced by amazement and delight. Judging from the scale-like leaves growing in dense, fan-shaped sprays and the reddish-yellow bark, the tree is a descendant of the king of all cypresses, the *cupressus sempervirens*.

The following night, when she goes outside to view the marvelous cypress again, she notices that innumerable ears have sprouted from its branches and have cocked themselves in the direction of the moon, as though to better listen to the pallid glow sliding down through the night air.

BRANKO VRBIC hails from Zavidovici, Bosnia and Herzegovina. After leaving former Yugoslavia in 1991, he spent five years as a refugee in Germany. He arrived in Vancouver, Canada in August, 1996. This is his first published short story in English. It was inspired by a Koan.

Mu

Branko Vrbic

I HARDLY REMEMBER him now. Only a few clear pictures of him have remained carved in my memory.

Somehow, I can see him in his gray suit coming slowly over the meadow toward the church. He didn't go around the large churchyard and come in through the gate; he took a shortcut by simply climbing over the fence. My grandfather was a short man, a little bit bent down from hard work; he had gray hair and a tricky, child-like smile.

I used to wait for him on cold Sunday mornings in front of the church door to take me in to the service. I was too little and too afraid to go in alone. We didn't talk much. He knew that I didn't want to be inside with my mom, but rather to sit beside him on the bench together with the other men. I remember during mass that he often pulled my ear gently and quietly warned me to look toward the priest. I was always confused and would wonder: "Why! It is a natural thing to look at the ceiling. Even the priest said that the Lord saw and listened to everything from above." I didn't argue with him. I tried to be a good boy; but the magic of the ceiling was stronger than what was repeated over and over again.

My grandfather was considered a strange man. He didn't want to work in a factory and thereby leave his land uncultivated. One day he simply walked out of the factory where he had been employed, despite the needs of his big family, at a time when being a farmer was unprofitable and everybody was looking for better opportunities in industry. He was a passionate farmer; the first thing he would do in the morning was go out and see his crops. He would spend the whole day working without getting tired. In the

evening he wouldn't go to bed without visiting his cows and he would stay in the cow-shed a while to talk to them.

It is still fresh in my memory how he saved me from being run over by one of his cows. He picked me up and barely got me out of harm's way, even as the cow kept trying to gore me. He took me safely into the house and so everything ended well, but the next morning the cow ended up in the hands of a butcher.

My grandfather died when I was so young I couldn't relate to his dying. I guess it is hard to understand any sort of change when you are a child, probably because at that age everything looks permanent.

Now I am of an age when my back is slowly bending and my hands are becoming rough from hard work. I am far away from home, from Bosnia, in a country called Canada.

I do not go to church any more; neither do I raise my eyes toward the Lord. Instead I look at the floor. It is quite normal in Vancouver's Zen Center. Everybody there looks at the floor. The floor is magic, the magic of realizing the self. We meditate. There is nobody beside me to warn me if I lose my concentration. I am alone and now I know that we are alone, anyway. There is some beauty in that. Sometimes I lose myself in the silence of sitting and in the tendency to become one with everything.

The days are now passing very quickly. Either life in a big city is too fast for time to be noticed or I am losing my expectations and becoming aware that I cannot get away from myself. Time does not matter any longer; everything is dissolving into silence. Memories are fading, excitements are becoming curiosities.

My zazen meditations are the only adventures where I keep facing myself and yet melt right away. The only way to endure it is by sitting.

Most of my visits to the Zen Center have all been the same – soaked in silence. I feel I might have reached some realizations, if not for something that has irrevocably changed my life and, like a worm, is destroying me from inside. During one of my Sunday meditations, I was moved to raise my eyes a little bit and was struck by the image of my grandfather standing with that cow in the middle of the zendo. They looked the same as the morning I had seen them so long, long ago on the way to the butcher's, only grandfather was now in his gray Sunday suit.

I looked at them for a while, frozen, then I shifted my glance and saw the other people sitting around in meditation as if nothing was happening. "I must be dreaming," I thought. "This is Vancouver and they have been dead for a long time."

The cow broke the silence with a soft, warm Mooooooo. It was like mother's milk; suddenly I wanted to cry.

I tried to reason with myself: "This isn't real, this is a vision. I have to regain the clarity of mind. If I concentrate on breathing, the illusion will disappear."

–Mooooooooooo.

She gored me again. I couldn't breathe.

–Moooooooooooo.

Snjezana Zivkovic came into my memory, my first love, and all those women with whom I bedded down, being tired of looking for true love.

Again, the mooing sound filled the space. I became frozen and cold. I looked at my grandfather standing in the middle of the room beside the cow, watching me with his impish smile, as if he knew what this riddle was all about. Then, suddenly, the scents of my childhood moved me; they were as fresh as when I had climbed my first tree.

–Mooooooooooooo.

She gored me again, without mercy, and various pictures from my life flashed in front of my eyes – school, friends, falling from my bike repeatedly, seeing new houses built in front of my home over and over again, swimming, sunset, music, dead fish, ah music, going down the street, the smell of my mother’s cooking, watching the stars, sitting on father’s shoulders, wind in my hair, fighting with my sister and so on, and so on.

–Moooooooooooo.

Smile; I was smiling, everything was melting into that smile. Wind, river, summer and cold danced in unity. And I knew that cow had been stabbing me ever since – since when? – the whole of my life; I knew that I had been dying ever since being born and that death is everlasting life.

I do not remember how the cow and my grandfather disappeared from the room. The bell rang for the end of the meditation. I got up and bowed along with the others in the room. Tears were running down my cheeks; but still I was smiling. I was feeling as though I was going to burst. “Oh Saints, from the old time, I am so sorry that I offended you so terribly.”

But I remained silent.

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

Incendiary Dreams

Ernest Hekkanen

IN THE SPRING OF 1999, I was part of an intellectual discussion group looking at our postmodern society and what seemed to be the relative nature of values once designed to civilize us. In a postmodern society we are subjected to a great deal of flux. Structures that we once relied on to give form to our daily lives disintegrate almost as fast as they are created. The pursuit of what is new and novel – from the latest fashion to the most recent type of therapy or computer – results in us discarding things as obsolete after they are but a few months or years old, and increasingly this is the case with our civilizing values as well.

In the postmodern society, our pace of life has resulted in greater and greater amounts of social and technological entropy being left in our wake. Correctly or incorrectly, our group felt that the individual had been cut adrift in every dimension of his or her life. Perhaps, someone said, the postmodern flux inherent in society was being used as a way to control us. By reducing us to the equivalent of human jetsam, we could be swept this way or that way by currents manufactured by current-makers, the same way a wreckage is subjected to the whims of a storm-tossed sea. In general, we felt as if the social and moral ground we had once thought so firm beneath our feet had become a kind of quicksand.

“Do you really think postmodern flux is being used as a way to control us?” someone asked.

“In a state of flux, everything is relative,” I responded. “There are no solid, structural truths any more. Anything goes. Bedlam rules supreme. In a

state of bedlam, we are prepared to kill our neighbor down the street. Why? Because, for a split second, we are able to assert that we have put an end to flux; we are able to assert that our values are more permanent, more solid than those of our dead neighbor.”

At this point in the discussion, we began to look for examples of what we were talking about and so we turned our attention to what was at the time going on in former Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia had suffered a kind of meltdown, I said. It was now in a state of continuous social flux that had been given rise to decades if not centuries ago, due to different empires that had swept through and successively dominated that region. However, during Tito’s time, the social flux had seemed to give way to stability and to structure, because of the use of force which totalitarian regimes tend to resort to in order to create social cohesion.

Ah, but that social cohesion never in fact really existed, someone else exclaimed. It was an illusion, a mirage, because after the breakdown of communism, the seams of that society began to split apart along ethnic lines. True, I admitted, but that was due in large part to the influence of superpowers outside the country – superpowers that were playing a kind of chess game. Those superpowers gave various demagogues in former Yugoslavia the impression that they could rule supreme, provided they formed the right sort of alliances. Moreover, to encourage them to form such alliances, the superpowers provided the demagogues with monetary inducements and military hardware on every side of the political equation. Soon the former Yugoslavian society was rife with dissension which began to express itself with ethnic and religious fervor. The intention of the superpowers had been to create upheaval in Yugoslavia, an objective that was achieved with relative ease. The result was the state of flux which now reigned in that region; and that reign of flux, so cruel in nature, provided the U.S.-led forces with a perfect excuse to intervene, on the grounds that bombing the hell out of Serbia was tantamount to a “humanitarian effort” and, indeed, was a humanitarian necessity. In other words, the sort of double-speak portrayed by George Orwell in *Animal Farm* or *1984* had come to reign supreme in the free world.

United States authorities knew that they couldn’t further their aims in the age-old fashion of empires which restlessly expand their borders for economic reasons, because the U.S. citizenry had been in a cynical frame of mind ever since the Vietnam War. Americans had grown weary of engaging in military conflicts that they were then billed for, followed by a further bill for rebuilding the countries their bombs had razed. In addition to that, the bitter memories of the Gulf War were still quite fresh, particularly in the minds of U.S. troops who had returned with ailments ranging from tumors and leukemia to genetic damage. The only way U.S. President Bill Clinton could make the war palatable to Americans was by calling it a “humanitarian effort” designed to stop ethnic cleansing, and that advertising ploy worked quite well. Americans allowed the U.S. government to bomb the hell out of Serbia, under the rubric that it was being done to save the region from ethnic cleansing, even though the U.S. had never deigned to take exception to the ethnic cleansing carried out by NATO partners like Turkey.

But what were the aims, the objectives, of this exercise? Were they, indeed, humanitarian in nature?

If one were to consult a map, I suggested, it would become clear why western superpowers had pumped so much money into the different ethnic factions in former Yugoslavia, with the intention of fomenting ethnic and religious unrest. One had only to entertain the fact that the Czech Republic, Hungary, Greece and Turkey were now NATO-aligned, or soon-to-be-NATO-aligned, countries. One shouldn't be surprised, I said, if Romania soon began to make noises about becoming aligned. Also, to the east of Romania lay the Ukraine, the former breadbasket of the late, great USSR, and somewhat to the southeast of that, the oil-rich Caucasus. Western superpowers were in the process of building an economic corridor to that area, I said, and those superpowers weren't going to allow an upstart communist country like Serbia to interfere with the unrestricted flow of free trade. I added that I wouldn't be surprised if, in the near future, the Ukraine voiced a desire to become a western-allied country also; for not far from the Ukraine's southeastern border lay another kind of threat that might express itself in ethnic and religious terms.

This sort of flux usually serves a purpose, I told the group of debaters. That purpose is the hidden agenda of people in positions of power. It is my opinion, I said, that crony politics and crony economics are running the world. Wealthy cronies look after the needs of their wealthy cohorts. You don't have to look very far afield to confirm my thesis, I said. Take, for instance, the APEC conference recently held in Vancouver, British Columbia. Prime Minister Chretien was more than willing to look after the needs of Suharto by subverting the rights of Canadians to peacefully demonstrate at the University of British Columbia and along parade routes to the conference. The Prime Minister ordered the police to keep any and all signs of protest far removed, so Suharto wouldn't have to suffer the sight of anything that might abuse his sensitivities as the dictator of Indonesia. That, I said, was a rather blatant example of wealthy cronies looking after the needs of one another, and moreover, it was achieved in direct violation of our rights as citizens of a democracy.

Democracy, I said, is content to offer the illusion of democracy, rather than real democracy. Consider, I said, the fact that the North American Free Trade Agreement was thrust upon Canadian citizens (by the Progressive Conservative Party) and that the unpopular GST still exists as a tax which we dislike, but which we are nevertheless obliged to pay. Consider the fact that the Liberals, when they were not in power, railed against NAFTA and the GST, but on acquiring power, did nothing to get rid of the GST or to disengage us from the North American Free Trade Agreement – even though their campaign promises had led us to believe that the Liberals would do exactly that. We were duped into voting for them. We were played for fools. The Liberals used our votes to gain power, but once in power, they looked after the needs of their wealthy friends. That is to say, there were no Liberals in that election who were beyond corruption, who were beyond lying to the electorate.

Politics, I suggested, is the art of looking after one's cronies, while only *pretending* to serve the wishes of the electorate. We who comprise the elec-

torate have intuited this to be the case and that, I strongly suggested, was why so few people indulged in the exercise of voting on election day, either here in Canada or in the United States. The electorate has intuited that it is a rigged game – that those in power inevitably look after the needs of their powerful cronies first and the wishes of the electorate last. It has always been and will always be so, I told them. Democracy is a crock of lies that we are asked to extend our credulity to, but personally, my credulity refuses to be further abused.

There was a brief, glum silence as we digested what we all recognized to be true – namely, that corruption ruled the day and always would. Finally, someone asked the question, how do we go about repairing the situation? How do we make those in power responsible to the people who elected them? It can't be done, I said. It's impossible. Whenever any political party of whatever political stripe gets into power, that party will inevitably look after the needs of those who have stuffed money in its coffers. Let me cite two examples, I said. The Prime Minister owned a hotel in common with one of his constituents. He sold his half of the operation to his business partner – for a considerable sum, by the way – and his business partner then received a hefty subsidization from the federal government. For a democracy to work, and to work well, politicians must not only be above benefiting their cronies, they must be *seen* to be above benefiting them.

The same applies to the fiasco that our Socialist Premier, Glen Clark, is currently embroiled in, I went on. You know what I am referring to – to that less than savory connection he has to gambling and to pornography entrepreneurs who operate that inn in Burnaby. One of those entrepreneurs was contracted to do construction work on the Premier's house for less than the actual cost and afterward, he was fast-tracked to receive a casino license.

Inevitably, politicians look after the interests of their business friends. They look after the interests of well-heeled lobbyists, not the interests of you or me. That's because the mandate of a politician is to serve the interests of his cronies while simply offering the *illusion* that he is paying attention to the interests of the electorate. There is no onus on a politician to comply with our electoral wishes, once he is in power. Our credulity is abused over and over again, and that adds to the postmodern flux of society, because there is nothing for us to believe in any more – not in the political arena, anyway. Politicians hold up their little red books or little blue books and say, "This is what I stand for. This is what I will do when I get into power. It's all right here, in this little book. All you have to do is read it, if you want to know what my party and I stand for." But when that politician gets into power, he throws away his little book and does the bidding of his wealthy, powerful cronies. He does what they tell him to do; for, after all, they are the ones who advised him to lie to the electorate in the first place.

What can be done to rectify this deplorable state of affairs? someone asked. I shrugged. "It's too bad the Weathermen aren't a viable political force any more. At least, when the Weathermen existed as part of the political equation, they could dispense with an unfaithful politician, or at least severely handicap him, if he declined to follow through on the promises that got him elected. A lying, conniving politician would soon suffer a dramatic fall from political grace, in a very definitive manner. No such onus exists

today. Politicians are content to lie to us each and every election, because they know we are impotent, because they know we can't do anything except to shrug our shoulders in submission. A politician's promise," I said, "is symbolic of the postmodern age. It is the ultimate expression of flux."

My last, rather long-winded proclamation had the effect of creating an alarmed silence; I might as well have set off an incendiary device in their midst. My fellow intellectuals regarded me with looks of real concern, for they were Canadians through and through, and the thought of resorting to violence to deal with the cynical promises of politicians, even if it were done to hold politicians to their word, was repugnant to them.

"Yes, and soon we would have the War Measures Act invoked, just like back in the 1970s, when the FLQ killed Pierre Laporte."

"No, you can't be serious," another person added.

"Surely, you're not suggesting that we maim our politicians, if they decline to live up to their election promises?"

"I'm only being partly hyperbolic," I said. "You see, there is no reason for politicians to keep the promises they have made to us. The political system as it works today in our democracy can only continue to work, and to work well, if the honor system – upon which the whole thing depends – works in an honorable sort of fashion. It doesn't work that way. Politicians feel free to break the contracts they have made with us at election time. They feel free to break their word of honor. When honor is dispensed with in a democracy, democracy no longer works the way it is supposed to. So, how do we get politicians to live up to their promises after an election has been won? How do we get them to be men of their word? There must be a procedure for doing this – a form of recall, perhaps. But recalls are cumbersome, costly and not very likely to work. The ultimate form of recall, the type the Weathermen and the FLQ once employed, is more immediate, and as we all know, immediate reward is the best kind of reward. In addition to that, it keeps a politician on his toes; he must decide on a daily basis whether it is feasible for him to go back on his word. His political dance becomes a dance with fate."

"You're being facetious," my friends retorted.

"Am I?" I replied. "Am I, really?"

Now and then, I told them, I suffer from seething annoyance when I witness my hard-earned tax dollars furthering the cause of those who benefit most from the pork-barreling practices of politicians. It doesn't seem to matter where a party is located on the political spectrum – whether far to the left, far to the right or smack-dab in the middle. They all resort to the same practice of benefiting their cronies. In British Columbia, we have the spectacular example of the fast-ferries boondoggle. The NDP tried to benefit the shipbuilding industry in this province, because the shipbuilding industry requires a plethora of skilled tradesmen and, during an NDP reign of government, those skilled tradesmen are chosen from the ranks of organized labor, due to the fact that the NDP has strong historical ties to the unionized segment of the economy.

Big unions and big business go hand in hand to the pork barrel. Union wages can only be paid by large corporate entities, and increasingly those corporate entities come in the guise of Transnationals. In other words, by

benefiting the shipbuilding industry, the NDP was hoping to widen its political base in the skilled labor sector. The NDP was trying to benefit its cronies, in hopes that it would be benefited in return. At the other extreme, there are countless examples of right-wing governments doing exactly the same thing, whether in this province or elsewhere in the world. Highway contracts are awarded to political supporters; firms that investigate welfare fraud receive lucrative multi-million dollar contracts which amount to far more than can be retrieved by expunging welfare cheats from the rolls; right-wing governments seek to make poverty illegal by outlawing the right to beg for a crust of bread, apparently because the poor should be indulging in cake; loopholes in the tax laws are created so Canadian entrepreneurs can headquarter companies offshore and so avoid paying Canadian taxes (a loophole, by the way, that the Finance Minister of Canada takes advantage of); publicly subsidized healthcare is privatized and so put in the greedy hands of large corporate entities like insurance companies that limit healthcare to those who can afford it – insurance companies that, in turn, make substantial contributions to the political party of their choice, usually a party on the political right. The political scene is rife with examples of politicians furthering the aims and agendas of their cronies, and it will always be this way, even though it is all quite shameful, sleazy, unfair, dishonest and unjust.

No honorable person would think of going into politics, I said, and so the playing field is crowded with shameless players who wish to benefit their friends, so that they, in turn, might be benefited. We who elect politicians to office simply serve as stepping stones on the way to the political trough. Wherever power and money meet, shameless gluttons gather. This applies to every pursuit, whether in the arena of medicine, science, or culture. So, given this unfortunate state of affairs, doesn't it make sense that there should be an ad hoc committee designed to cull dishonorable politicians, conniving bureaucrats and their cronies? We might even do what Jonathan Swift suggested in his essay, *A Modest Proposal* – namely, we might consign dishonorable politicians to the pork barrel, to be dined upon at a later date by the very citizens whom they have dishonored. "And if this is too unpalatable," I said, "they could be rendered down and turned into pellets that could then be fed to hogs or cattle."

"Yes, but if we do that, our dishonest, sleazy politicians will end up contaminating the food chain," someone objected. "We who comprise the electorate will come down with Mad Politician Disease."

"Perhaps, if we rendered them down really well, they could be turned into fertilizer," I suggested.

"I wouldn't spread them around my flowers," another person replied. "It would be worse than pissing on them. Instantly, my flowers would turn yellow and die."

"Perhaps, we could use them as fuel, then – to stoke the furnace of the economy," I said. "That appeals to my incendiary nature."