

The New Orphic Review

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ISSN 1480-5243

The New Orphic Review, a journal devoted to publishing fiction, poetry, reviews and essays, is published two times per year by New Orphic Publishers. The review accepts no financial assistance from government sources, but will accept advertising.

EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICE:

The New Orphic Review, 706 Mill Street, Nelson, British Columbia, Canada, V1L 4S5. Fax: (250) 352 - 0743. Make sure all inquires and manuscripts are accompanied by an SASE and that the return postage is Canadian. Manuscripts with insufficient return postage will be held for six months and then discarded.

Payment to contributors is one copy of the review in which the author's work appears. *The New Orphic Review* purchases First North American Serial Rights only.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS PER YEAR (2 ISSUES)

Individuals Canada	\$25 (CAD)	Institutions Canada	\$30 (CAD)
USA	\$25 (USD)	USA	\$30 (USD)

Note: all subscriptions outside Canada are in U.S. funds.

Individual issues \$15.00 CAD or USD as applicable.

ADVERTISEMENTS (BLACK & WHITE CAMERA-READY ONLY):

Inside covers:	Other pages:	Half pages:
\$200 CAD, \$175 USD	\$150 CAD, \$125 USD	\$75 CAD, \$60 USD

Subscriptions and advertisements should be sent to the above address. Cheques should be payable to *The New Orphic Review*.

Cover art by Ernest Hekkanen

706 Mill Street Nelson, British Columbia V1L 4S5 Canada

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of twenty-eight books. The most recent are *The Misadventures of Bumbleberry Finn*, *The Radio Interview*, *The Clown Act*, *Harbinger of Fall*, *The Well*, *The Lambing*, *Man's Sadness*, *Sometimes I Have These Incendiary Dreams*, *The Island of Winged Wonders*, *Dementia Island* and *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*.

Alienation and the Kingdom

Ernest Hekkanen

EVEN THOUGH I was born in the Seattle area and lived there for only twenty-two years before crossing the border into Canada to avoid being drafted into the U.S. Army – this migration took place in the late 1960s – I have never felt myself to be an inseparable part of the Canadian fabric, despite the fact that I have resided here for thirty-two years now. To see me walking down the street, one would think: middle-aged guy, white, looks vaguely professorial with his gray hair shorn close to his skull and his beard trimmed close to his jaws, must be a staunch member of the community, one who pays his taxes, which are neither too great nor too little. However, my looks belie the way I feel.

From what I can remember I have always felt slightly out of sync, ever since the age of about six. Getting older didn't make me feel any less alienated. Indeed, I seemed to become more keenly aware of how I didn't fit in – in any group or in any social situation. I felt like the odd person out, and I wasn't at all certain why. I remember, in 9th Grade, I was sitting in a biology class, when an announcement came over the public address system to the effect that the Kennedy Administration had placed an embargo on Cuba. When the address was over and done with, Mr. McLeod, the biology teacher, said: "I'm sure everybody in this class will agree with what President Kennedy has done – except perhaps for Mike."

At that time, I preferred to use my middle name. It was less earnest than my first name.

The desk behind me was occupied by two girls. One asked the other, “Why did Mr. McLeod say that?”

“Because Mike’s last name is Russian,” said the other.

Until that incident, I had considered myself to be as American as any other person in the United States. I had, so to speak, been rendered down in the country’s melting pot. My heroes were typical American heroes: Davy Crockett, Elvis Presley, Mickey Mantle and John F. Kennedy, but obviously that wasn’t good enough to make me a true-blue American. My first experience with bigotry was totally baffling to me. You see, I had been built nine ways to Sunday by the Wonder Bread mentality of the U.S., but now there was a little whole-grain seed of doubt. Maybe there was something about me that was different – so different I could be mistaken for being of Russian heritage, rather than Finnish.

In E. M. Forster’s novel, *Howards End*, the character of Margaret, hoping to bring enlightenment to the soul of Henry Wilcox, draws the conclusion that life would be a lot more exalted – anyway, a lot less insufferable – if only we could connect. “Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.”

A sense of connectedness is supposed to keep us engaged and interested in participating to the fullest in life. It is supposed to give us a badly needed sense of purpose. For many, that could be construed to mean participation in rather humdrum, ordinary or downright stupid activities, along with a lot of other supposedly connected individuals. No doubt, this exercise – which amounts to little more than being comforted by numbers of like-minded mortals – is of some value. After all, we are social creatures and community helps to sustain our sense of ourselves. It’s that old saw about no man being an island unto himself. In literature, there are well-known characters who demonstrate what can happen if we suffer from the opposite – that is, a sense of disconnectedness. In Georges Simenon’s novel *The Stain in the Snow*, Frank Friedmaier’s estrangement leads him inexorably to his execution, in much the same manner that Meursault is led to his in Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*. Also, we have the example of Harry Haller in Herman Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, for whom the solidity of middle-class life is a kind of Paradise Lost.

Back when I was a young man in the 1960s, I found myself drawn to books that dealt with the existential nature of life. Indeed, when I was twenty-one, I wrote a rather bad novel that dealt with the

same sort of experience. Arguably, I had something to feel estranged about. The Vietnam War was raging and I was inclined not to participate in it. My definitive act came when I refused to step forward and so be inducted into Uncle Sam's army. Robert Fulghum, the Unitarian Minister famous for books like *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* and *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*, kept me from committing the blunder of dropping out of university and ending up in prison. He put in a good word for me at the Art School at the University of Washington and so got me reinstated at that institution, just in time to keep me out of the clutches of the legal system.

One day, I went to see him at his office – to discuss my future, which, at that time, didn't look as if it would extend far beyond a few weeks or months. He asked me to tell him about myself and so I unpacked my emotional and intellectual luggage. "Well, I don't know what to tell you," he said, after listening to my complaints. "You'll either get over these feelings in a few years or you'll have them for the rest of your life and, to tell you the truth, I don't know which is better."

Now, in my fifty-fourth year, I realize the sense of estrangement I have suffered from all my life is never going to go away. It will always be with me. I'm not a joiner. I don't work well in groups. I'm not a team player. When I'm *not* working on a book, I realize I have no talent for life or living – which isn't to say I haven't enjoyed as many trials and tribulations as the next person, for I have. Indeed, if one is plagued with my particular condition, for it *is* a condition, one is liable to encounter many more obstacles in life.

No, what I am trying to say is that the ephemeral communities I create on the page are, oddly enough, a lot more real and sustaining to me, albeit a lot more brief in duration, than the community I find myself living in – which is why, upon finishing one book, I am already mentally getting into the next one. I no longer find this condition as disturbing as I once did. In fact, I have come to embrace it, the same way the oyster embraces the irritant that results in the pearl.

Everyone, to some extent, suffers from the condition I am speaking of, but some feel it more acutely. A touch too much of this condition and you might be termed autistic. Without a positive way to deal with it, you might become an alcoholic or a drug addict. It is a condition that lets us know we aren't an inseparable part of the Kingdom. We have undergone some sort of separation that lets us know we aren't woven into the fabric of life as firmly as we would like to be – like animals who are content to roam the forest, for instance.

Engaging in the human drama, as existentialists such as Sartre and Malraux spoke of being engaged, is one way of overcoming the

gnawing sense of alienation or exile, but too often, as Camus warns us in *The Rebel*, such engagement can result in us abandoning ourselves to homicide and blood-letting of magnificent proportions, as exemplified by individuals such as Saint-Just and Robespierre during the French Revolution, Hitler during the Nazis era or Stalin in Russia. “Men of action, when they are without faith, have never believed in anything but action,” Camus says in *The Rebel*; and a little while later, “To those who despair of everything, not reason but only passion can provide a faith, and in this particular case it must be the same passion that lay at the root of despair – namely, humiliation and hatred.”

Ours is a wonderful conundrum. We are always trying to deal with it in one manner or another, in order to feel less isolated and alone, in order to feel like an operative in the service of Something Higher, like a functioning part of Something Greater. Some people resort to meditation or prayer in order to deal with the human condition. They try to reunite themselves with the Kingdom, to feel the great bliss of connectedness – or, as the Buddhists would put it, emptiness – but the need to resort to such practices only testifies to our true predicament. We are exiles who wish to feel our exile less acutely, by becoming part of a perceived whole.

The stories and poems in this issue of *The New Orphic Review* address the theme of alienation in various ways. Indeed, I suspect, that the condition we suffer from, this feeling of being singled out, has given rise to much of our literature, which is little more than an ongoing examination of the schism we are all familiar with, but which we try so hard to deny the existence of – whether with words or by deeds.

RICHARD SCARSBROOK is the author of *Sandcastles*, *Waves* and *Guessing At Madeline*. His work has appeared in *The Harpweaver*, *Storyteller*, *NeWest Review*, *Zygote*, etc. He lives in Toronto, Ontario.

Sky and Earth

1st Prize Winner / \$300

Richard Scarsbrook

1

I WAS BORN in a big city, and I live in a big city now. I have big city friends, and I spend my leisure hours doing big city things. But I make my living with charcoal stick, pencil, and paper, sketching portraits of ghosts of the rural past. I specialize in depictions of things which are either sprouting from the earth, or sinking into it. I wander through retired farmlands until I find something; a water-warped plank in the darkened corner of a long-abandoned farmhouse, or a crusted leather glove, half-buried in dirt and bits of the last harvest's cornstalks, frozen in the middle of its decay. An old iron plough, perhaps, reddish-brown like the soil it once carved, flaking away in small measures, its return to the earth hastened with each rainfall.

I translate these scenes into two dimensions, solemnize them in shades of grey, sanctify them in frames of silver and black. Other city people pay me well for these sketches. In an eight-by-eleven-inch frame, things dead and decaying become mere decorations.

Today is different, though. I am working on a type of sketch which I ordinarily never try. I am drawing a picture of a person. From memory. My subject's name is Robin, which suggests a little bird, flitting about, carefree, light-hearted, thoroughly unprotected. It is a name which is only about one-third correct.

I will begin by drawing her fingers. I remember her fingers as vividly as I can see my own, which grip this pencil like a lifeline. But at which point in time do I stop and draw? Which version of her fingers will give me the solace I need?

We are seven years old, exploring the landscape of Nana's farm. We are digging in the dirt, our fingernails cracking the drought-baked crust like tiny steam shovel scoops. We unearth small treasures: smooth, warm stones, bits of last season's cornstalks, bottle caps, shards of green and brown glass. Ants tickle our toes, the grass greens our knees, the sun reddens our cheeks and lightens Robin's hair to the colour of dried hay. High above us, not much larger than the stars of the night, jet airplanes carve their signatures in the sky. Their vapour trails sit in the sky like white woolen strings.

Is this where I should stop and sketch? Or should I move closer to the source of this silence?

Now it is the middle of July. We are both thirteen, sitting cross-legged atop an old horse blanket inside the old stable. Again we are explorers, learning with our hands. This is the first time I have touched female flesh, and it is the first time that I have been touched this way by another.

Robin is soft and warm and malleable, in places where I am cool and hard and flat. She draws a vertical line upon me with her index finger, dividing me in half, starting at the pit of my neck, parting the soft tuft of hair which has appeared at the center of my chest, stopping just millimeters above my belly button. She hesitates only for a moment, rests her face against my shoulder, then her fingers proceed with the descent. When she reaches the bottom of the trail, her other fingers join the lone explorer, and they curl up together like sleeping puppies.

She looks at me and smiles, her eyebrows cocked skyward. Robin is more brave in her explorations than I. She seems to have an instinct for this new territory, an instinct which I most desperately lack.

Her nipples are apple blossom pink, the texture of silk buttons on a grade-school teacher's blouse. I touch them lightly, with apprehension, as if my cool hands might destroy them, as early frost kills other delicate things. I am already too saturated, too overloaded with fascination to proceed any further than this, but Robin wanders on, causing the crooked walls to spin around me. On this climb I am suffering from vertigo, but Robin maintains her balance, and carries me further. My heart thumps like a ritual drum. Robin presses her face against my chest and absorbs my rhythm. I can feel her eyelashes twitch against my chest.

We move outside the stable, lean against its cold, rough walls, our eyes rolled up at the sky. At night, Robin can identify many stellar constellations, but I am the one who is most familiar with the sky's daytime inhabitants. I know more of the things which can be

seen up close, touched, understood through mechanics, made with the hands. I know more of things which live close to the earth. Airplanes and clouds are as far as my mind ventures from the ground; the stars belong to Robin.

3

And now comes another scene, one which I want to draw, to capture and contain, to make it trivial, and small. But I cannot.

I am in the stable again, but the hazy air has given way to the cold clarity of winter. Robin is lying on her back on the hardened ground. There is snow and dirt in her hair, a rivulet of blood on her lower lip where a tooth has unknowingly penetrated. Her skin is white from the cold, and she makes no sound. I can only be sure she is alive by the vapour from her breath.

On top of her is Danny, Nana's hired hand. His big hairy ass is bobbing up and down, obscuring Robin's waist. His chubby face is pressed against the side of a stall. Robin's thin white legs are pried apart. Danny's clay-crustured boots pin her ankles to the ground. Her eyes roll over in my direction, but she does not cry out. Her face displays no expression at all.

I have only now become aware of the predatory shriek which has exploded from inside me. My hand has wrapped itself around a handle which protrudes from a barrel of old farm tools, and the head of the sledgehammer has met decisively with the back of Danny's head before I am even fully aware of what I am doing.

He rolls over several times, legs kicking violently, his shattered skull sandwiched between his big bony elbows. His breathing becomes fast and shallow, like the breath of a hunting dog that's been shot by its master.

Robin is fully exposed now. Steam rises in wispy ribbons from her mouth. I take her by the shoulders, prop her limp body against the wall, pull her sweater down and her stockings up. I see the blood, feel the stony cold of her skin. He has ripped her winter skirt to ribbons trying to get to her, like a hungry scavenger might tear through a garbage bag for table scraps.

I am dizzy, the air in my lungs like molten metal. I lunge for the tool barrel, selecting another weapon. Both hands close around the handle, absorbing splinters as I raise it above my head and then plunge it downward. There is a sound like plucking the stem from a ripe apricot as I skewer his belly with the prongs of the pitchfork. He screams with the rage and confusion of a colicky infant.

Shut up! Shut up! I jab him again and again, until his screaming is swallowed by the cold silence of the barn. His shirt glistens deep

red, like wine spilled on a tablecloth. Steam rises from the holes, disappears in the sterile cold. His blood pools thickly around him, penetrates the frost, is absorbed indifferently by the barren ground. Then, eyes wide open, he twitches slightly in the warmth of his own death.

There are two parallel lines on Robin's face, the frozen tracks of tears. She does not blink, or move, or make a single sound as I carry her across the field to the house. Clenched between her fingers are the ends of a thin, black cord. She has worn this cord for as long as I have known her. The cord has been snapped, probably by Danny during his attack.

Danny. I have killed him...

Nana wraps Robin in blankets, sets her in front of the fire, calls a neighbour to retrieve Danny's body. I sit next to her for many hours, waiting for her to move or speak. Just as the flicker of the flames has nearly lulled me to sleep, I hear a faint utterance from her.

One word: "Wrong."

It's the last thing she says to me. Nana has both of us sent away before the end of the next day.

The paper crackles and resists, but I compress it into a tiny ball. It lets out a feeble death rattle as it settles into the waste basket.

I don't think I can put this into a drawing.

4

Now I am six years old. My brother Michael is attempting to teach me how to hit a baseball with a bat.

"Ready, Philip?" he happily barks.

"Ready, Mikey!" I chirp.

"Remember to keep your eye on the ball!"

"Okay, Mikey!"

The ball sails over the plate, and lands softly in the grass behind me.

"C'mon, Philip! You didn't even swing! You were looking up in the sky! Whatsa matter with ya?"

"Sorry," I say automatically.

"Let's try again. Keep your eye on it. Here it comes..."

Again, though, I am distracted by the sky. It is a beautiful, shooter-marble shade of blue. Thin white trails arc across the dome of sky. Jet airplanes. I love them.

"God, Phil! Another kid could've hit that ball with both eyes closed!"

"Sorry, Mikey."

I start pouting, which is one of the few defense mechanisms I've got.

"Okay, okay, Philip, don't get all sucky on me. We'll try it again, okay?"

"You'll yell at me!" I whine. This sort of thing really works on poor Mikey.

He walks over and puts his arm around me.

"I promise I won't yell at you, Philip. So whadda you say we try hitting that ball again! And, Philip, tuck your lip back into your face, okay? A bird's gonna poop on it if you don't!"

We scamper back to our positions in the middle of the lawn.

I can still hear the jet planes moving quietly across the sky, but I watch that stupid ball. I lock my gaze upon it, and I hammer it with a whack that sends it flying nearly two yards. Michael jumps up and down, cheering.

I look back up at the sky. There is a new vapour trail etched against the blue, one which hadn't been there before. One of life's great injustices: It is impossible to keep your eye on the ball and watch the sky at the same time.

"Stay right there, Philip," says Michael, as he runs towards the house, "I want Dad to see you hit the ball!"

My father is home today. This is very rare; his presence today lends a certain importance to anything we do.

5

Thomas Randall Skyler. My father. He was the inventor of several bits of apparatus which you have probably never heard of, unless you happen to be a particle physicist. He is best known for having built the prototype for a Stellar Mass Spectrometer which is now standard equipment in university laboratories around the world. Aside from being toolmaker to the Einsteins of his generation, however, my father had another little-known claim to fame. At age twenty-one, he was the youngest member of an elite group of scientists brought together during World War II for the purpose of isolating the most deadly neurotoxin that had ever existed.

My father was working on his Ph.D. in Physics at the time, and was recruited as a lab assistant by the group of scientists who were busy isolating the super-toxic compound known as Agent Z. When the toxin was finally produced and contained, my father was delegated to deliver the results to the National Research Council headquarters in Ottawa. They gave him enough money for an economy train ticket, three meals, and one night's stay in a cheap hotel. They also handed him a briefcase containing a small plastic capsule of Agent Z.

When my father got to the hotel it was quite late, and it was obvious that delivery of the substance would have to wait until morning, so he put the briefcase in the bathroom, opened the bathroom window, and shut the door behind him, “just in case something happened to the capsule during the night.”

That capsule of Agent Z, of course, if diffused through the air, was potent enough to kill every human being in the city of Ottawa. One bombful of the stuff would have been enough to destroy the entire population of Germany – and my naïve young father thought he was making himself safe by opening a window!

The next day, he dropped off the briefcase at the designated NRC office, signed a release form, and was back at his post by that same evening.

My mother was eighteen years old and my father was forty-one when they married. She could barely remember World War Two, and she was only vaguely aware of the conditions of my father’s wartime work. Since the weapon had never been used, he naïvely assumed that all research pertaining to Agent Z had been destroyed.

At any rate, it was my father’s name which appeared on the release form which was stolen from the NRC archives by a small group of radicals known as the “Action Front For the Elimination of Chemical, Biological, And Nuclear Weapons.” They had a clever acronym, of course: AFFECT BAN.

First came the threatening telephone calls, which demanded that my father give them the names of all the scientists who had worked on the project.

“Most of them are dead, and the rest are senile,” he told them. “I’m the only one left, and I was never directly involved in the research. So forget about it. It’s over.”

But the calls continued. They demanded names, the locations of data, and other information which my father refused to give them. Our latest unlisted phone number would be in place no longer than three weeks before the calls from AFFECT BAN would begin again.

I can only vaguely remember the two military police who were posted to our home, and I remember nothing of the harassing calls which preceded their presence. I do remember what happened afterwards, though, when the calls stopped and the policemen went away.

6

Michael has just taught me how to hit a baseball with a bat, and he is running towards the house to get my father, so that my second hit will have the legitimacy which accompanies adult witness to a child-

hood milestone. Michael is nearly to the steps of the front porch when it happens.

There is a package on our doorstep, which my mother has knelt to retrieve. The card, which will be later recovered from the eaves of our garage by the police detectives, reads: "To Doctor Thomas Skyler. With respect for all of your work."

My young, pretty mother is practically incinerated as the package explodes in her hands. The rush of yellow flame consumes our front porch, and scorches the front of our house all the way to the roof. The demon roar shatters windows in neighbouring homes. One of my mother's shoes is later found on the roof of a house two blocks away. Her wedding ring is embedded in the plaster of the living room wall.

I watch as Mikey is knocked onto his back by the shock wave; it is a small shock wave, I later learn, compared to that of an atomic weapon or even a conventional firebomb, but to me it is as if the Apocalypse has been unleashed in our front yard. The last thing I remember is Michael's wiry body bursting into flame, his screams, his blackening form writhing on the ground like a beetle on its back.

In my scrapbook, I have a clipping of the message which was sent out by AFFECT BAN to the newspapers the next day:

AFFECT BAN (the Action Front for the Elimination of Chemical, Biological, and Nuclear Weapons) claims responsibility for yesterday's incident at the Skyler home. The intended victim of the blast was Dr. Skyler himself, not his wife or any other member of his family. Dr. Skyler was involved in the manufacture of atrocious experimental biological weapons during WW2. This heinous knowledge cannot be left alive. We regret the loss of Skyler's wife and son, but we feel that nevertheless another blow has been struck in our battle to eliminate Chemical, Biological, and Nuclear Weapons.

Apparently, though, AFFECT BAN didn't have a moral problem with plastic explosives in plain brown wrappers.

My great-aunt Verna always insisted that we call her Nana. It is a name which suited her well, I think – closer in origin to the word "nurse" than to the word "mother." Nana's farm was the place to

which all of our family's wounded were sent to recover, or at least to exist. As a result of the explosion, I was the first of my generation to be placed under Nana's supervision.

Nana provided good physical care, but she was not what one would call a warm person. She saw it as her duty to provide routine maintenance for lives cast aside by fate, but she approached this duty in a very clinical way. Her experience had always been with invalids; she was not really prepared to care for a six-year-old boy with more-or-less normal human capacities.

Her farm was located about fifteen kilometers from the town of Faireville, which sits at the edge of Lake Erie, mostly minding its own business. I was sent to school in Faireville, where I prayed every day to God (in whom I still somehow believed) to take me away. In His own peculiar way, God sent Robin to me instead.

She was small, and her clothes and hair made her look as if she was delivered to school each day inside a tornado funnel. In class, she spoke as little as I did, and she was ignored equally by the other kids at recess time. When I would wander to the back of the school yard, to camouflage myself in the thick mess of vines which had grown around the fence, it became her habit to sit beside me inside the vines.

One day, while sitting together, dreading the ring of the bell which would end the solace of recess, she took hold of my hand. The warmth of her slight touch diffused through my entire body.

"My name is Robin," she said. "I want to be your friend."

8

Halfway through the first year of our friendship, Robin was absent from school. I was worried. Robin was never kept home from school, even when she was sick.

"Class," our teacher said, "Robin's mother died last night. I think it would be a nice gesture if we all signed this card for her."

There were groans from a few of the kids in the class. I should have been angry, I should have wanted to hurt them, to punish them for failing to love Robin the way I did, but I was only puzzled by their reaction. Why couldn't they understand that it was not Robin's fault that she had been born the child of Winifred Bright?

Winifred Bright had lived in an apartment over a store in downtown Faireville. She had become an unwed mother at the age of sixteen, and thus became the Devil's Representative when the Sins of the Flesh were discussed in hushed tones by Faireville's tea-and-cookie social elite. Whenever the teenaged daughter of a town busybody

was caught in the act of kissing a boy (or some similar atrocity), a finger would be pointed in the direction of Winifred Bright as an example of what happened to girls who distributed their affections indiscriminately.

I suppose Winifred eventually decided to play the role in which the townsfolk had cast her, because shortly after Robin was born she took to slinking down the sidewalk in plastic-wrap pants, and loose, low-cut blouses which allowed for much jiggling and bouncing. She had the type of physique which inspired certain men, when they saw her, to lean out through the windows of their pickup trucks and hoot “Whew-wee! Would’ja lookit THAT!”

Winifred brought a man home nearly every night. According to rumour (nobody would ever admit to having discovered this firsthand), Winifred never demanded anything in exchange for a night in her bed.

“My love is free to anyone who needs it!” she would declare. In her own mind, Winifred was not a prostitute. She didn’t ask to be paid for her sexual favours. Somehow, though, she managed to pay her rent, and feed and clothe her child, however meagerly, entirely with “gifts” from her many male “friends.”

Everybody in Faireville knew that Winifred had posters of Chairman Mao Tse Tung plastered all over the walls of her apartment. It wasn’t that anyone had *been there*, mind you... you could see them from the street at night. Winifred rarely bothered to pull her blinds down; some said that this was a clever advertising technique. Whenever the Beatles’ tune *Revolution* was played on the radio, certain righteous citizens of Faireville would turn to each other and exchange knowing glances when the Beatles sang the line, “If you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao, You ain’t gonna make it with anyone anyhow.” These individuals figured jokingly that the Beatles had never known Winifred Bright, because she owned pictures of Chairman Mao, yet she “made it” with practically everyone. Others, particularly her male “friends,” would scratch their heads and wonder aloud just who in the world “Mousey Tongue” was.

It was Winifred’s frequent habit to undress for bed in front of an open window, much to the delight of the boys who had quietly crawled out through their bedroom windows to carefully hide in the shadows of the small park across the street. She would lean through her window and sway back and forth, taunting the poor boys until their hearts were pounding so hard you could feel tremors in the earth. Then, when many of the boys were about to faint from lack of breathing, Winifred would finally unleash her enormous breasts from the confines of her lacy white bra. She would allow the invisible boys

only the briefest glimpse of her famous possessions, then she would tug the blinds down.

Perhaps it was not until the moment she threw herself from the Lakeside Park Bridge that it occurred to her that she was being used rather than valued.

9

“But, Philip,” came Nana’s flustered response to my desperate request, “I’ve never taken care of a little girl before! I wouldn’t know what to do!”

“But Nana!” I begged. “She has nowhere to stay! Please!”

Nana slowly shook her head.

“I’m an old woman, Philip. I have a hard enough time looking after *you!*”

“But Nana!” I wailed. “They going to send her to an *institution!*”

I’m not sure how I became aware of this, but I knew there was something in Nana’s past that had given the word “institution” a meaning similar to “hell” in her vocabulary.

“All right, Philip,” she said quietly, displaying the tight-lipped frown which I later understood to be her version of a smile, “bring me the telephone.”

Something about Nana changed at almost the same moment that Robin timidly stepped through her front door. Nana combed out Robin’s tangled hair and draped her in one of her own sweaters, which, on Robin, nearly touched the floor.

“You certainly are a pretty little thing, aren’t you?” Nana said. I had never heard Nana use a word like “pretty” before.

From that point on, there were uncontrollable bouts of silliness and laughter in Nana’s home, for probably the first time ever, and it became apparent to me that Nana was a woman who was full of love, but she had never known how to show it until she was reminded that her hardened old shell had once been small and soft and pretty, too. The fire inside Nana, once turned outwards, became too much for just Robin and I, and she decided to hire several disadvantaged persons from town as live-in farm hands. Within two seasons, Nana’s farm was transformed from weed-choked dormancy into a once-again productive homestead.

One of the new workers was Danny Campbell, an ox of a man with the mental capabilities of a three-year-old. Danny could barely speak, and walked with an odd limp, but he was stronger than everyone else in our house combined. He had kept himself alive by doing heavy jobs the other people in Faireville would never do, for wages

they would never accept. Although there was rarely anything more than an uncomprehending expression on poor Danny's face, I believe that he was much happier in the employ of Nana than at the mercy of the townsfolk, who saw him as something less than natural.

Nana saw Danny as someone who could be saved.

10

I have discarded half a sheath of sketch papers now, but have yet to complete a single sketch of Robin, the way she was before we were torn apart.

I am running out of time. Tomorrow is Nana's funeral, and I know that Robin will be there.

11

Robin is wearing black, as I knew she would be, but I am stunned by how she looks. I expected that she would be shrunken, withered by trauma. She looks sad, as one should look at the funeral of a loved one, but she is also slim, and tall, and incredibly beautiful. How odd it is that sadness is the detail which turns a pretty face into a beautiful one.

"Philip?" she says.

"Robin."

She takes hold of my hands and she rushes through me, like every time we've ever touched. I have always been afraid of this power of hers. Despite the fact that I never really knew my mother, I have a very strong feeling that she had this same sort of effect on my father. This terrifies me.

The slim black cord is still around Robin's neck. A small knot holds it together where it was broken.

The funeral is soon over. Nana is safely tucked away beneath the crusted soil of her farm, which is once again overgrown with weeds. I am carrying my sketchpad. Robin is a few steps ahead of me. I am surprised that she has agreed to do this.

She leans back against the stable wall and exhales gently. My pencil makes slight scratching sounds against the paper. Robin toys with the knot of that slim cord, rolls it back and forth between her porcelain-doll fingers.

"Did I ever tell you about this cord?" she asks.

I shake my head.

"My mother gave me this necklace. She used to wear it herself, before I was born. It's just a plastic string, really, but she liked the

way it felt between her fingers. And she liked that it was never cold against her neck, the way gold and silver necklaces are.”

I continue sketching. My mind is empty of words.

“I was wrong, you know,” she says.

“Wrong about what?” I ask hoarsely.

“Remember when we used to come out here. We would touch and kiss, and try to talk about difficult things.”

“Yes. I remember.”

“I thought it was magic,” she says, to herself as much as to me. “I thought it was *my* magic. I thought it came from me.”

She brings the knot up level with her eyes.

“I thought I could make Danny better. But it wasn’t my magic, and it didn’t make him better. Did it?”

I think about Danny, writhing on the ground in shock.

“No. It certainly didn’t.”

“It made him fierce,” she whispers.

“It made him dead, too,” I mutter, almost inaudibly.

12

There is nothing but the scratching of the pencil for a heavy expanse of time. Robin continues to fondle the knot in the cord around her neck.

“Love doesn’t protect anyone from anything, does it?” she says, so abruptly that I drop the sketchpad.

I cannot exhale. Could this be the question which I have been trying to force onto the safety of paper?

My father loved my mother and brother, but they were destroyed along with him. Robin’s mother loved anyone who asked her to, but she was destroyed by everyone around her. I loved Robin, and Robin loved me...

I hold Robin around the waist. Our faces are wet with each other’s tears.

Robin reaches to the pit of her neck and unties the knot in the cord. It drops to the ground as her arms pull her close to me again.

“Can we go on now?” she whispers in my ear.

We wander slowly away from the old stable, leaning against one another, eyes skyward. There is always an airplane slowly crossing the vast expanse of sky.

My sketchpad is closed, nestled under my free arm, and the cord lies upon the cool ground at the place where it was first broken, left to be taken back by the earth.

VAUGHAN CHAPMAN of Surrey, B.C. works in a university library. In December 2000, she finished a five-year stint teaching yoga part-time and is now devoting her energies to writing. She has previously published work in *Pottersfield Portfolio* and in the 'Reader's Write' section of *The Sun: a magazine of ideas*.

Urban Legend I

2nd Prize Winner / \$100

Vaughan Chapman

ONCE, THERE WAS a woman who worked for a large corporation in a tall building in the downtown core of a city. She worked on the twentieth floor, did data entry, and had, for a time, gone out with one of the men on the twenty-third floor. It seemed serious enough to begin with, but over time, he was more interested in climbing the corporate ladder than he was in her, and she didn't know if she was interested in him or not. They had gone out for five or six months, then had gone their separate ways. No hard feelings, really. No divisive undercurrents in the relationship between one floor of the building and the other. She kept going to work, entering data, and returning to her small apartment on the ground floor of a three-storey brick walk-up on the outskirts of the city. He, well, she didn't know what he did.

She was a quiet woman, and content, except that she longed to take one of those packaged vacations to some tropical island where the poverty of the people who live there all year round can't be seen, where only those on such vacations are booked into the hotels, and where sand, surf, sunsets, tropical fruit, late dinners, and dances fill the days and nights with memories of a lifetime. She'd wanted to take one of those vacations since her sister had died six years before, after being hit from behind by a bus whose brakes had failed. Her sister had lain in a coma for three days, not expected to live a normal life if she lived at all. She hadn't lived, and so the family – then just

herself and her parents – had never had to discuss *what if*. Her sister had died with all of the tubes still in her and with all of the life support systems turned on. None of them had been there at the end.

Bit by bit, the woman secreted away the money she needed for the trip, never believing, really, that she would go through with it. Yet, one day, she did not walk straight ahead when she left the elevator after work. Instead, she turned left, walked into the travel agent's office, asked about prices and timing, made reservations, and charged them to her credit card, knowing full well that she had already saved more than enough to pay off the charge when it came due.

Five weeks later she was at the airport, an off-white raincoat over one arm and a pale blue over-the-shoulder bag filled with more things than even she thought she'd need clutched tightly against an even paler blue cotton dress fastened with a narrow white belt. She had already handed her matching suitcase to the clerk at the check-in counter. No one was there to see her off. She had no close friends, and all of her acquaintances were busy or none of them cared. It didn't matter. Her parents hadn't been to the city since her sister's death. Besides, they would have questioned her about why she was going and admonished her to be careful. As if such a vacation were fraught with danger. Or she weren't naturally careful. Or there were anything at all she could do if there were some natural disaster, some earthquake, or tidal wave, or hurricane.

She waited excitedly for the flight to be called, though all that might have been seen of that excitement was the heightened glint of her eyes and how she would not sit but rather stand, raising and lowering the heel of her right sandal in some pale imitation of fingers drumming absentmindedly upon a desk.

The flight was called, and she moved toward the passageway. Her tickets were in order. She passed through and walked with others down a long, narrow corridor toward the waiting plane, echoes of shoe taps sounding and resounding around her.

Her seat was next to the window and for this she was grateful. She climbed in, straightened her dress, placed her bag under the seat ahead of her, and fastened her seat belt. Soon, she saw the world as she knew it rush past and fade as the plane taxied down the runway, took off low, then climbed higher. She looked down at her lap, saw her left hand tremble slightly, then lifted both hands to push her tired shoulder-length blonde hair behind her ears. The edges of her bangs fell forward.

The beach sands were white when she got there, the waves rushing and blue, and the temperature and the breeze just hot enough and cool enough in turn. Only those registered at the hotel were to be

found on the beach and then not all of them, for some were in the small town nearby or in the air-conditioned rooms or at lunch in the dining area just off one of three hotel pools. Mornings, she ate tropical fruit that was brought to her room for breakfast, then went into town to wander through the shops, sometimes eating a little lunch there, sometimes returning to lunch at the hotel. Afternoons, she would put on her white straw hat, fasten it under her chin, don some white or blue shorts and matching blouse, pop on sunglasses, and walk the open beach. The warmth beneath her feet softened her and made her smile.

One day at a restaurant in the nearby town, a man at the table next to hers struck up a conversation. She had seen him before, on the street, and they had smiled. Their conversation was easy, and before the meal was over, he had asked her to dinner and she had accepted. His manner was respectful, and besides, she had come to the island for the possibility of this, too. The brochures had suggested as much. Yet she had not packed a dinner dress and so had to pick her way through the shops before going back to the hotel, all the while hoping he did not see that she had to do this. Or that she wanted to. There were lots of dresses to choose from, and who is to say whether it was indecision or hope that caused her to buy three before taking a cab back to the hotel to lie down and rest before the evening.

She put on one dress and then another, and then another and then the first again. The orange and red print looked good, but she felt more comfortable in the blue that matched her pale eyes and decided on that one at last, bemoaning, as she did so, how the powder, mascara and lipstick she had brought weren't really right for her skin anymore. It had darkened, just a little, with the sun. She was still pale though, pale more than fair, for her colouring came not so much from what she had inherited as from her way of life, how she had engaged with it over the years. She was soft, yet for a woman in her early forties, she had a good figure.

He knocked at seven precisely. Her stomach tightened. She wished she had had time to go to the bathroom just one more time but pushed her tired bob behind her ears and stepped across the floor to open the door.

And when she did, and she saw his open, yellow shirt breathing gently over his dark chest, her heart beat fiercely as she looked up into his face and met his warm, brown eyes with her blue ones. He smiled, and they were soon walking over the white sands, their sandals in their hands, the breeze stroking their already charged skins.

Dinner, as lunch before, was easy, and afterwards, he asked her to dance. As the night grew longer and the dances slower, he held her more and more closely in his arms. Her head lay on the beating of his

heart, and when she felt his sex throb against her thigh, she squeezed him, then moved so that her ear lay against the skin on his strong, dark chest and she knew that if she wanted to, she could turn her head and feel the hairs of that chest tickle her open lips.

They walked back the way they had come, their sandals again in their hands, for the night was warm and the sands still held the heat of the day. It was dark, but he knew the way well. They laughed easily, and when they reached the hotel and her room, it was only natural that he should enter first and turn on only the lowest of lights and look long into her eyes before bringing her to him and kissing her strongly, all the while holding her with a gentleness that reminded her of how the stakes with their canvas ties held the young trees outside her front window at home. It was unlike her to be so free with a man on the first date. She was, really, quite unsure of herself when it came to matters of the body and how to be with another sexually. Yet he so steadily moved the two of them toward their coming together she did not falter but basked, all the while, in the attentions he lavished upon her, and trusted, trusted him completely because he moved so slowly, even though his body belied a great need.

They came together fully, he crying out for her and she for him, and they slept, he dark against her pale, on the white sheets, night after night, until it was time for her to leave. Which day they both had known would come, and so, while they spoke of things that two will speak of when they have had an affair on a tropical island, they were more filled by their parting than drained by it. The light now shone from her eyes all the time.

He drove her to the airport and stood with her until she had to leave. They held one another closely. Until the last possible moment, when, as she turned, he pressed a small package into her right hand and whispered hoarsely into her close ear, "For you. To open when you are safely home."

"But —"

"No," he said, drawing her to him again. "Not until you are safely home. Then you open it." Lifting her head with his left hand and clutching her blonde hair back through his fingers, he kissed her deeply to silence her protestations, then let her go. "Hurry," he urged, pressing her elbow. Partway through the gates, she turned to wave goodbye. He waved back. She turned again and ran. The sound of her sandals slapping the polished floor echoed back and over her shoulders.

Again, she sat at the window. Looking out at the tarmac and then the blue sea and the cloudless sky, she raised her left hand to push her tired hair behind her ear. Her bangs fell forward. She saw the diamond of a tear in the black branches of her mascaraed lashes. She

felt the small gift in her right hand, squeezed it as a heart squeezes blood through a living body. She looked down and slowly opened that hand. It trembled slightly. A small oblong box lay in sharp relief against her soft palm.

Why wait until I get home, she asked herself, fingering the small black package tenderly. A narrow gold ribbon divided the black in four, and a delicate red bow, like a rose, petalled out from the middle of its surface. She plucked the rose and lay it on the skirt of the same blue dress she had worn on her flight over. She slipped the gold ribbon off, first from the sides of the package, then from the length of it. She ran her fingers along the surface of the shiny black paper as she had so recently run them across the skin of the man who had given her this gift. She slid a nail under the tape and slit it cleanly. She lifted the paper.

And her heart skipped a beat.

Her eyes darted to the man seated next to her. He was not watching. Her ears pounded with the roaring of the plane. She straightened in the seat and forced herself to examine the box more closely. It looked like a miniature coffin. Her heart raced as she slowly removed the lid. Small papers, rolled and tied with a red ribbon, sat upon a bed of cotton batting. With trembling fingers, she raised the roll and pushed the ribbon off, not caring where it fell. Her heart rate slowed and her breathing became shallow. She unfurled the papers. There were two of them. "You are a dead woman." She moved that first page. "AIDS."

Coldly, she returned the wee pages to their bed of cotton batting. She replaced the lid and pushed the box, papers and all, into a small white purse she had bought on one of her trips into the nearby town. Her hands held that purse in her lap all the way home, never moving, never trembling. She stared out the window but no longer saw the cloudless sky, the blue sea below, or the patchwork of land when they came to it, veined as it was by the rivers and creeks running through it.

She disembarked with the rest of them, mechanically picked up her luggage, moved through customs without incident, and went to the airport bar for a single scotch, neat, before taking a cab home.

In the time before a definitive test could be made, she became paler than she had been, though this was not immediately clear because of her tan. She lost weight, too, on which her co-workers first congratulated her, then later fell to whispering about among themselves. She withdrew from her acquaintances, did not go to see her parents at all. And in the months after what was, ultimately, a positive diagnosis, she could often be found sitting in a pale blue armchair in her off-white living room. There, legs curled up under her,

hands folded and unmoving in her lap, she gazed out the near window through a glistening tear caught in her mascaraed lashes to the young trees with the green leaves, eager branches, and trunks so thin they had to be staked and bound by canvas ties to hold them erect.

W.P. KINSELLA is the author of over thirty books including the novel *Shoeless Joe*, which became the movie *Field of Dreams*. He lives in retirement in Chilliwack, B.C. where his wife, graphic artist Barbara Turner, is restoring their 1891 Victorian gothic home. Kinsella cuts the lawn and stays out of the way.

Do Not Abandon Me

3rd Prize Winner / \$50

W. P. Kinsella

I DON'T REALLY know what my husband, Richard, does for a living. I do know that because of his occupation he is one of the loneliest men on earth. The reason I don't know is not for lack of interest, but lack of understanding. Richard, never Ricky, Rick, or Dick, is employed by Harvard as a sort of one-man think tank. He spends his days in a quiet office in front of a clean desk thinking about mathematics. He has made some breakthroughs in the echelons of higher calculus that only two other men in the world are capable of interpreting, of telling him whether he is right or wrong. One is in Japan, the other in one of those countries, Honduras, Ecuador, Bolivia, where magical thinking is part of the national psyche, a country where it is unreasonably hot and humid and the political situation is terminally volatile.

I know it sounds cruel, but Richard is such a bore. I am so sick of him. He is totally predictable. I know I am being unfair to Richard because, ten years ago, predictable was what I wanted. I was twenty-two, had just come out of a two-year, knock-down, drag-out relationship with a 6'8" tackle for the New England Patriots. Sex so intense I often felt I'd explode, or at least cause myself irreversible bodily harm if we continued for one more minute. The bad times were equally intense, to summarize all our difficulties, Karl had no concept of the word fidelity. Women flung themselves at him as if he were a rock star. I traveled with him one fall, road trips to Dallas,

and Los Angeles. He received Fedex packages and letters at the front desk, hand-delivered letters slipped under his door. Panties, bras, photos, gifts, some purchased, some handmade, each accompanied by primitive, pitiful letters full of misspellings and pornographic suggestions. I'll always remember one from a girl who in her arcade, three-for-a-dollar photo looked about eighteen, she had a long pimply face and lank black hair. The accompanying note read in part, "I like to due a good blowjob so there's no chance I should get pregnate."

I met Richard at a book signing. There is a monster bookstore in Worcester and a girlfriend convinced me to accompany her there one Sunday afternoon where a young author, whose name I had never heard, and can't recall, was signing his book which had something to do with philosophy and the cultural revolution. I read, but I enjoy love stories and mysteries, and like to be scared by Stephen King. While we were waiting in line to get her book signed, Richard walked by. My girlfriend's bother had roomed with Richard at Harvard, where Richard had attended from freshman to Ph.D., and then gone into their esoteric think tank. He looked like a sad puppy. I wanted to cuddle him and pet him and wipe those laces of black hair off his forehead. We went for coffee after the signing, and Richard was shy and looked into his coffee whenever he spoke. My girlfriend was the one he should have been interested in, she had a degree in psychology from Smith and was about to set up her own practice; she was as close to an intellectual equal as Richard might find. She was trying to impress him, but it apparently didn't work, for the next week Richard phoned her brother and asked him to call his sister and get my last name and phone number.

After my tumultuous relationship with Karl, Richard was peace, tranquillity, stability. Richard would never have groupies.

We dated for several months. Movies, dinners, concerts, lectures. I had to seduce him. Undoing my bra while he was tentatively touching my breasts, after about our seventh date, gave him a clue that I was ready. I compared this to Karl, who moments after we met, clutching me in an elevator on the way to the parking garage, asked me if I enjoyed a number of activities, all connected with oral sex. I was too stunned not to reply. I panted that I did. "Just laying it on the line," said Karl. "There are actually chicks who think they can impress me by holding out."

When we did make love, Richard was surprisingly passionate. I hadn't expected much from this slight, sink-chested man with his uneasy smile and small, pale hands. Eventually, Richard asked me to marry him. I said yes. I longed for stability. But not boredom.

Let me give you an example. This is what Richard considers a significant activity for the two of us. I'm sure he's read somewhere in a magazine that married couples should do things together in order to keep their marriage fresh. He enrolled us in a course on Navigational Codes and Signals.

"We don't own a boat," I protested.

"That's not the point," Richard said. "This is something new to us. I'll bet none of our friends have done this."

"And with good reason," I said, but under my breath.

We do occasionally go out for a Sunday afternoon on a friend's boat, but if they have any navigational flags I've never noticed them, and I certainly don't recall anyone ever flashing them signals. After the first class, held in a musty room in some kind of privately funded community center not far from Harvard Square, I said to Richard, "These flags aren't even applicable anymore. They're obsolete."

We had to put a one-hundred dollar deposit on each text, a book published in the 1930s, and long out of print. The elderly instructor loaned us each a copy that was held together by glue, tape and fingerprints. "These flags were used by commercial vessels. That kind of communication has been almost completely replaced by radio, radar, sonar, computers. And who is this guy teaching the course? He looks like he's old enough to have sailed on the Pequod." The signals themselves were mainly commands. T: Keep clear of me. U: You are running into danger. Y: I am dragging my anchor. I joked that many of the commands could apply to personal relationships as well as seagoing vessels. Richard stared at me as though I had spoken in a foreign language. His sense of humor is minimal to say the least.

We attended every Thursday for six weeks. We wrote a final exam, received a little certificate stating that we were qualified in the Communication Aspects of Practical Navigation.

"I'll put this on my résumé," I said. I laughed. Richard smiled slowly. I have no résumé. My degree certificate reads *Artus Generalis* or something foolish; I took a few literature courses, some theater, art history, basic psychology. I'm qualified to work as a part-time clerk in an art gallery, which I do when I'm totally bored.

West travels. On a moment's notice he flies off to Cairo, Budapest, Peking, Madagascar, Zanzibar. He told me a story about being associated with clove smugglers in Zanzibar who risk death to sneak sacks of contraband cloves into Kenya, from where they eventually make their way to the gourmet chefs of Europe, who use them to create exotic sauces.

"My business," says West, "is dangerous antiques and artifacts."

His life is full of intrigue. Albania has only recently become accessible. Last month, he smuggled a dozen silver goblets from the 1300s out of Albania, each encased in a garishly painted plaster statue of a saintly-looking monk. I helped him unpack them from their bed of cedar shavings and shredded newspapers.

“Part of my business is to circumvent bureaucracy,” says West, a smile crinkling the lines at the corner of each eye. “Countries make unacceptable rules concerning cultural artifacts. It is my job to stretch, bend, or even break the rules. I can bribe my way through customs anywhere except the United States, Canada and sometimes Great Britain. One has to be patient, in some countries it takes a long time to reach a bribable official.”

West has golden hair, the body of a very good tennis player which, at forty-two, has widened until his step has slowed enough that he only plays doubles of a Sunday morning, and only for fun. He has a golden aura of danger about him. I have to admit, I have a fascination with dangerous men.

“I want us to travel together,” West said over the phone yesterday, as we were finalizing this date. West has been married once, has a child to whom he is very good. “My ex,” he says, “lost her spirit of adventure.”

“Perhaps we could introduce her to Richard,” I say. We giggle like children.

I met West at an antique show. “I don’t usually do this,” he said, after I’d stopped to admire a jade dragon, seamless, seeming to glow with an inner light. “But sometimes rich people go slumming, and they assume that I’m selling at below my regular prices because everything else in the show is so tacky. I usually work by appointment only.”

I inquired about the dragon.

“Because you’re such a beautiful woman I could let you have it for \$80, 000.”

“I’m afraid only tacky is within my price range,” I said. West was wearing khakis with many pockets; he looked like a scientist in a Tarzan movie, the one who warns the expedition leader, “The natives are restless, I don’t think it’s safe to travel any further up this river.”

“I’ll give you my phone number,” West said cheerfully. “Call me, I’m sure I have any number of artifacts within your price range.” He handed me a business card centered with a W in sweeping calligraphy. His hand held mine for a few seconds as the card, and jolt of sexual energy, passed between us.

I called him the next day. I went to his shop on antique row, where customers are admitted only after ringing a bell, stating their purpose, and sometimes showing ID. “I deal in coins, precious

gems,” said West. “Browsers aren’t welcome here. There are many extremely devious men in my profession.”

We went for lunch, three hours with good wine, and food I don’t even remember. I spent my time staring into West’s aquamarine eyes and longing to touch him. As we slid from the booth in the now empty restaurant West faced me, put his right arm around me, lifted me right off the floor and kissed me. I never wanted him to stop.

Whatever guilt I had drifted away as his tongue filled my mouth and I grabbed the golden curls that extended over his collar and returned the kiss as passionately as I knew how.

Still, I put off consummating the affair.

“I have to be certain,” I told West, “about our feelings, about my lack of feelings for Richard. I think it would be sinful to just have an affair. That would be tacky.”

We’ve had lunch almost every afternoon for three weeks. I’ve lied to Richard about working at the gallery. I’ve actually told the owner I won’t be in for the next few weeks, maybe never again. We’ve done everything but have actual intercourse. I have only to say the word and West will get us a hotel room for an afternoon, because I can’t figure a way to stay out overnight.

One afternoon in his office, after kissing passionately for a long time, West sat me in the huge leather swivel chair behind his desk, knelt in front of me, slipped my panties down and loved me with his tongue until I shrieked and thought I might faint from ecstasy. We traded places and I found myself, still trembling from my own climax, letting myself go completely. I was so anxious to fill my throat with him, to please him, that for a moment I knew what those football groupies (Karl referred to them disdainfully as cum garglers) must have experienced, the chance to give the gift of passion, with a hope, no matter how slight, that it would be received meaningfully, that something like love might follow.

In the evenings, whenever Richard retires to his study to read his texts and treatises on mathematics, I phone West, who lives some fifty miles out of Boston. The calls will appear on our phone bill. I don’t know how I will explain them. I don’t care.

I think of Richard in his study perusing documents in a language only three people in the world understand. Rich once considered a hobby. “I think I’d like to get a little lathe and put it in the garage,” he said. “I thought I could make wooden coat hangers.”

I think opulent might best describe the hotel room where I will shortly give myself completely to West. There are fresh flowers, champagne, a fruit basket, a wooden bowl of those delicious, foil-wrapped chocolates that are mysteriously placed on your pillow in

the late evening. I eat one without even realizing what I am doing. Its taste is so intense I eat another.

I have been in this hotel room once before, this elegant, impersonal space, or at least an identical room on this or a nearby floor. The room was engaged by Harvard, and from it we were able to see the finish line of the Boston marathon. The Japanese genius was visiting Boston, and Harvard had booked the room months in advance because the Japanese mathematical prodigy, a Mr. Nakagawa, postulated that there was a possible mathematical formula that would explain the muscular coordination of trained athletes, something to do with the way they pumped their arms when running.

It was an eerie feeling watching the progress of the race on television where, ever so often they would cut to the finish line, which we could see below our window. In fact, once they showed the hotel and if they'd held the shot another few second we could have picked out our window. The view was remarkable in that we could read the numbers of the runners, chests heaving, as they crossed the line, and we could see the journalists shoving microphones into the faces of the sweating athletes. I felt disoriented, like a kitten in a room filled with sober monkeys in business suits, their arms folded in privacy across their collective chests.

At 10:00 a.m. a Fedex courier arrived at my door with a large, colorful envelope. It contained one of those coded plastic cards for opening a hotel room door. There was a hotel business card with the room number scrawled on the back along with the word Noon, and West's large, calligraphed *W*, his signature, the same *W* that appears on his shirts, in gold on a ruby pinkie ring, his key chain.

The ringing phone jars me back to the present. Oh, no. West is going to be late. Worse yet, West can't make it. Some European count is desperate to purchase a Ming vase.

"Madame, it is the Concierge. Madame is requested to glance out the window of her suite."

"What on earth for?"

The Concierge has a heavy French accent. All American concierges have heavy European accents. He's probably lived all his life in Worcester. I wonder if European concierges have heavy American accents?

"I can only repeat the message supplied to me, Madame. I am informed that if you glance out the window of your suite, you will see something interesting."

I hang up.

It can be only one of two things. West is doing something wonderful and extravagant, a banner on one of the nearby buildings that says I LOVE YOU, ESME. A huge floral arrangement: I picture a horseshoe-shape, ten feet high, like those at the Kentucky Derby, or a gangster's funeral, sculpted of white carnations, with my face centering the interior, my cheeks and lips red roses, my eyes blue hydrangeas.

On the other hand, what if Richard has followed me? I can't imagine him doing that. He's never missed a day at his job in the ten years I've known him. I've been so happy the past few weeks, since I've been spending time with West, perhaps Richard has noticed. Has he shown any signs of suspicion? Nothing comes to mind. He left for work at his usual time; he always leaves the house at 7:30 a.m.

I make my way across the room to the window, slowly, as if I am walking in something congealed, each step an effort.

Oh, it is worse than I thought. It is Richard. He is standing across the street, about where the runners crossed the finish line of the Boston Marathon, staring toward me through his thick glasses. He looks so helpless. His colorless slacks are rumpled, he wears a brown windbreaker, a slight breeze blows unruly laces of black hair down across his forehead. His right shoulder droops so unhappily. He is holding a flag. It is on a tiny flag pole. Where in the world would he find such a little flag pole? It is one of the flags from our text book. I can picture Richard in his study, thinking about, instead of mathematical formulas too complicated for even extraordinary mortals, something he can do to rekindle my interest in him, to make me love him again.

The flag he holds displays the letters CXL. I have to admit I only did a halfhearted job of learning the signals, and after we passed the test, Richard with 100%, me with 55%, a bare pass, I let many of them drift away like notes of music disappearing forever. This is information I will never use again, I thought. Let's see – A = I am undergoing a speed trial. K = You should stop your vessel instantly. What do these combinations mean? CXL sounds like the acronym for a football league.

Oh, my. Oh, my. It comes to me. And I place my hands, palms flat to the glass, arms extended above my head as if there is a burglar with a revolver standing behind me. Tears well up, overflow. I snuffle. Richard looks so intense, so vulnerable, so lonely.

CXL is a command: Do not abandon me. DO NOT ABANDON ME! It is the perfect flag. Richard sees me, raises the flag a little higher with his right hand, waves diffidently with his left.

West's knock sounds at the door. Cheerful, full of energy. My heart flutters. I remain at the window. West knocks and knocks.

VIRGIL SUAREZ, born in Havana, Cuba in 1962, is the author of over fifteen books of prose and poetry, the most recent a poetry collection entitled *In the Republic of Longing*. His poetry, stories, translations and essays have appeared in numerous journals, *TriQuarterly*, *The Ohio Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Kenyon Review*, etc. A fifth collection of poems, *Palm Crows*, is forthcoming from the University of Arizona Press. The following poems are from a work in progress, *Caliban Ponders Chaos*. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida.

Virgil Suarez / **Four Poems**

Night Rapture, Or Doña Inez Gives and Gives of Herself

How easy to compare her labia
to the soft, gentle petals of her orchids,
blushed, a pink suffusion of her lips,

the two times her lovers have pleased
her in that way—what words come
to mind, don't stay long, flutter away

like doves, in their wake her writhing
on her pillows, enveloped in mosquito
netting. As a child she recalls blushing

when she saw the gardeners at her
father's house plant roses along the path
in front, their strong arms, their dark

skin. These are the memories she knows
will haunt her until the end, those
and the gardenia scent wafting through

the open windows, the frogs beckoning
their own nuptial visitations. How sweet
this desire, the ebb and flow between

her breast. Now her thighs burn, absent
are her lover's hands, her lover's mouth,
in the waking of all this luscious living.

Pageant

The youngest girls sob when hairspray burns in their eyes because they need poofy hair. The woman hairdresser comforts them with stories of kittens, Lassie-type dogs who rescue children exposed on the hillsides, or she mentions pizza and cheeseburgers. They wait their turn on stage where they will dance, juggle flowers, their minty-breath words spoken loud so that everyone can hear how they will make it to the eighth grade, excel in math, teach their dogs new tricks; a world opens with possibility, but for now their mascara has run. The mothers, ex-beauty queens themselves, chew on their cuticles, waiting in the wings for their little darlings to belt out a song, tap dance their moment of greatness. This is middle America, little girls strut their potential. Way up high on the stage rafters, a sand bag is about to break off and fall on the center of the stage, missing contestant #7, barely, and she continues to act the scene from Romeo and Juliet lost in a cloud of dust, putting out a hand, saying "O Romeo," and the SNEEZE! The girl's mother wants to faint, does, and falls back on the lap of a grandfather who can hardly keep back the tears. Who could resist them, these darling girls on the verge of how the world waits for them?

Road Kill, Cold Coffee, & Motel Porno, An American Journey in Reverse

between crushed armadillos,
 possum carcasses, & dead deer,
 the miles of tarred road,
 a shimmer of wavering heat, a vortex
 of the lost . . . crows congregate
 like monks to the shoulders
 gorge themselves on maggots,
 pluck them from ribcages-
 a red trail of intestines
 from east to west, sun's ripe
 malice of dusk. tattered
 maps & books in a box
 in the front seat, a backpack
 with sox & underwear, a haze
 of college yearning behind.

over the bridge & into yet
 another truck stop: piss, stretch,
 fill up on hot coffee, a steady lull
 of wheel against asphalt. radio
 doesn't work, loses frequency
 under the overpass where black
 scissortail nest in Texas, blue
 sky country, cows propped
 on the hillsides. when it's time
 to stop, check into a motel,
 not a chain, but an off-road
 job run by Pakistanis, room 8,
 of course, & a musk of feet
 on the carpets, barf stains
 in the bathroom floors, leaky
 faucets. but the television works,
 the television always works,
 channels 50-60, pick of adult
 entertainment. everyone tunes
 in, this blue flash of skin upon
 skin. in the middle of the night
 when you drive through small

towns on the outskirts of cities,
you will pass such motels, a flicker
of this kind of blue light seeping
from behind curtains in these motels.

there are men dying in such rooms,
you will say, women too.
men & women staring at porno on tv,
transfixed-like that moment
when a desperate, wild animal crosses
in the silence of a divided highway
and doesn't turn fast enough
to see the truck or car coming . . .
it's that flash of recognition
between those living & those dead –
such blue light is never enough
to drown us out of such rooms,
silent places we leave behind,
the shape of a body on a mattress,
a glass of water on the night table,
a newspaper strewn on the floor,
a flickering sign like a bug zapper
that beckons all travelers
to stop for good, end all journeys.

Owl Pellets

My eight year old daughter, Alex, comes home from school one afternoon with a Ziplock baggy full of what looks like lint,

these little balls of fluff and bones, and I ask her what it is and she says simply “owl pellets” and I follow her to her room

to ask what those are. She is in the second grade and already she is smarter than I will ever be. She explains that her teacher

ordered them from a company that collects the pellets, cleans them, you know, because when the owl regurgitates them,

they are yucky and dirty, nobody wants to get E.coli from them. And I stay up with her by saying a lot of “uh-hums” and “oh-yeahs”

but she knows her father didn’t go to elementary school here in the United States. Her daddy is a naturalized foreigner

from a little island in the middle of the Caribbean, and he didn’t do much in elementary school other than march in uniform,

dismantle AK-47s blindfolded, things kids here would never have to do. She holds up the baggy to the light, and I see them, little

skulls, tiny jawbones, and Alex laughs at me for the way I’m looking into the bag, my eyebrows all “scrunched up,” as she calls

my inquisitive stare. She explains further that the teacher. Mrs. B Brown says that the company keeps these owls in a big aviary,

and a man feeds them all kinds of mice: field, deer, house mice, rats, voles, even moles, even hamsters. Then he waits around for the owls

to hock them up and he collects the pellets. They clean and disinfect them, put the pellets by the dozens into boxes and ship them out

to the schools. “The pellets,” Alex says, “look sort of brown and they are elongated - you could see the bones encrusted in there.”

I’m still looking at the baggy when she asks for me to look

at the chart they've given her at the school, you know, the lesson.

#37 LAB-AIDS OWL PELLET KIT: COMMON PREY FOUND
IN OWL PELLETS / BONE SORTING CHART.

And I am looking at the chart, then at the bag, and Alex wants me to move to the table in the kitchen because she's afraid I might

drop the bag and lose her collection of tiny bones. I can't help myself.

I take the Ziplock to the kitchen table and sit there as though I were

working at a puzzle, and I begin to identify the tiny bones and match them to the pictures on the charts, the femurs, the scapulas (shoulder

blades), the fibulas & tibias, vertebrae, front & hind feet, a shrew's skull & jawbones, its little teeth, and I start to think of the man

whose job it is to wait for the owl to throw up these little bags of bones so that children all over America can learn what an owl

eats. I see him carrying in these big trays of live mice, hamsters, gerbils- he knows the trick. He lights a cigarette because it is the night

shift and he's alone, and besides who cares? Because he's the only feeder who's stuck around, and he leans against a tree, smokes,

waits for the big birds to get hungry, and they are always hungry, and when they scoop up a claw full of mice he knows it's a matter

of time before the sounds of coughing begin, old birds perched high up on the branches, trying to get these pellets dislodged

from deep inside their throats. The man thinks of his next drink, and the next, of a woman who left him because of his job, because

she said he was an absolute loser, and I'm thinking this man is a hero,

because now I am sitting with my daughter in the kitchen, looking

at how well all these bits and pieces of bones can tell such sad, sad stories.

JOONSEONG PARK was born and grew up in Seoul, Korea. He is currently a first year Ph.D. student in English at Texas A&M University. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Pangolin Papers*, *Cicada*, and *RE:AL*.

The Warped Wheel

Joonseong Park

I WATCH A GIRL in cut-off jeans, a light blue scoop neck tee and a red Texas Rangers baseball cap, standing next to a lady in a long white dress with lace at the hem, perhaps the girl's mother. They talk to a customer representative, a woman in a bright blouse, her hair gray and wavy, who smiles affably, engagingly, like a school principal receiving a student's parent. The woman, patting her bright blouse, stands up slightly and sits down. As the lady in the white dress and the girl walk away, I approach the desk and sit in a chair.

"How can I help you?" the woman asks.

"I want to open an account," I say, looking at her manicured nails, her hands playing with a ballpoint pen and then drumming it on the glass-covered desk.

"Can I see your visa?"

"Excuse me?" I hesitate for a moment, staring at her face and her hand raised to her hair, discreetly arranging its waves.

"I have a driver's license."

"Oh! You have everything," she says with a false smile.

"I just have a driver's license." My face strains. My cold impassive gaze makes her smile disappear. I pick out a brochure from the plastic holder, and then reach for more.

"Would you just take one and leave the others in place?" she says to me, putting papers in front of me, which I sign. She asks for a PIN number, which I blurt out and soon forget.

“What is your phone number, sir?”

“I don’t have a number yet. I came to town only last night.”

With a preoccupied look, she starts sorting papers on her desk, paying no more attention to me than she would an invisible man.

“You are all set, sir,” she says without raising her head.

Slowly picking up a book of temporary checks, I stand and walk out of the building.

Outside, I feel disconcerted and irritated. I look at my reflection on the glass wall, thinking the woman must have mistaken me for a Mexican or Chinese.

Last winter I received a letter offering me a teaching position in the English department at a small college in Texas. I didn’t have any choice but to come down from New York City. I hadn’t heard from any of the other schools where I had wanted to teach. I decided to fly down and later buy a used car. I hadn’t driven in NYC for several years.

I start pedaling my bike, not realizing I am moving, not knowing what direction to take. I ride along the road, passing a church, and go down the sloping streets to the public parking lot, passing by restaurants and fast food outlets. I stop at a Chevron gas station. My gaze wanders over to the booth, the gas pumps, then the payphone attached to the side wall of the booth. I park my bicycle and stand behind a man at the payphone, waiting for my turn. The man is talking, his back towards me. He turns around, the receiver tucked between his chin and his shoulder, glances at my face quietly for a second, and then continues to talk, his head turned toward the street, hands in pockets, leaning against the booth. I look at his nape and double chin over the white collar of his shirt, then look around, trying to find another payphone. I decide to later call my mother.

I am on my bicycle again. The back of my shirt is soaked with sweat. The sun, the blistering sun. I feel exhausted by the mid-afternoon heat. Everything around me is blurry, burning, trembling with heat. It is as if I am walking on a desert. I stop at Café Paper Moon.

A back-lit stained glass wall features a life-size replica of Garth Brooks. Deep inside are a lighted domed ceiling, an open kitchen with a counter and a separate retail entrance for merchandise purchases. I order a cheeseburger at the counter. Two men with broad shoulders and sinewy necks walk into the café and stand behind me. The stocky one is wearing a light brown cowboy hat, thick cow-leather belt, tight jeans and long boots with high heels. The cowboy hat is creased down the center and has a pencil-roll brim and a slight upsweep on the sides. They start talking about Railroad Killer, a Mexican national who has been an illegal migrant farm worker for

almost twenty years. He traveled by hitching rides on rail cars. He is now wanted in a string of slayings near the railroad tracks in Texas and Kentucky.

“People say he may have crossed the border to Mexico.”

“I bought another shotgun yesterday.”

I take the cheeseburger and sit down at a table in the corner. The two men, who have been sitting on the other side, stare at me and talk in a half-whisper, then the man on the right turns his head and waves his hand. A tall girl with long white legs comes to the table and sits next to the man for a while. Her light blond hair is cut to brush the shoulders of her white T-shirt. She has a small face with light blue eyes and a pert little nose. I see their mouths moving and then laughing. The man puts his arm around the girl’s waist as they stand up and walk out. Showing panty lines through her tight shorts, the girl’s bottom trembles as she walks. The girl turns her face and casts a swift glance at me. She pretends to see nothing, pulls the man’s arm, passes me. I look at their backs, my shoulders hunched. The footsteps of the boots ring in my ears.

I look up at the sizzling sun, making a grimace and shading my eyes with my hand, and walk across the road to the library, wondering why Rafael Resendez-Ramirez, the Mexican man, had killed so many white people and why every time he was kicked out of the States, he had to come back. I walk into the library. Down the hall, there is a payphone.

“Hi, mom. It’s me.”

“You arrived there safely? It’s hot down there, isn’t it?”

My mother is Korean. She met my father when she worked in a women’s clothing store in Jamaica, Queens. My father was a Mexican manager in that store and my mother was an undocumented worker there. She came to NYC with her uncle’s family from Los Angeles and was just eighteen years old when she married my father.

“It’s hot. I feel like I’m in a desert.”

“Did you talk to the people in that school?”

“I just talked to the secretary. She told me the head of the department is out of town but will be back this weekend.”

Ω

I am in the reading room. There is J. M. G. Le Clézio’s *Livre des fuites* on a table. I sit at the table and try to absorb myself in reading for a while, to find why Adam Polo, the main character, flees from Paris to London, to Bangkok, to New York, from city to city, on and on. Not having any clue, I lean back in my chair and watch a man clear his throat. I slowly stand and walk out of the room.

Three elevator doors at the end of the corridor are decorated with posters and ads. People are waiting in front of them, men with the same hairstyle, wearing the same white T-shirts, and women wearing identical backpacks and caps. Above the elevator doors, indicator lights flash on and off and a bell rings at intervals. The people look up at the indicators, the green and red winking arrows. They press the buttons and wait. The metal doors open. An aluminum interior comes into view. People emerge from the elevator. The iron doors close gently. I look down at the spotless floor and look up at the light moving from number 4 to 3, 2, 1, then fix my eyes on the ceiling for a moment, straining my neck. I get out and start walking. Suddenly I stop and look around. I see blank faces with blond hair and blue eyes, cowboy hats and boots, limbs of passing women, and the dull burst of mouths speaking.

In front of the circulation desk is a big man wearing a black robe with a cape, wide flowing sleeves, and a pointy hood. A white rope is around his waist, hanging down to his knees. I stare at his broad back and wonder if he belongs to a religious cult, or if he could be in the Ku Klux Klan. I squeeze my hand into a fist, as though crushing something. The man under the hood turns around, the wide sleeves flapping. He stares at me, as if I am an alien from another planet. He takes two steps forward. I stare at his white face, with long white mustache and beard. I feel something shaking me. I feel something break inside me. My wet clenched hands loosen and I look down at the spotless floor, my shoulders hunched, my hands in my trouser pockets. I stay there, motionless. I don't know how long I stand there, but I stand there until a young man behind me touches my shoulder. I look at the clerk at the front desk. He asks, "May I help you?"

Ω

I take off the U lock and mount my bicycle. My legs feel wobbly as I ride up the road. I stop my bike and look around at the stadium, the field, the goal post, and the white-lined track. I get off my bike and start perambulating, looking around and gazing down at the grass-covered ground. I stop, look up at the sun, my eyes squinting, shading them with my hand. The sun is motionless in the middle of a blue sky. Suddenly, I feel myself being overcome with drowsiness. The buildings at the left look hazy. I close my eyes and rub them with my hand. I get on my bike again and slowly start pedaling.

There is no bike road or sidewalk on old College Avenue. The 45-mile per hour speed limit sign stands alone in weeds on the right side of the Avenue. There are no buildings except for a Exxon station

surrounded by weed-covered land. At the right side of the gas station is a spray-painted, junked car, tires gone, windows broken, doors open. San Pedro Avenue parallels the railroad track that cuts through town. I have to cross the track to get on the road to the apartment complex. I hear a whistle of a locomotive and then a long line of box cars and tank cars appears from the east. The red and green signal lights flicker above the switches. I pedal as fast as I can to cross the track before the train comes.

“Damn it,” I curse, panting. I stop my bike as the train passes in front of me. My face is red hot and wet with sweat. An endless line of dark cars passes in front of me, the locomotive disappearing into the west. I get off my bike, sit on a rock and take out a cigarette from my pack, light it, draw hard three or four times, watch the smoke come out from between my lips, then put out the cigarette and retie my sneakers. I sit there for a while. Then I watch the last car vanish into the distance, sliding on the shiny track. Soon nothing is left but the naked rails gleaming faintly and the silent telephone poles and the harsh sizzling sun.

Ω

I am on my knees on the ground. I stand and look at my hands, the scratched palms covered with dirt. I thought the driver saw me coming. I thought she would wait until I passed the driveway. She should have seen me; I am not an invisible man.

My bicycle is lying on the ground, the back wheel still spinning. A petite girl with a freckled face and long blond braids gets out of a car and asks with a frightened voice, “Are you all right?”

“I don’t know.” I look at my scraped hands. I pull the bike toward me, see the warped front wheel and press the tire of the bicycle to check whether it has a puncture. I don’t know how the police officer has come to the scene. Somebody might have called 911. Perhaps the officer saw us as he patrolled the road. He takes off his hat, wiping his forehead and his bald, strangely white skull.

“What is your name?”

“Michael Choi Fernández.”

The police officer looks up at my face from the pad and asks, “You have an unusual name. You are an Oriental?”

I stare at his face without answering that I am half-Oriental and half-Mexican.

“Are you new to this town?”

“I just arrived here last night.”

“You don’t like this town?”

“Why do you assume I don’t like this town?”

“Because strangers...” he mumbles to himself.

I tell the officer what happened and he writes it down on the pad.

A man with a potbelly, maybe the girl’s father, shows up. He shakes hands with the officer and talks to him, smiling. The officer pats his back, laughing. The father looks at the bumper of his car and tries to rub off the trace of the bicycle tire with his hands. The girl and her father get in the car and drive away. The officer comes back to me, tells me that I can pick up the police report later at the station, and then he turns his back and gets into his police cruiser. I am left alone with my bicycle. Slowly, I start pushing my bicycle, which moves in a zigzag fashion.

“What happened?” a small black girl asks.

I stagger along with my bike. I drag it, lifting the warped front wheel off the ground. Black kids on bicycles stop for a moment.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Would you leave me alone?”

Behind me, the boys burst into loud laughter. The voices of youngsters ring out, then die off. I arrive at my apartment, my shirt and jeans wet with sweat. Several two-storey wooden buildings stand in rows. A dumpster is in the unpaved parking space between the buildings. Papers and plastic bags litter the ground.

I take the key out of my pocket, slide it into the lock, and open the door. The walls, the carpet, the closet, the kitchenette are ground-colored. There is no furniture except for a dirty gray sofa and a chair beside the door. I plump down in the corner of the sofa, lean back, look at the ceiling, hearing the noisy sound of the air-conditioner above my head.

I walk to the laundromat, where an old tiny Oriental woman, sandals on her small feet, is dropping clothes into a washing machine. She glances at me and I smile. She says something in a foreign language, maybe Chinese, and I say, “I don’t understand Chinese.” She looks disappointed as she says, “Oh.” I feed three quarters into the vending machine. The Coke falls, hitting the plastic cover. I bend, lift the cover, and grab the Coke. The coldness of the aluminum can in my hand spreads through my whole body, making my body shake a little bit or perhaps just making me feel like that. I guzzle the coke, making a gulping sound, and then look at the bulletin board at the right, on which is posted a car for sale ad. The white paper has turned gray with age. All the phone number pieces at the bottom are gone.

I walk back to the apartment. I take out a transparent plastic packet of pot from a drawer and see that there is not much left in it. I dent the empty Coke can in the middle with my thumb, then make a few holes with an ice pick. I put some pot in the middle of the crease.

I light it and draw the air through the open mouth of the can. I draw hard, stop breathing for a moment, close my eyes, and exhale slowly, the smoke being dispersed by the cold air from the rattling air-conditioner.

Ω

It was the thunderstorm that woke me up. I hear the rain beating on the windows. I open my eyes and stare into the empty dark space. I look around and half raise myself and sit on the bed with my hands on my knees. I don't know where I am and why I am here. The objects in the room slowly take on vague shapes. I turn on the light. I squint, dazzled by the light from the ceiling. I look at the alarm clock and find the face of the clock is dead. I don't know how long I have slept. I stand up, draw back the shades, and look outside. It is dark. Rain is falling. There is lightning in the dark sky. The feathery top of a tree, a harsh green color, illuminated by lamplight, sways back and forth in the wind. I sit on the sofa, lean back, and stare at the warped bicycle wheel beside the still unpacked boxes and luggage. The bicycle is resting on its handlebars, without a front wheel. I grab the pedal and slowly start pedaling with my hand. I stare at the rear wheel, the spinning reflectors and the crisscrossed stainless steel spokes. Then, outside, I hear the sound of the locomotive over the rain, the lugubrious sound of a quiet night.

PADDY BUSHE was born in 1948 and lives in County Kerry, Ireland. He has published four collections of poetry, the most recent of which is *To Make the Stone Sing*. This year will see the publication of two further collections, *In Ainneoin na gCloch* (Coiscéim), a collection in Gaelic, and *Hopkins On Skellig Michael* (Dedalus).

Paddy Bushe / **Three Poems**

At Cúirt in Galway

for Seamus Heaney

The tide race is crazy today, passing itself out
In a mad rush between river and sea,
Running rings around streets and traffic,
Revvng over weirs, flat out under bridges.

Where it calms a bit, below the Spanish Arch,
A whole billowing armada of swans is still
Holding the line magnificently against the flow,
Their dogged, webbed effort a measure of grace.

The sun is orchestrating jigs and reels of light
(Around the harbour and mind the jetties),
While mooring chains are clanking out the time
For tipsy masts that nod, a beat or two behind.

And last night's reading lifted up our hearts,
And blew them open, and coaxed them out to dance.
We're still high, and mighty. So who cares today
That the bitter little sickle-man tomorrow gets his way?

April 1999

Layers

for Fang Yang Ying

When the huge Jade Dragon Snow Mountain
Hunched itself for days behind layers of cloud,
And hid its scaly peaks so that they gleamed
Only in half-remembered photographs,

I thought of those layered pagodas
Where a monk survives as a tiny crystal
That shines still behind the carved locks
Of stone doors that open only in the mind.

Didjeridoo

No doubt it was the baby, the business
Of sites, plans, house and all
The attendant satisfaction that pushed it

From our minds, beyond the 'final notice'.
I had never collected it from Customs, away back,
After we had flown home, the package labelled

'Aboriginal artefact' that had followed by sea.
Now and again I thought of it, wondering
If it lay choked with dust, silently shelved

With the other veterans of the yearly auction.
I hope it resounded for someone, or that children
Spied each other wide-eyed along its length.

Twenty years on, increasingly I imagine it,
The bark incised with criss-cross patterns,
Its snakes and emus sacred in ochre.

I would search with it for songlines, despite
The mockery of kookaburras, the rasp
Of cicadas, the sun beating like a drum.

I would hum new totems into my dreaming,
Feel the pulsing in the lizard's throat
And root for grubs between huge horizons.

I would leave my handprint at the mouths of caves
And I would feel, far beyond the last fence
The reverberation of the earth aching for rain.

Born in Liverpool, England, in 1969, ANDREW PARKER has had poems and stories published in France, Italy, Germany, India, U.S.A., Japan and elsewhere. He has recently finished writing his first novel, *August in the Pool*.

Essence of an English Village

Andrew Parker

A MAN ON A shining Japanese motorbike rode through the twisting country lane, and even through the restricted aperture of his full-face helmet, he could appreciate the simple beauty and vision of the land. Well-maintained privets brushed past him on both sides and wild flowers sprung from gaps in the road surface. He smiled with recognition at the vague odour that permeated most of the countryside; manure.

Approaching the village, he felt a sense of relief but couldn't fathom the reason why. He thought to himself, "Why should I feel relief at entering this village – what would cause me to feel like this – and why?" He could not come up with a satisfactory answer.

The lane widened out and swept around a quaint village green. It was a small expanse of lovingly manicured grass, about one-hundred yards long and twenty yards wide – it was a strip of grass, basically. Cars were parked haphazardly on both sides of it and our protagonist, Jack, pulled over and parked his bike.

Hesket Newmarket was an old Cumbrian village that had been mentioned in the Domesday Book. Its inhabitants remained loyal to each other and to the old ways of communal English life – people actually spoke to each other! They made general conversation and people even went to the trouble of raising their hats in passing, but predictably, outsiders were not tolerated.

Jack took off his helmet and looked around the square. A variety of cottages and ersatz buildings lined the western side, and on the other, the Post Office, general store and village pub stood as if they had been there since the beginning; they had. A bandstand with ornate wrought iron metalwork was the central attraction of the green, and verdigris had captured it securely to the ground. Once again, Jack felt that strange sense of relief, but this time he recognized its stimulus. He was home, he realized. Jack had returned home for the first time in two decades, and although some things had changed, (the pub had changed its name to the *Lamb & Kettle*) essentially what remained was the same village he'd left in 1978.

"How can it be," he thought to himself, "that a thing can exist for so long outside our experience, then upon experiencing it again at a future time, its existence becomes once again realized – where's it been in the meantime?!" Confused slightly, Jack walked over the green to the Lamb & Kettle, kicking up dew off the grass; grass greener than he'd ever seen before. His gaze lingered, and his brow became furrowed with the complex intensity of the colour. The green grass had startled him.

He sat down in the pub near an open fire that was roaring at the far end of the lounge. Its orange reality had attracted him to it; its warmth and noises. He drank a bottle of stout whilst thinking about the village, as it was now, and how it was when he'd left it. He found the comparison both intriguing and slightly odious. On one hand, he concluded, nothing had changed – the village essentials had remained and in all probability, would continue to remain. But on the other hand, everything had gone – sort of *shifted* – replaced by the new imagery that was now in his consciousness. He concluded that for a thing to exist, it ultimately had to be *constantly* experienced, otherwise only its essence could be perceived, and that perception became shapeless and unstable as time passed. This shook him. From the back pocket of his trousers he took out an envelope that was folded in half, removed the letter that was inside it, and proceeded to read it to himself. This was what he read.

184, Londonderry Lane,
Smethwick 41
Staffs.
Sat 15th Sept 1951.

Hallo, Hallo,

I'm back in London and it's raining – *so* depressing. I've just phoned the place I thought had my suitcase and discovered it's not there! Ha, ha, it's reposing with an

airforce officer whose christian name is Don & who lives in *the* biggest block of flats in London. I can't go out to find it because it's raining like hell & I'm afraid my sandals will disintegrate if I set foot outside the door.

However – ain't life grand! My dears, I'm so sorry not to be with you now having fun in Amsterdam. But did you ever hear of a better hitch than from Cannes to London – I couldn't miss it & it cost nothing. We left Cannes at 6.30 Wed morning – arrived in Paris at 10 a.m. Thursday – *cherché la bicyclette à la Acheye* – & left it there – and flew across the Channel yesterday morning. Since then I've been rushing madly around trying to locate everyone & collecting luggage. Apparently the other girls, two of them at least, have been within a stone's throw of me at Nice. Pat – I haven't located yet – presumably she's still alive. What I'm worrying about is walking into "Chelsea cloisters" & asking vaguely for Don – it looks so odd to say the least. And to top all that, Don is a funny one! He writes strange little poems and short stories. Just listen to this odd thing he published with an *avant-garde* pamphleteer. "Souvenir" he called it.

"The car. Parked. Its door. I locked it. Feet – steps taken one after the other to facilitate a forwards momentum; a success this. Walking it's called. Then click-clack tottering slut clops. A girl, young, heels, arse beyond comparison size-wise – Gulp! She's behind me and following. Nearer she is now. I turn at a seemingly nonchalant opportunity, and smiling, get one back. It approaches and with an intimate whisper in me ear 'ole, invites me inside her. Fuck me, oh fuck me, she caws, as if I'd negative reply! Hold hands we do she virtual drags me as if appendage down road not far to flat she pays for. Nice inside she straight away splays and displays cute glistening thigh-hole and motions me and mine penetration ways. No messing around disrobed I become and hammer away all smiles delighted slipping and shunt-grunter. Come smelly together – a rarity. Musty pineapples hers is. Mine yucky gruesome bodge. Laughing but then nervously a conversation tries itself, though fails as if otherwise it couldn't. I leave remaining the quickly brunette girl to herself and once away feel quite giddy-euphoric for once in a while, while walking. The

original idea-plan of the bookshop visit is undertaken eventually but really, much endorphined mind wanders over tomes like a swan's breath – consciousness too overgripped by thigh-hole acquaintance and the pale face skin of hers surrounded by the protein-hair brunettenness teased into a shape. Tongs must've done it. Drove home after ignition of car's engine with won't-ever-read books. Days later, her scent still lingers on a dangle of mine. Shan't ever wash it off..."

and so it goes on like this – see what I mean when I say he's odd?! However, at least, I'll have shoes to wear. At least I'm not looking too disreputable – the last place I stayed at I acquired quite a nice coat – but let me start at the beginning. Briefly and ignoring details – I slept for a fortnight in a garden – the place you left me at & had a good time getting acquainted with the Riviera (no comment here). Then I stayed at a boulangerie for another fortnight – then the last week I met a bloke in the Blue Bar and so I spent the last week working in a flower farm. This man was Dutch married to an Englishwoman & with an eighteen year old son – I earned some money and spent a very pleasant week. I've met lots of people – including half the American navy & learnt a lot about *Life*.

Here, the letter ended abruptly and he folded it back up into his pocket. He got warm, drank up his beer, and walked out of the pub. He had spoken to no one, other than to order his drink, and no one had spoken to him in return. He knew the rules, acceptance took time, trust, and a strong will was essential to endure the non-tolerant nature of country folk. He walked out of the village via the northern route and came across, in a large field, some sort of fête or cattlemarket with a fête-type atmosphere. There were food stands selling the usual country fare, jams and chutneys and stuff, and other stores selling secondhand books and clothes and a white elephant stall selling off all sorts of junk. The cattle pens contained all manner of bovinity, plus there were pigs, goats and a couple of aged shire horses somebody wanted to swap for a pony. Jack visibly winced as he caught sight of two teenagers leaning over the goat pen and slapping one in the face – he captured that image and it remained in his memory for the rest of his life, but he didn't realize this at the time, that it would remain there for so long.

He walked about for a bit but then went back to the village and his bike. Just as he was about to get on his bike, he thought to him-

self, “I think I’ll just have one last smoke, before I go.” He rolled up a thick cigarette, being overly generous with his tobacco, then pulled out the straggly bits from each end. “This cigarette in my hands,” he thought, “must exist, and I’ll prove it to myself by smoking it down to the end.” He sat down on the grass and did just what he promised himself, all the time inhaling deeply, much more recklessly than he’d inhaled in the past. It was enough to burn him and he clutched the side of his chest with the discomfort.

So finished, he got on his bike and accelerated away, back down the road from which he had initially entered Heskett Newmarket. He rode for about a minute, then pulled over by a stile, steadied himself with his feet, and took his helmet off. A cow in the field looked at him with its head cocked to the left; whether this was in curiosity or just unawareness, it wasn’t clear. What was clear – plain and real – was that the cow’s inquisitive nature proved its existence, and this baffled Jack. How can an animal, deemed to be unaware, react to an event it obviously perceives? Frustrated, Jack threw his helmet at the cow but his aim was poor – he missed the creature by a wide margin. But it was close enough to startle the animal, and it bolted away across the field, hauling its massive bulk impressively.

Jack revved the bike, turned around and sped back towards the village. The flora flashed past in his periphery as before, but now it held no beauty for Jack as he accelerated and gained momentum. The roadside fencing became a blur, a cattlegrid failed to slow him down, and still he gathered speed. It was determined that this happened. Jack’s will had never been as free as he had perceived – he realized that as he reached the village green and bore across it at 65 mph. He momentarily looked down at the speedo and willed it to register 70, but the bike didn’t have it in it. The bandstand was upon him quicker than he expected, it seemed to rush up to meet him. On that initial contact – front tire and bandstand foundation – Jack felt the relief flood through him. Of course, his existence would be proven by this act, he knew that now, he knew he was right, and he felt beautiful. His last sentient moment was a fleeting instance of quite uncomfortable nausea, and over at the cattle auction, at the exact moment the auctioneer’s gavel struck, they all heard the distant impact.

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

The Word Mechanic

Ernest Hekkanen

When people ask me what I do for a living
I tell them I am a word mechanic.
I take broken-down utterances, spluttering phrases
and wheezed-out sentences and, well, I repair them.
I tune them up, grind them smooth, put in new points
and, in general, stop them from leaking.
That is, I rejuvenate them. I give them new life.
Once that is done they are free to go
anywhere they please. There is nothing to it, really.
Just pass me that word wrench over there;
I think these phrases could use some tightening up.

Featured Poet

Susan McCaslin



Release at Young Lake

SUSAN McCASLIN teaches at Douglas College. She has published eight volumes of poetry: *Conversing with Paradise*, *Locutions*, *Light Housekeeping*, *Into the Open*, *Flying Wounded*, *The Altering Eye* and *Common Longing: The Teresa Poems and A Canticle for Mary and Martha*. She edited the well-received anthology, *A Matter of Spirit: Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry* and is now editing *The Practice of Spirit: Contemporary Canadian Poets on a Spiritual Path*. She resides with her husband and daughter in Port Moody, B.C., where she is editing the papers of an early 20th century mystic and pioneer of early Vancouver, Mary Olga Park, and working on a new volume of poetry, *The Fit of Song*.

Mere Poetry

Mere = absolute or unqualified

L. merus unmixed, bare

Susan McCaslin

POETRY IN ITS ESSENCE is larger than my ego, any ego, yet it makes the whole self larger. Yeats' lifelong quest was for what he called "Unity of Being," so the discipline of poetry he practiced opened him constantly to a unity of body, mind, soul and spirit that already contained him. Poetry for me is the essential spiritual practice that gives meaning to my life, unremitting as a creek in a rain forest.

Today as I was walking my cocker spaniel around Sasamat Lake, a single sear leaf pronounced its outline, arrested from gravity by a bent and withered branch. It became in the instant of perception a stay of longing against death – like poetry. If, as Blake once suggested, death is like moving from one room into another, I know that new room will be as ontologically concrete and intense as the ones we now inhabit. More real perhaps – a riot of colour and sensation. There is a slippage of religious thought into the notion of heaven as more ethereal, abstract and diaphanous than everyday reality. I am with those who say it is supersensual, ecstatic, not just a place for disembodied brains to strut their stuff, but a chariot for the body. The brain there is not a muscle to be flexed, but a pipe organ to be played.

The longing of poetry is to reconcile philosophy and mysticism, science and poetry into a new ordering of direct perception, to reveal the geography of the intermediary realm of Imagination. The philosopher Henri Corbin called it “the Imaginal world” to clarify its nature. Despite the work of the Romantic poets, the common sense of the world “imagination” remains “unreal,” “airy fairy.” And this is just what poetry is not. It is a purple Archangel walking toward you with garments dipped in blood. You smell the blood; you live the encounter. You don’t know what to say, but something comes out of your mouth. You are not the same afterward. You are not in another world because the event has happened where you are.

Almost as long as I can remember I have been drawn to religion, spirituality, mysticism, spending years trying to distinguish and define these terms; but poetry is not about definition. I have studied most of the great mystics, lived with and written about some of them like William Blake, Teresa of Avila and the author[s] of the gospel of John and Thomas. I love mystics of the east like Lao Tzu. Black Elk, shaman of the Oglala Sioux, speaks to my soul. Only a spirituality of inclusiveness will survive.

In my early twenties, I met an extraordinary woman who had stepped outside her conventional Anglicanism into the esoteric stream of Christianity. When she spoke, she voiced my own unspoken, almost inexpressible thoughts. She was a catalyst, an awakener, drawing me out into the larger me. Her thought and teaching belonged to the interior realm. Mary Olga Park was a living 20th century mystic hidden in Port Moody.

In the west, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have their esoteric streams, whether persecuted or tolerated within or at the periphery of orthodox religious institutions. Such people as Olga Park were called “heretics” in the past, and tortured or burned at the stake. Yet the so-called “heretic” is the root and foundation of institutional religion. Who can doubt that the institutional Church radically altered and tamed the life and teachings of its founder, rebel Jesus, as well as the insights of the Gnostics. Today, business goes on and nobody really cares if you have some eccentric beliefs. But, as my mentor taught, beliefs aren’t what matter. What matters is the experience of the divine and how you order your life in its wake.

My spiritual practice is a form of contemplative prayer passed on by my mentor. Lately, I have been struck by the analogies between a lifelong, dedicated spiritual practice and the spiritual practice of poetry. They are for me distinct, yet inseparable. Both require dedication, a setting aside of time and a clearing of space. In both, one cultivates an attitude of openness to what flows in. The inrush and welling up from within cannot be forced. If I try to force a poem, I might

as well forget it, as it will usually forget me. The poem, like a divine word of guidance, is there inside me, other, alive, about to pronounce itself. At first I catch fragments, and then start to feel them out as part of a larger whole. I am not inventing anything, but actively letting go to receive a pre-existent, whole and living thing. Without me and my organs of perception and knowing, this large, wondrous creation could pass on and never return in exactly the same way; yet it would return.

Contemplatives and poets enact a dialectic between the public and private worlds, between speech and silence. They live in the paradox and tension of many worlds. Without extended periods of solitude, everyday life cannot be maintained in balance and sanity. Without silence, words do not flow. The words of poetry carry us back to our origins, to our deepest selves, to the beginnings of the cosmos out of which we came. They gather us in like sheaves. They are the manna on which we feed.

My poems do not always pause to reflect consciously on the spiritual life, because the spiritual life is not separable from life itself. Some of them are about *angst* in the suburbs, raising a child, walking in the natural world, interacting with animals, singing, teaching, reading, thinking and sleeping. Some are about my dreams. Some are about marriage as a spiritual vocation. Some stretch to address larger environmental and social concerns. A few emerge directly from my practice of prayer and praise. To the extent that a practice of spirit permeates my life, these poems may likewise be permeated by grace and blessing. Poetry is for me the infallible heart, the radiant body. Mere poetry.

White Meditation

Begins as a humming behind the ear
a musical mood, a dark listening

Meaning thrums, circles, intends
toward us, tends us well.

Why bother to arrest
that unlovely, unlikely suspect

of a thought? I'm no cop.
Let it go by. All strictures die.

*Loop your skittish will
to the wild horsewoman.*

*Lasso yourself to the subtle stars
which are not fixed, glued*

*to the firmament, never were,
but part of some larger circling.*

*Drop the priest and magus,
become the hermitess*

*small, brown and peripheral,
an effective nobody*

*in rainforest or desert
an occasion for speech, or silence.*

*When the world speaks
try not to get in the way.*

Summer Godlore

In this green necklace of a wet summer
 where days are peridots
 I am my own blockage and release

a dike unhinged into the Godflow
 a stipple in Noon's creek.

Vials of sleep may cure what words cannot
 Two birds of thought and feeling cling
 to the one tree of the body

Don't ask me to choose between them

Contemplation

Accustomed to distraction
 somehow I fell into a sacred space,
 template awaiting its musical score
 (myself devoid of music)

A robin in the rain
 could have told me
 in the streaked gray
 all was silent

Water splashed in a pond
 like words around their hush.

Liberation

(on a painting by F.H. Varley)

A man can embody truth but he cannot know it.

W.B. Yeats

Here, in the hive of our days,
you have left us an open door,
someone walking out of light
so dazzled it breaks to blue green rose.

Matter too has changed
and the possibilities of flesh,
flayed, splayed, now
like an open palm, unnailed.

Here, now, we are that person
walking in, that being
walked into, a presence
in the part that vivifies.

Someone has entered
and leapt the self to return
and say with all colours:
This body, it is good

as we glide through the door
to ourselves where honey globes,
dripping like streaks of paint
onto our hands, feet, tongues.

In this place and this crowning,
the box we once thought large enough
has shattered all to shards.
We are liminal and literal and walking.

Omega Suite

The greatest taboo is spirituality.
 Carl Jung

Light like cracked glass and Christ
 with his bucket of stars falling in our ears.

Whatever I am allergic to I don't know,
 but it's more or less a permanent condition now.

The best thing he said, *The kingdom
 of heaven is within you.*

It is not God's anger undressing before you,
 but your own enmity against the earth.

I carry a small, white stone in my pocket wherever I go,
 and every time I rub it there's a prayer for you.

Whatever they push on you won't be the thing;
 whatever you find for yourself out of love will be.

The poet enters the particulars
 already drenched with meaning and lets them be.

Antennae up, trusting the flow –
 that's all.

Release at Young Lake

A river quakes through aspen leaves
and my unhurried heart.

A train of mergansers chugs for shore;
eyes listen for minnows.

Cheeky chipmunks jabber and dart;
the chest rises and falls.

Aspiring osprey lifts, eagle dives;
a human brain undoes one knot.

Ants march under the door,
their core will burning.

The gliding loon releases its ghostly cry;
spirit cuts loose from the dock.

Every barefoot breath falls down
the blue, blue wind

down the paradise stair,
straight into the arms of fire.

MICHAEL BULLOCK is the author of more than fifty volumes of poetry and fiction and two plays. His *Selected Works 1936-1996* were published in 1998. This was followed by *Sonnet in Black and Other Poems*, *Erupting in Flowers* and *Nocturnes: poems of night*. His work is the subject of a 340-page critical study by Jack Stewart, *The Incandescent Word: the Poetic Vision of Michael Bullock* .

Seven Short Stories

Michael Bullock

The Poet's Head

THE DREAM fades. The scent of wallflowers fills the garden. A poet sits with his head in his hands, meditating on eternity. Placing his head on the stone bench beside him he rises, walks into a plantation of tall hollyhocks and disappears from view.

The head, now lying abandoned on the bench, bewails its enforced immobility.

A bird descends, picks up the head and flies with it to the top of a tree. There the head rests precariously on a branch, filled with regret for its previous immobile but secure position.

The poet returns to the bench and searches desperately but in vain for his discarded head, without which he can no longer write.

The head laughs mockingly from its place at the top of the tree, glad to be avenged for its abandonment.

Midnight Theatre

It is deep night. On the unlit stage phantom figures move in meaningless arabesques, their gyrations controlled by the ghostly music that rises from the empty orchestra pit. We anticipate the appearance of Columbine, Harlequin and Pierrot. In response to our expectations

they emerge from the wings and take over the stage. The other figures vanish, leaving the trio in sole possession. The action takes on meaning. Pierrot pleads with Columbine, who turns away in disdain. Rejected, Pierrot retires into a corner, weeping. Columbine makes no secret of her devotion to Harlequin, who accepts it as his due.

From some hidden area of the theatre a dog barks. Startled, Pierrot and Columbine take fright and flee from the stage. Harlequin strides after them with a contemptuous smile. A moment later a blood-chilling cry rings out. Someone has died.

Angel

Walking on water the blue-lidded angel makes her way to a grove of cypresses growing around a temple of marble on whose altar sits a god, whose yellow eyes see into the hearts of all who enter.

Slighted by the absence of any welcoming music, the angel turns on her heel and leaves the temple.

The yellow-eyed god gathers his forces and prepares to peer into the heart of the next visitor, whose feet may already have led him in an entirely different direction.

Disguised as an ape the god now perches on the branch of the largest and most imposing of the cypresses.

The angel, who is still within the precincts of the temple, turns back and greets the god, whose disguise she has penetrated.

Caught out in his subterfuge, the god abandons his defences and falls prey to the angel's most voracious longings.

Night Walks Softly

Night walks softly across the grass. The blades that rise in its footsteps are a darker green than the rest. Following in these footsteps I feel something dark rising up through the soles of my feet and entering my brain, filling it with a greenish mist that colours my vision of everything I see. Even the flowers, especially the white flowers that glow in the moonlight, have a greenish tint as though tinged by green moonbeams. The music that comes from among the trees has a greenish sound like the rustle of reeds in a flowing river. A face

emerges from the darkness. It too, even the long hair that falls on either side, is bathed in a greenish light, a moonchild born of the moon and fathered by the night. As the figure takes shape I abandon my search for whatever is hidden in the darkness and surrender myself to this figure, this night and this magical garden, to everything that surrounds me in this single unrepeatable moment.

The Queen of the Night

The Queen of the Night rules a realm that is far away. By day she is barely visible, by night she comes into her own, seated in splendour on a throne of green jade, holding a sceptre of jade and clad in a green robe bearing mystic symbols in black. Throne and sceptre reflect the light of the moon, the empress in whose name the Queen of Night rules.

Her garden is full of flowers that are closed and unremarkable during the day. But at night they open up into magnificence and form a colourful host that comes in from the garden, to cluster round the throne of jade – the courtiers and servants of the great Queen.

This poem is one of these flowers. I lay it at the Queen's feet, hoping that she will deign to see it and pierce me with her green eyes.

Rose Night

The scent of roses has taken possession of the night.

I walk dazed by the perfume in the gardens of paradise.

Night scatters seeds that sprout and fill the landscape.

Dreams fly in and take over my mind. In visions I see a myriad female forms that fly, sigh, dance and dive all through my inner world.

Soon day will arrive with its sober sickle, mow down the dream flowers and lay waste to the paradisaal garden.

Nothing will be left but the scent of roses.

And I shall pine for night.

Voyage

I sail on through the night as though convinced of the existence of a port, even though I know there is no port. My despondency blossoms in a corner of the cabin in the shape of a black flower. My companions *Luxe, calme et volupté* are overboard, their place has been taken by *mélancholie, nostalgie et angoisse*. These are now my only shipmates, my own crew. Their incompetence guarantees disaster. Shipwreck would be the least catastrophic outcome; most likely the ship will be devoured by fire and we ourselves will be agonizingly consumed by the flames.

Suddenly this prospect ceased to appear as a catastrophe, seeming instead a much desired apotheosis. At the very least, I hoped, it would set me free forever from my three tiresome companions.

Meanwhile the black flower of despondency blossoms luxuriantly in a corner of the cabin as my ship sails on through the night.

BRAD BUCHANAN grew up in Ottawa, received a BA from McGill University, and is now a student at Stanford University, where he is working on a Ph.D. in English Literature. He has had poetry accepted by a number of Canadian journals, among them *Scrivener*, *Grain*, *Descant* and *The Windsor Review*.

Brad Buchanan / **Three Poems**

This Emigrant, Language

This emigrant, language,
 escaping from the populous
 and impoverished realm
 of childhood, grows
 to a foundering claim
 on a prosperous coast.

History bides its tongue
 in Babel or neologisms
 of conquest, sex
 (our terrestrial ends)
 and, always, displacement.

Subliminal terms of exile
 are the allotted names
 we know, but more lineal
 details, transcendent
 borders look back on the lands
 that we cannot describe,
 despite many returns.

The Glue Eater

(An Allegory of Poetry)

I ate glue scribbles poured into my desk—
slowly sautéed, like a snot-and-bone bisque—
a neutral flavour shaped overnight,
patient, tantalized strips down a metal leg
or suckable blocks pried up with a sharp
point that sometimes took the paint with it...

Mucilage, appetizingly named
and in a pot both nipples and round,
was a palate-smoother, my protean thumb
scummed, somehow, with an unspeakable film.

Smells stuck with me in those days; the sting
of mustard burned me for meals at a time
and bread was smuggled painlessly home
in armpit *boulangeries* by the Rhine.

The vague placebo of classroom bonds
made everything new permanent and extreme;
they couldn't bribe me to let go of the torn
yellow blanket-cover that smelled like my dreams
until I discovered the go-between of glue:
partly me, partly something to learn...

In Separate Sleep

The trees stand tall at
night, practicing the gestures
that impress the moon.

Their sincerity
today is learned behavior
endorsed by the sun.

You tell me that the
night before our wedding, I
made noises like a

lunatic. The lush
rustling in my throat when I
spoke my vows, the rain

that swept my clouded
eyes had been subconsciously
rehearsed. So you say.

What watchfulness in
that silent forest did you
mimic, staying close

to those stormed branches?
Did you perceive the prey of
love, burrowing deep

or clinging wildly
to shaken boughs? The deaths,
in separate sleep?

JESSE MITTLEMAN is a native New Yorker recently relocated to Bainbridge Island, Washington. Varied career in publishing, graphic arts, print journalism, freelance non-fiction, director of publications New York University and Rutgers U. Certificate in short literary fiction, University of Washington; B.A. Bowling Green, Ohio; M.A. Columbia, N.Y.

Venus in Black

Jesse Mittleman

SHE'S WAITING FOR the light to change, on the opposite corner, looking toward me. Even from this distance, in my own lexicon, I peg her as a "too" girl: Her face is too white, her lips too thin, lipstick too red, sweater too tight, her skirt is too short, and her waist is too slim.

The light turns green. We start to cross, the space between us narrows. I notice her broad-brimmed hat, black, jet black, like everything else she's wearing that's visible. A few strands of purple hair poke out. Her sweater precisely outlines her too small breasts with their too small nipples. I imagine her too tight skirt hugging a tight little ass like a hero sandwich wrapped in Saran. I suspect her shoes are too tight. Fleetinglly, I wonder if her snatch is as tight as everything else.

No bra, certainly, probably no underpants. If she does wear them, must be thongs; no bumps or ridges in this girl's skirt that aren't her. And a kid – no more than late teens, maybe twenty. Even in a crowd of Village weirdos she'd stand out.

I wonder if this walking sex-bomb feels safe in the streets at night, alone, and then realize, of course she'd feel safe – the hoods would think she's one of them. She looks tough, exudes confidence. All that's missing is a half-smoked joint dangling from her lower lip. The only time I can imagine this girl screaming is when she's having an orgasm.

She passes, close. Cheap perfume. I could have guessed. Then, I have to look, I have to be sure: I turn, and sure, a tight ass.

Me? I'm on my lunch break. It's around twelve-thirty, sunny, spring, Manhattan, First and 26th. I work at Bellevue – the hospital. Across the street. Administration. I supervise a bunch of people who see that we don't run out of toilet paper or bed sheets or ten thousand other things. Anyway, we *shouldn't* run out. We goof sometimes. Hey, we're a hospital.

I'm married to Liz. It's a so-so situation. She's put on a few pounds, doesn't get dressed until noon, leaves ash trays full of her cigarette butts all over the apartment, and when she's not shopping sits around reading sexy paperbacks. She doesn't practice what she reads any more. But then, I don't much encourage her either.

Sometimes I wonder if she's got a boyfriend. I doubt it. But the idea doesn't bother me, and that's what bothers me.

We got two kids. Andy eight, Jo four. We live on the upper West Side, 94th near West End. Makes getting to Bellevue a pain in the ass: take the subway at 96th and Broadway to 23rd, a crosstown bus to First, walk up to 26th. But we like the neighborhood, seein' as it's near Riverside Park where we take the kids on Sunday and watch the birds. On a clear day we can see way uptown to the George Washington Bridge. I tell the kids, "That's the George Washington Bridge."

They used to chase pigeons across the grass and the bare dirt patches. Now they throw rocks at them. "Stop that!" I yell. They keep throwing. Sometimes I'm distracted, like maybe by a young woman with a short skirt bending over to lift a baby out of a stroller. I can almost see her underwear. Other times I just keep reading the *Post*. Liz smokes, reads her paperback.

On the way back we'll stop for hot dogs and slices of pizza and sodas. Liz hates to cook and considers Sunday night her night off. That's the way it goes. Every Sunday. Once in a while we all get on the subway and visit her sister in Queens. It's a long ride. I hate the ride and her sister and her brother-in-law and their three kids, but we don't go very often and it's better than having them drop in on us.

That's all you need to know about me. Right now I'm concerned, no, curious about this girl. Blackie. What's she doing in this part of town? Visiting somebody in the hospital? Could be. Likely somebody with AIDS. We've got lots of them here. Maybe she's lost. How could somebody lost wind up on First Avenue and 26th Street? Lost looking for what? Not likely. Coming from or going to a job interview? Dressed like that? You've got to be kidding!

Maybe she's a dancer on her way to work in some bar. She might live around here some place. I hear those dancers do pretty well, so she could afford the rent. Probably shares an apartment with a couple

of other girls. Or maybe some guy. Imagine some guy getting into that every night. Probably a couple of times a night. Maybe three times. These kids have stamina. Soon as they discover it's more than just to pee out of they try to wear it out.

We're on opposite sides of the street now. She's headed south, I'm headed north. Where is she going? I'm curious as hell about this girl, this Blackie. Should I follow her? Maybe catch up to her and say, "Hey, I noticed back there you've got a real tight ass and I'd like a piece of it." Might get by with that if I were twenty, but at my age, forty's close enough, she'd probably wallop me or look for a cop. Maybe I could just follow her, see where she goes. I look at my watch. It's twelve thirty-five. I've got almost a half hour.

I hesitate a few seconds, and just as the light's changing I turn around and jog back across the street, maybe twenty, thirty feet behind her. The sidewalk isn't crowded in this part of town, so it's easy enough to keep her in sight, but it's also easy for her to see me following if she turns around. I keep my distance, confused about just what I'm doing and why. We make the next light, but at 24th the *Don't Walk* sign is lit and surprisingly, she doesn't walk. She's not a New Yorker. I have no choice but to wait at the curb next to her.

Suddenly, and I think I'm gonna plotz right here, she turns to me and says, "Buy me lunch." Just like that. Out of the blue. Like we're old friends. I expected a tough, gravelly voice, but she sounds like a little girl – high, thin. It takes a few seconds for me to process this idea. Yeah, I have enough cash so I won't have a lunch bill show up on my credit card.

I figure I shouldn't answer too quickly. Might seem too anxious. Or stupid. So I wait a few seconds. The light changes. We don't move. "What'd you have in mind?" I ask, playing my cards close to my chest, you might say.

"There's a nice French place on 30th near Second Avenue," she says. I think a minute. Yeah, I know the place. Can't remember the name, but it's pretty classy. Expensive. Never been inside but I've seen the menu in the window. This kid seems to know the neighborhood. I try to remember what I've got in my wallet. If we don't have a bottle of wine I can manage it. She's too young for wine.

Before I answer, and I know right now I'm going to say "Okay," I wonder, where's this going? What's in it for me? Unlikely we'll wind up in the sack. I can't take all afternoon off – even another hour will take some explaining. And there's statutory rape. She's young. What's the age? Under twenty-one? Eighteen? No, I think it's sixteen. Sixteen or eighteen. Hell, she's certainly over eighteen. I think. Forget the screwing.

I say the "Okay" I'd been thinking.

She takes my arm, and I hope to hell nobody I know sees this. Maybe I could explain she's a visiting niece from Ohio. No visiting niece from Ohio looks like this. We walk to Second on 24th, where it's less likely we'll meet people I know, then up to 30th. We get to the restaurant undetected.... I hope. La Petite Chatte. This is the place. The Little Cat. The Little Female Cat. The Little Pussy. Jesus! I'm having lunch with this sex pot at a place called The Little Pussy! I can hardly keep my hand steady as I open the door.

The maître d', then a waiter, eye us oddly. I'm not sure whether they're surprised at an older guy like me with this most unlikely girlfriend, or whether they recognize her and wonder about this new guy she's picked up.

There's a table in a back corner, and I motion toward it to the waiter.

Blackie studies the menu, picks the duck à l'orange. I check to see what it costs and gulp. Not the most expensive thing, but close. I take a bowl of onion soup. "I just had lunch," I explain, which happens to be true. My daily sandwich and an apple. I can manage a bowl of onion soup.

So we sit, and it's awkward. What do I say to this kid? Lucky for me, she talks.

"You married?"

"Yes."

"Got kids?"

"Yeah."

"How many?"

"Two. What is this? Why the grilling? Who are you?"

She leans forward, and in that little girl voice almost whispers, "Alice."

"Alice?" Alice, I repeat to myself. This Goth – pure, unadulterated Goth – can't be named Alice. This kid with purple hair. This kid in clothes so tight no part of her anatomy is secret. Alice is for little girls with long blond curls and blue eyes, dressed in pink with patent leather shoes, carrying parasols and eating vanilla ice cream cones. This girl is, I don't know, maybe Georgia or Reggie or Dixie. Alice?

"I live in Jersey."

"What are you doing in New York?"

"There's nothing going on in Jersey. In Metuchen. I want to be where the action is. I want to meet people, go places, see things. I'm drying up out there. My Ma says I got time, but I feel, well, sometimes I feel that life is just going right by me...."

I look hard at this kid. Her chin trembles. She looks like she's ready to crumble.

"How old are you?"

“Going on sixteen.”

“What’s ‘going on’ mean?”

“I turned fifteen last month.”

I wonder how I got involved in this. Then I remember the tight ass, and come back to Alice.

“So you’re playing hooky.”

“Yeah.”

“Got any brothers, sisters?”

“A younger brother. He’s eleven.”

“Your parents know where you are?”

“No.”

“How’d you get to this part of town?”

“I got off the train and just started walking. That’s how I knew of this restaurant – I passed it and it looked nice. When I saw the river I turned down to where you saw me.” She pauses. “I was looking for Greenwich Village.”

I nod. I can’t take my eyes off this kid.

“Ever done this before?”

“No.”

“What will happen when your parents find out where you are?”

“They’ll be pretty pissed. I guess I’ll be grounded for a while.”

“What made you ask me to buy you lunch?”

“I was hungry. I don’t have much money. I saw you staring at me when we crossed the street back there, and then figured you were following me when you stopped next to me at the light.” Another pause. “You were walking the other way, you know.” She gives me a hint of a smile.

It makes sense.

“I think you should go home,” I say. “You’re too young to be roaming around the city alone, especially dressed like that.”

Her eyes well up. Huge teardrops roll down her cheeks, tracking black mascara across her chalk-white makeup. I hate to see women cry. Turns me to mush. Maybe I spoke too harshly.

I reach across the table, take both her hands in mine. They’re ice cold.

“Listen,” I say. “We’re going to have a nice lunch. Then I’m taking you back to Penn Station, you’re getting on a train to Metuchen, and you’re not coming back to New York alone for at least three more years.”

“But I’m getting older and nothing’s happening and I feel so alone and I have nobody to talk to.” She sobs noisily, reaches for a tissue and blows her nose. I look around the restaurant, embarrassed, hoping nobody’s noticing. I think we’re okay – the place isn’t crowded, the tables are far apart, and everyone seems involved with

their own conversations, their cell phones, their food. She dabs at her cheeks with a napkin, smearing mascara and makeup over her face and the cloth. It's a mess.

The teenagers' lament. Been down that road, and not so long ago that I don't remember the frustrations, the loneliness, the unreturned puppy loves, the day dreams. I think of my own two kids and worry what they'll be like ten, fifteen years from now. I want to hold this kid in my arms, dry her tears, tell her everything will turn out just fine. Patience, that's what it takes. Just be patient. Things change quickly when you're fifteen. It may not seem quickly, but all too soon you'll be out of high school and going to college or looking for a job and your world will keep changing, changing so fast you'll be breathless just trying to keep up. You'll have a chance to make a world, a real world, of your own. There is so much, so much coming. Don't cry. Don't despair. This will pass.

How can I tell her this? How can I make her understand? I want to cut through the false world she's built for herself with her black hat, sweater, skirt, her purple hair. I want to protect her from this charade she's adopted to keep from facing the realities of her home, her school, her life. How can I explain that the world she wants to be part of is a sham? A substanceless shadow?

Alice copes with the duck with moderate success – it's not sliding off her plate. She manages to cut some meat from a bone and eats a slice, then glances up and sees me watching. She fidgets, embarrassed, and looks down at her plate. "It's very good," she says softly.

"So is the onion soup."

We finish in silence. No dessert, no coffee.

She excuses herself and leaves to repair her makeup while I pay the check, in cash.

Outside, Alice takes my hand and we walk silently to Penn Station. Her fingers become warmer, she holds on tightly, like a small child being led by its parent. We reach the gate to her train. She stands on her toes, kisses me full on the mouth, warm, soft, slow. I hold her shoulders, kiss her on the forehead, and say, "Good luck."

I watch as Blackie walks carefully down the broad staircase. She doesn't look back. Her tight ass sways provocatively under that tight skirt. Purposely? For my benefit? No underwear. I'm sure. She steps into the train.

I wait another minute or so, then head back to Bellevue, cross-town on 30th, past La Petite Chatte.

I worry for her.

I worry for myself.

JOEL KUPER lives on the shore of Lake Superior with his growing family. He is a writer/actor who has performed across North America. His latest fascinations include being biopsied, unloading trucks and the violin. He has appeared in *Hunger Magazine*, *The Prairie Journal*, *Other Voices* and *LiNQ*.

Joel Kuper / **Three Poems**

Enclosure in the Iron Maiden

Hope is a handle slipping
through her fingers, a sparse
sky covered in star tissue

desolation strains from the
pores of her scar, here she
hides her beating heart, here
she hides her soul

her skin, mountain ash
shrivels under the sun
sheds, leaves an empty shell

the tragedy is divided into scales
a pound of flesh for the remedy
flying into your arm, exchange
six thousand breaths for the
pressure of your thumb on
plastic, tomorrow is just

another excuse to live, another
friable daze to crush in your
tourniquet, you always knew
that hope could be an angel

she takes this cherub by its
wings and gently fills herself
with love

At the End of Architecture

She comes to me, slowly
 after a long absence, the
 crack in her face is a crevasse
 glacial, a dog swallowing green

written on her body is love
 freehand with a flexible V

colours are not her problem
 rather
 the distance between them
 blue eludes her like
 One Ton Depot

before
 in her enclosure
 there was a blubber stove
 powdered pemmican
 for a moment she saw
 the stars and dust descended
 like a legend

she comes to me
 fitter, flaying penguins
 her steel blade hone
 on a stone

survival is less rarefied
 say an end to festerings
 open and suppurating
 bless this tuxedo meat

soon the sun will skin the
 purpose of this pack ice
 and we will see water
 once again with inflections
 prismatic and enticing.

Canada Day

...in the back alley of Lacey's Taxi sprawls a thirty year old woman sipping from a can of paint thinner with eyes oblivious to the beating of her heart and on the morning of Canada Day there was the man with all the cuts and stubble mixed with the brick blood on black saying TAKE ME TO THE NEAREST PLACE WHERE I CAN BUY SOME LISTERINE so I do so and he gets out face full of intention and his young partner in the back seat says I'M NOT DRINKING THAT SHIT I DON'T DRINK HARD STUFF ANYMORE I USED TO DRINK HARD STUFF BUT IT FUCKED ME UP TOO MUCH YOU KNOW SO NOW I JUST DRINK BEER BUT I MIGHT STOP DRINKING BEER TOO BECAUSE I ALMOST KILLED MYSELF THE OTHER NIGHT ON MY BIKE I WENT FLYING OVER THE HANDLEBARS 'CAUSE I HAD FIFTEEN BEERS AND I THINK I HURT MYSELF PRETTY BAD TOO 'CAUSE MY BACK REALLY HURTS AND I THINK MY SHOULDER IS OUT TOO BECAUSE I CAN'T MOVE THIS ARM then his friend gets back in with the family-sized bottle and I don't know where but I think he's already had a drink of it because his breath is so much better and he says to take them back to where I picked them up which was the Robin's Donuts on Syndicate and later after my shift I kick an empty Lysol can across a crust of broken glass and all the empty Supreme bottles are strewn through the trees while the head of a dead moose stares up at me with its black eyes...

ANDRÉ CARPENTIER was born in Montreal in 1947. He is the author of *Axel et Nicholas*, *L'Aigle volera à travers le soleil*, *Rue St. Denis*, and *Carnet sur la fin possible d' un monde*. *Du pain des oiseaux* was translated by Michael Bullock and published under the title *Bread of the Birds* (Ekstasis Editions, 1993).

MICHAEL BULLOCK was born in London, England in 1918. He has translated over two-hundred books and plays from the German, French and Italian.

Compound Past and Imperfect

André Carpentier

[translated by Michael Bullock]

Oh, it would be just too simple if every character could unpack before the audience, in a fine monologue or a straightforward lecture, everything that is simmering within him

Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

You haven't led me to love, but to my killing you!...I'm ready to strike and kill if I can't write.

Herbert Achtenbosch, *Susn*

WHAT I KNOW about it is what I think about it. It's worth no less than what others say about it, his mother, his sisters, his blondes, all those women who populated his life. Because no one knew him more intimately than I did. As a matter of fact, that's why he thrust me out of his life in such a spectacular manner. He didn't say that certain things were no longer possible between us, but rather that everything had become impossible, that our paths had crossed for long enough, that he would never forget, but that he would never speak of it again. And everything suggests that he would have kept his word.

I've completely forgotten our first meeting. It doesn't matter, that's not what I want to talk about. As a child, I used to take him to spend the summers in the country, with my grandparents, in the Saint-Faustin area. He knew how to build tree-houses, unhesitatingly ate the over-ripe apples people gave him, carried a Swiss knife on his belt. At night he read adventure stories which he told us next day without pretending they were his own. He wasn't like us, always

proud of our feats just because they were ours. When he played at being a rodeo rider on his bicycle, my cousin and I were all convinced. He was the most to be envied of all of us, because he took nothing seriously and succeeded in everything. Grandfather preferred him to his own grandchildren; he didn't say so, but we knew, without feeling sore about it, that he would have preferred us all to be like him.

He had amorous adventures before the rest of us; he learned to play the guitar without my knowledge, although I saw him every day. He never felt the need to blaspheme loudly in public or to bully smaller children in order to assert himself. Our teachers, whom he didn't pointlessly dislike, felt impelled to confide in us that one day they would boast of having had him in their class. If he was unruly, it was not so much in a spirit of vengeance as because of a certain freedom from constraint.

Under all circumstances, in class as on the running track, he always kept just behind the first. He didn't dream of becoming a flight pilot, he was going to be one. Handsome? Less than many of us, but girls liked him without any effort on his part. I didn't really admire him, I was too busy living in his friendship. Not that I deferred to him under all circumstances or followed him like a disciple. As a matter of fact, it was usually he who telephoned or called at the house for me. I don't remember ever going to his home. I don't know what his father did, if he had one.

One day he was hit by a car that fractured his pelvis. I was responsible for the accident, I was the one who threw the frisbee into the road. Whenever I visited him in the hospital he was alone, reading the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, *Black Arrow*, *The Master of Ballantrae*, the story of enemy brothers, he told me. When he came out of hospital, three of us took the blame for the accident. He wrote a scenario that exonerated all of us. I began to sleep well again.

One evening during the dog days, when my cousins and I were all of us overexcited, we were playing throwing stones at each other that just missed. To ratchet the game up a notch, he threw a pretty large stone at one of my cousins and knocked him out cold. The family, grandmother and our aunt claimed it was an accident. I reproached him for what he had done, he didn't seem surprised. Another time, in the street, he knocked several of the postmaster's teeth out with a baseball bat. Again it was an accident. I thought two clumsy actions of this sort showed a lack of intelligence. I didn't tell him so, but he understood from the incredulous looks I gave him.

Up to the age of twelve lots of things happened in our lives, at least I suppose they did. Between twelve and twenty, too few things

happened, I know that for sure. In high school we supported each other in every possible way. I proposed him as head of the class, he won by acclamation. The following year he backed my candidature, that went without saying, for him, and he conducted such a campaign that I won, but only just.

Our first argument was about the Beatles, whom he adored but I didn't yet. The difference of opinion was deep. The second was about opera. The same backwardness on my part. It was little things like this that made me start swearing at him, oh, not seriously, a bit the way old married couples get impatient with one another. In fact, we rarely touched on things that either of us held dear. Our friendship seemed to be worthwhile only by virtue of the atmosphere that we enjoyed whenever we happened to be in one another's presence.

In college, I turned to the theatre, he started writing, no doubt so that I could have something to act in. I was two of his characters, which were him, of course. He put his crazy words into my mouth, and as he also directed he gave me his movements. The others were simply dazzled. No doubt this way of letting people see through him, was just one more method of fooling us all and himself through us. But I only found that out recently.

After college, he left for the aeronautical school in Chicoutimi and I went to the National Theatre School. He pretended to have stopped writing, I concealed the fact that I had started. Then I gave up acting. We wrote to each other, we wrote a lot. Flying was his reason for living, he told me. He passed his pilot's test, but immediately gave it up. Why, under what circumstances? I never found out. He so quickly moved on to other things...

What I know about the next few years is limited to a few scraps of information that don't add up to a rounded picture. He dealt in marijuana, then he escaped by the skin of his teeth from some business involving cocaine. He suffered at least two setbacks in love, worked on an experimental farm near Quebec, in a hotel in Saint-Irénée, he delivered pizzas in Saguenay, became a driving instructor in Abitibi and who knows what else. Something inexhaustible about him – his charm, his frenzy? – reconciled me every time with the most unpardonable thing about his behavior: this obsessive flight forward. We had held the same convictions; I had preserved them, but he hadn't. To me, who had never changed course, his indifference looked like mockery. I imagine my fixation must have appeared laughable to him, who was not governed by any sort of compulsion.

A few years ago, on my thirtieth birthday – his was a little earlier – when we hadn't seen one another for at least five years, he dashed into the apartment near the university that I shared with a girl who would have preferred a guy like him, I wasn't there. He left a mes-

sage to say he would never write me again, wouldn't read my letters, wouldn't see me again. I made no attempt to get him to change his mind. After all, I told myself, friendship is never more than a loan, so it can be taken back at any moment. This break, in spite of the distance between us for the last few years, seemed sudden to me; it upset me terribly, so much so that I quit the university, which was causing me to waste my time in badly paid teaching, and the girl, who had difficulty understanding my distress. I found myself alone again and unemployed, compelled, in the words of old Schopenhauer, whose works we had studied together, to ask myself: Who is this individual thrown back into his solitude? Then a burst of rage deflected the question onto the person responsible for this isolation. I began to hate even his memory. And yet, without admitting it to myself, I lived for a time in hopes of his return. Then I progressed to the point of losing this illusion.

One day, when I gave a reading of my second published play at the Salon du livre, I saw him in the distance, so far away that I can't swear it was him, even though I know it was no one else. And also, and I'm not less sure of this, some months later I caught sight of him at the door of the theatre in which it was being performed. In both cases I made no attempt to catch up with him. And I don't blame myself for that. Both times I could see from the way he looked that he was close to what awaited him, and twice I refused to face up to that.

On the day after his death, his elder sister asked me, as a service that could only be expected from a true friend, to collect his personal belongings from the Grand Remous whirlpool. I picked up three suitcases found on the spot, which I have secretly kept. The bundles of papers they contained – outlines of novels, the beginnings of plays, the first drafts of poems and stories – changed my life. I hardly ever produce my own stories under my own name any more, just enough to make sure my injuries and the existence of my person are not forgotten. Every time I do, it's a wasted effort, because no one reads me any more, no one stages my plays, no one even speaks to me about them.

During the first period of this double life, I was burdened by a sense of guilt, I constantly dragged around with me a mixture of suffering and irritation. When I began to experience the living face of pain, I understood that suffering is the only thing that matters and that the sole purpose of anger is to make sure it continues. Thus, any attempt to tone down anger too soon, by forgiving or forgetting, merely disguises it. In any case, the laws of mathematics teach us that anger multiplied by forgiveness produces an even greater anger, because the negative always wins out over the positive, as the mascu-

line wins out over the feminine. Then, contrary to those who, to eliminate their aggressiveness, forgive without forgetting, I chose rather for a time to forget without forgiving, moved by the hope of preserving my belligerence intact.

I believed I had talent – which is at once both a great deal and very little – a certain sense of structure and grammar; but he, damn him, had more, he had fervor and audacity, an imagination served by an enviable experience of life. I write, I would say, because I know how to write, prompted by a concern for language; he wrote, that was obvious, in response to an urge that was in the service of his own life...which he lived to the full, I imagine because he had a foreboding that it would be short.

Everything he left me – at least I interpret as the steps in a legacy his sister's call and the suitcases placed in full view – everything he entrusted to me, then, was written in haste, either incorrectly, or incompletely. So I correct and complete everything. And sign in his place. With one of the three pseudonyms I have devised, which intertwine parts of both our names. Not one young Turk on the literary reviews will be able to unravel this tangle. I wonder how they could even dream of penetrating the mysteries of these pseudonyms that nothing seems to link. And the old hands on the dailies, whose resignation no longer deceives anyone, will be no less fooled. As for the people on *Liberté* or *Voir*, they will be content to recognize the crime of pseudonymity, which they will interpret as a sociological fact, and this will enable them to devise new cryptologies... attributing them to a new generation, of course, but a generation that has never been mine. I'm one of those who has been murdered by silence. They stabbed me with repeated indifference, but I've emerged from my ashes suitcases in hand, bundles of paper in my head... A gemmiparous birth! I carry us within me and we are living at least two lives...

He wanted to get out of his bag of skin, to escape from himself! I gave up trying to understand, because understanding would have made anger impossible. I needed to hate him for having left me alone, for having taught me by his example that I shall never break free from this carbon copy of myself that is renewed daily in the same state of mental torpor. But I behave as though he didn't figure in all this, because no one, since the day I was born, has provided me with so much material for living...Because he has given me part of my present... Because, of the two faces of the moon, suffering and boredom, his will never be the second.

Ah yes, how did he depart into the great cold? By sitting at the wheel of a truck and driving it like an aeroplane, that's to say sending it hurtling out over the river from the end of a bluff, in the neigh-

borhood of Montmagny. What made this act consistent with his life was the element of flight, his irresistible urge to be somewhere else, which was only a corrosive form of the desire, never put into words, to be present to himself in an altered shape, to be different. Whereas I know people who would have loved to be like him.

Today, one part of my exasperation, once more active, springs from the fact that he compelled me to move from admiration to infidelity, and later from indifference to envy. He provoked in me everything that was most undesirable: first alienation, then a spirit of covetousness. For this I bear him a grudge, a furious resentment that keeps me alive or rather that brings me to life, makes me as much alive as when we were breathing side by side, unaware that we were only alive because we were close to one another. In my best moments, which are not many, I tell myself that he slipped from his pedestal because nothing could have reunited us more or better than the shock of this separation. At difficult moments I hate even his bundles of paper, which have made me discover what I felt without realizing it: that I am only now in the world! Living our lives...

Because, although I could perfectly well live on the contents of his suitcases, I keep moving from place to place and sometimes doing odd jobs. I polished cars at Montmagny, delivered pizzas in Quebec. I was an apprentice groom at Saint-Faustin, bell-boy at a hotel in Saguenay, a hardware salesman in a department store. I even got a pilot's license, but then I merely kept the accounts for a small airline at Saint-Irénée. And I also did certain other things that I can't admit to for legal reasons... I shall not stop until I have built up a past, which will never be anything but imperfect, but will at least be consistent with what I take out of the suitcases, which I match with my terrors, which I put in my own mouth and publish under pseudonyms. Therein lies the whole crime. Within myself I keep him alive; outside myself I kill him.

Of course, I'm beginning to think of resisting this conversion to someone else's life, which will have cost me all the amorous passions I have established in the various towns. I assume professions he never practiced, as though I wanted to stop imitating the course of his life, walking in his by-ways. This winter, for example, I am driving a snow plow. I clear the streets and then empty the contents into the river... from the tip of a bluff.

MIKE CATALANO researched his North American Indian poetry collection *Silent Thunder* throughout 1998-1999. He was editor of *Melting Trees Review* from 1995-1998. Recent poems have appeared in: *RATTLE*, *Paris/Atlantic*, *Clay Palm Review*, and *Storyboard* (Guam). He lives in Santa Cruz, California.

Mike Catalano / **Three Poems**

The Shaman (Tlingit)

There was nothing evil or foreboding
about his face, nothing to indicate
a sorcerer's sword or pacts with Satan.
He smiled when I mentioned rattles,
drums, and other incantation aids.
He said he drove a white Camry,
made house calls that sometimes lasted
a week, and was a respected member
of the local school board.

His calling came when he was young;
a teenager more interested in partying
than partaking in school activities.
His parents were against shamanism:
even older healers advised him to wait.
I don't know if it took a car wreck
to convince him of his career choice.
At any rate, he learned under the masters
just like any undergraduate student.
Wisdom, he said, didn't come from books.
It evolved from a few bad reads, catcalls
of fakery, and in general, disrepute
among the whites. And like any actor
or artist, he got better with practice.
But his crammed schedule
left no time to watch his son's
Little League baseball game.

September, 1999
Kitamat, British Columbia, Canada

The Ghost Bears (Kitasoo)

It doesn't matter what you call them:
spirit bears or ghost bears.
They were white black bears—
not albino or the polar bear variety.
The Kitasoo say when Raven created
the world, it was a solid, white mass.
And after the black bears crept forth,
like snails from my mother's garden,
Raven tithed the land with ghost bears
as a reminder of the First Day.

They usually foraged on higher ground,
melting through the cedar and spruce
that rarely felt a kiss from the sun.
But when the salmon spawned, the Kitasoo
launched their boats from Klemtu.
On board a somewhat modern motorboat,
I glimpsed a small white bear upstream
with the aid of a monocular. It fought
with a bald eagle and a kingfisher
for that movable feast. The Kitasoo say
if you see the bear, you see the future.
In their world, unshackled by progress,
I'm not so sure I want to know.
Let nature decide when the rules change.

Klemtu, British Columbia
Queen Charlotte Sound, Canada
September, 1999

The Ghost Tracker

(Cree)

for Thomas Ten Mountains

He was simply a carpenter
with bashed thumbs and broken fingers.
He didn't wear the drapes of Casper
or the cape of Dracula.
And he didn't drone at séances
or touch tarot cards.
Nor was he a tavern sot
or a hallucinogenic.
He seemed invisible on Friday nights,
strolling in the cemeteries—
sneering at 13s and black cats
and man-made superstition, claiming,
in a deadpan voice,
to see ghosts in the graveyard.
“Not every deceased has a spirit,”
he said. “Some are gone too long.”
And when the dams of his seventh sense
broke loose, he was more petrified
by the approaches of *paparazzi*
than the spectral shimmers
that only he could see.

Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan
1998

HILLEL WRIGHT recently co-edited *Poesie Yaponesia*, a bilingual anthology of poetry and fiction published in Tokyo. His stories and poems have also appeared in Japan in *Blue Beat Jacket*, *Café Independent*, *Printed Mater*, *Tokyo's International Literary Review*, *Yomimono*, and in Canada, *Iris* and *Minus Tides*. The following story is the second to last chapter of a serialized novel, *All Worldly Pursuits* (ISBN 0-9687317-6-7 \$20.00 CAD), now available from New Orphic Publishers.

The Sacred & Profane Love Bridal Shop

Hillel Wright

WILEY WAITED for Mayumi in a cheap hotel room on Granville Street. Staying in cheap hotels over stripper bars was one of the profane things Wiley and Mayumi liked to do. The rooms were clean enough, if old and threadbare, and they often had kinky little touches; this one had a full-length mirror set horizontally, at eye level from the bed.

They both got a slightly profane kick out of watching Mayumi's long slender legs rise in the mirror just before she locked them around Wiley's broad back or lifted them onto his shoulders. They could both be mesmerized by the sight of his pelvis and her rump pumping rhythmically together in the mirror, the fire escapes and the alley behind them in the window reflected, too, in painterly perspective in the background.

Right now Mayumi was out looking for an antique silver hairbrush. The hairbrush, with its soft bristles and solid frame, wasn't for Mayumi's hair, which she now wore in an electric blue Mohawk, nor for Wiley's, which was long, like an old hippie's, and silver, like the handle and the back of the fine old hairbrush which he would use to spank Mayumi's tight little ass.

Ω

Waiting for Mayumi's return, Wiley hit the power-on button on the remote and leaned back against the headboard of the bed to watch

TV. Even in 1995, TV was still a novelty for Wiley. He had pretty much given it up way back in his hippie days, and really hadn't watched much or had one in the house for most of the past twenty-five years. Was it an over-reaction to his wasted youth as a TV addict from 1950, when his parents bought a seventeen inch Emerson and he was in seven-year-old heaven? They had gotten only one channel. He still remembered the programs: *Howdy Doody*, *Kukla, Fran & Ollie*, *Lux Video Theater*, *I Remember Mama*, *Victory at Sea*, and of course on Sunday evenings, *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

He gave up going to the YMCA on Saturday mornings in order to watch *Tom Corbett*, *Space Cadet*. Ah, wasted youth.

Actually, he did have a TV, but no antenna, satellite dish or cable. What he did have was a VCR and a gig writing video reviews for several local newspapers and monthly magazines under three different noms de plume.

Ever since stripping went out of fashion at Vancouver Island bars a few years earlier, he had to scramble even harder to make ends meet. Funny, how trends changed. Years ago it was live bands, then strippers and now, of all things, karaoke. And, luckily for him, movies at home on the VCR.

Magenta, his number one client from the Vancouver agency he used to work for, had retired and gotten a job calling numbers in a bingo parlor which used to be a roller-drome. The whole business made him feel positively old. Well, he would be fifty-two by the end of the year. But his years with Magenta and the other girls had introduced him to a world of kinkiness he had previously only read about. The island bars, the ones in fishing towns like Tofino and Ucluelet, or the biker bars in Courtenay and Campbell River, were pretty straight and dull as far as sexual innovations were concerned. The customers were macho and unsophisticated, and fights in the bar were more prevalent than kinkiness on the stage. The men wanted strippers to be acrobatic, their routines predictable, orchestrated with rock music, and yes, they demanded big tits.

It was only at the odd off-the-golf course bar in some rich retirement town like Parksville or Qualicum Beach, or in a discreet private club for Japanese sex tourists in downtown Vancouver, that whips, handcuffs, lesbian menages, sex toys and techno music could be experienced.

Laura had gone to stripper bars with Wiley a few times in the early days of their romance, first out of sheer curiosity, later to find interesting subjects for paintings, and finally to check up on Wiley's agent-client relationship with Magenta. But the more she drifted away from her short-lived Bohemian artist life and toward her Wiccan, eco-feminist activism, the less interested and more critical she

became. The collapse of the industry on the island probably saved, or at least prolonged, their relationship.

But now he mused, disinterestedly surfing through the channels, he was in an entirely different relationship – with a young, talented, artistic, opinionated and, yes, kinky young woman, one less than half his age.

Ω

Mayumi loved being spanked. It was perhaps another profane delight, but to Mayumi it was sacred, like the love she and Wiley had for each other underneath the apparent vulgarity of their exterior life. Being spanked, no matter how hot and wet she already was, always brought on a rose-like flush of deep release, always made her hotter and wetter. She would linger on the edge of orgasm for interminably drawn-out moments until she felt Wiley's work-hardened hand slap her taut young buttocks and she would gush and slide easily on Wiley's stiff shaft. She would yell and moan and thrash in orgasmic ecstasy while Wiley, beneath or behind her, would shout and shake and shudder in his own euphoric orgasm until they collapsed on the bed together, touching, hugging, kissing and whispering secret promises in each other's ears.

Their love was, if not profane, certainly perverse. People often stared at them or shot them dubious glances. "She could only be a hooker. He could only be a john."

He was an American, fifty-one, an old hippie living a backwoods life on a small Canadian island. She was Japanese, twenty-two, a young punk living as an international language student in Vancouver.

She was a prodigy. After three years as a student in Canada, she had written a book of short, sarcastic stories in English, illustrated with her own dark and ironic cartoons. It was for sale in all the hip and alternative book shops.

He was a late bloomer. His first slim volume of verse had been published by a small press only two years ago, when he was forty-nine.

Ω

Annoyed, he pressed the power-off button and the amorphous picture on the TV screen died. He got off the bed, crossed the hotel room's stained and faded carpet, sat at the little writing table, its shabby surface scarred with cigarette burns, and rolled a joint. He lit up and glanced out the window at Granville Street, a mix of garish and bleak images. Yellow, black, red and white advertising signs on the sex

shops and XXX-rated video stores. Colorless forms of homeless teenagers, pierced, tattooed, panhandling on every corner, some covered with Salvation Army blankets, huddling in the doorways of the cheap apartment hotels where they couldn't afford a room. They slept in abandoned banks and department stores at night.

Ω

Wiley and Mayumi had met right here on Granville Street. She had been selling her book on a busy corner, between the Burger King and the Book Warehouse. He offered to trade straight across, his book for hers. He always carried a few of his books with him when he visited Vancouver.

She had been wearing a magenta Mohawk at the time, with eight rings in one ear, a black leather jacket full of stainless steel stars and studs, black denims and black fourteen hole Doc Marten boots. He expected her to say something like “Cash only” or “Fuck off, asshole!” or something equally punky, but instead she said, “Sure, okay,” and the exchange was made.

He had walked away, up toward Georgia Street, toward the bus stop. He read a story while waiting for the bus. The story was about a convict on death row who wants to die dressed as Elvis. Once his last request is granted, “no one has the heart to kill the King” and ultimately, he is released. The story had, at first reading, what seemed like some rather obvious flaws, but he soon realized it was written in punk style with a Japanese accent. It was a good story, fully realized, and he loved the cartoons, especially the last one which depicted the convict several months after his release, dead on his toilet of a drug overdose. The toilet was eerily reminiscent of the electric chair.

Ω

The joint he was smoking was the last of last season's homegrown. It had a strong skunky aroma and lots of sticky THC around the buds. Unlike the hydroponic pot which was becoming popular, he could function on it, but still, it always kicked his long-term memory into passing gear.

He passed the Portuguese restaurant on Commercial Drive where he and Laura had the argument that finally broke them up a year and a half ago, and the blockade at the logging road in Clayoquot Sound the month before that, where Laura got herself arrested with a bunch of other Save-the-Old-Growth activists, while he had moved off the road in response to the RCMP officer's order to do so. And it was not, as Laura insisted, because he had seen Eddie Charlie among the

loggers in the MacBlo crummy trying to get to work. No, he was still a single parent with two kids in school then. He couldn't defy an injunction and take on a charge of criminal contempt of court, risking a jail term and an indictable offense on his record. The way he saw it, his first responsibility was to his children. The way Laura saw it, everyone's first responsibility was to the planet and its ecology.

But he moved off the road on that argument now, too, and back to the meeting in Alert Bay, three years earlier, in September, 1990.

Like everything else about the Oka crisis at that time, the final days as they soon proved to be, no one could agree on what to do. The young activists, bolstered by TV images like Lasagna staring down a Canadian soldier, were for leaving immediately for Quebec. The more traditional and spiritual elders, like the Red Cedar Circle, favored keeping out of the conflict entirely and concentrating on the many health and social needs of the community.

Buffalo, as an AIM activist from the Plains tribes, was listened to respectfully, but he was clearly looked upon as an outsider by the historically isolationist Coastal people.

Eddie Charlie suggested sending supplies – food, money, cellular phones, even a case of industrial earplugs – but how to get the supplies behind the barricades was a logistical nightmare.

Finally, the news from Oka itself revealed the widening gap between the Chiefs of the Six Nations Confederacy and the Warrior Society leadership, and after a couple of days the meetings broke up and the *Sassy Mary* headed back down the coast on her long way back to Tofino. It was during that passage that they learned of the loss of the *Albatross* in Seymour Narrows and the demise of Holgar Larsen.

Ω

Wiley had an uncomfortable prickly feeling on his scalp, and his palms were moist as he made his way back down Granville Street to talk to the exotic, exciting young punk. He worried about being able to control the pitch of his voice and he was sure that she would think of him as a dirty old man, would feel that he was bugging her, trying to pick her up. But her writing was as powerful and explosive as dynamite, her drawing was like sharp claws ripping flesh, and he wanted her to know he thought she was ... terrific.

So, he was delighted to find her reading his book when he got back to where she sat on the cold autumn sidewalk.

They went and had a coffee together in a pretentious downtown cappuccino joint, and she was so shy she hardly said a word. He had to stop himself from talking on and on. But she communicated with-

out talking. She would smile, just barely, but the slight wrinkles about the eyes and lips spoke dangerous oceans to Wiley. She would softly touch his hand over the tacky Formica tabletop, but her long, strong delicate fingers spoke fog-shrouded hills and fearsome mountains, and when she reached under the table and lightly stroked his knee, she spoke deep dark forests and boldly laughing, racing streams.

Her name was Mayumi Matsunaga. She came from a small fishing village on the inland sea. She had been rebellious ever since she could remember and had fallen under the influence of British and American punk music in junior high. In addition to writing and drawing, she once sang – “screamed,” she said, smiling – and played electric guitar in an all-girl punk band back in Japan.

After an hour or so, she left him, but they exchanged addresses and telephone numbers. A few days later, he was quite surprised when she phoned him back home on Pitlamp Island and asked if she could come up for a visit.

“Sure, but bring plenty of cigarettes,” he told her. “The store closes at five p.m. and there’s no ferry off the island after six.”

He had been terrified that she would find the island hopelessly boring and leave after a couple of days.

So, he was surprised when she stayed almost two weeks on that first visit, even more surprised to find that she was still a virgin at twenty-one, and delighted that she had chosen him to relieve her of this burden. Less surprised and more delighted when she fell in love with him. Not surprised at all when he fell in love with her.

Ω

Wiley peeled down the roach and emptied the remains of the joint into a black plastic film canister, rolled up the tar-stained paper and threw it out the window into the alley, where it would disappear among the cigarette butts and filters, used condoms, and occasional dirty syringe.

A couple of weeks after he had returned to Pitlamp Island from Alert Bay, Wiley remembered, the Oka Standoff fizzled to an end. Just as in the meetings in Alert Bay, indecision reigned at Kanesatake, and on the evening of September 26, 1990 the Warriors surrendered and, except of course for the trials, which dragged on for nearly two years, Oka was history.

About a week after that, he and Laura had been walking along their favorite stretch of beach on the east side of Pitlamp Island, looking out across a wide expanse of the Gulf of Georgia to the snowy peaks and tusks of the mainland’s Coast Range. The rising

The poem was published in a Vancouver lit-zine and although Laura once mentioned having read it, she showed no desire to talk about it and Wiley just let it go.

Laura came to Pitlamp Island more and more, but only sometimes to visit Wiley. Usually, she attended meetings of eco-feminist activists, planning demonstrations to save one coastal forest or valley threatened by clear-cut logging after another or, more clandestinely, to meet with the growing community of Wiccans spreading out across the islands of Canada's inland sea.

Ω

Wiley and Mayumi had now been together for a year. During that time much had transpired. Her sexual curiosity and desire seemed insatiable. She awakened him to lusts and performances he thought were long in the past. She told him she had read somewhere that men reached their peak of sexual frequency from ages fifty-one to sixty-four. She told him she still had a lot to look forward to.

She like him to talk dirty to her. She liked him to tell her what he was doing to her – “now I'm putting a big stiff cock in your hot little cunt ... now I'm squeezing your hard little tits...”

She loved afternoon delights, often coming up behind him while he wrote in his study or typed at his computer, and played with his nipples until he got hard. Then she would take his straining shaft out of his pants and tease him until he took her to bed. She especially liked it when he spanked her and she went off like a blasting cap.

She had published a new book of stories and comix called, rather dramatically, *The Sacred & Profane*. The stories were provocative, funny and absurd. One told of a shy young necrophiliac who worked as a morgue attendant. Too timid to act out his forbidden desires, he restricts himself to jerking off at home until one day a beautiful young suicide is brought in direct from the mountain river where she had drowned. The drawing focused on the upturned big toe of the corpse, from which an ID tag with a skull and crossbones rigidly hangs. Above her, the downturned toes of the attendant. Another story concerned a young couple who win a giant Teddy Bear at a carnival and discover a vibrator hidden in a secret compartment in the fuzzy, stuffed animal's back. Every day, she drew or painted, wrote in her hardcover notebook, and played guitar on her black Fender Telecaster, with her headphones jacked into a little practice amp. She knew Wiley wasn't a big fan of punk rock.

Ω

Wiley grabbed the remote, pressed the power-on and then the mute and flipped through the channels until he found the news. The environmentalists were at it again in the woods. Some of them had chained themselves to big old-growth cedars. He half-expected to see Laura's image among them.

He remembered the final argument – a fight he guessed you could call it, since it ended with him slamming some paper money down on the table and storming out of the restaurant, leaving Laura to settle the bill – when he tried to express his exasperation with political correctness and the escalating activism against resource extractors, as Laura and her friends now chose to call them, which of course included fishermen as well as loggers and miners.

He reminded her of the gangs of unemployed young men, his son George among them, drunkenly roaring around the narrow island roads in uninsured, patched-up pickup trucks until, inevitably, one more wound up as a statistic, and the RCMP was called to come over from Courtenay and scrape the casualty off the road. He tried to remind her that Pitlamp Island and the other rural coastal communities had always been resource-based economies, and saving the trees, while a noble and commendable endeavor in an ideal world, was in reality sacrificing the lives and futures of the island youth, undermining the stability of families, and converting the islands into retirement communities, hobby farms, and rustic playgrounds for the rich.

Laura countered with rainforest depletion, desertization and heritage trees.

“Heritage trees, for God's sake,” he remembered himself spitting out the words. “What about the heritage woods workers? What about the dying arts of topping a tree, making a back-cut, driving a wedge, splicing a cable, rigging a spar? What about the heritage of an honest day's work and food on the family table at the end of it? Where the hell is all that gone to?”

“You sound like a member of the Reform Party,” Laura answered. “Like some kind of right-wing, family values, pro-life....”

“And you sound like some goddamn green fascist!”

Shocked at his abrasive interruption, or perhaps it was the surfacing memories of old Holgar – called up by the unexpected profanity and defacing the sacred aura that the ghost had so successfully conjured – Laura screamed at him, “No! No! Go away! Stop it! Leave me alone!”

Which he did. Once and forever more. They never felt at ease around each other again, meeting by chance at one of Pitlamp Island's two cafés, seeing each other at a meeting called to discuss the problem of herring fishers shooting sea lions raiding their nets, being

invited to the same house party by their old and increasingly fewer mutual friends.

And finally, just when he was beginning to resign himself to the horrific prospect of loveless, sexless, lonely old age – even, for a fleeting moment now and then envisioning suicide – Wiley met Mayumi selling her profane, sacred books on Granville Street.

Ω

One day, when they were in Vancouver, walking together along East Broadway, they passed the window of a bridal shop. The window display caught Wiley's eye and he stopped and pointed it out to Mayumi. The bride, dressed traditionally in white, with a short train and a delicate veil, was front and center, her pose elegant and demure. The bridesmaid – or perhaps the bride, hours later – was placed further back from the window and dressed garishly in a short red dress, showing lots of exposed cleavage in an artless and vulgar pose.

“The Sacred and Profane Love Bridal Shop,” Wiley told Mayumi, laughing sardonically at the naïve symbolism portrayed in the shop window by the Taiwanese owners.

Mayumi noticed something else in the window. It was an antique silver hairbrush, placed on a nightstand in the sparsely furnished display.

So, on that afternoon, Wiley was not surprised when Mayumi returned to the hotel room with the hairbrush. Some day, when all the red tape and paperwork that they had initiated in Vancouver that very week was concluded, they would be married. Then Mayumi would become a landed immigrant and they could live together in Canada. They could travel freely together. They could live together and love each other anywhere in the world.

But now the hard, flat silver against her firm, round cheeks was all that was on Mayumi's mind. She was already on the springy old bed on top of Wiley, pulling his shirt off, licking his nipples, occasionally watching herself work on him in the mirror.

Finally, she felt Wiley spanking her with the silver hairbrush. He was behind her; his phallus, engorged with blood and swollen with excitement, was buried deep in her slick, wet sheath. Her whole body trembled with pleasure. The patrons of the thin-walled adjoining room no doubt heard her raunchy shrieks profane the amber afternoon air.

Less likely would they hear her soft, sacred whispers of unseemly love.

JOHN GREY is an Australian-born poet, playwright and musician. His work has appeared in *Two Rivers Review*, *Apostrophe*, *Weber Studies*, *Osiris*, *Potpourri*, with work upcoming in *Pacific Coast Journal* and *South Carolina Review*. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island.

John Grey / **Two Poems**

Here

It's my responsibility
to describe this day.
I can drift back to old times
or project into the future
but my words
always return to this landscape,
these grassy banks, the river
cruising beside me,
my sheer absorption
in the swirl of its current,
the lapping at its banks.
It can hint at rougher, swifter waters
back there in the woods
or the slow emulsion
of stream into ocean
at the mouth out there somewhere,
that flow into all directions,
into seamlessness.
But it will only ever be about
these times, this walk,
this perfect silence and obscurity.

Cuckoo Clock

A carved cuckoo clock
adorns the far wall.
In the sell-off of a marriage,
I can imagine this
as the last item to go under
the auctioneer's hammer.

Green ivy, purple grapes,
entangle that time piece's door.
Like our love,
I can't remember
if we thought it beautiful
or merely quaint.

The door swings open
and the star of the mechanical show
puffs out its feathered breast,
cuckoos, one, two, three,
and then, job done,
slips back inside its house,
awaits the next hour.

I'm resigned to the inventiveness
of all that goes on and on and on...
lives that are still lives
even as they split from others,
and a tiny wooden bird
that tells the time
when it most needs telling.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is currently at work on a novel that takes place in Canada, Finland and Switzerland. He is assembling *The Flat Earth Excavation Company: a surreal fiction anthology*, available from New Orphic Publishers in late 2001.

Goodfellow Finds It Deep

Ernest Hekkanen

FRANK GOODFELLOW worked as an electroplater in a fishing tackle factory. He plated strings of lures in open tanks full of acid and cyanide. He plated them nickel, chrome, copper, brass and silver. By the end of the day his skin would exude a sour chemical fragrance that his wife Darlene complained about quite vociferously. "Don't get near me," she said. "You smell like a toxic dump."

Darlene spent the day looking after their four year-old daughter, Babs. She spent money on things for the apartment, watched television three to four hours a day and, at five o'clock, turned her thoughts to making dinner. She was never up in time to pack Frank a lunch or to glower at him across the breakfast table, which was fine and dandy with him because he didn't like having to glower at her.

Each evening, when he stepped through the door into the apartment, Darlene would tell him not to sit on any of the furniture for fear of making the upholstery smell of chemicals, although, invariably, he would go straight to the bathroom to take a shower. Frank never got any sex. His wife told him they were too poor to risk having any more children and so he would just have to do without. Frank accepted the situation complacently enough rather than arguing with his wife. His wife – a tall, blonde woman with milky skin and a sharp, bony chin – embodied too much virtue for him to approach her on any other terms than as a desecrator.

“And besides,” she said, “you’re such a dowdy, unattractive little man.”

His wife knew how to hurt him. That’s why he avoided picking fights with her. His sarcasm wasn’t equal to hers.

“You’re so nondescript. Why don’t you hide under the sink with all the other potatoes?”

Frank would suffuse with embarrassment whenever he looked at himself in the mirror. “Well, your mug might not be all that attractive,” he told his reflection, “but it’ll fetch a good price at the produce counter.”

Then he would laugh. After all, what else could he do?

Ω

Back when Frank and Darlene were first married it looked as if things might go a lot smoother than they had. Frank had a small antique business, a truck for hauling merchandise around town and what he thought was an unbridled enthusiasm for life. But one day, his wife started complaining about how much she hated the musty smells connected with the antique business. She hated living upstairs from the store and putting up with all the clutter.

“I want to live in a nice place – a place I can be proud of. Not a dump, Goodfellow!”

Invariably, his wife would use his surname when she was upset with him. It got so she used it nearly all the time. They purchased a house which they financed by selling the antique business, then the roof fell in on their heads. The house was repossessed. They moved into an apartment, and that’s when his wife’s tongue really started getting nasty.

“If you had any gumption, we could afford to live the way other people do. For instance, my sister. Her husband’s a stockbroker. But what are you? You’re some luckless electroplater who brings home a bad smell instead of cash!”

Goodfellow had started working at the fishing lure factory after losing his job as a carpet cleaner. He had started by buffing lures. He had worked his way up the ladder by pouring lead sinkers and working on punch presses. Finally, after a year, he was moved to the electroplating room.

“See the flies floating on the surface of that tank,” said his predecessor. “That’s because they flew too close to the cyanide.”

“What cyanide?”

“The cyanide in that silver tank. So don’t go sticking your nose in it. You’ll wind up with a permanent case of death.”

Now and then, Frank thought about killing himself by drinking a cupful of the cyanide solution; however, the thought that he might die in pain, in agony, prevented him from doing so. He didn't often contemplate such things – only when he began to think of himself as a failure, which usually occurred after his wife Darlene had given him a good tongue-lashing for being such a lousy provider.

Frank began to feel as if something might split apart in him. He didn't know how to satisfy his wife. As a result she was nasty and quarrelsome most of the time. From what he could tell, she had only two interests in life: reading women's magazines and watching television. Whenever she saw something advertised in print or on the tube, something she really wanted, she would berate him for being such a lousy provider.

“What I've come to realize is that it's always going to be like this. You're never going to make enough money for us to do anything or own anything that's really nice.”

Even though he felt miserable at home, Frank tried to appear optimistic at work. He arrived at the factory whistling a tune and wishing everybody a good morning. In a weird sort of way, he felt obliged to live up to his last name. He wanted to be a good fellow. He wanted to be cheerful, if for no other reason than to lessen the guilt he felt about being such a lousy father and husband.

Frank was actually a pretty good electroplater. He scheduled his work in such a manner, he could send it through the electroplating room with speed and efficiency. He was so efficient the workers up front in the assembly room groaned each time they saw him come through the door with another batch of fishing lures. Nearly all of the lures the shop turned out had to be funneled through the electroplating room. Because he plated them on strings, mostly in the nickel tank, he was able to swamp the assembly room in no time at all. However, when he plated chrome, it was another matter. Chrome was sensitive and required a lot of care. On days when he plated lots of chrome lures, the workers up front in the assembly room would smile with warmth and gratitude, knowing it would be a slow day.

There were moments when Frank regretted having given up the antique business. At least when he was in business for himself, he didn't have a boss telling him what to do. He could obey his own inclinations to some extent. Plus, being in business had given him a badly needed sense of status. Electroplating was a step down. His wife never failed to bring it to his attention. In her opinion, families of stockbrokers and automobile salesmen fared much better.

“Unfortunately, I'm neither of those,” he said.

“Yes, I know. I know that very well.”

“Then why do you keep bringing it up?”

“Why!” she said, flying into a rage. “Because, if you really cared about us, Goodfellow, you’d make something of yourself.”

“I am.”

“Oh, sure. Sure, you are. Some big factory worker. Some big electroplating whiz. Hell, I could turn tricks for more money than you’re making.”

And so it was. Whenever his wife got the chance to rub his nose in his failure, she would damn well take the opportunity to do so. But worse than that was the way she was passing on her attitude to their daughter. Little Babs began to avoid him whenever he was in the same room with her. She would look askance at him at the dinner table, curling her upper lip the same way Darlene did.

One day, she said out of the blue:

“Daddy is low class. Isn’t he, mommy?”

“Yes, darling. He’s terribly low class. And he’s poor. That’s an even worse crime. When a man is poor, it forces everybody in the family to hang their heads in shame.”

Ω

It wasn’t until his wife began to refer to him as an *embittered worm* that Frank began to have serious doubts about the feasibility of their marriage. The name did not come as a surprise as much as it was icing on the cake. The thing that had been threatening to tear apart in him finally began to split at the seams. Darlene’s accusation seemed so totally uncalled for, so totally unfair. It implied that he had expected more of life. But he hadn’t – not really. He had always thought of himself as an ordinary kind of fellow, one who brought his check home intact every two weeks. But now – now his belief in himself had been ruined. By one utterance, by one unthoughtful phrase: *You embittered worm*. It confused him. He began to feel uncomfortable in his own skin.

People at work began to notice the change in Frank. Now, instead of arriving at the factory full of good cheer, he was sullen and angry and went around with a scowl. Nor did he have any mercy. He plated so fast, with such furious determination, the workers in the assembly room hissed each time he came through the door with more lures. The looks they gave him made him feel uneasy, because he was not without sympathy for them. Most of the assembly workers had been hurt in some fashion. One had hooks for hands, a second was missing his right leg, a third was severely hunchbacked and two more occupied wheelchairs. They reminded him that the same thing could happen to him – that he might be stuck in the lure factory for the rest of

his life! But just the same, he couldn't bring himself to slow down, to make their lives less miserable.

This went on for several weeks. Finally, one day, the one-legged man hobbled on crutches into the electroplating room. He told Frank in no uncertain terms to slow down. The one-legged man was a hulking, strong Yugoslav, with powerful shoulders and explosive blue eyes.

"Enough is enough," the man told Goodfellow. "After all, what do we make? I tell you what we make. Peanuts. Barely enough to live on. In old country, we work together. Man like you who drives others crazy by pushing so hard, soon has accident. So let's be a good fellow, huh? Make less work. We be on better terms."

What the Yugoslav and his fellow assembly workers failed to understand was the fact that Frank wasn't driving himself because he found it particularly pleasant to do so. He drove himself in order to occupy his mind. The faster he worked the less time he had to think about difficulties at home. He worked to drive away the anguish. He worked to drive away that refrain: *You embittered worm!*

Frank could not seem to get the phrase out of his head. The thing was, his wife had tossed off the remark so casually.

"You embittered worm. You embittered little worm."

He could not remember what had provoked the remark. He suddenly became aware of it when it pierced his skin. He remembered he was reading the newspaper. He looked up from the armchair, only to realize that his wife had fired the insult at him. That was just the point! The most casual sort of thing could inspire her to say the most vindictive things. He could do nothing right – not even sit down and read the newspaper!

Each day after work, as he was riding home on the city bus, he started bracing himself for the assault that would take place as soon as he opened the apartment door. Darlene didn't even have to say anything to get her point across. All she had to do was look at him in this funny way, as if he were an insect that she would sooner crush. Right away, he felt tense. Out of place.

Dinner was the worst time of all. His wife and daughter would sit at the table, watching him eat. They wouldn't eat anything themselves! Usually dinner consisted of some starchy mess that had begun to congeal.

"I hope you like it," his wife would tell him. "It's all we can afford."

"Aren't you going to have anything?"

"We'll eat after you – provided there's something left!"

His wife and daughter were rather plump. He suspected them of filling their mouths while he was away at work and saving their caus-

tic remarks for when he got home. He felt pangs of guilt each time he opened his mouth to take a bite, so much so he pushed his plate away before he had completely satisfied his hunger. As a result, he got thinner and thinner.

One day, Darlene told him that she and Babs were saving up their money to go back East. She went so far as to show him the coffee can they were keeping their money in. The note taped to the side of the can read: *Our Going Away Money*. She rifled his pockets for coins she could drop through the slot in the plastic lid.

“Hear it getting full, daddy. We’re going to get it so full we can go away from here forever. Isn’t that right, mommy?”

Living with that knowledge was like living with his own inadequacy. Frank pleaded with his wife for them to see a marriage counselor.

“No dice,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re such a loser, darling. All you’ll ever ring up is a big, fat zero, and I don’t want to live with a big, fat zero the rest of my life. I want to travel. I want to take trips to Hawaii, and things like that, and you’re not willing to work hard enough to afford those sort of things.”

So why live? he told himself. Why the dogged persistence? These were questions he had never asked himself, until now. There had been no reason to. Previously, life had gone so smoothly. One day had eased into the next. He had come to think that each day would spin and twirl and, therefore, he had given little thought to the future. He had always thought that the future would take care of itself. But now, things were falling apart.

Ω

One day in August, he went home to find the sink full of dirty dishes, the suitcases gone from the closet, the coffee can empty of coins and his check book missing from the bureau drawer. He sat down, wanting to experience a vast feeling of regret. But he wasn’t able to; he couldn’t muster any. He figured his wife and daughter would soon be coming home. Certainly, they couldn’t get very far on the money Darlene said he didn’t make enough of. He would give them a week, he told himself. But a week became two weeks, then a month. Finally he stopped expecting them to come home.

Well, that’s just fine, he told himself. He would just have to go on. However, he didn’t find that very easy to do. The vicious curse followed him around like a dog. He had no luck with women. Maybe it really was his face? Maybe it really did resemble a potato – just

like his wife had said! Anyway, he couldn't make himself attractive to women. He saw in their eyes a look he had so often seen in his wife's eyes – that is, a look of disgust!

This was driven home to him when he tried to make friends with the new girl at work. He noticed her when he took a bunch of freshly plated fishing lures into the assembly room. She was the sort of girl that Frank felt he might have some luck with: plain, with heavy features. However, her eyes were nice. They seemed to contemplate him from afar whenever he entered the assembly room.

Frank showed her some attention. Unfortunately, it was lost on her. She didn't smile or speak. She didn't even nod. Frank wasn't disheartened. He began to shave again. He took better care of his appearance. He stopped eating onion sandwiches, which he ate whenever he was feeling depressed. He got back some of his former vigor. He even puffed his chest.

Nothing he did would break the ice with her. He couldn't seem to get to first base.

"What's wrong with me?" he asked his reflection. "Why am I so eternally unpopular?"

The next day, Frank decided to try a joke, thinking the new girl might go for that.

"Have you ever noticed how this job lures you to work each morning?"

The girl stared at him. The other workers in the assembly room laughed, but not her. Frank redoubled his efforts. He decided to try another joke after the ten o'clock coffee break.

"There's one thing you should be aware of about the fishing lure business," he told her. "You end up putting your life on the line."

The hulking, one-legged Yugoslav spoke up from the table where he was working. "Stop tormenting her, you idiot. Can't you see she's deaf and dumb?"

"You're kidding?" Frank said, feeling his neck redden.

"No, I'm not kidding. So stop with your stupid jokes, okay?"

The rest of the day was sheer torment for him. His skin crawled each time he took more lures into the assembly room. His shoulders seemed heavier and more exhausted. The new girl, understanding the joke now, smiled at him as if he were the most pathetic thing in the world.

Why does it always happen like this? he asked himself. Why do I always put my foot in dog shit?

It was in the fall of the year when Frank began to have problems with his electroplating. All of a sudden, for no apparent reason, the nickel and chrome plated lures began to peel like bananas.

“It’s grease,” the old shop foreman told him. “There’s grease on the brass. It’s lifting the plating.”

Frank took an unplated lure out of the acid bath. “Show me. Point to it. I can’t see any grease.”

“There, right there,” the foreman said, seizing the lure with his greasy fingers. “It’s all over. See how the water beads.”

Frank scrubbed each lure as if his life depended on it. Nonetheless, all of the nickel and chrome plated lures continued to peel.

“It’s grease. It’s got to be grease,” the shop foreman said. “You can’t see it, but it’s there. It’s got to be there.”

Frank wasn’t so sure. He changed every cleaning solution in every cleaning tank. He scrubbed the lures in a paranoid fashion. They continued to peel. Relentlessly. It got so costly the manager came down to see what the problem was.

“You know, the onus is on you, Goodfellow. You’re responsible for the plating room. It’s up to you to see that everything comes out all right.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing wrong,” Frank told him. “I’ve tried everything.”

“Well, maybe you’re not trying hard enough.”

“I’ll redouble my efforts. I’m sure I’ll discover what’s wrong.”

The manager brought an expert in to examine the problem. The expert plated several nickel lures that came out perfectly – without peeling! When Frank tried it, his lures began to peel. He cursed God under his breath.

“I think you should take some time off,” the manager told him. “Maybe when you come back your attitude will be a lot better.”

But when he came back to work it was the same old problem. His nickel and chrome plated lures peeled almost willfully. Finally, he was demoted to the buffing room. There, after grinding his life away for eight hours, he would go home with a dull pain in his neck.

Then, to make matters worse, Frank’s wife came back. One night she swept into the apartment. She no longer looked like the same woman. She was dressed in a knee-length fur coat. Ermine by the look and feel. Babs was dressed in a small fur outfit, too.

“Well, I can see you haven’t changed,” his wife told him. “Still the same old place. Still the same dumb louse.” She pulled at her white leather gloves as though preparing to get down to business. “I might as well tell you why I’m here. I want a divorce, Goodfellow.”

Frank was drunk. He stared at her drunkenly. She swam before his eyes.

“Listen here, if you think I’m kidding just go out on the balcony. Take a look down in the parking lot. You’ll see a silver Thunderbird parked down there. It’s mine.”

Frank stumbled out onto the balcony. Sure enough, there was a silver Thunderbird parked right below. He had drunk so much he was seeing two of everything. Two Thunderbirds, two Thunderbird wives, and a couple of Babses. Something like that, anyway.

“That proves what I’ve been telling you all this time,” his wife said. “All you need is a little gumption and you can do all right for yourself. By the way, this winter Babs and I will be vacationing in Hawaii – while you freeze your ass off here!”

And she laughed.

The next day, Frank quit his job at the lure factory. He walked out of the apartment, sticking the landlord for the rent. He sought anonymity on skid row. No matter where he went, though, he couldn’t escape the refrain in his head: *You embittered worm.*

Ω

It was spring. Frank spent his time feeding pigeons in the park. One day he was approached by a lanky, dark-eyed man who spoke of God, miracles and cures. Frank asked him if God had a cure for persistent, pernicious bad luck.

“Yes, He does,” the man said. “His Son. All you have to do is open your heart to Him.”

Frank went to find out for himself. After all, what harm could it do? He listened to the sermon. Afterwards, he went up to the altar hoping to be relieved of his suffering – the misfortune he dragged around after him like a shadow! The minister put his hands on Frank. He muttered incantations under his breath, then he smacked Frank on the head. Frank left the mission, expecting his life to turn to gold at any moment. One day passed, then another. By the end of the week, he was again feeding pigeons in the park.

Early one July morning, Frank was strolling along the waterfront when he was accosted by a one-legged man hobbling along on crutches. It was the Yugoslav come back to haunt him. Frank tried to scamper away, but the Yugoslav grabbed him by the arm.

“So this is what has become of you, my friend! You’re a bum!”

Frank wrenched at the Yugoslav’s hand, but he couldn’t get away.

“I knew when I first laid eyes on you that you were a good-for-nothing. Always pushing people! Always the big man! Now look at you. You’re a bum! A filthy, no-good bum!”

Frank raised his arm in fear of being hit. The one-legged Yugoslav bellowed laughter. The laughter became a hideous gurgling sound in his throat, then he spat on the ground at Frank's feet.

"So much for you, my friend. So much."

Frank scampered down the sidewalk. Soon he slowed to a walk. The wine he had drunk was now pressing against his bladder. He headed down the pier to where a fancy restaurant overlooked the harbor. He unzipped his fly and pissed into the water below. He thought how wonderful it would be to go away – somewhere far, far away. But where? He couldn't think of any place he really wanted to go to.

Then he thought: You embittered worm. You really are an embittered worm.

Sunshine danced on the water. He thought momentarily of ending his life, but he knew he wouldn't be able to do it. He would never be able to drown himself. As soon as he would hit the water, his arms and legs would start thrashing independently of his will. He would be dragged from the harbor to face an even greater humiliation. So why try? It would only end in more frustration.

Frank turned away from the water and walked back down the street in the direction of the park where he fed the pigeons. The park was always a good place to go to on hot summer days. Usually, if he hid himself just right, he wouldn't be disturbed.

He hurried his steps.

Finally, he came to a secluded spot in the park. Stretching out on his back and cupping his hands under his head, his eyelids fluttered shut. Almost instantly he started to dream. He dreamed of chrome-plated lures that kept peeling. One second, he would see them in mint condition; the next second, they would start to peel. He tried to wake from the dream, but he was lured deeper and deeper into it – until he felt quite alone and lost.