

The New Orphic Review

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The Seeing Hand

Ernest Hekkanen

MY FIRST THOUGHT, after getting up at four a.m., making myself a stovetop espresso and sitting down to work on this editorial, was: "I'm not up to this."

I put down my pen, held my face in my hands as I lightly massaged my eyes with my fingertips, had another sip or two of coffee, and then *felt* more like picking up my pen. My mind now *felt* more like participating in the activity of writing and so, I began to *grope* for the correct words that would allow me to express the vague notions forming just below the surface of waking consciousness. I write with my right hand, while my left fidgets with a coin or paperclip. Later on, once my resistance has been overcome, I switch to the computer. But, initially, the act of writing – of coming up with words – is more like divining than it is anything else. My hand "sees" the way I have to go.

No matter what I'm working on – be it a short story, novel, play, or poem – I work more or less blindly. Although I might have a vague *feeling* for where a certain piece might be going, I do not create outlines, graphs, character profiles, or anything of that nature. In the past, when I resorted to such aids, I ended up stymieing myself. Trying to be methodical if not premeditated resulted in my becoming *blocked*. Now I prefer to *feel* my way through a piece, from beginning to end. Writing in this fashion requires me to be a lot more trusting. I must *trust* that my subconscious mind will come up with something, when I sit down to write.

My method is one of stuffing images, impressions, information and experiences down into my subconscious and letting it sort out what to do, as well as what route to take. While my subconscious relies on my imagination to come up with the proper motifs, images, or scenarios, I must first signal my readiness by picking up my pen. Working in this fashion has made me aware of one thing, and that is this: – when my frontal lobe goes into hibernation, as it does now and then, usually after reaching the point of exhaustion, all I can do is wait, all I can do is be patient, in hopes that my forebrain will eventually come back to life.

For me, the frontal lobe has become identified with the seat of the imagination. That leads me to wonder whether alchemists and mystics of old might have known something of which the general population was unaware. Perhaps, that is why they came to identify the imagination with, respectively, *the crucible* or *the third eye*?

The above meanderings bring me to the cover illustration and the Featured Poet Section of the spring, 2003 issue of *The New Orphic Review*. Both feature work by Michael Bullock, an internationally known Surrealist.

Bullock has contrary feelings about being lumped in with Surrealist writers. In his article, “Surrealism and I,” he notes that:

Through the years I have continued to practice Surrealist writing as I conceived it, with a varying degree of emphasis on automatism. I have dealt with the problem of automatic writing in other essays, so I will not discuss it here. But at all times I saw in Surrealism a justification for freeing the imagination from the shackles of realism and allowing it to follow its own laws with total liberty and spontaneity. In so far as this is the essence of the Surrealist enterprise, I am happy to call myself a Surrealist. But to the extent that most contemporary Surrealists, disregarding Breton’s own abandonment of “automatic” writing, insist that only writing that is automatic and free from conscious control (an impossibility except in a mediumistic trance) qualifies as Surrealist, to this extent I repudiate Surrealism and reject it as a designation of my own writing. Hence the ambivalence of my attitude. Surrealism as a liberation of the imagination, I welcome. But Surrealism as a dictatorial edict as to how I should write, I wholeheartedly reject.¹

¹ “Surrealism and I,” Michael Bullock, from *The Flat Earth Excavation Company: A Surreal Fiction Anthology* (New Orphic Publishers, 2002), edited by Ernest Hekkanen

The opening of his story “The Double Ego: an autocollage” epitomizes Michael Bullock’s *modus operandi*.

At the dawn of this new day I allow my pen to wander at random over the white paper. In no time at all I see myself threading my way between dark bushes, laurels with pale-green, hard, textured fruit. I am peering down into the long grass among the bushes, apparently searching for something.

Every now and then, in “The Double Ego,” the narrator returns to his “former vantage point...to watch [his] further actions.” One gets the *feeling* that the author is both a recorder and a participant in the story – which unfolds in a controlled kaleidoscope of images. Throughout the story, the reader *feels* (that word again) as though the story is spontaneously arising from the author’s pen. Each word is a stone that magically appears in the stream of consciousness – for us, the readers, to step on, one after another, until, at last, we arrive at the end of the story – at precisely the same moment that the author himself arrives at that juncture, and there, we find ourselves standing at a “pit into which all things will vanish, so that only a fallen tree and its naked roots will remain to bear witness to a world that has passed away.”

The roots in question belong to the world tree, Yggdrasil. Unlike the roots in Jean-Paul Sartre’s novella, *Nausea*, they do not inspire sickness unto death, but rather a sense of awe and connectedness. They are equivalent to the roots of the lotus and grow out of the emptiness of nonbeing, ultimately to produce a stem and then a blossom designed to absorb the enlightening rays of the sun. However, in “The Double Ego,” Bullock works from the blossoms, leaves and lush embellishments of the Yggdrasil back to the roots of existence – that is, the emptiness which gives rise to the phenomenal world.

What I find so interesting and indeed telling about “The Double Ego” is the fact that it begins with the dawning of a new day, and with the narrator prepared to allow his pen to wander as though at will. In this case, that “will” is the will of the subconscious mind, which proceeds to unfold the story of the double ego, both for Bullock and for us. The narrator “threads his way ... apparently searching for something.” With his pen firmly in hand, he *feels* his way toward the end of the story. The “autocollage” that unfolds is, in large part, the result of so-called “automatic” writing.

Now, let’s take a look at the illustration on the cover on this issue of the *NOR*. Entitled *Seeing Hand*, it causes one to wonder whether that colorful hand with eyes might not also be the one which penned “The Double Ego.” Of course, as one can easily see, the *right* or *dexter* hand

depicted in the illustration is, in fact, a mirror image of the *left* or *sinister* hand. That is, his right hand simply drew the outline of his left hand and then began to adorn it. One hand is the double of the other. Indeed, it matters very little which hand did the actually writing of “The Double Ego,” because they were *united* in the process. One hand “saw” the way to go and the other described what was “seen.” Often, in Bullock’s stories, there is a “sinister” aspect to events. We are led into a landscape where we often meet death or the potential for violence, and this, in many ways, reminds me of the lingering threat of death and violence depicted in many of Henri Rousseau’s jungle paintings.

One day, in the middle of January, 2003, Margrith Schraner and I were invited to have lunch with Michael Bullock, Lori-ann Latremouille and Angus Bungay. Lori-ann and Angus are artists of extraordinary talent, skill, versatility and vision; later, when we visited them at their home, we were treated to a visual feast much more intriguing and indeed exhilarating than many of the exhibits we have viewed in Vancouver art galleries. Angus has shot two videos based on Bullock’s poetry – the latest, *Wings of the Black Swan* – and Lori-ann’s artwork has appeared on the covers of many of Bullock’s books. As we were having lunch with the three of them, Lori-ann made the following curious observation about Bullock. “When he holds hands with the philodendron, I can see the green blood flowing through his veins.”

As in Rousseau’s jungle paintings, vegetation often plays a significant, even active role in many of Bullock’s stories. Witness Selva in the story, “The Green Girl.” Selva is associated with the overwhelming vitality of nature. The first person narrator becomes lovers with her. Later, he comes to feel threatened by Selva’s incomprehensible, but extremely vital nature, and so he poisons her with a concoction made of poison ivy. But nature retaliates. Magnolia trees begin to sprout with abandon in the narrator’s yard. Eventually, they besiege his home, and the somewhat ineffectual narrator, a writer, resorts to burning down his own house in order to get rid of them. When Lori-ann made her observation about Michael joining hands with the philodendron and green blood flowing through his veins, I immediately thought of “The Green Girl” and his *sinister* and *dexter* hands joined in creativity.

I don’t wish to make too much of my *feelings* about the creative process in this editorial, as this isn’t the appropriate place for such an in-depth examination. But as you, the good readers of the *NOR*, peruse the stories and poems in this issue, read them with regard to how well the “seeing hand” has “seen the way.” If nothing else, the stories say a little something about the way human beings keep *groping* for a narrative that is meaningful to them.

LEE D. THOMPSON is a writer, editor, and sometimes publisher from Moncton, New Brunswick. His short fiction has recently appeared in *Gaspereau Review*, *The Nashwaak Review*, and the Doubleday Canada anthology *Victory Meats: Fresh Cuts from Atlantic Canada*.

Beyond the Valley Below

Lee D. Thompson

Sweet Echo, sweetest nymph, that liv'st unseen
 Within thy airy shell
 By slow Meander's margent green,
 And the violet-embroidered vale.
 —Milton

UNTIL I CAME upon the scene of the accident, until I stopped before the mangled guard rail and broken cliff-side trees, until I opened my door and set foot upon the sun-soft asphalt, the wilted weeds, my journey had been uneventful. I had been humming in my car, entranced by the vista before me, the last of the mountain valleys, valleys spectacular in the bright summer air, shimmering in the white summer sun, valleys in this country of valleys, this, my homeland, and being so entranced I nearly drove the car over the cliff-side myself. It is easy to understand how a driver, lost in his gazing, could miss the turn, the sharp right turn, so sudden, and go over.

Twenty years I have been away from my homeland, held by commitments, distracted by desires, twenty years of saying yes, I will return, next year, I promise, yet year after year passing, and I not returning. Why was this year different? I do not know. I was born in a land of exquisite beauty, a land of fresh forests and soft, woodscented fogs, a land, a valley, where every morning was a continuation of the night's hushed, womb-like dream.

Then, humming in my car, an hour from my destination, I came to a stop. I had been humming, watching the vista before me, entranced, but there were twin black streaks, a gap in the guard rail, a disruption in the treeline, my mind registered this as noise, and the aria ceased. Sound and the mountain fell steeply. My front fender hung over nothing.

Until I came upon the scene of the accident, stopped my car at the sudden precipice, until then, I drove and I drove and I wondered how they would greet me, I who had left, and I wondered did they all still live in the same row of houses, the same small, wooden river-huddled houses, my family, my mother, my brothers and sisters. I drove and I stopped where the guard rail was mangled, where the trees were shattered.

Yes, I drove and I hummed and I stepped from my car. The white sun had softened the asphalt and the roadside weeds were wilting. The vista before me showed the last of the mountain valleys, far forests like knotty mossland, silvers of rivers, all viewed with a hot wind on my face, and a cliff-side vertigo. The mountain fell steeply and beyond the valley below, beyond the next mountain, was my homeland, a river, a row of houses.

But my front fender hung over nothing.

I kicked at the weeds, angry that there were no signs warning of this sharp right turn, this deadly detour that could keep travelers from their destination. The guard rail was mangled, thrown back like a gate, and looking down I could see a red car, it was upright, sideways to me, the sun flashed on glass and chrome, and I heard a faint cry for help.

Twenty years of longing to return, longing for nothing more, but the wind carried this cry, it came from the car on the slate-grey slope, the red car among the scattered shrubs, the crashed car over the falling valley, its shining slivers of river, and I stood in the weeds, slopeside, felt a hot wind in my hair, shielded my eyes, saw movement in the red car below, saw a wave of a hand, a jolt of the head, and heard the cry once more.

Then a bird flew from the broken cliff-side trees.

Then I followed the flight of the bird, raised my right hand, then I fell. And the guard rail with its sudden hinge directed me down.

When I came upon the scene of the accident, the twin black streaks, the gap in the guard rail, the disrupted treeline, I had been humming an aria I do not remember. When I stood cliff-side, which was not a cliff, though steep enough to fall, as I would fall, the aria lay in my mind like a wind approaching leaves. When I fell with my arm upraised, when the bird shot from the trees, when I wanted to acknowledge the dark driver, the gestures, it seemed the events before me, the slope, the scattered gravel, the red car, were like that melody which had escaped me.

Yet the melody seemed fated.

And until I stopped under the red car, wedged there, with my shins aflame and my toes crushed, I had assumed the driver was alive. I had heard her cry, had seen her move, had raised my right hand to show her I saw her. But then the soil shifted, and I fell. It was stupid of me to stand there, staring at the red car, but if it wasn't for the red car I would have fallen much farther.

But if it wasn't for the red car my journey would be complete.

I would be home.

Where they are waiting for me, waiting in houses huddled like valley shadows, houses, homes to my family, whom I have never forgotten, despite the city's dizzying distractions. They are waiting for me on their shaded porches, watching the river, checking their watches and waiting and sighing.

I fear they will never see me.

Why have you decided to return? they will never ask.

Because you are my family, I will never answer.

Because when I stopped below the red car, when my slide came to its end, my legs wedged tightly. Because when I stopped half under the red car my trousers ripped and the shin skin peeled back, exposing wet bone, white bone, and any movement is needles and flame. I had been falling fast, and when I stopped with a rip of flesh and my palms hard on the door, I screamed, saw the shattered windshield, lay back, looked up, saw the driver in the angled rear-view mirror.

I lay with my arm over my eyes.

I see her now in the rear-view mirror; lying back, I see her, her long hair caked with blood, her scalp fallen over her left eye, her left arm in a gesture behind her head, boasting an unnatural flexibility. I see her. She was dead and I was calling for help, pounding the red car in pain. She was dead and I was silent and I saw her right eyelid move, saw it blink, flutter a long dark lash. She was dead, but then her lips moved and she spoke to me, spoke softly to me, and I watched her lips move in the mirror, in horror.

When I first came upon the scene of the horror, this valley, this crashed car, this dead woman, my life had been uneventful. For twenty years I had sustained a life of little consequence, of meetings in lightless rooms with lifeless faces, of lovers left and lovers sought, and I had been driving back to my homeland, to the valley fogs, the mornings of valley fog, the slumberous valley fog, ready to descend to the final valley, the valley shimmering in the white summer sun, my family in shade along the slow forest river, and I came to the sudden turn, the sharp right turn, and nearly went over. It is easy to understand how a driver, standing cliff-side in the wilted weeds, can fall.

And when she first moved her lips, when I was pounding the car door and screaming, when all this was happening, I could not hear what she was saying, could not tell if she was saying anything at all, so when she first moved her lips, it is possible that she was simply moving her lips.

The bird that flew from the bushes was black and red.

Yes, and I tried to grab hold of the guard rail, got hold of the guard rail with my left hand, let go of the guard rail when it sliced off most of my first two fingers.

It directed me down.

I was falling.

Listen, they told me, it doesn't matter when you arrive, it doesn't matter if you arrive next week, or the week thereafter, for there have been many weeks to arrive, and there will be many more, and we will all still be here, you know that, though we will not be here forever, for houses have lately fallen into the river, which is slow, as you know, but patient, so we haven't much time left here, but until then, we will wait here, until then, we will keep your room and we will wait here, but beware the sharp right turn, for it's so sudden, and there are no signs of warning, and the traffic up there is rare, and I lay with my arms over my eyes, and the white sun has stalled, become a beacon for flies.

I saw a gap in the treeline, the twin black streaks like rails.

I had been humming.

My front fender hangs over nothing.

Then there was a man in black, a standing man in black leather.

Who came upon the scene of the accident, who saw the scene below, saw the bright red car, the talking woman, the prone man, and gazed upon them. He was a man who stood in black leather at cliff-side and gazed down, and I made to cry to him, wanted to call to him, but my voice was lost from screaming, and the sun was in my eyes.

Then he was gone.

It is easy to understand.

For he, too, would have fallen. He, too, would have wedged below the red car, would have pounded the door with his mangled hands, would have cried through his cracked lips, swatted flies from his face.

Why have I returned?

Born in land of exquisite beauty, of luminous dawn fogs, I longed to return. Twenty years I have been away from my homeland, and for twenty years I have promised to return, twenty years of saying next year, listen, next year, I promise, I promise, I promise.

And if the sun has stalled, it is because some days are inescapable.

Listen...

I had been humming, she says, it was an aria, and the sun was so white, the valleys were so green, the valley rivers so sparkling, and it was beautiful. Yes, I had been humming an aria, a lovely aria, and it was beautiful. Yes, I had been humming an aria, had been seeing the endless mountain valleys, valley after verdant valley, and humming, humming, tears filling my eyes, the world was so beautiful, how I had missed this, and there was the treeline, the guard rail, my tires had been humming on asphalt, but not now, for now sound and the mountain fell steeply, and I had gone over.

But it was beautiful.

Until I came upon this valley, I had never seen anything so beautiful.

Until I came upon this valley, I had been longing for a homeland.

Until I came upon this valley, I had lived a life of loneliness, and I had accomplished nothing. But I realized patience was not a virtue, but was wasting a life. So I drove and I drove and I came upon the turn, the sharp right turn, so sudden, and I was in the air, the valley was below, the river glittered across the horizon, a bright seam to other things, and it was beautiful, so beautiful, and I thought, yes, yes, my journey has neared its end.

RICHARD ARNOLD lives on Vancouver Island, where he helps raise his children, explores the wilderness, writes, and teaches English at Malaspina University-College. His poetry and reviews have appeared in journals in North America and Ireland, including *Tower*, *Ecoforestry*, *Wind*, *Snowy Egret*, *Bibliophilos*, and *Brobdingnagian Times*. His first collection was published by Leaf Press in October, 2002.

Richard Arnold / **Two Poems**

Bethel on the Beach:

Perseid Meteors,
Gabriola Island, B.C.

Patiently awaiting the vision, my head on a log,
I imagine, Jacob, that I can hear you scoff,
Old desert dreamer, whose pillow was a rock –
At how the thirty centuries have turned us soft.

In goatskins, you gobbled Canaan's dusty miles,
An ironwood club to whack the wolves and lions –
Wore only an inch of callus on your soles,
Picked figseeds from your teeth with lizard bones.

You'd laugh at my latte, beach shoes, ten-dollar star chart;
To whack mosquitoes, my designer flashlight.
But I've one thing on you, old patriarch:
I get my dream and never close my eyes,
All night, angel after searing angel, shot
Down a silver ladder from a god.

Zen Weekend Workshop:

Squamish, B.C.

We meet in a million-dollar
 Varnished cedar lodge sprawled
 On the bank of the Cheakamus –
 The river where gathers each winter
 (So tells the tourist brochure
 By the reception desk)

The greatest assembly of bald eagles
 On the continent – many hundreds,
 Sometimes several thousands,
 For six weeks congregating, filling
 The ancient firs and cottonwoods
 Along the Cheakamus.

Our class leader has the look
 Of a lively capitalist – a girl
 In diamonds (hardly meditative),
 Reeking of Vancouver west-end chic:
 CK cologne, leather boots, and belt
 With cellphone holstered for quick-draw.

At the morning break the students
 Clump into groups in the lobby,
 Toe the royal plush carpet,
 Sip cappuccinos and puff du Mauriers,
 Yapping on their cells in that
 Irritating, loudly public way.

Outside, on rainslick limbs, grim monks hunker
 White-hooded and black-robed in austere
 Poplars and dark monastic firs; their eyes,
 A fierce topaz clarity we dare not look into,
 Staring past the fast transparent stream
 Full of bright, bouncing pebbles,

Level gazes on the farther shore.

BEN GEORGE lives with his wife in Moscow, Idaho, where he is currently enrolled in the creative writing program at the University of Idaho. “Obituary” is his first published story.

Obituary

Ben George

SOMETIME LAST YEAR I started reading the obituaries. At the time I wouldn't have been able to tell you why exactly, and I'm not even sure I could tell you now. Though I think it's because I've always loved stories, and what is a life if not a story, a long unfolding, the obituary being the officially recorded end of that story. Once I started reading them, it became a habit. Every day now I read them, imagining from the supplied information what each person's existence must have been like – how it might have proceeded from one event to another and finally ended. I imagine whose lives that person's life intersected and what impression, if any, that intersection made. In this way, perhaps it is not the end of the story but the beginning of another. But, I wonder, what do those left behind feel toward the departed? In what way do the dead and the fragments of their stories survive in the hearts of the bereft?

This past weekend, I canceled all my piano lessons. I was too depressed to give them. I haven't played professionally myself in over a year; not being able to share your music takes its toll. For several years, I headlined a jazz band named Night Train that played locally around Detroit, but it folded and I haven't been able to get any gigs going since. Hearing the rumors floating around, that Wayne State plans on cutting my untenured position in the music department, doesn't help matters. I do not like the prospect of being an unemployed musician. What's more, my college-sophomore daughter recently became a Hindu convert and has developed the habit of preaching to me about reincarnation and my own spiritual vacuousness. Spiritual vacuousness, those

were her exact words. And to top it off, my boyfriend and I finally decided to end our relationship for good.

So, like any other daughter in distress, I went home to visit my mother. I canceled my lessons, packed my bags, and traveled back home to Little Hope, where I grew up – the kind of country town where if you happen to get lost and pull into someone’s gravel drive to turn around, he will stare at you through the screen door while you jerkily turn your car around and beat a hasty retreat. Being in the habit, I picked up mother’s paper, the *Traverse City Record-Eagle*, and began to peruse the obituaries. I was surprised to come across an entry for which I had neither to conjure nor invent a story:

KNIFE LAKE, MI – Antonina Skruzewski, 93, of 22 Pleasant Street, wife of Claude Skruzewski, died yesterday at her residence. She was a member of St. Isaac Jogues Catholic Church in Knife Lake, and a craft maker in the community. She is survived by her husband, Claude. Services will be 5 p.m. Tuesday at St. Isaac Jogues Catholic Church.

After reading the article, I recalled the one night in my life, nearly thirty years ago, that I had met Antonina.

Ω

On a Saturday in the winter of my senior year at Silent Springs High School, my boyfriend Jake Warring had called my house non-stop to persuade me to take him night skiing at Boyne Highlands. I had a car and he didn’t. For some reason, Jake could barely stand to be in the same room with his father since his mother had died. It was something he never talked about. But he took every chance he got to get out of the house. In a way we were the perfect pair; Jake had lost his mother and I’d lost my father.

I hadn’t felt like going when he first called. I’d been listening to an Oscar Peterson record all afternoon, playing the riffs over and over, trying to get them just right. The last thing I wanted to do was bundle up and brave the cold night. But Jake was sweet. The thing that killed me was how he could feel you looking at him and start to smile at you even before he turned his head. He was the first boy I’d gone out with who didn’t want to get in my pants all the time. He just wanted to touch me, my skin. The way he did it made my stomach flutter. And he had this way of convincing you that what he wanted was what you wanted too. Somehow he always wore me down.

I picked him up at his house in Silent Springs, and we drove together to Boyne. The trip turned out to be a bad idea. It’s not that we didn’t have a great time skiing. We did. But when, on the drive home, the worst blizzard on record in the Grand Traverse Bay area marooned my car in Knife Lake, the fun of the evening melted away.

It was late, then – past ten o’clock. My faithful Chevelle sat idling in the Lakeside Market parking lot that bordered the lake. Because of the darkness I could see the snow only in my beams that tried without much success to cut through the night. Whips of wind buffeted the car. The snow danced crazily in my beams. It was hard to believe this was the same place Jake and I had swung on the tree rope and splashed into the lake the summer before. Watching the stiff rope bang against the tree with each gust of wind infused me with an overwhelming sadness. I felt it in my chest.

Jake crossed his arms and leaned back against the seat. He sighed loudly. “Way to go, Eileen. Now what are we going to do?”

Up until this point, Jake had been a sweetie. He had flirted with me the way I liked him to on the slopes. He had been his usual charming self. He had even cracked jokes when we first started to drive back, when the storm was still just an adventure, before it had turned a little scary. But insinuating that a random act of God was somehow my fault crossed a line I could not ignore.

I lashed out. “Jake, I like you. But sometimes I wonder if you have a brain inside your head. Is there anything in there?” I balled up my fist and knocked on his wool cap.

He smacked my hand and turned away. “Didn’t you check the weather report or anything?”

“It wasn’t even my idea to come, Jake!” It really goaded me that after he came up with the fun ideas, I was always supposed to be the responsible one.

I turned the car off and got out. Snow dusted up when I slammed the door.

There were no motels in the area other than the Blue Heron, which was always booked solid during ski season. I wasn’t sure what Jake and I should do. As I considered, I spotted a light around the curve of the lake, winking through the swirling snow. I strained to see if it was a house. I couldn’t be sure, but I headed for the light.

Jake emerged into the thick, wet fracas of snow. “Where are you going?” he called out apologetically.

I kept walking.

“Eileen! Where are you going?”

Over the moan of the wind, I heard the door shut and then the faint crunch of his boots catching up with me.

“I saw a light,” I said.

We turned our collars up against the cold, pulled our knit caps down snug, and continued walking toward what I hoped was a lighted house. We turned down a snow-covered street. On one corner stood a gazebo, beautiful amid the whirling curlicues of white powder. On the other corner, the rickety wooden post office building that must’ve been a hundred years old seemed on the verge of tumbling over with every

blast of wind. Flecks of its peeling paint ripped off and disappeared into the night. But through the snow, the light glowed cheerfully in the first house past the post office. With our hands thrust deep into our coat pockets and our chins against our chests, we approached the house. Snow lined the stark branches of the towering maple trees that surrounded the small, brown cabin.

Jake and I huddled on the porch. I reached out my gloved finger and pushed the doorbell. We crept to a space in the window where the curtain had been drawn and bent to look in. What we saw was an elderly woman in a wheelchair, furiously pumping her arms along the wheels and thrusting her stooped shoulders forward in an effort to get to the door. We recoiled and stood cowering on the first step.

The woman opened the door, twisted the wheelchair part way through it, and peered at us. She wore enormous wraparound sunglasses, the kind one expects some angler to be sporting on Saturday morning TV. Almost eleven o'clock at night in a snowstorm, and she was wearing angler sunglasses! My chest tightened, as did Jake's grip around my waist.

"Well, come here," the woman called out. "Come here, I can't see you. I can't see very well." She beckoned us with her wrinkled hand. "Come in. Come inside."

Jake and I stamped our boots on the porch and went in as the woman backed up the wheelchair.

"I'm Antonina Skruzewski." Her accent made me think of peasants hoeing potatoes.

I shot Jake a worried glance.

"Oh, don't be afraid," she said as she flopped her wrist. "Don't be silly. Everybody knows me. Now, who're you?"

Unsure, Jake and I introduced ourselves.

"Well, for goodness sakes, what're you doing out in weather like this?"

I explained the situation to her and asked if she knew of a place nearby where we might be able to stay. She said she knew of no close motels, but that even if she did, she wouldn't feel right about letting us go out in a snowstorm. She had an extra bed and insisted we spend the night.

"You can use the phone in the kitchen to call your parents," she said.

As we walked into the living room, what I noticed first were bows of ribbon. Everywhere. They sprouted off the walls as decorations, cascaded down lamps and tables, sprawled half-finished across the glossy baby grand piano in the corner – all colors and sizes of ribbon. As I made my way through the labyrinth of bows in the living room, I saw an elderly man sunk into a collapsing couch. He smiled broadly and

bobbed his bald head at me as I passed. He wore a rumpled sports coat and a bow tie. A *bow tie*. As if there weren't enough bows in the house.

Antonina pumped her wheelchair along behind Jake and me. "If your mother is worried, just tell her who I am. Everyone knows me," she insisted. "Ask anybody. Nina the bowmaker, they call me. I make bows and crafts and sell 'em over here, at Wonderments. I even make the bows for the cheerleaders to put in their hair."

When Jake and I tried to phone my mom and his dad, the lines were out. I knew my mother would worry herself into a conniption, but there was nothing I could do about it. We walked back into the living room.

"Have a seat," Antonina said.

Jake and I plopped down into two wooden chairs across from the elderly gentleman on the couch and Antonina in her wheelchair.

"Did you get a hold of your parents?" Antonina asked.

"No," I said. "The lines are down."

"Well, I guess you'll be staying, then," Antonina said as she smoothed her plain, flower-print dress. "Don't worry. I'm sure they'll have everything cleared up in the morning."

Jake and I nodded our heads.

"Meet my husband, Claude," Antonina said.

"Pleased to meet you," Claude said and pushed his round glasses up on his nose. Like his wife, he spoke with a very slight accent – an intimation of a different life long ago, one far removed from our knowing.

"I like your bows," I said, trying to be polite.

"Thank you," Antonina said.

"She's famous," Claude offered. "They're in high demand." He winked at Antonina, whose cheeks blushed slightly beneath the gigantic sunglasses.

"You're not blind, are you?" Jake said from out of nowhere.

I gave him a look that could have cauterized a wound.

"Oh, no," Antonina replied. "The light's just hard on my eyes sometimes. That's why I wear these." She touched her ridiculous sunglasses.

"I thought it would have been difficult to make all these bows and craft things if you were blind, that's all," Jake said.

We all stared at each other, without saying anything, for what must have been two awful minutes. I could hear a grandfather clock ticking off the minutes out in the hall. The room was rife with that strange medicinal odor that seems to cling to old people.

Then Jake asked what we both must have been thinking, but what I surely wasn't going to ask.

He looked straight at Antonina and blurted, "How did you end up in a wheelchair? Did you get crippled?"

I elbowed him hard in the ribs.

"Ow!" he said.

“No, it’s all right. It’s all right,” Antonina reassured us. “It’s a natural thing to want to know about.” She put her hands on her knees and arched her back, stretching herself. I could see only the nub of her nose beneath the enormous sunglasses. It seemed as if she were going to speak, but she turned in the direction of Claude and sneezed loudly.

“Bless you,” Jake and I said simultaneously. Claude said something in a language I didn’t know.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Antonina started, “but when I was young, in high school, long before this fake professional wrestling stuff, I used to wrestle for real with other girls in my school. I would have what you girls today call a slumber party, and we would all sleep in the basement. After my parents had gone to bed, we would get into our various get-ups for the wrestling matches. They called me The Butcher. Small as I was, I would dart out of the bathroom with my red cape flying, flailing my make-believe butcher knife, which I had put together using tinfoil and cardboard. I was a sight.”

Antonina threw up her hand limply, and laughed. Jake and I both leaned forward.

“Well, one night,” she continued, “I had a match with Suzanne, The Hornet, which got a little out of control. We started pushing each other beyond the ring we had set up, and in Suzanne’s excitement, she picked me up and flipped me over her shoulder. My back landed hard against the arm of a chair, and immediately I couldn’t feel my legs. I knew they were still there – I could see them – but I couldn’t feel them and I was terrified.”

I had been ready to hear just about anything, but I was not prepared for that. Profound pity passed over Jake’s face. He gasped and covered his mouth with his hand. “God, that’s horrible,” he said. “That’s awful. What did you do, then?”

“Okay,” Claude interrupted. “That’s enough, now. Before you youngsters make fools of yourselves.”

I wasn’t sure what he was going to say next, but I was glad I hadn’t expressed any sympathy toward Antonina.

“Didn’t you hear her sneeze before she told the story?” Claude asked innocently.

“I did. I guess we did,” I said.

“Don’t you know what that means?” he persisted.

“Um...” I looked over at Jake. He shrugged. “No, I guess not,” I said.

Claude leaned forward and tossed his hands out wide. “It’s an Old World trick. You have to watch her. In the Old World – Poland, I mean – if a person sneezes before he tells a tale, it means, ‘Beware, watch out. What you are about to hear, though it may be entertaining, is a complete fib, a fabrication. Don’t be taken in.’”

Through the bay window behind the couch, I could see the heavy flakes coming down.

“So,” Claude said, “enough with the folderol. Tell ’em the real story, Nina.”

“Well,” she said sadly, and started again. “It really revolves around a lover I had in my youth. He was such a handsome young boy.”

I watched Jake’s eyes grow big, but inwardly tried to deny my interest in Antonina’s paralysis, because I didn’t want to be taken in again.

“One night, we decided to take a walk out by the railroad tracks. As we embraced on the tracks, my foot got lodged beneath one of the railroad ties. As the young man struggled to help me free it, we heard the ghostly cry of the train whistle off in the distance.”

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud, Nina. Give it up,” Claude said. He chuckled and turned to Jake and me. “You want to know the real story? Do you want to know the real truth?”

Jake and I both nodded.

“It’s simple,” he said. “She had polio when she was twelve years old. That’s it.” He raised his hands, as though making some kind of peace offering. “That’s all there is to it.”

Antonina scowled at Claude and reached over to smack the shoulder of his rumpled coat. “I was going to tell them. You just didn’t give me time. I would’ve told them.”

“Well, we can’t keep them waiting for the truth all night.”

Antonina frowned. Claude seemed satisfied to have brought the truth to light, and he relaxed back into the couch and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Outside, I could hear the shrill wail of the wind rifling past the house.

“You know what you should do,” Claude said to Antonina. “You should play us a song before we go to bed. Would you do that?”

“No, no,” she objected.

“Yes, come on and play a song.” Claude turned to Jake and me. “Wouldn’t you like to hear a song?”

We didn’t have time to answer before he continued his pleading. “Will you play a song?” he asked Antonina again. “She’s an excellent pianist. You kids won’t believe it till you hear it. Will you play?” he repeated.

“Only if these two want me to.”

“Yes, I’d like to hear a song,” I said, and Jake said it would be beautiful.

Antonina relented. She wheeled herself to the corner and pulled herself around to the front of the piano – there was no bench – brushed aside a couple of brilliant red and blue bows and placed her fingers lightly on the keys.

The music. The rising feeling. It seemed that each new sound would topple something inside of me. The song was slow, but wanting to go faster at the same time. There it was, Beethoven's *Pathétique*. It had been my father's favorite piece of music. I had practiced to play it at his funeral, as a tribute, but I could never get it quite right, so I didn't play it. Beneath Antonina's fingers it was magic. The bass notes plodded on, their steady pace making me ache for the next treble note. My insides heaved. She was touching the keys, sending the melody right across the room, but the music was happening inside my chest. That is when you know it is good – when the music occurs not on the outside, but on the inside. You are hearing it, and you know it is outside you, but someone puts a chord together and then another and another, and you don't know how it happens, but your heart cracks wide open and the music starts happening inside you. Your heart swells to receive it. It is almost more than you can take and remain sane, and you don't know whether you want to laugh or cry, but when it happens, it is just right and it is what you want. I could not have asked for anything more beautiful in the middle of the maelstrom that had brought all of us together.

When Antonina had finished, no one spoke. The silence asked for nothing to fill it. Antonina picked up a bow off the top of the piano and took her time fixing it to the back of her silver hair. She wheeled slowly and, I thought, proudly back beside the couch.

Jake interrupted the stillness. "That was wonderful," he said.

Demurely, Antonina said, "Thank you."

Then she and Claude spoke easy words to each other in a language I did not understand – merely a few sentences.

I imagined him calling her "Darling" in their native tongue. And, at that moment, sitting in the living room of an utter stranger who had taken me in for the night, I wanted more than anything to know what Claude and Antonina Skruzewski had communicated to one another. I knew, however, that this was something I could not know, that what I most wanted to know would remain secret, and that perhaps all the things in life I cared most about knowing would forever hide themselves. Antonina whispered one more phrase, and then the two elderly companions laughed softly to each other. To see them laugh made me want to laugh, too.

Claude wound his arms under her and lifted her from the wheelchair, helping her into a rocking chair to the side of the couch. It was past midnight now. Antonina was positioned directly beneath the lamp. I watched her as she rocked, leisurely, into the light cast by the lamp and then back out of it, so that her aged face was shrouded in shadow. The night was old now. It was passing, and I watched Nina glide out of the light and back into it.

I was supposed to return home Monday evening, but I decided to stay an extra day and attend Antonina's funeral. There was something ineffable I felt I might obtain by paying my respects.

St. Isaac Jogues Catholic Church was a small, white stone chapel. When I walked in through the stone vestibule archway, I saw that though I was a half-hour early, the cramped church was nearly full. I sat in a pew closer to the back than the front. Stained glass windows along the wall of the parish church dazzled in the late afternoon sunlight.

There were three windows; each displayed a scene in the life of a man I took to be St. Isaac Jogues. In the first, the man, dressed in a black robe, was seated in a canoe between two Indians in full dress. The canoe drifted just off the bank of the river, ready to depart on some journey of import. On the bank a few Indians stood with a bishop, who offered the sign of the blessing to the fleeing St. Isaac. In the next window St. Isaac stood by a campfire between two fierce-looking groups of Indians. In his belted black robe, he lifted his hands high in seeming mediation to each side. Each group of Indians – one comprised of bronzed men with mohawks and large earrings, and the other of men with long hair containing colorful feathers – appeared to be shouting angry insults at one another and waving their tomahawks. In the window beyond this melee, the one nearest the front, St. Isaac knelt in his black robe, head bowed. A group of frenzied Indians encircled him. They seemed to be chanting and jeering while a painted leader lifted a hatchet high above the suppliant head of St. Isaac. Below this final depiction, etched in sharp black letters, were the words PRECIOUS IN THE SIGHT OF THE LORD IS THE DEATH OF HIS SAINTS. The scenes were all the more chilling for their incredible beauty.

Up front, beneath the raised altar where, I assumed, the priest distributed the bread and the wine to parishioners, stood a simple, thin lectern. When the service began, an elderly man with a cane was helped up behind the lectern. Standing alone, he seemed forsaken. It took me a moment to recognize him as Claude. He made some introductory remarks and talked kindly about Antonina, only losing his composure once. When he had finished, he turned the service over to a man he introduced as Father Raymond. The man's large presence was immediately comforting, as though he could absorb all kinds of harsh circumstances and still persevere. And his name – Raymond – seemed to me a good one, an appropriate name for one whose duty is to lead others to light and salvation. He spoke softly and reverently with his head slightly bowed, as though trying to do equal justice to each word that left his mouth. He spoke of what Antonina's life had meant to those of us gathered to honor her; he spoke of hope, but also of questions we all asked of life. How do we find meaning in our world? Do our lives have a pur-

pose? Is there a blissful reward after death? What evidence of our lives do we leave behind for others? I leaned forward to listen. He insisted upon the importance of faith, the importance of affecting others' lives with one's own, the importance of opening oneself to the revelation of mystery. The last phrase seemed to echo in my mind – the revelation of mystery. After a brief silence for Antonina, Father Raymond led the congregation in a prayer.

We all filed past the casket to look at her body. I had wanted to see her again, I did. But in a sense, it seemed silly – to say goodbye to her lifeless body when she wasn't here herself to hear it, and who knew *where* she was? Wherever it was, she couldn't tell me what it was like there, and I couldn't tell her what it was like here. I simply looked down at her. Her body was a withered shell of the woman I remembered, a mere husk, barely recognizable. But I stood there, nonetheless, and looked at the face and the hands of a woman who had done some good for some people by making things during the years she was alive.

After the Mass and the Holy Communion had concluded and we had all returned to our seats, a woman at the organ began the postlude. The pallbearers carried the casket out. Somber parishioners shuffled along behind them.

At the secluded cemetery overlooking Knife Lake, I stood back from the other mourners as Antonina's body was lowered into her final resting place on a small knoll beneath a lone maple tree. Most of the tree's leaves had turned a brilliant red. Some had begun already to fall to the ground.

I stood apart like that, considering things, until gradually the crowd dispersed in twos and threes and I was left to myself. I approached Antonina's grave, though I don't know why. It was true I had not been close to her. I had known her only on one night of the many nights of my life. But I felt something of significance was to be comprehended from my chance discovery of her death. I felt anxious. I knew some slippery mystery, some wisp of truth, was eluding me once again – like an older brother holding me at arm's length and me swinging furiously at empty air. But, perhaps, if I came close to Antonina, whatever revelation I needed to be at peace might disclose itself.

But no great truth presented itself to me. I was left only with the satisfaction of having been a small part of Antonina's story and realizing she had become part of mine. As I stood among the myriad grave markers, the dozens upon dozens who had gone before, among all those stories crying out to be told, I understood that because of Antonina's tenderness and the beauty of her music and her bows, she had mysteriously yet irrevocably grafted herself to my life and my own story through the experience of that one night. I felt that, but I did not know what it meant. I knew only that I could not ask for greater concord. That

whatever peace I would find would be through my own music, a hopeful passing on to others.

The sun was almost gone. The last rays of slanted light began to vanish, stealing unmistakably away from the cemetery. I knelt alone among the dead. I had brought something to leave with Antonina. From my purse I removed the sheet music to the *Pathétique* and slid it into the flowers on the grave. The wind began to rustle the leaves softly. It blew gently through the tree branches, creating a quiet elegy. The leaves that drifted down were notes floating toward me.

As I turned to walk away, the wind left me with a memory of my first encounter with the power of music, the day my infatuation with the piano began. I knelt back down at Antonina's grave. I leaned forward and began to whisper the story.

I told her how once, when I was six and had just begun taking piano lessons, in order to fire my enthusiasm, my father had driven me all the way down to the Detroit Philharmonic to hear a famous pianist who had come to town. Before the performance, my father noticed a friend sitting nearby and left me unattended to go chat with the man. I got up to wander around the concert hall, so I could see its balconies, plush seats, and elaborate designs. When my father returned to his seat just before the time the pianist was to begin and did not find me, he panicked. The curtain ascended from the stage to reveal me, sitting at the piano. A collective, hushed gasp went up from the audience. Somehow – I don't remember exactly – I had meandered to a side entrance to the stage. When I had seen the sleek grand piano glistening under the lights, I had wanted to play it and couldn't help myself. As the audience watched, I began a clunky version of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. The pianist crossed the stage and stood still behind me, and I stopped momentarily. But he leaned down and whispered in my ear, "No, don't stop. Keep playing." So I kept on. And while I did, he reached around me – one hand on each side – and began to add the most beautiful notes to my tripping melody. Stunning crescendos and high, tinkling obbligatos. Sounds that only the hands of a master could have elicited. When we had finished, he took my hand. He led me to the center of the stage. In what seemed like one motion, the crowd rose to its feet and gave an uproarious ovation. We stood side by side, almost levitating, and together we bowed.

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K. Alma Peterson / **Four Poems**

Her Father's Happy Life

In the back bedroom of her childhood home, she listens for church bells, the smell of her mother's Swedish rye bread rising like a holy spirit, simplifying her desires. Her nose delights in the pungent pitch of white pine, tall and primordial like her father who smelled of black soap and sauna switches. The woman who is no longer

a girl will always be a girl. The harder and longer she lives, the more easily she startles. She listens like a cat, half alert, half asleep, its whiskered black lips in a semi-smile. It's a wonder what a shot of rye whiskey does for an anxious mind, how the pines imbibe the wind, then moan with vague desire.

Her father had been a man of few words, fewer desires – content to putter in the clutter of his garage, happier the longer he lingered in the strawberry fields on Saturdays. *To pine for more is for fools*, he said. If his wife scolded, he listened, shaking his head slowly and saying nothing, a boy's wry half-smile bending his expression. His overalls were black

with field dirt and car fluids. She pictured bottles of black India ink he dipped his calligraphy pen in – her desired name appearing in flourishes. He even made a list – rye, wheat, sourdough, pumpernickel, cardamom (long braided loaves) – all the breads her mother made. *Listen to what memory teaches, let it stick like the pitch of pine,*

ooze out clear and resinous. In your longing, pine quietly, with the stoic dignity of Finland's forests, black ancestral soil, cold streams you plunge in, then listen

*as long as it takes for the thin din of false desire
to disappear.* She wonders if bread that takes longer
to rise increases in flavor. Next time she makes rye

bread, she will make shapely loaves, let the rye
rise twice, serve it buttered.

Spine straight as pine,
she extends her branches, every needle inching longer,
crown lifting gently upward, feet, ball to heel, pressing black
Earth for answers: Who is the gardener of our desires?
Who turns you, Mother? She stands still and listens.

When death and desire interrupt, however rudely, we listen.
How natural to pine for another whole life – longer,
with more blackberries, more strawberries, more rye.

Aubade

Night, to Day

Like a careless thief I leave
my prints below the southern eave
exposed and nearly blistered bare
where for treeless hours stares
the brazen sun.

I have a thirst for flat champagne
stained with soot where we have lain
joined in tingent low profile
an aspect of the visible
darkness, light.

At dawn, the jailer closes the cover
of the book he knows like the skin of a lover.
I watch him check the rusty latch
of every cell, until he catches
mine wide open.

Day, to Night

Lover, wear my velvet dress
black with shine of silverfish.
Leave before the gadflies say
they saw me at the break of day
in a sepia slip.

The Finer Points of Disappointment

I.

At risk, you skirt the dinner table
 with a valance made for windows, drape
 yourself in flesh-tinted light suggested
 by the meeting of pane and skin. Warmth.
 In the triangle of floor and walls, the cat's
 round presence obscures any sharpness.
 Still, your tongue is not your own. Owing
 to inarticulated wishes, it presses the roof
 of your mouth for wisdom. Seldom do you
 speak with bitterness about powers not received.

II.

Chopsticks in paper sleeves, fortune cookies
 in cellophane. Seated, you separate
 the chopsticks and beg your hand's cooperation.
 The food cools almost completely
 and your hand looks like a crow's claw.
 No dessert has been earned, but a small
 fortune may be inside the cookie's golden folds:
 "Banality will never be yours to fall back on."

III.

Light stretched thin behind the curtain
 on the highest window in the neighboring room.
 More by rote than rite, you wash the plates
 set with the care and discernment meant for
 more intimate offerings. You must direct
 your attention where it will be received. Light
 knows this, and you are being given instruction.

IV.

Line of indeterminate length, broken
 and repaired. Language ladles meaning
 from two bowls – experience and memory.
 Memory, unfit for survival, favors
 strong flavors. Experience has a sweet
 tooth, spitting sour and bitter into memory's
 container.

Sestina For a Lost Friend

Half a dozen times today, more red-
heads than I notice in a year –
shining tangerine windblown
tresses. Yes, you are everywhere
this May. And it's no coincidence,
no surprise you choose this way
to stay in touch. Telepathic, in a way,
safer than the telephone, or a car on red-
letter days. Fact is, no coincidence
is completely accidental, even in a year
when planets line up in Taurus everywhere.
Little chance reason will be blown,
thrown out by two hard-headed mind-blown
rebels bent on staying out of the way.
That means going everywhere
but never meeting. I miss the red
skies in the morning, more every year.
I miss your cool nod to coincidence,

your pride in managing risky incidents.
I miss the off-handed innuendos, blown
like thoughtless kisses, spanning light years
in your freckled eyes, staring in ways
that break love down to primary colors – red
affection, blue affliction – meeting somewhere
blunt and tired, ready to be anywhere
but in this old scenario. No coincidence
I memorized it. Things I whispered, things I read
to you are dust on wavy vinyl now, blown
off, needle down to Etta James – we were always
sugar on the floor, girl, those years.
Leather, never vinyl, you spent years
accessorizing, lecturing to big ears everywhere –
saying you could never teach me anything, always
forgetting I was your fool. Leaving out the coincidence
of me showing up when your tea leaves are read.

If I misread you, if I misunderstood, by some coincidence
(as is my way), tell me it's history, give me a sign somewhere –
the ill wind has blown over. I've grown watchful these years.

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Extraterrestrial

Steve Carter

I DON'T KNOW if Ian Wakefield was really getting messages from outer space. I know this: after that night at his house, the world changed. Jackie would probably say I got a taste of higher consciousness by temporarily accessing Higher Emotional Center. She still reads Ouspensky. Of course, I've never told her about Wakefield. She already thinks I'm teetering on the edge. I haven't told her about Vickie either. But for different reasons.

The truth is I'm still trying to sort out what happened, even after all these years. I keep looking for some sign I'm part of an advanced wave of undead space invaders, puncture marks on my neck, or some place under my skin where one of them implanted a radio receiver for interstellar broadcasts. Jackie tells me sometimes I mumble in my sleep like a prophet, "Hear, O Israel," flailing around in bed. She bends close to hear, but she can't make it out. And I can't tell her anything when I wake up. I don't know what I'm saying. It's not me talking.

I learned about Wakefield at Mitch and Vickie's the summer of '68, when Vietnam was stinking up the air like a pile of old tires burning. Les Bryan drove me over. I'd met him more or less by accident – if there is such a thing – in a hallway in Griffin Hall, while we waited to see an advisor about our master's programs, and we just started talking. That was late spring, and as soon as he drove me out to their place, it was like *déjà vu*. I leaned back on their threadbare, second-hand couch listening to Jefferson Airplane and Bob Dylan and Judy Collins, and

immediately Vickie and I fell to joking and teasing each other, like we were taking up the threads of a life we'd started a couple thousand years ago in Egypt or ancient Babylonia or someplace. Les might be talking about how the planets are "conscious" and Vickie and I would make bizarre comments, making fun. "If planets are conscious," she'd say, "do they make love?"

I'd say, "They used to make love in their dark phase before they were conscious. Where do you think the moon came from?"

"They're divorced now."

"No, a legal separation."

She'd sigh. "Condemned to circling around each other forever." She'd be smiling at that point, just barely swaying back and forth on her favorite chair, an old upholstered, soft-cushioned sofa with curved arm rests.

"It would be too dangerous. If they ever got together, they'd blow each other up and screw up the whole system."

"Wild. The gravity of love keeps them together and apart."

"It's mind sex."

"Love, Eddy. Love. Even planets have got to have somebody to love."

Stuff like that. Les didn't mind. He'd keep a tight smile through it all, sometimes throwing in a twisted comment of his own. Actually, it wasn't just the four of us. Other people came by, too. But I worked three temps that summer, and I'd drive down between jobs or after work or on weekends and hang out, and the times I remember most, it was just Les and Vickie and me, with Mitch jacking around outside playing mechanic with their VW van or with Les's Falcon or hammering and sawing wood, working on the railings and the flooring on the porch or the cabinets in the kitchen. He'd made some kind of agreement with the landlord to do carpenter work for part of the rent that summer. When he came inside to sit around with us, he talked in adages and pat phrases. "Six of one, half dozen of the other," he'd say, or "What goes around comes around." He stood about six-foot-two, with a smooth child's face and a fair complexion that burned easily in the sun, and he couldn't sit still for long. Something we said would flame his cheeks red in neat circles like some cartoon character, and he'd jump up and head back outside again in his smudged, wide-brimmed Panama hat and long-sleeved shirt.

Vickie sat cross-legged on her sofa or on the floor, drinking sun tea or lemonade or sipping a small glass of red wine, looking like a small-town version of Cher, a smug smile on her face, her eyes liquid ink behind her granny glasses, the white elastic band of her panties riding above her black pedal pushers or slacks. She had a high-pitched, tee-hee-hee laugh until she got serious, when she'd switch to a deep alto and go, "Let the good times roll," or she'd quote Jefferson Airplane:

“Remember what the dormouse said, ‘Feed my head.’” And she’d rock back and forth like a tree swaying to music, alternately giggling with a high-pitched tee-hee-hee and gazing past me with a kind of intense, impersonal longing.

Les would ramble along in his slow, cornpone voice about the limits of a three-dimensional world. He’d squat down, slender but sinewy from farm work, rock onto the balls of his feet, and draw pictures of planetary “time bodies” on a notepad, his eyes hazy and bloodshot from marijuana or LSD, a smile burned into his face like an etching on wood.

“Yeah,” I’d say slowly, almost yawning, think of double entendres and jokes. And, of course, the talk always got around to Wakefield. Wakefield said this, or Wakefield said that. They’d been to sessions with him at his home in Corales, a town about 50 miles east.

I remember one time in particular when Wakefield’s name came up, and there was the usual hush in the room. “Phalithor,” Les said. “That’s who he talks to, that’s his main man, his contact.”

“You mean his spirit guide?” I asked.

“No, Phalithor’s from deep space, another planetary system. He oversees this part of the cosmos.”

“They’re all around,” Vickie said, smiling, ironic, lying. “They’re here right now. Watching and listening.” And the quiet got thick and eerie, like they were part of some spy network watching my reactions to see if I could be trusted. But then, Les put in, “I think they’ve got super grass on other planets,” and we all laughed as if the whole thing really was just one big put-on. But then, moments later, Vickie turned serious again. “You should go some time,” she said.

I could feel their eyes on me, especially Mitch’s. He stood at the entryway to the kitchen with a glass of iced tea, his eyes dark with blame and challenge, and I turned the talk back to the tease and banter I was used to. “If I go, do I have to let him hypnotize me?”

“Everybody’s hypnotized by something, Eddy,” Les said. “Just different things.”

“Wakefield’s a businessman,” Mitch added, walking back over to sit on the couch with Vickie, jiggling the ice in his tea glass as he went. “He’s building a restaurant and a bait house out by the new dam.” If it hadn’t been for Vietnam, Mitch could have been in the construction business, maybe teaming up with Wakefield to build that restaurant and bait house.

“He sounds like an entrepreneur all right,” I said. At the time, I was sitting in one of their wobbly folding chairs.

“Everybody’s got to live,” Mitch said.

But Les broke in quickly with a sudden out-puff of air that was so forceful it almost threw him off his chair. “It’s all just an act,” he said. “He doesn’t believe in it. It’s not that he doesn’t trust other people. He

just knows people can't do anything but lie. We all do that. We're all asleep."

"Wakefield says that?"

"He reads Ouspensky," Les said. At the time, the name just flew right by me.

"Just don't push people's buttons," Vickie said. "Don't get in anybody's way when they're doing their thing."

"People aren't playing with a full deck," Mitch said. Then he turned to Vickie. "What does the Airplane say, Vicks?" He leaned toward her and teasingly brushed his shoulder against hers. "When the truth is found to be lies..."

And Vickie played along, taking up the refrain, tee-heeing and rocking back and forth. She had a thing about Jefferson Airplane: "And the joy within you dies, don't you want somebody to love."

I had to look away. A wave of envy washed over me and I had a flashback to the break-up with Chrissy just a month or so before. It had been a year or so in the process, starting from when my times on the track team dropped off and I hit a wall and finally just quit the team and started dabbling with weed and peyote and having arguments with Chrissy long-distance and getting turned off on athletics and everything else. I still have a mental snapshot of her standing there, in her apartment, looking wounded and peevish, like Doris Day in a movie with Rock Hudson, that dishwasher-blond hair of hers brushed perfectly and flipped over her ears, her nose a little dice thrown into the middle of her face. I remember the words. "You used to be so motivated," she told me. "Now you don't care about anything, anymore."

"I care about what I care about," I told her, and I turned on my heels and left for the last time, glad it was over, glad I didn't have to answer questions like why didn't you call or why did you say that or why did you use that tone of voice. But it was hard – we'd been going together since high school, always planning to marry, but holding off. Maybe I should have married her. But if I had, I wouldn't have met Wakefield. Or Vickie, either.

And I think right from the start I was in love with Vickie. I just hadn't worked free enough of Chrissy yet to be able to see it. At the beginning of August, a week or so before I drove down to Wakefield's, I got my last summer job, and that's when I started to feel it. The job was out at the grain elevators north of town, and I had to shove endless, shifting mountains of wheat out of railroad cars using a "pancake," a big, heavy, metal plate with handles connected by a cable to a winch that pulled you back so you felt like a water skier riding a shifting lake of wheat. I would slog up to the top of the pile, sink the pancake down, and then guide it out, the way you push snow off a sidewalk or – if you could – sand out of an hourglass, shoving it out of the box car and down into the elevator grate, all the time thinking of what it was like making

love to Chrissy before we broke up. Then, those memories would get mixed up with Vickie. Chrissy's break-up line might be rolling around in my head, "You used to be so motivated, but now you just don't care," and then I'd hear Vickie saying, "Remember what the dormouse said. Feed my head," and my mind would start racing and I wouldn't feel the pinpricks of wheat through my socks or the wheat dust seeping through my mask and clogging up my respiratory system. I was already in that apartment, joking and teasing with Vickie.

When I got to Wakefield's place in Corales that night, Mitch and Vickie's VW van was already parked outside in the dirt driveway, with its psychedelic paint job and stick-ons, sun-swirls and flowers and peace signs. I brought my dilapidated old Dodge Dart to a crinkly, crackling stop on the dry grass beside it and stepped out into a small dust cloud that lapped past. It was still stifling hot even at that time, about 7:00, and the ground was baked.

The house stood alone on a slight rise on scrubby hard-pack, like something lowered down from a helicopter or maybe a UFO, an old-style Victorian frame house in peeling gray paint with two stories and a dormer on each side of the roof, the kind of house that could have been some 19th century rancher's or banker's. Out back, an electric saw buzzed, and somebody clapped some planks of wood together. That had to be Wakefield working, building.

I knocked at the door, a thick, ponderous thing, with a dirty, blistered coat of dark green paint, and when the door swung open, faced an East Indian-looking woman, smooth complexioned and attractive in the face, but beginning to sag just a little in the breasts and neck. Wakefield's wife. Vickie had mentioned her once, but I'd forgotten. She wore a light dress that looked a little like a sari made of a silky, synthetic material. "I'm Yolanda," she said in her pleasant, educated accent. "You are Eddy?"

I nodded.

"Come in. Your friends are talking upstairs. Watch your step." She motioned toward an uncarpeted, wooden staircase obviously just constructed. It gave off a sweet aroma of new lumber and spiraled upward from the first floor alongside an oddly slanting, newly built bookshelf to an enclosed loft above.

They were all up there, Les and Mitch and Vickie, passing a joint around, sprawled on the floor, propped up on cushions or sitting cross-legged, their backs against the wall. Beth was there, too, Les's girlfriend, this heavy-set wench with a bawdy laugh and a doughy moon face. The times I'd met her before, she had grated on my nerves, but now she seemed quiet and subdued, like a kid on good behavior at church.

The talk was about Les's latest draft dodge, conscientious objector status. "Aren't you supposed to be Amish or Mennonite or something to

qualify?" Mitch asked. "What did you put on the form when they asked for religion?"

"Zen Baptist," Les said, still smiling his unchanging, pasted-on smile.

Everybody laughed and Vickie tee-hee-ed. "That'll be a big hit with the draft board," she said.

"What I wrote, I wrote," Les said.

"You just wrote your epitaph, is what you did," Beth said, giving out a mild version of her loud, braying laugh.

After that, we talked a while about LBJ and Dean Rusk, "fish lips" as we called him, and about the stupidity of the war, and before long we ran out of things to talk about, as if we'd exhausted every subject, or maybe had gotten so mellowed out from the pot we'd lost interest and settled into a kind of lazy drift. The wind had died down outside the window, so there was no air coming through, and inside, the scent of marijuana hung like incense in the air. But we felt an undercurrent of excitement, too. Wakefield would show up soon.

Yolanda peeked in twice to bring us water and iced tea. Then, I must have been looking away or maybe dozing off after my day of slogging through wheat, because I didn't notice the sound of feet on the stairs, and it was as if he just materialized through the walls and appeared in the loft like a genie popped out of the bottle, fresh from his shower, wearing loose blue slacks and a clean-smelling Hawaiian shirt, not tall, but sturdy in torso, with steel-gray eyes and a square face, electric with energy and topped with thick, black, curly hair, almost African curly at the base.

Yolanda had come in behind Wakefield and stood there, calm and gracious, and Vickie whispered something to her and Beth said something to Les, and all the time Wakefield kept grinning like a politician, looking everybody square in the eye. He shook hands with Les and then with Mitch, who grinned stupidly as he stood up, bumping his head against a slanting roof beam above him. Then, Wakefield and Mitch turned to me, and I stood up, too, and reached a wary hand out to shake. He had strong, thick fingers, as calloused as any West Texas rancher's, and when we shook, the energy of his grin and the aura of that whole scene hit me like a jolt of electricity and knocked me back a little.

Then, just as suddenly as we'd started whispering and talking, we gentled down like dogs curling asleep by a fire again after the commotion of barking at some stranger. Wakefield sat down, too, moving with alert intention, the way a cat moves. He leaned his back against one wall and folded his legs into a half-lotus, legs so skinny they looked almost artificial, like pencils or wooden peg legs. Yolanda sat beside him and folded her legs to one side under her.

Wakefield reached over and squeezed Les's shoulder, and Les smiled broadly like the good ole boy he was underneath all this talk

about quantum physics and time warps. “What’re we down for this time?” Wakefield said to no one in particular, smiling, teasing.

“Phalithor,” Les said.

“I hope you’ve got good questions. He won’t come without good questions.”

“We’ve got a thousand and one questions,” Vickie said.

“One for every night, right?”

“Maybe.” Vickie’s voice was tinny now and small, but she still had the yearning in her smile, a candle flame of desire in a breeze.

“Different strokes for different folks,” Wakefield teased, and here he and Vickie looked toward me at the same time, as if their heads were tied together by a string, and I felt a clutch in my gut, and a sense that this was all really a movie about me, about what I really wanted, about all my secret desires.

Then Wakefield laughed and broke the spell. “But some like it hot,” he said and patted Vickie’s knee, as if they shared some open secret between them.

“Some days,” she said. She’d been swaying back and forth and now she relaxed her smile and folded back into herself like a Siamese cat curling onto a couch, purring.

“A square peg in a round hole,” Mitch said with a little snarl of illogic, throwing a dark glance my way.

“Everybody’s a square peg, right?” Wakefield said, turning to Les, who nodded. “That’s me,” he said. Then Wakefield turned to Beth, and Yolanda laughed and said something, and I lost track. It was moving too fast for me. My muscles ached and my body chemistry had changed from the marijuana, and I was adrift in images and daydreams.

“Of course, some people just don’t care about anything,” I heard Wakefield saying in some part of my mind. He was laughing, the tease in his voice like a knife cutting through. Suddenly I realized everybody was looking at me and laughing along with him. “They’re just not motivated anymore.” He stopped, as if waiting for what I would say, his mouth slightly agape, expectant, a teasing grin on his face waiting to explode into a laugh.

Now, how did he come up with those words? Chrissy’s words. I hadn’t told anybody else. He’d plucked them out of my mind the way you’d dip minnows out of a tank. He even had Chrissy’s inflection, and I sat there, naked, a criminal on a hot seat with a klieg light burning down, and I realized I’d been needing to urinate now for a long time. I’d been leaning back on an elbow, but now I pulled myself together and straightened up.

“It’s on the other side of the house. Go downstairs and then down the hall past the living room,” Wakefield said, smiling, and we both knew he’d read my mind again, and everybody else thought the whole

thing hilarious and laughed even harder at my expense. “Don’t stay too long,” Les said. “You’ll miss your flight time.”

“Hold my seat,” I mumbled. I could sense their eyes following me as I stood up and then wobbled down the spiral staircase, but my mind was stuck on those words Wakefield had pulled out of his magic hat, “not motivated,” “just don’t care anymore.” How had he found those exact words?

Downstairs, I felt safe from Wakefield’s mental snooping, but the world had tilted and the house seemed as chaotic and dark as the universe before God decided to put things in order. Some of the hall was carpeted, some not, and loose cuts and swatches of carpet lay in odd places along the floor. Just past the living room, one big roll of carpet sat against one wall, ready to be rolled out, and I could smell a potpourri of new wood and dust and carpet and glue.

Beyond the living room, where the hallway led back toward the bathroom, I stopped. From there on, it was carpeted all the way. A light from the half-open bathroom door at the end sent out a little streak like a finger from God, and I could feel something opening up inside my head out of the usual churn of thoughts and daydreams, and I stopped walking and put out a hand to steady myself so I wouldn’t lose the thought. It had to do with Wakefield’s mind-reading, and how I needed to wall my mind off from his. And suddenly, it came to me. If he was reading my mind, who was reading *his*? That seemed a critical point. There had to be somebody, some Kreskin jacked up on crank or Dexedrine or something, somebody who could tune into his mind the way he was tuning into mine. And then that guy, that imaginary Kreskin up in the loft of the next higher level, what about him? Who was reading *his* mind? There had to be somebody, some entity. And then the next higher Kreskin, who was reading his? And so on, and on, forever. I’d got hold of some kind of super space-age truth, and I was almost shaking with excitement.

I kept leaning against the wall to let it clear up. The vision showed how everything is connected and sings along this invisible telephone wire infinitely extended. And I was somewhere on the wire myself, turned-on, vibrating. Then, as quickly as it came on, the whole vision passed and I felt my body again, and I stumbled on into the bathroom, still pumped up and buzzing with thoughts. The bathroom smelled like a lumber yard with boxes of nails and stacks of 2X4s and sheets of particle board and wood planks leaning against one wall, and on the sink counters, whorls of thickened muck from glue or just wet dust smudged with dark spots.

When I finished a long pee, all I could think of was getting back. I wanted to be there for Wakefield’s trance. But something else happened, instead. Something big. When I opened the bathroom door to leave, there stood Vickie in half-shadow, pivoting toward me like a lazy

Susan out of the dark. “Finished?” she asked, but teasing, not really wanting an answer. “Mmm-huh.” I felt her hand brush up along my jaw and cheek, and her rich alto, “Good for you.”

She turned away and stepped into the bathroom, but she waited about closing the door behind her and I knew she was inviting me to join her. We’d started our little game months before, teasing, insinuating, dancing our little mind-games, and now they were shooting our scene. No more dress rehearsals.

I leaned down toward her and kissed her full on the lips, and she made a low, humming sound in her throat and we slid into the room together. Her hand lay lightly on my arm, and then we were inside and she reached back to shut the door and lock it. I kissed her again and took her granny glasses off and raked them clumsily onto the counter, and she slid down to the carpet and pulled me after her, her hands guiding mine to the tops of her pedal pushers, and I started unbuttoning and unzipping and unbuckling, my heart going in my chest like feet pounding on a cinder track in a race. I had a buzz on from the marijuana, and at the layer under that, an exhaustion from shoveling wheat, and over and above it all, like background music, images and thoughts mixing with the general excitement of Wakefield’s surreal, half-constructed house, where everything seemed unformed as yet and impersonal and out of whack, as if my body was operating on some turtle-based, primitive time scale, while my mind was racing ahead at warp speed. I think Vickie felt something like that, too, and it took a while for us to get in sync, but then I could feel an almost audible click and alignment, like two train cars coupling in the distance, and in seconds we were making crazy love there on the newly laid, cushiony carpet in the bathroom with all that stuff stacked around, pounding and grinding away, trying to keep it quiet and hearing every muffled pant and bump as if it was a cannon shot, afraid they’d hear us upstairs, at the other end of the house, where Wakefield even now could have been out of body, racing along some invisible telephone wire toward other galaxies, toward God, pulling us with him.

I felt split, as if everything was happening to two parts of me at the same time, to me and Wakefield maybe, Wakefield, my Other Self, my secret likeness, both of us flying, holding our breath, until it ended and I was pulled back into my body in tiny little tugs, and I was just me again, one person, heavy and physical, sweaty and tired, a tiny dot in the universe, and all I could do was lie there, totally spent, then roll away. “Go on back,” she whispered after a while and turned away.

I didn’t say anything, just buttoned and zipped and pulled everything back on, then stumbled my way back down the hall and past the living room, pleased and sad at the same time, nagged by something at the back of my mind. When I got back, I slowly climbed back up the spiral staircase to the loft, where they’d turned off the ceiling light and

lit a candle in a Chianti bottle and it was making strange flickering shadow patterns on the walls and the exposed joists of the ceiling. Mitch gave me a dark glance and I looked away.

Wakefield had moved to another wall, and his head lay on a wedge-shaped pillow, his legs straight out, Yolanda beside him, her sari-like dress circling her legs like a collapsed tent. His eyes were open, and he gave me a quick glance, which to me seemed to say he knew everything, that I'd been under surveillance the whole time, and I looked away again and lay down close to the stairs, making as little noise as possible, and instantly I was fighting just to stay awake.

I wish I could say what happened after that, tell some secret knowledge I learned, but I was so tired by then, so completely spent and exhausted, I only remember bits and pieces. I'm not sure Wakefield ever went into trance. I remember him saying something about Vietnam, that it came along because it had to, because we draw to us what fits our level of consciousness and all we know is violence. We don't trust our real inner powers, so we dream and plan external power to bring the world around to mirror our own desires. Something like that.

While Wakefield was talking, Vickie slipped back in with a little nod my way. By then, Wakefield was telling about how God is just the next step above us, like we're God to dogs because we know more than they do and can train them to obey us, but how there are conscious beings above us and we're like dogs to them, and then, above those beings are others too, and on and on, and immediately, I remembered my vision. That was what was nagging at my mind, that vision. I had to remember. Wakefield had his own version of it. His house was a vision factory.

Then, he started talking about hypnosis and trance states and I really blanked out. I think I fell asleep, but I've read since then about hypnosis, how easy it is for a person to be hypnotized from just being around somebody else who's being hypnotized, so maybe I went into a trance myself.

All I remember is driving back home and several times rousing from the rapid-fire washboard kachunk-kachunk of tires on the shoulder of the road and having to jerk the wheel to bring my Dodge back onto pavement. I'm lucky I didn't end up dead in some ditch before I made it back and crawled into bed and fell down that long mine shaft of sleep.

I slept till almost 11 the next day and woke with a headache and Vickie on my mind. I'd missed work at the elevator, but that particular temp was almost over anyway, and I called to tell Phillips I had to quit. The wheat dust had re-activated my asthma, I told him, and I'd had an attack. Then, that night, after a whole day fretting as to how I could get in touch with Vickie, she called and we set up the first rendezvous and started on a run that passed like scenes at night outside a car window, driving fast. We would meet at odd times between classes, whenever

Vickie could get free, at Beth's apartment or mine. Once, we just got in the car and drove out to a rest stop north of town and made love on a blanket not thirty yards from the road. We could hear the cars whining by. When the fall semester started, we'd meet at the CAC between classes in the morning to make plans. I knew it couldn't last, we both did, but we were on board a train with no brakes and no engineer at the throttle, racing toward death and we had to hang on for the inevitable smash-up or suicide leap when it reached the end of the continent and flew off into the ocean.

Right after that, the week before Christmas, it happened. She stopped calling me or meeting me at the CAC. Nothing. I thought something had come up, some trouble with Mitch, and eventually she'd get back in touch and we'd go flying off down the tracks again. But instead, Beth met me one biting cold January day at the very beginning of the spring semester at our place at the CAC just past the fake fireplace and handed me a Christmas card-sized envelope. "From Vickie," she said with a wry smile and immediately disappeared. Inside, a handwritten message on a large note card, not even stationery. "I have to go now," it said. "It's time. It was good, but it's over. We're only here a little while, Eddy. We'd just destroy everything if we tried to keep going. Let's be two different planets again. Feed me good thoughts from your planet. I'll send you good thoughts from mine. Love, Vicks."

I stood there a long time, staring at the note. I didn't want to believe it. I drove by their place that afternoon, but the VW wasn't there. I tried again the next day and the next, but no VW. I got out and knocked on the door and squinted inside with my hands cupped against the window, but it was empty, deserted.

A week after the note, I met Les just inside the front door as I was leaving the CAC. They'd gone to Uganda, he told me. The Peace Corps. I felt a wave of anger at Vickie for not telling me. "How long was this in the works?" I asked him.

"Two months at least. I thought you knew."

"How could I know if nobody told me?"

"You stopped coming by, Eddy. How could we tell you?" He twisted his smile into a wry grin. "We drove back down to Wakefield's, you know. Twice."

"I've been busy," I said, but of course I was lying. I would have had to see Vickie and Mitch together and pretend indifference. What if Mitch knew everything? Or, if he didn't, what if I let something slip? There was no possible scenario that wouldn't have caused problems.

"There's plenty of time," Les said, just as he got jostled by somebody coming through the door. He looked over with a flash of irritation and took a step to one side. "In reality," he said, "there's only one time and one space and we're all in it at the same time." And I could sense him pulling me into his own vision with that slow, plodding rhythm of

his, where it's like having a hold on an anchor going down to the bottom of a lake. But I didn't want that now. I wanted Vickie walking next to me, her voice answering mine, that strange little laugh. I looked at my watch. "Look, Les, I know that's true in some dimension, but in this one people get up in the morning and get jerked around, and time matters."

"If that's how you see it."

"Right now, that's how I see it. I mean, look, it's time! Time for my next class!" I lifted my wristwatch to show him, but it wasn't really that late. I was lying again. I could have stayed longer, but I was sick at heart and didn't want to talk anymore. I turned away to leave, then turned back. "You'll let me know if you hear anything about them, won't you? Mitch and Vickie, I mean?"

"Sure," he said. "We'll stay in touch."

"Let's do it," I said, and I left, pushing through the door past a group of people coming inside.

For a while after that, Les did keep me informed, though he never said anything about Vickie. He told me about Wakefield's legal problems instead, how he got sued by one of his partners over some bank loans or financial malfeasance or misrepresentation or something like that. The case got settled with just a small judgment against him, but he ended up leaving Corales, anyway. Les thought he'd planned the whole thing because he had a higher mission and needed to be somewhere else, a big city like Chicago, maybe.

Then, Les himself got busted for drugs. I never found out the details, but in his case I'm pretty sure it really was part of a plan. "I'd rather do jail time than Vietnam," I remember him saying after they turned down his bid for CO status, and I think jail time was his back-up plan. He wrote me once from Huntsville, how he'd found a former addict in there he could talk to about time warps and intergalactic communication. At the end of the letter, he said some bizarre things that showed me how he was thinking about Wakefield and us, our group. "Don't forget," he said. "Stay awake to the field. We've all got to hold up our end and do our part." We were all part of Wakefield's invasion force, is what he meant.

Maybe he's right. Maybe we were recruited and trained without really knowing it. I know, sometimes in class the psych textbook starts to feel like wading through piles of wheat, trying to clear out box cars using that pancake, and I start free-wheeling without knowing where I'm going, and I realize I'm sounding like Wakefield. I mean is it me or Wakefield? The class is focused on me 100% and I feel like I've got this extra electricity. Maybe I'm talking about the nature of the mind and the correlation between behavior and unconscious thinking and how it's all connected by a dimension of time and our physical rhythms, and there's really just one mind and we're all building, working, even

when we don't realize it, and I bring in the studies in imagery I did for my MA or something I've read since, and the whole time it's like I'm reading from an invisible script.

Other times I think about Vickie. Her gentle swaying back and forth, her laugh. Crazy thoughts of her in Africa. I even wonder sometimes if maybe she left to have our baby. Because that first time at Wakefield's I didn't use any protection. Of course, I never noticed her swelling that fall and I think I would have noticed, because our little train trip lasted over four months. But I know she's the reason I started running again. Sometimes I'm making love to Jackie now, and she's Vickie and it's that house in Corales again and I'm on the carpet in the bathroom and at the same time some part of me is in that loft with Wakefield on some astral journey and it's like creation, the beginning of time again. Jackie thinks I'm crazy to keep jogging every day and running in 10Ks, 12Ks. She sits in her reading chair, looking demure and narrow-faced as a saint, disciplined, talking in her steady, quiet voice about things they talked about in the Work group she was in for a while, in Oakland, before she moved out to Texas and we met and then moved back here to Bakersfield. "You're identifying with your athlete 'I,'" she tells me. "It's not your Real Self." I don't say anything, but I know she's right. I just can't quit running. It's too much a part of me. It may be a lie, but it's my own lie. It gives me a screen to read minds on, a way to stay in tune with Vickie and other people.

I mean, maybe Wakefield was just another con man, a rip-off artist, a businessman. Gouge thy neighbor before he can gouge you. But even if he was lying, I believe that's how the ETs will take over if they ever invade us: by gradually changing our thinking on the inside, until we become aliens too.

I'm not afraid of it. I kind of welcome it. I know it sounds crazy. Jackie thinks I'm pressing the envelope when I get off on things like that, so I slant what I say to throw her off the track, slip the logic to one side a little, but I mean, what's crazy? What's sane? You go through Vietnam and you'll never believe the world is sane again. And don't think things have changed. Read the paper. The back pages. Chile and Central America and the terrorism we sponsored in Nicaragua. What goes around, comes around. Wakefield was right. It's the consciousness of the planet that's the problem. People need to evolve beyond violence. Maybe Phalithor was all fiction, but I know this: with the world the way it is, I'd rather play some con game, like Wakefield. It's all a lie anyway, so why not live based on what you want to believe? It might turn out to be true and you haven't lost anything if it's not.

The last couple years, I believe I could almost start prophesying. Maybe I'm talking with some of the guys from my classes, psych students of mine, computer geeks, jocks. I start out talking about track or running or some aspect of athletics, the "runner's high," a miraculous,

last-second shot, a final stretch for the tape. I go with whatever comes to mind, hypnosis or UFOs or astral travel, whatever they want to hear, but I know it's just a way to keep running, to get into their heads and live there so they'll carry it on. It's like planting little radio receivers under their skins so they can get the messages they'll need to have when the time comes.

LAURA CARDOSO is a Spanish interpreter and translator living in Vancouver. “The First Day of School” comes from a novel in progress entitled *Dulce Dolorosa*, which is set in the Colombia Caribbean city of Barranquilla.

The First Day of School

Laura Cardoso

THE TAXI WHEEZED as it climbed the steep hill, and from the back seat, Maya contemplated the school grounds. A vine of bougainvillea had snaked into a chain link fence. From a distance it looked like a hot pink choker surrounding a playing field. On the slope of lawn sprinklers sputtered.

Hail Mary full of grace, she muttered. Far from religious, by no means a churchgoer, it was only under dire distress that Maya prayed. She was nervous. It was the first day on the job. Thoughts of her boss, Sister Renata, sent a ripple of anxiety through her. The former nun, now a thriving entrepreneur, was definitely modern. Apparently, she had transformed the Ave Maria Catholic School from a humble boarding school for girls and made it into a prestigious co-ed institution. Rumor had it that, “If Sister weren’t tough-skinned after forty years in Colombia, *le comerian viva* (they’d eat her alive). *What if she turned out to be butch, with garrison boots? And why did she still call herself Sister Renata? Out of habit? A tribute to women?*

“Mona, we’ve arrived,” said the driver, his gold teeth glinting in the morning sun.

“Gracias.” She gave him 500 pesos and slid out. *Luck of the draw. Maybe tomorrow I’ll flag down a better car*, she hoped.

She hurried toward a gateway where students in celestial blue uniforms had flocked before its silvery bars. It was as though she were peeking into an aviary. Girls in knee-length pinafores and saddle shoes

chirped with anticipation. Among them were a few boys. Maya was soon whisked inside. As the crowd funneled into the school, she recognized the coat of arms on one of the uniforms: Ave Maria, inscribed above the crucifix with a dove.

At the entrance, a lanky guard with a pistol detained her. Except for the white of his teeth and eyes, he was of a dark licorice color. He asked, “*Señorita*, who are you?”

“Maya Palacios, a new teacher. Grade 10 and 11, English.”

He relayed this information to a second guard and returned to his gate-keeping post. From a glass tollbooth, the second man made a call. Putting down the receiver, he said, “*Pase, pase.*” He pointed to chalk footprints on the asphalt that meandered in the direction of a white-washed building next to a chapel. “You need to go to the auditorium. You’ll receive further instructions there.”

Cheerful students bustled to and fro, greeting their friends. Behind them and facing west, there was a large interior courtyard flanked by three-storey classroom buildings. Welcome banners hung from red-flowered acacia trees. It was festive, like a church bazaar. As Maya neared the courtyard, she noticed a cluster of plump matrons gathered around a pale woman with short hair. At her feet hovered a mongrel and two French poodles, the tease of their bluish-gray fur identical to the pale woman’s hair. A mongrel scampered toward Maya and the poodles followed suit. Rhinestone collars glittered while arrogant yowls sliced the air. Maya gasped. The pale woman abandoned her entourage and came toward the dogs.

She clicked her tongue. “Roosevelt, calm down,” she said in a New York accent. Picking up one of the poodles, she snapped, “Sparkie!” It was only after she glared at them that their cries simmered to a low growl.

“They’re harmless, really. I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Sister Renata. You must be Maya, the new English teacher. Heard you’re a wonderful teacher.”

“You... what?”

Sister Renata clasped Maya’s hands to welcome her. Human warmth was what she loved about the tropics. Sister Renata had assimilated well. Up close, it was hard to believe that she was over seventy. She looked like a blue-rinsed woman of forty. Maya’s fingers jittered in her grasp. When Sister Renata let go, her fingernails grazed the back of Maya’s wrists. How to interpret that touch?

Church bells chimed in the background. “Uhh... I gotta go,” said Maya, looking in the direction of the whitewashed building.

“Oh, I guess you don’t want to be late. Punctual. I like that,” replied Sister. “I’ll catch up after the second bell rings.”

Maya molded her stride to the vanishing trail of chalk footprints that led her to a marble staircase near the chapel. She climbed up, two steps at a time, and went inside.

The amphitheatre smelled of new upholstery. Sapphire velvet curtains skirting the stage matched the carpeted aisles. The only available places were in the front two rows where teachers had gathered. There were a handful of sedate men outnumbered by women who jabbered, their speech as grinding and steady as a locomotive. Among older colleagues, Maya felt her twenty-four years and noted how each had what the other lacked – they, youth; she, life experience.

As soon as the room was filled and the curtain parted, everyone was silent. Sister Renata planted herself center stage. In her white moccasins and pinstriped frock, she looked like a nurse gone mad. She glowered at her audience, her blue eyes cold and piercing. The matrons trembled fearfully and were already dewy with perspiration, despite the air-conditioning. One of the poodles splayed its hind legs and began licking its genitalia, incessantly. Girls scrunched their faces and held back giggles as the lascivious runt masturbated. But no one dared to laugh. Roosevelt wore a look of utter contempt as he scrutinized his audience. *What're you staring at, dog, you're probably the apple of sister's eye*, Maya guessed, and funnily enough, the mongrel smiled at her.

A minute elapsed. Sister Renata's stony expression cracked and the corners of her mouth curled into a wide grin.

The ex-nun sidled toward the lectern and said, "Welcome back, everyone. You look well-rested. I hope you enjoyed your summer vacation. As you already know, today is a half-day. We'll start with introductions and speeches. Then we'll end with mass. Miss Carmela, my assistant, will do the introductions and Professor Ortega, our Spanish teacher, will have the last word."

After Sister's brief introduction, a lady strutted toward the podium, the click of low-heeled pumps marking her precise steps. She was in her forties and had short, chestnut hair and large, luminous eyes. This was Miss Carmela, who had interviewed Maya a month ago. And Maya could now see for herself that Carmela was a *femme* – a lipstick lesbian, without the lipstick. In fact, neither she nor Sister Renata wore make-up, but were of natural beauty, a refreshing contrast to the masquerade of matrons whose faces were caked in what resembled flamboyant icing. More money than taste defined their style of dress.

"Welcome back to Ave Maria," her voice thrummed. "Before we proceed with the introductions, Sister and I would like to remind the girls not to wear nail polish or cosmetics. And a lot of you are wearing far too much jewelry. You are only allowed to wear one gold chain and a ring. That's all." To Maya's left, girls hummed and hawed, some moaned. "As I call the names of the new teachers, I'd like them to stand up so that we can all see you. Javier Santos will be teaching math and

physics; Manuel Rodríguez, chemistry; Lucia Garcia, guidance.” Hand clapping punctuated the stillness. “Last, but not least, Maya Palacios, English.”

Maya rose to a wave of applause and felt a smile spread over her face. Her knees were shaking and she slunk back into her seat.

Professor Ortega, a bald gentleman, was now standing at the podium. He was clothed in white and withheld speech much the same way Sister Renata had, but his was a more powerful stance: he stood before them, divested of pretension, emanating peace. Turning away from the lectern, he cast the dogs a look of indignation that sent them scurrying off the stage.

“*Buenos dias*,” he greeted them in a crisp Castilian accent. “After forty years of living in Colombia, I’ve just returned from a visit to my homeland, Spain. The changes are incredible,” he said, pausing to wipe his shiny forehead with a handkerchief. Maya wondered if he had fled Spain for the same reasons as her parents: Franco’s dictatorship and Catholicism. Fortunately, non-Catholics were not barred from working at this American school. Professor Ortega continued, “In Spain, teachers as young as eighteen are being selected so long as they are innovative and possess the right values. My vocation has been teaching and I love it. But, let me tell you, it is an ungrateful profession. The word *educador* (educator) comes from Latin. The suffix ‘*dor*’ means pain. Neither parents nor students fully realize what a teacher must endure.”

Maya scanned the teenage faces and felt a twinge of discomfort. Growing pains was the first phrase that came to mind. In Vancouver, she had only taught adults. “*Niños ricos* get away with murder” was the warning she had received after accepting the position. Apparently these spoiled kids had studied English since kindergarten and knew how to talk back. One look at her blonde hair and pale skin, and they’d think, another dumb *gringa*, or worse, the babysitter, the parental figure who terrorized with surrogate pleasure. She let out a deep breath.

Professor Ortega had sailed onto the topic of culture and explained that it was nourishment for the intellect and spirit. He went on to expound the view that man’s greatness was measured by the richness of his inner life, this being his true source of beauty.

“By saying what I am about to say, I will be going against the superficiality that is prevalent in our society. We are more than well-dressed bodies, adorned with precious stones and jewels. Human value goes beyond a reputable name, appearances, and fashion. On the topic of fashion, there is a difference between gaudy and esthetic. Simplicity is elegance. And, elegance never goes out of fashion.” He held them in a steady gaze and walked off the stage unhurriedly.

Miss Desirée reappeared. She instructed them to head for their respective homerooms. After teachers and students acquainted themselves with each other, everyone would reunite in the chapel for Mass.

Outside, the mid-morning sun prickled Maya's cheeks. She was drenched in moisture. As she continued toward the main hall, heavy footsteps plodded behind her. She turned around and found herself face to face with Professor Ortega.

He tipped his cap, nodded and said, "Where are you off to?"

"Room 202. I've been assigned Grade 10."

He motioned for her to walk with him. "I hear you're Canadian. Do you speak French?"

"Yes."

"Great! It's about time that someone with the right qualifications was hired. You're already a step ahead of the rest."

"The rest?"

"Rich, bored housewives who teach here. Don't have a clue what they're doing."

"Pity the students."

"My exact sentiments. You'll be fine, Maya. Just don't let anyone push you around."

They were approaching the ashen school building, which had rows of ice-cubed windows, their panes seeming to melt in the heat. He led her inside and down an immaculate corridor. It was white and the disinfectant smell tickled her nostrils. They walked in stillness, the fallow kind that lingers shortly after the passage of summer, halls not yet fully trodden. Professor Ortega and she parted near her classroom, where boisterous students hollered at each other. When Maya entered, they gradually sat down and became quiet. All eyes were on her. There was a pause. Maya took in the boys and girls. Their accessories stood out. Regardless of Miss Desirée's instructions and as if concealing the real gem, their youth, they were bedecked in gold, diamond and emerald jewelry. She met their appraisal in a fleeting head-to-toe glance, as a woman being sized up by a seamstress for the first time, wary of the sharp pins. Maya not only felt naked in her modest dress, but also devalued in their eyes for her lack of adornment. The meaning of "filthy rich" finally registered. And at that moment, she hoped that the prophecy – teacher meet your worst nightmare – wouldn't fulfill itself.

She smiled casually and said, "Hi, I'm Maya."

"We know that," said a slight girl. She flicked feathery wisps of raven-black hair off her shoulder and, with a sparkle in her eyes, declared, "You're well-traveled and have a Master's Degree."

"How do you know that?"

"Word gets around," said the raven-girl. "Miss, are you a teacher or a friend?"

"It depends on your definition of friendship. To me, a real friend is someone who will be truthful... honest enough to point out my weaknesses."

“A friend is someone who will understand us,” interrupted a brawny fellow with stubble on his chin. “A teacher punishes,” he smirked, with baby-fat cheeks that dimpled.

“Consequences for your actions. Is that what you mean?”

“Yeah, yeah...same thing,” he shrugged, and other heads bobbed in agreement.

Maya suspected he was their leader. “What’s your name?”

“Juan, but everyone calls me Juancho.”

“Ju-an-ch-o,” she pronounced his name, stressing every syllable. Juancho grinned proudly while the boys guffawed and the girls cackled. “Besides homeroom, you’ll have me for English, too,” said Maya. “We have a lot of material to cover, but I intend to make it fun.”

A loud bell sounded in the corridor, doubling Maya’s alarm. Students lunged from their desks and raced outside.

By the time Maya arrived at the chapel, the nave was overflowing with worshippers, so she went to the clerestory, perched herself along the balustrade and peered down. Besides teachers and adolescents, youngsters from middle school and a flurry of nuns in full habit were present. A shaft of light streamed through a steeple of skylight and illuminated the congregation in their pews. Eyes fixed on the stained-glass windows behind the sacristy, Maya stared at the incredulous Christ agonizing under his prickly crown, forehead beaded with blood.

The priest, José Maria Cabrera, was a beautiful man in a golden chasuble and alb that flowed to his ankles, where his black trousers and shoes betrayed the rest of his costume.

“I confess to almighty God, and you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault. I ask the blessed Mary, ever virgin, to pray for me, and to the Lord, our God,” his voice echoed.

Up until then, Maya had enjoyed making the sign of the cross, but by the time the gospel had been read, the ritualistic postures of standing, kneeling, and sitting were tiring to her. Bored, her attention shifted from the services to the dogs. The poodles scurried over to the choir, pink tongues lolling as they brushed Miss Carmela’s calves. Roosevelt, the fudge-brown mongrel, patrolled the length of the sanctuary, occasionally stopping to sniff walled pews. Father José was so engrossed in the homily that he seemed oblivious to the fact that he was being upstaged.

“Blessed be Mary, the Mother of us all,” he proclaimed. “Sister Renata is also a mother, a universal one. She is a hard worker and loves this school and you children even more than your own mothers do.”

Shrill whines and poodle-woofs tore into his script. Roosevelt suddenly leaped onto the altar. He snarled and bared his teeth and darted straight for the clergyman. Womanishly, and encumbered by his dress, the priest kicked the air in vain while attempting to keep the dog at bay. He almost tripped. It was then that the animal thrust its snout under

skirted calves and, with a vise-like grip of a pant-leg, tugged the preacher from the pulpit. A priest on a leash. Face engraved with terror, Father José trembled like a virgin. The students laughed. Amid the pandemonium, Sister Renata emerged as though out of nowhere.

“Bad dog... bad dog!” she cried, pulling the mongrel off the livid priest. She squeezed the writhing beast to her bosom and summoned the poodles. “Sparkie, Tinker, come here, right now!”

They yelped, but obediently tiptoed behind their mistress, their poofy tails wagging.

The mother of dogs, Maya chuckled to herself.

The grimacing priest swung pots of frankincense on a chain, sending smoke signals up to God, clouding the sanctuary. Those sitting closest to the altar inhaled the fragrant dust and released tight coughs. By the time Father José plunged into the liturgy, the excitement had faded to a hush. The parishioners knelt and beat their chests as if rapping guiltily on the portal of their concealed hearts.

“*Por mi culpa... por mi gran culpa*. My fault, of my own great fault,” they chanted in unison, brows furrowed in trenches of sin.

“Lord, I am not worthy to receive you...” The priest’s words smoldered.

This collective penance was as foreign to Maya as the Catholic faith itself. Thank God, her parents had declared religion taboo. The window stained with the bleeding Christ loomed above the altar. This was human sacrifice: He suffered like any man of flesh and bone. A sharp pain bore into Maya’s chest, unearthing fears about living in Columbia. Instantly, the faces of beggars, homeless children, and scrawny collectors of cardboard crowded her thoughts, as if posing for a snapshot of poverty. In this *dulce, dolorosa* land where resources abounded, the rich had snake-leather belts and handbags, worth what it would cost to feed a poor family for a year.

The chalice that Father José offered to God shimmered in the light that beamed almost biblically onto the altar. He raised a wafer-moon to the heavens and pressed it between his lips. The host crunched in his mouth, but was soon washed down with the Blood of Christ. Maya could almost taste the pungent wine that she had sipped at Julián’s studio a few nights ago. It had been a lovely evening, if not perfect, until Gabriel, the apprentice, blurted, “Sister Renata has balls.” Initially, his bluntness had stunned her, but later Maya saw his point. Undoubtedly, Sister was strong. Maya glanced at the center aisle below the altar, where she and Father José were feeding bread and wine to the congregation.

“Body of Christ,” said Father.

“Amen...”

“Blood of Christ,” said Sister.

“Amen...”

Under the direction of Miss Desirée, the student choir sang, “*Make me a channel of your peace... Where there be injury, let there be pardon... where there be sorrow may there be light...*”

The dissonant voices of youth soared to the heavens; some screeed like seagulls, while others croaked like crows or cooed like doves. Miss Desirée’s poised fingers plucked guitar strings while her foot kept time, mechanically and rigidly, like the needle of a Swiss watch ticking off microseconds. Despite the terribly mistaken cords that her dyslexic fingers struck, the essence of the hymn lifted the pall of remorse and disgrace above the gloom. Although Maya wasn’t religious, she admired the author of that prayer, St. Francis of Assisi, for being an advocate of peace. Christ-like.

After Holy Communion and closing prayers, the service was over at last. Maya was relieved. She wanted to leave before Sister Renata or some real nun could snare her in an ecclesiastic discourse. She longed for wings, for the freedom to flutter off the bench and dovetail toward the landing. Instead, she had to worm her way downstairs before fleeing the church. In the hot, almost soupy air, a flock of uniformed disciples glowed. The lambs of God, branded with the institutional seal of Ave Maria, filed in step, with assurance in their gait, as members of the elite society into which they had been born.

Maya turned the corner and disappeared – mind and spirit virgin of dog-ma.

ERNEST HEKKANEN'S latest literary project was *The Flat Earth Excavation Company: A Surreal Fiction Anthology*.

This Morning the Birds

Ernest Hekkanen

This morning the birds prattled so loudly
I thought my head a cathedral
With saints singing in the rafters.

Beneath the eaves outside my window
I thought saints this morning had flocked
From every corner of the blazing countryside.

I thought my head full of stained glass
Discoloring the light where birds
Mimicked the tones of singing tongues.

My thoughts flew out of me, a bevy of saints
Taking sudden fright this morning in the rafters
Where a monk sang his feathered omens into me.

ANDREW PARKIN has published three books of poetry: *Dancers in a Web* (Turnstone), *Yokohama Days*, *Kyoto Nights* (Ekstasis) and *Honk Kong Poems* (Ronsdale). A fourth volume is forthcoming in 2003. He now lives in Paris.

On the Wings of the Black Swan

[For Michael Bullock]

Andrew Parkin

You roam across fantastic landscapes
in pursuit of a dark goddess
and a woman from the great lake at Wuhan.

Nature in her many guises
never fails to offer rough nipples
to feed your hungry lips.

Your hydrogen thoughts
are compressed with feelings of sulphur
and your fingers leak acid.

You have climbed a mountain
to engrave on a rock face
a different logic, another wisdom.

In your doctor's office
an ultrasound image of your heart
reveals that it, too, is engraved:

a dark woman caresses your face
as she embraces a black swan.
You make love to her

As if you held a younger planet in your arms.

Featured Poet

Michael Bullock

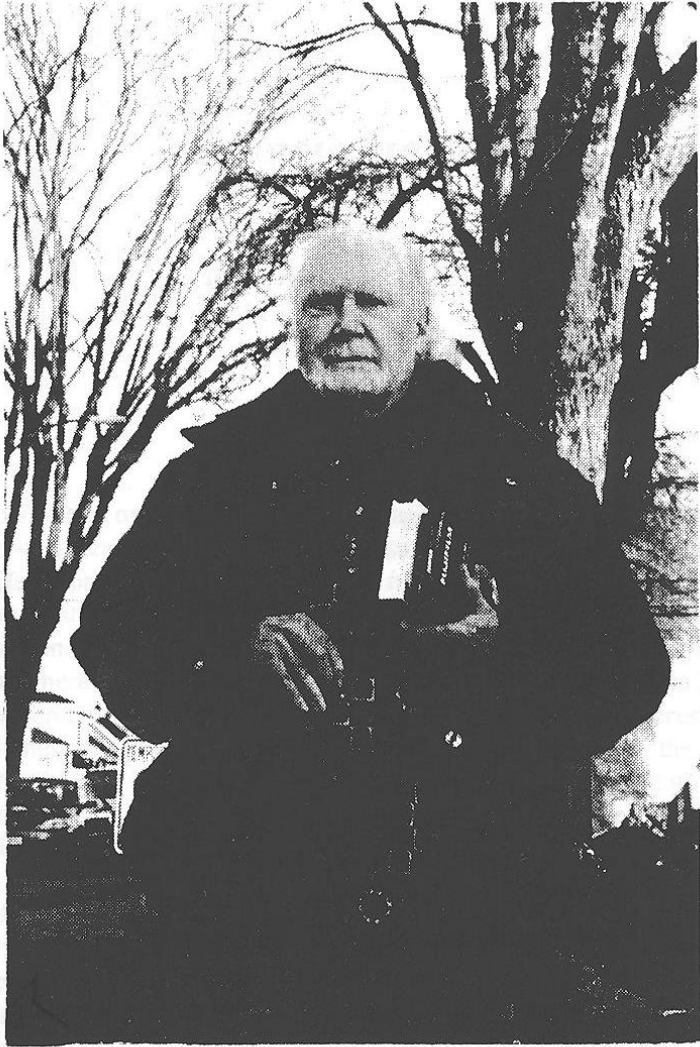


Photo by Brian Graham

Sarabands from Red to Mauve

MICHAEL BULLOCK has published over 50 books of prose and poems and has translated over 200 books from the French, Italian and German. *His Selected Works 1936-1996* was published in 1998, followed by *Sonnet in Black and Other Poems*, *Erupting in Flowers*, *Nocturnes: Poems of Night* and, most recently, *Wings of the Black Swan*. Last year Ronsdale Press published his translation of Max Frisch's plays.

Transmutations

Michael Bullock

AS I STAND on the threshold of old age, now officially calculated at eighty-five years, I welcome this opportunity to look back over my writing life, in particular my experience of reading and writing poetry.

My first encounter with poetry occurred in my sixth or seventh year, when I undertook the bizarre task of reading the Bible from cover to cover. There was no religious impulse behind this; I think it was based on the same sort of reasoning that prompts people to climb Everest: it is the highest mountain, therefore they must climb it. Similarly, the Bible was the thickest book I knew, therefore I felt compelled to read it.

In any case, most of it made little impression on me, but I was deeply moved by the *Song of Songs*, which struck me as something quite different from all the rest. I doubt whether I can have identified this difference at the time as lying in the fact that the *Song of Songs* is poetry, prose poetry. This may have contributed to my deeply held conviction that the antithesis poetry and prose is entirely false. The antithesis should be either verse and prose, an entirely typographic description (which is how my *Selected Works* was divided up), or poetry and fiction (or non-fiction) which indicates the context and purpose of the work. A poem can just as well be written in the form of prose as in verse, while verse by no means implies poetry. In my opinion Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, brilliant though it is, is not poetry since it involves social commentary, narrative, didactic philosophical statements and other elements quite alien to poetry. This conviction clearly goes back

to my very early, but often repeated reading of the *Song of Songs*. Some ten years later, incidentally, I saw the *Shia ha Shirim* or *Song of Songs* performed by the Habima Hebrew Players as a drama and was again deeply impressed by it in this form. (I cannot help remembering Anne Hébert's statement: *Tout art, à un certain niveau, devient poésie.*)

My next encounter with poetry, very soon afterwards, was with Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," which formed part of a children's Christmas anthology entitled *No 1 Joy Street*. I subsequently received copies of *No 2* and, I believe, *No 3*, but nothing else in any of them came anywhere near equaling "Ode to a Nightingale." Not until years later, when I was introduced to poems by Keats and Shelly at school, did I feel that there were other poems that challenged "Ode to a Nightingale," though only Shelley's "Indian Serenade" truly vied with it. In any case, these two poems remain my favorites in the whole of English literature.

I was fortunate in being sent to three schools that paid special attention to languages. In the "dame school" to which I went at age four I was introduced to Latin and French. When I moved on to prep school at age eight these were joined by Greek. Finally, at Stowe, which enjoyed a particularly outstanding reputation for language teaching, I dropped Greek and replaced it with German and Spanish, which I later abandoned in favor of Italian. This concentration on languages meant that I studied the poetry of all these languages. I recall being especially impressed by the poetry of Verlaine, Rimbaud and Baudelaire. I remember as though it were yesterday my first introduction to Verlaine's poem on Autumn that begins "Les sanglots longs / Des violons / De l'automne / Blessent mon Coeur / D'une langueur / Monotone..." From the point of view of sound these lines, in fact the whole poem, seem to me unparalleled in any language.

However, it was the prose poems of Rimbaud that exercised the most powerful influence on me, though I do also have a particularly vivid memory of a poem by Camille Mauclair that was cited in our textbook as a typical Symbolist poem. This poem sticks in my mind partly because it contains the phrase "une musique fleurie," literally "a flowery music" and in translating the poem I wrestled with this phrase, finally taking the liberty of rendering it as "a flower-scented music." This was my first experiment with synaesthesia.

At this stage I have no recollection of being equally impressed by any poems in German, with the possible exception of Heinrich Heine, and Goethe, and the poems by Eichendorff embedded in his novel *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*. This situation was radically altered when I came across a book in the school library that changed my life. This was *An Anthology of World Poetry* edited by Mark van Doren. As the title implies, it contained poetry from virtually every country and ethnic group in the world, including, for example, poems from North Ameri-

can Indian languages. Here I encountered poems by contemporary German Expressionist poets like Richard Schaukal, Arno Holz and an obscure poet named Peter Baum whose two poems impressed me deeply but whom I have never come across anywhere else since -- although I did subsequently correspond with a friend of his, the proto-Expressionist poetess Else Lasker-Schüler, many of whose poems I translated into English.

The same volume contained translations of Chinese and Japanese poems, which I found particularly appealing for their brevity and vivid imagery. These poems left an indelible imprint on my writing style and may perhaps help to explain why so much of my poetry has been translated into Chinese and why my books sell vastly more copies in China than in Canada -- I believe it may by now be a thousand times as many. The *Anthology* further contained poems by British and American Imagist poets like Carl Sandberg, H.D., Richard Aldington, and others who were themselves profoundly influenced by Chinese and Japanese poetry and whose theoretical views on poetry I consequently found extremely congenial.

While still at school I visited the International Surrealist Exhibition at the National Gallery in London. This was a new influence which did not replace but was added to those I have already mentioned. Since I have previously gone into this in some detail in an earlier piece in *NOR*, I will not devote more space to it here.

On leaving school I worked my passage to India and back on a tramp steamer, spending six months in the country and visiting most parts of it. Both on the voyages and while in the country I continued to write poetry. The whole experience was overwhelming, but the most significant single event was my encounter with a Bengali girl named Maya who, over sixty years later, became the central character in three of my novellas and numerous poems. One of these novellas, *Through the Veil of Maya*, has been translated into Bengali and published in India, where it seems to have enjoyed considerable success. It has just appeared in English.

Almost as soon as I returned to England I put together my first book of poems, *Transmutations*, containing some poems written while still at school, while the rest were written either on the voyage or in India. Considering that I was barely twenty when this volume was published it met with a surprisingly positive reception, getting a favorable review in the *Times Literary Supplement* due, I suspect, to the publisher's good connections.

After the outbreak of war I was plunged into such a state of depression, both in and out of the forces, (which the stress of supporting a family under those conditions did nothing to alleviate) that I wrote very little and published almost nothing. Almost as soon as the war was over, however, I began to write and publish again. I remember that around

this time a prose poem of mine entitled *A Savage Darkness*, years later the title of a whole book, appeared in the pages of the very prestigious literary magazine *Encounter* edited by Stephen Spender, whom I met as a result.

Since then my output has continued at an increasing pace. Three outstanding events have been the publication of Jack Stewart's book *The Incandescent Word: The Poetic Vision of Michael Bullock*, of my *Selected Works 1936-1996*, edited by Peter Loeffler and Jack Stewart, and finally the appearance of *Wings of the Black Swan: Poems of Love and Loss*, which I consider my most important single poetry book, other than my *Selected Works*. I might also add that the recent appearance of some of my poems in German translation by Herbert Meier in the pages of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* gives me a special satisfaction, partly because it is a repayment of the debt I owe German poetry, but not least because I understand that *NZZ* enjoys a circulation of around one million! Two of my poetry books have already appeared in German translation. I look forward to these two being hopefully joined by a third – though German has a very long way to go to catch up with Chinese as a language of translation for my works.

At this point I will interject a few personal guidelines for poetry:

- Poetry is not synonymous with verse.
- Poetry should be “pure” like music; that is to say, it should not be employed to convey anything outside itself; it is not an appropriate vehicle for the expression of societal, political or philosophical opinions. The kind of poetry I advocate is far more common in the East than in the West, where it is pretty much limited to one or two poets like Mallarmé, the early Rilke and the Imagists who were imitating Oriental poetry (I confess to having written political poems, especially after the Tiananmen Square massacre, but I don't intend to write any more!).
- Free verse should be written as it would be read aloud; which means, above all, that lines should not end on insignificant words like prepositions or articles or any word that is closely linked with the word that follows. I agree with the Imagist principle that as far as possible each line should hold a self-contained image. A true lyric poem should not tell a story.

I personally much prefer short poems, like the Chinese quatrain, or the Japanese *tanka* or *haiku*. Few long poems can maintain the intensity I ask of a poem. They tend to consist of a series of short poems joined together by *longueurs* that merely lead to a loss of concentration and interest. Of course, there are exceptions, but they are indeed exceptions.

The prose poem should likewise aim to be “pure poetry.” It is distinct from the mini-story or the mini-drama set on an imaginary stage, though both have their own unique possibilities; the mini-drama or

mini-ballet, for example, can be performed on a real stage to great effect. But the prose poem remains an independent genre with its own lyrical qualities. This distinction is not always respected or indeed recognized by even the greatest writers. To my mind Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose*, supposedly the prototype of the modern prose poem, contains only three or four true poems in prose, the rest being mini-stories or, in one case, a mini-dialogue.

There is one strand in my writing to which I have not yet alluded: the so-called "nature poem." I say so-called because it is a genre that is capable of so many interpretations as to be almost meaningless. My poetry, for example, has very little in common with that of Wordsworth, who is generally accepted as the supreme exponent of nature poetry in English. What I am referring to is those poems of mine in which the images are drawn from nature but treated in an entirely unnaturalistic manner. For example: "With their long green fingernails / the bamboos scratch the surface / of the pale blue porcelain sky." Incidentally, when set out on the page, this poem has the outward appearance of a Japanese haiku, even though it flouts all the traditional rules of haiku except the number of lines. It is typical of the kind of "haiku" I write. To my surprise, however, many of my haiku have been printed in prestigious Japanese periodicals under the rubric haiku. Almost all of them have fallen into the category of nature poems, like the majority of traditional Japanese haiku. In general my nature poems have been even more popular in China, thanks in part no doubt to the wonderful translations by Professor Serena S.H. Jin. A contributing factor may be that my view of nature is far more closely akin to the Chinese and Japanese attitude, where mankind is seen as an integral part of nature, as inseparably embedded in the matrix of nature, whereas in the West mankind and nature are seen as antitheses, as standing in opposition to one another. I believe that the Western viewpoint, which has now unfortunately been widely adopted in the East, is responsible for the present catastrophic degradation of the earth. As I have said before: "If nature is not sacred, nothing is." For this reason, the nature poem has a continuing relevance, even though it may seem almost anachronistic and alien to the modern world.

Finally, a word about my fiction, to which I have so far made only a few passing references, even though the totality of my writing contains as much fiction as poetry. One reason that I have said little about it is that it is firmly anti-realistic and always has been, and therefore needs little discussion. My way of writing is to allow my imagination completely free rein. This is not the same as so-called "automatic writing," since my stories are indeed concrete narratives, even though they defy reason and the constraints of reality. I began writing in this manner while I was still at school and have never deviated from it. My very first story, "The Man Who Loved Trees," written as a school assignment, was included many years later in my collection *Sixteen Stories As They*

Happened. I was lucky enough to have as my English teacher the poet and novelist T.H. White, author of the famous *Sword in the Stone* and other novels with an Arthurian setting. His response to my story was as favorable as it could possibly have been. In fact, he went so far as to say he was going to steal it and publish it under his own name. I was sufficiently flattered to decide that I had nothing more to learn and that I would continue indefinitely to write in the same style. This I have done, except that with the passage of time I have allowed my imagination even more freedom. I am not aware of having received any influence from anywhere. When I finally encountered Surrealism I felt that it provided a rationale for the way I wrote, but it in no way changed my style or writing, which I prefer to call surreal rather than surrealist. I have no critical principles to enunciate where my fiction is concerned: it is simply storytelling untrammelled by reason.

In the last resort I regard all descriptive definitions as at best irrelevant and at worst profoundly misleading, arousing expectation that may be disappointed or lead to prejudiced rejection without trial. Hence I tend nowadays to fight shy of all attempts to categorize my work. Similarly, although I do regard the "pure poem" as the ultimate aim of poetry, I am not too hung up on questions of genre, since in practice the lines are blurred and one genre tends to shade off into another.

I would like to conclude with a quotation from the French Symbolist poet Pierre Louÿs: "Poetry is an Oriental flower that does not live in our hothouses ... André Chénier and Keats transplanted it among us, in the poetic desert of their time; but it dies with each poet who brings it to us from Asia. One must always look for it at the source of the sun." This statement strikes a very responsive chord in me.

Three Sarabands

poems in prose

Saraband in White

The darkened stage reveals the presence of a dream figure, who moves across the stage from right to left as though walking in water. As she floats from right to left a shoal of fish swim in from left to right. When figure and fish cross in the center of the stage they are all magically transformed into floating flowers, like the Japanese flowers that open up when immersed in water. These flowers float upwards and vanish from sight.

Now the stage appears to be empty. In fact, however, it is occupied by the principle of circularity, not by a circle, but by the abstract concept of circularity. At times this concept of circularity is modified into a conceptual oval, or even into an equally conceptual three-dimensional ovoid. These conceptual constructs are joined by conceptual triangles, rhombuses and pentagons.

The dance they perform fills the stage with imaginary movement, an abstract ballet of thought shapes, gloriously harmonious, perfect but empty, a saraband of white ghosts steeped in nothingness.

This ballet is brought to an abrupt end by the return of the figure and the fish as they descend in their original form from the realm in which they took refuge from the principle of conceptuality. The dominion of the circle, queen of forms, is over. Together figure and fish perform an underwater saraband of voluptuous arabesques rich with colors, that sweeps away all traces of the white dance of concepts and lures the watcher into a dream state from which he will find it hard to escape.

Saraband in Red

Again there is a darkened stage, but this time the darkness is shot through with flashes of red.

Gradually these flashes coalesce to form a religious icon, a protean icon that is susceptible of many interpretations. To a Christian it represents the figure of Christ, to a Buddhist Buddha, to a Hindu Krishna and so on.

This figure soon disintegrates into many different shapes that are amorphous and changing like clouds. And like clouds they can be interpreted in many ways. To me they appear scabrous, outrageously erotic. To others they might look completely innocuous and innocent.

After a while, these vague and changing shapes take on clearly defined forms, becoming human figures, all clad in red and glowing with an inner fire, that dance about the stage to the music of a stately saraband.

I watch this dance, entranced, until the curtain falls and cuts me off from this magical vision, which must still be going on since the music continues to play.

Saraband in Mauve

The darkened stage calls me, beckons, entices, invites me to take part in the invisible drama being enacted on its boards.

Reluctantly, I mount the steps. The moment I set foot on the stage I am seized by invisible hands and whirled into a frenzied dance. Then the music changes. Played by a single cello its sound is mauve and fills the stage with the scent of lilac.

The dance changes with the music, becoming a voluptuous saraband, but my partner is still unseen.

Then the curtain falls. No sooner is it down than my partner, now sheltered from alien eyes by the curtain, becomes flesh and blood, a fair-haired girl with eyes the color of the music.

The dance continues. I feel it will have no end and am content, glad that I accepted the challenge and stepped onto the stage, from which I may now never depart.

Martyr

For Anne Breaky

Guided by the wind
a burning leaf
descends on your hair

The flames leap up
like a crimson flower
casting a shower of sparks
onto the waiting air

Lit by their lamp
your face glows
with a martyr's smile

A darkness of falling roses
obscures the scene
until a heart appears
nailed to the burning tree

Darkness

For Pang-Yi

When you let go my hand and left
I slipped into black water
where I struggle to keep afloat

Lights drift past me in the dark
floating stars
destined to drown

Flashes of memory light up the gloom
when they fade
the darkness is deeper still

Poem for Wenting

When you enter the room
you bring the scent of roses
and the notes
of a heartrending music
that comes from far away
and leaves a trail of tears
each tear a crystal note
between black lines on a white page

Rose petals fall
like snowflakes
in my hungry heart

The music fades
becomes your voice
speaking softly in my ear

25 October 2002

The Doll

Hurled by a hidden hand
the doll hurtles to earth
shatters into a hundred pieces

The fragments arrange themselves
in the shape of a heart
a broken heart

beyond hope of repair

Dolls

Dolls mock mankind with their multitudinous manifestations; the infinite variety of their costumes; their ability to change their identity, even their gender, at will; to be male or female or a combination of the two: to be objects of love or hate; to inflict pain or to offer themselves as victims; to sacrifice themselves or to demand a sacrifice. A doll can crucify or be crucified. There are no limits to their powers of transformation, powers that human beings would pay any price to possess.

Dolls

A dark room. A row of dolls on a shelf, motionless until the moon rises and a shaft of moonlight enters the room. Then the dolls come to life, descend from the shelf and begin to dance. On each of the china faces is written a human vice: envy, lubricity, pride, hatred, cunning, covetousness – nothing is missing. They move in complex gyrations and patters as though programmed to perform these meticulously timed operations. The only exception is one doll who stands aside from the rest. Her face wears an expression of mingled benevolence and melancholy.

The dance continues until the first pale light of dawn displaces the moon. Immediately all the dolls return to the shelf and their former state of immobility. The last to clamber back onto the shelf, with every appearance of reluctance, is the solitary doll who did not take part in the witches' sabbath and who continues to keep her distance from the rest.

JULIE HENSLEY grew up in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, but currently makes her home in Arizona. Her stories and poems are forthcoming in *Fourteen Hills*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Indiana Review* and *Petroglyph*. "Dry River" is part of a larger work, an interrelated collection entitled *Landfall*.

Dry River

Julie Hensley

LINCOLN FOLLOWED a girl to the town of Garrison. Really she was a woman – four full years older than Lincoln, who was twenty-two that August – but he could not yet fathom that the world through which he moved might be adulthood. The girl, whose name was Cora, had magnificent breasts and only slightly crooked teeth. Her short, wispy hair changed colors every few weeks in a way that left Lincoln breathless. She was from the south, well, from Virginia, and that meant she had a kind of accent that she could turn on for antique dealers and waiters and state troopers.

They met in an empty McDonald's in St. Paul where Lincoln was eating 39-cent cheeseburgers and studying for his Ancient Civilizations midterm. Cora sat in the booth behind him, working her way through an order of large French fries and a Diet Coke. Before each sip, she would rattle the ice around in the cup a few times, and Lincoln, who had been growing more and more annoyed, finally turned around to say something. They didn't fall in love immediately, but they fell in love. Cora cooked all her dinners in a ceramic crock pot, and by the end of January, Lincoln spent each evening on her sofa, forking mushy vegetables into his mouth and watching an endless string of sitcoms (she thought Lincoln a dead ringer for Michael J. Fox of *Family Ties*), just for the chance to work his way into the embroidered kimono she always wore.

Cora had been to graduate school in the Midwest, and what she said she really wanted to be was a writer. Not a junior copywriter at Berg-

man and Horwitz, the advertising agency where she worked in Minneapolis, but a poet. She composed poems about cottonwoods and prairie chickens and apples ripening – long, serious poems in sprawling free verse – which she recorded in a little leather journal. She would have Lincoln read them back to her while she painted her toenails on the coffee table. She wouldn't look at him as he read but would pretend, instead, to concentrate on the nail polish. He loved the loopy, feminine curve of her handwriting and the way something dark seemed to hover just behind the pastoral scenes. She had lost her father in some kind of accident when she was a girl, and that loss – Lincoln was certain of this – was what these lines were really about. He measured his tone and inflection carefully, wanting to please her with her own words, but she always took the book from him as soon as he had finished. “That one's crap,” she'd say, shuddering dramatically. “I should've never let you read it.”

They had some fights – incredible fights, really – with screaming and “fuck this” and “fuck that,” and, sometimes, with a broken glass and, always, with Cora running out of her apartment. Lincoln was never really sure what these fights were about, but he ran after her. He would find her, hunched over and glaring, at the bus stop or seated on a swing in the park. They had make up sex in amazing places: ATM vestibules, the bathroom of their favorite bar, the amphitheater in the park.

Ω

When Lincoln completed his history degree at Concordia in May, Cora announced plans to move back to Virginia where she was going to take a public relations position under the mayor of a town not far from where she grew up. There were several fights about whether Lincoln should go with her. In what Lincoln thought was true dramatic form, Cora thought it would make more sense to go alone. “There's really nothing there for you,” she told him. “In fact, there's really nothing there at all. It's boring beyond belief.” She thought they should wait and see what happened.

In the end, Lincoln followed her. Well, actually, he drove the U-haul truck, and she followed behind in her Ford Tempo. He bought a set of walkie-talkies as a surprise, and every so often, she would buzz him. “Lincoln, sweetie,” she would turn the accent on across the static. “Can we pull over at the next exit? I have to use the little girl's room.”

Garrison was a medium-sized town. It was a college town and a farming town, but most of all it was a Christian town. When he and Cora drove through the rolling fields that connected Garrison to Interstate 81, Lincoln was sufficiently awed. The wrought-iron gates of Mount Solon College were ornately twisted into the shape of descending doves, and they were mounted on a brick base. From there a low

wall snaked around the perimeter of the entire campus. It was, Lincoln decided as he heaved the moving van into third gear, not the sort of wall built for security, or even for privacy. Yellow and orange day lilies swayed on the other side. Why, he asked Cora, when they were stretching their limbs in the parking lot of Penny Lane Apartments, had she not stayed and attended graduate school here.

“It’s a Christian school,” she told him, and when he reminded her that she was a Christian, she said, “Not enough.”

Although there had come a time, back in Minnesota, when Lincoln had left a toothbrush and some clothes at Cora’s apartment, this was the first time he had ever really lived outside his parents’ home. When they began making phone calls to apartment hunters, Cora had suggested they find something small, even a studio, but Lincoln had finally convinced her they should sign a lease on a renovated townhouse at the edge of the city. It was statelier than he had imagined, with green shutters and geraniums by the door.

He began to unpack immediately, and it thrilled him to see his history books next to Cora’s literature anthologies on the shelves that were built into the living room wall, their shoes together in a heap on the closet floor. He loved the way his desk, the same desk at which he had studied back in high school, looked here in their spare bedroom. He loved the high ceilings and tall windows, the shady courtyard with the picnic table and grill.

They arrived in early August, and Lincoln – with a history degree and no education training – took the only job he could find. One evening, while he and Cora were lined up for custard-style cones in front of Bert’s Dairy Bar, Lincoln overhead some parents commenting that a local private school still had several teaching positions left unfilled. Three days later, he was able to sign a nine-month contract at Spring Creek Christian Academy. Classes didn’t commence until after Labor Day, and by that time Cora had left their apartment and moved into a bungalow that the mayor had rented and furnished for her on the other side of Wildwood Park. She told him quietly and apologetically that she was leaving, reminded him that she had tried, for his sake, to come here alone. They carried her things out to her car together. He wanted her to scream, to storm out so that he could chase her.

Ω

Each morning, Lincoln walked to school along the flood mound, an artificial ridge that Garrison had raised in the late twenties after Dry River flooded and destroyed part of the town. Now the hill was smooth and grassy, and the crest – where the people of Garrison had taken to jogging and walking their dogs – was slowly flattening out with time and weather. On one side rose Victorian houses and squat cottages with

stone steps and bright shutters, not unlike the one Cora lived in now. There was Sullivan Street, lined with mossy brick sidewalks and shaded by sugar maples, and just beyond that the austere brick buildings of Mount Solon. On the other side, half a mile of farm land, mostly corn and alfalfa, stretched toward the river. Then, just before Spring Creek Christian Academy, the swath of land on the far side of the mound narrowed into a sparse forest of thick hardwoods.

The river continued on toward the new part of town, where there were fast food restaurants and a shopping mall, but here on the outskirts of it all, Lincoln was able to lull himself into a kind of content, which despite his loneliness, or perhaps because of it, he was able to foster into hope. As he walked, he sipped coffee from a plastic mug, and he took note of things around him that he would like to tell Cora about, things that made him think about her poems: the black snake sunning himself on the edge of the cornfield; the way one or two old men were always casting their lines into the riffles where the old bridge had collapsed; the pile of waxy poplar leaves left in the school yard, the surface of each leaf punched by some girl's fingers to form a smiling cat face.

Each evening after dinner, Lincoln walked to the house that the mayor had arranged for Cora and stood for a little while on the sidewalk across from Wildwood Park. He never knocked or peered into the Dutch windows. He didn't want to see her and the mayor in the midst of anything that would make it more difficult to take her back later. Once in a while, Lincoln recorded the things he had noticed that day on yellow legal paper, which he tucked beneath the windshield wiper of Cora's car.

On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, when Spring Creek did not hold early chapel, the day still commenced with the voice of the principal, Rev. Jonas Baxter, reminding everyone to pick up the order forms and "sell, sell, sell" those ceramic Christmas ornaments for the fall fundraiser. The reverend started and finished with prayer, and he filled in some of the time in between with a daily Bible verse. These lines were non-offensive and vaguely hopeful ("Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see, Hebrews 11:1"), and if he found them appropriate, Lincoln sometimes recorded them at the bottom of the note before he pinned it to Cora's car.

Ω

Lincoln, who had muddled his way through English and barely passed his required mathematics courses, had to teach all subjects to the only sixth grade class at Spring Creek. He was an acceptable teacher. That is what Rev. Baxter wrote when he came to observe him during the second week of school. He wrote that Lincoln's attire was professional in

appearance, with his belt matching his shoes; that he knew most of his students by name; that he seemed to be selecting appropriate worksheets from *A Christian Curriculum for Grades Six and Seven*; and that he was, overall, an acceptable teacher.

The day before the observation, Lincoln pleaded with his students, “The love of my life has left me for a married man, and my position here is essential to winning her back.” They stared at him with mild amusement. After school they played Asteroids or Missile Command in the back room of Boberia’s Pizza, and during recess a gaggle of them always gathered around Jennifer, who snuck glossy covered romance novels from a box in her grandmother’s garage. They knew something about desperation, something about passion. And so, that is the way it went until the second month of school when something happened that changed everything.

Lincoln sat eating his dinner and flipping through a book that he had come across in the school library. The book was about the history of the Brethren religion and its role in the settlement of Garrison, and Lincoln, a sucker for history’s ridiculous details, was growing truly interested when the telephone rang. He pushed aside his box of fried chicken and faced the phone. His parents called on Saturday afternoons.

He wiped the grease from his mouth with a paper napkin and picked up the receiver. “Hello.” His heart was pounding from somewhere down in his belly.

“Mr. Erdrich?” This was not the sultry fake accent that had been playing through Lincoln’s mind for weeks. “This is Jonas Baxter. I’m terribly sorry to phone you at home, but we have a bit of an emergency. One of your students failed to return home after school today. Mark Lively was in attendance today, was he not?”

“Mark Lively?” Lincoln knew that in his class there were at least two Marks. He couldn’t picture either of their faces, yet he felt fairly certain that one of them played soccer on a community league and sometimes wore his uniform to school.

“His younger brothers walked with him to school,” explained Baxter. “And they waited for Mark, as they always do, to walk home this afternoon, but he never appeared, and now the boy’s parents are starting to panic. Was Mark in your class today?”

Lincoln had not taken attendance, not once since Baxter’s visit. He had planned on filling in his grade book later, fudging everything at the end of the semester, even using different colored ink pens, the way he had in the weekly journal entries required as part of his freshman English class back at Concordia. “I’m not sure,” said Mark. “I’ll have to check my book tomorrow.”

“Well, I guess that’s all you can do,” said Baxter.

“You know, I have a feeling he probably just ditched school with a friend,” said Lincoln. “He’s probably been smoking all afternoon behind the I.G.A.. He’ll show up within the hour, like nothing happened.”

Baxter sighed heavily into the phone, and Lincoln wasn’t sure if the man was more disappointed by his inability to resolve the situation or by the prospect of one of Spring Creek’s flock hiding out behind a dumpster and sharing a stolen pack of cigarettes. “The police won’t let the parents file a formal report until tomorrow anyway,” Baxter said. “You get there as early as you can.”

Ω

The next morning, emergency vehicles had smashed a trail of flattened cornstalks through the fields. Two police cars were parked just shy of the water’s edge, and they had turned up a wake of black mud. The early arrivals, mostly country children whose parents brought them by car from Shelby or Whitetail Gap, stood around on top of the flood mound. Lincoln told them to go inside.

“We’re allowed to play out here,” one of them said. “It’s intramurals.”

“You don’t look like you’re playing.” Lincoln’s voice, louder and an octave higher than usual, surprised even him. “Either stay on the black top and play some kind of ball, or go into the cafeteria and draw.”

Lincoln found one of his students, Andy, amidst the dispersing crowd and asked him if Mark Lively was in school yesterday. The kid eyed Lincoln suspiciously and shook his head.

Rev. Baxter had already assumed the smooth and consoling demeanor of a eulogist. His entire head moved in a subtle rhythmic motion as he spoke. He told Lincoln that early that morning fishermen had found a backpack and the detachable hood from a nylon jacket, along with various other personal items that Mark’s parents had identified as their son’s, scattered along the bank and caught in the roots of an overturned tree, downstream from the school. “So far,” Baxter said, “there is no body.”

The search and rescue team came out from Garrison, and they dragged the river bottom. Their yellow boats moved in long arcs across the deep and slow-moving stretch of water above Wildwood Dam. They sent divers in below the old bridge and into the places water pooled dark below the rapids. Rev. Baxter led a chain of around-the-clock prayer for the next 48 hours. Students from the college stood in a line and fanned across the cornfield and then through woods north of town, moving like a beaded string across the ground.

Finally, the town of Garrison admitted what everyone knew to be true. They held a memorial service in Spring Creek Church of the Brethren, the chapel adjacent to the school. The mayor himself led the

mourners in a prayer, which turned into an oration on the duty of the people of Garrison to protect the innocence of children everywhere. It was the first time Lincoln had gotten a good look at the mayor, who was younger than he expected, though not as good-looking. He couldn't spot Cora anywhere among the man's suited enclave as it pressed out of the sanctuary. Throughout the boy's disappearance, which was heavily televised on the local news, Lincoln had been waiting for her to call. He walked by her house most evenings, but he could no longer bring himself to record all the events and observations of his days. Leaving such thoughts folded on her windshield would have left him feeling a little too out of control.

The family asked that, instead of arrangements of cut flowers, friends bring potted mums. They planted some of them on either side of the steps leading up to the main entrance of the school, and the others they placed in a flower bed with a plaque engraved with Mark's name and the verse, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

Ω

After that, the days passed with a certain level of normalcy. The college lost its homecoming game, and the town tapped the trees and hung buckets for the annual Sugar Maple Festival. The world outside continued, and it's true there were further-reaching losses: That autumn, in China, a group of student protestors were massacred in Tiananmen Square. The kids at Mount Solon gathered on the steps of the college library, lit candles and sang "Imagine" and "Give Peace a Chance." But still Lincoln heard talk.

"The loss of her oldest," the guidance counselor said one morning as she poured coffee for the choir teacher in the lounge. "And she just had her tubes tied last year."

Roy, the janitor, was the brother-in-law of one of the fishermen who found Mark's belongings, and he recounted the scene over and over in mounting gothic detail for the women who worked in the cafeteria. "The boy's Bible," Roy said, "was spread like raw manure across the rocks."

The most disconcerting gossip came from the children themselves. When he headed into the boy's restroom to hustle along the stragglers who were playing in the sinks, Lincoln heard their voices, hushed and echoing off the tiled walls. "Lucy Breeden was with him. He told me they were going down there to do it."

The gossip sent Lincoln's mind reeling. He had viewed the eleven-years-olds with whom he spent seven hours each day as children. Mark Lively was tall for his age. He was an athlete and a bit of a smart aleck. He had a miniature pincher dog named Gumby, and he had read all the

books in a young Christian horror series called *Spinetinglers*. Lincoln had encountered such details only after the boy's disappearance, and they had, admittedly, surprised him. Might Mark Lively have been sneaking down to the river bank for an early morning romantic rendezvous?

There was a game that Cora used to play. Lincoln had always called it the "what if" game, and he hated it. Something, anything – a toilet paper commercial or a lady squeezing honeydew melons in the produce aisle – would trigger an emotional response that would start the questions. "What if I couldn't have any babies, would we adopt? What if I wanted my own baby, would we pay for fertility treatments? What if they didn't work because, really, the problem was you, and we were all out of money? Could I have sex with another guy, just one time? What if I got pregnant with his baby? Would you still want it? Would we tell the child the truth? How old would it be when we finally came clean?" It could go on all day, and almost always what started in hypothetical fun ended in a real argument.

Lucy, whom he watched closely, was reclusive, but he couldn't tell if her isolation was self-imposed, if she scorned the other children or they scorned her. In some ways she reminded him of Cora. She had short, dark hair and a look that bordered on haughty. He would catch her staring out the window for long stretches of time, but he couldn't bring himself to reprimand her.

Every day Lincoln thought up a new possibility. What if Mark and Lucy had gone down to the river to smoke pot? Lincoln couldn't remember when he had first smoked pot, but he was sure it wasn't until high school. Eleven years old was young, yes, but drugs were a growing threat. The majority of the business at both PTA meetings Lincoln had attended centered on the drugs circulating in the public school system and how it was the duty of every parent, every member of the Spring Creek staff, every citizen of Garrison to keep them outside these walls.

What if Mark was secretly depressed and had weighed the pockets of his windbreaker down with the smooth stones that lined the riverbank and jumped into the deep pool on the far side of the bridge. What if he had changed his mind but become caught on something. Dry River was deep in places. Its path carved in and out of underwater limestone caverns.

Lincoln considered mentioning some of the gossip to Rev. Baxter, but it would, he finally decided, be unwise to give such talk credence.

Ω

Suddenly, Lincoln wanted to know his students. He wanted to see past their sneers, past the standard navy pants and white oxford shirts (the breast pocket of each stamped with the Spring Creek logo, the silhou-

ette of a church next to a leafy sugar maple). So he put away *A Christian Curriculum for Grades Six and Seven*, and began thinking about a special project for History and English. First, he brought in the writings of Captain John Smith, Samuel Sewall's witchcraft tales, and Mary Rowlandson's captivity narratives.

"This is too hard!" his students complained mercilessly. "We can't read this stuff. My Dad doesn't even know these words. He thinks they're not in the dictionary." Lincoln, admitting that he had been a little overzealous, decided he would have to forego Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet A. Jacobs.

Although Lincoln's concentration had been in ancient cultures – Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Egyptian – and he had memorized long sequences of rulers and monuments and movements, timeliness which began with Menses' unification of Upper and Lower Egypt and ended with Nekhtnebf's clash with Alexander the Great – his passion was American revisionist history. He loved the scholars who revealed heroes for what they really were, the ones who depicted the colonists responsible for the Boston Tea Party as a bunch of drunken rednecks, Molly Pitcher as prostitute. He claimed to believe in the gossip of history, but, in truth, he read a lot of pop-culture biographies and trashy check-out magazines.

Lincoln decided to read to his class from the autobiography of Bill Veeck, the man who at various points in his career had owned the Cleveland Indians, the St. Louis Browns, and the Chicago White Sox. Veeck, who was probably the greatest promotional genius baseball has ever seen, was, in Lincoln's opinion, fascinating and completely irreverent. The book, which was titled *Veeck as in Wreck*, had been reprinted after the man's death in '86.

Lincoln purchased a box of baseball cards from the I.G.A., and when he began handing out packs, the kids looked at him, confused. "Well, come on," he said, sitting down in the front of the room and opening the book. "Get over here, and tear into them. Let's see what you've got." He began to read, and they gathered around him in a half circle, squirming a little and comparing cards. He read for three hours, breaking only for lunch, glossing over some of the racier parts. They laughed at all of Veeck's promotional pranks, the way Lincoln had known they would – the exploding scoreboards; the 3'7" midget he brought to the plate for the Browns; the "Grandstand Managers' Day," in which the fans determined the team's strategy by holding up large placards marked "Yes" on one side and "No" on the other – and they grew quiet during the part when Veeck was diagnosed with cancer and moved to New York to paint and meditate and await what he thought was his impending death. Once he'd finished the book, Lincoln in-

structed the kids to compose their own autobiographies, complete with pictures.

“Wait a minute,” one student raised his hand. “You want us to write everything we’ve ever done?”

“Veeck doesn’t include every detail from every minute of every day,” said Lincoln. “He’s obviously decided what’s most important, what he wants people to remember.”

“How long does it have to be?” It was Jennifer, the girl with all the smut novels.

“I can’t decide that for you,” he said. “It all depends on how much you have to say. Your story should build toward something, though. For Veeck,” Lincoln held up the book, “the culmination is getting a second chance at life.”

“We don’t have anything like that.” A couple of them started to groan.

“That guy had, like, a peg leg and was practically resurrected, like Jesus or something.” Andy, one of the clowns of the class, hopped around, imitating Veeck’s amputation. “I never even broke a bone.”

“Look, guys,” Lincoln sighed. “For Veeck, I think his accomplishments show creativity and an open mind. He signed the American League’s first black player and its oldest rookie. I’d say he’s also selected events that illustrate his work ethic and the way he learned to deal with pressure and get along with people. What do your actions and accomplishments say about you?” Lincoln wasn’t sure they understood, but he liked seeing them so agitated.

Ω

The Sugar Maple Festival ran the third weekend in November. The weather did turn decidedly colder, but nothing like the people of Garrison made it out to be. In Minnesota, Lincoln’s parents told him, they had already had three substantial snowfalls. Bundled up in winter coats, scarves wrapped around their necks, and hoods pulled tight, his students looked like cartoon versions of themselves. Most of the kids walked in the company of a friend, a good ten paces behind or in front of their parents. Sullivan Street was closed to traffic, and vendors set up booths that spilled over onto the college mall. There were kettle popcorn and candy apples and BBQ turkey legs. Artists laid out beaded necklaces and watercolors of the Blue Ridge Mountains. They smiled at him and asked where he was from. How, Lincoln wondered, could they still recognize him as an outsider?

A fortune teller was reading palms out of a family-sized Coleman tent, and Lincoln peeked inside just for fun. The girl who couldn’t have been more than seventeen or eighteen sat on a folding chair in front of a collapsible card table. She had thin, reddish-blond hair that hung past

her shoulders. The ends were wild and ragged. “She needs a good trim,” that’s what Cora would have said. That’s what Cora said about most women with long hair.

“Come on in.” The girl at the table motioned toward an empty lawn chair. “There’s no line-up.” In the corner a space heater glowed orange.

“How much?” asked Lincoln as he sat down.

“Is this your first time?” she asked, and Lincoln nodded, smiling. “For you,” she tilted her head and looked at him. She was heavily freckled. “Nine bucks.”

Lincoln laughed. “What?” she said. “That’s a tremendous value. It means your fortune will be good. I charge more for the scary ones.”

He pulled a ten from his wallet, and she took his hand. Her nails were bitten low, and the tips of her fingers felt like cold water on his palm. He thought about how it was with that sort of touch, the slighter it was the more you felt it. There was a girl before Cora, someone he remembered from high school, who used to lean in and brush her eyelashes against his neck.

The girl’s fingers only fluttered over his palm for a moment, and then she held onto his wrist and leaned toward him. “Someone,” she said, “someone you know extraordinarily well is going to make a decision that will bring you much joy.” The heater buzzed in the corner.

“I don’t know anyone very well.”

“Well,” she said, folding the money and pushing it into her coat pocket, “perhaps you’ll get to know this person better.” Lincoln laughed and thanked the girl, but he thought about what she had said as he headed back into the crowd.

The highlight of the festival was the maple syrup, made from the sap of local trees and sold in tins depicting the college bell tower, framed by snow-covered tree tops. Lincoln bought a tin for his mother and a tin for his Aunt Mare. He would take them when he visited at Christmas.

The local churches ran non-stop all-you-can-eat pancake breakfasts out of their fellowship halls. Lincoln made his way through the crowd to Spring Creek Church of the Brethren. As he waited in line with his Styrofoam plate, he happened to look up and see Lucy Breeden. She was wearing a wool coat, plaid with gold buttons, and holding the hand of a man Lincoln presumed to be her father. They paused at one of the trash cans to dump their plates. When they turned to go, Lincoln saw Lucy recognize him, smile, and give a little half-wave.

Ω

Lincoln spent Thanksgiving in Virginia. He didn’t really have enough money to fly back to St. Paul – he’d been paying the full rent on an apartment he’d originally planned to share – and, truth be told, he had not been completely honest with his parents. They knew that he and

Cora were having some problems but assumed it was nothing that could not be worked out in time.

For his holiday meal, Lincoln took a taxi to Showalter's Mennonite Family Restaurant, a little place just before the Interstate. The Mennonite faith ruled the surrounding countryside, the same way the Brethren faith ruled Garrison. The parking lot had posts where customers of the old order could hitch their teams, and a few buggies were already parked out front when Lincoln stepped out of the taxi. The horses snaked their heads and stamped their hind legs, rattling their harnesses.

It was a good thing Lincoln had come early, because at half past twelve a horde of families descended on the place. The line twisted out of the lobby and around the building. Women wearing prayer bonnets bustled in and out of the kitchen with trays of apple cobbler and shoofly pie. Lincoln found a quiet corner table and began working his way through his students' autobiographies.

Most of the kids had secured the pages in report binders or spiral-bound notebooks and decorated them with drawings and photographs. It seemed his students couldn't sustain a long narrative, so each page stood alone, like a kind of poem. One girl, Ruth, had begun her own story with that of the Garden of Eden. There were all-star baseball picks, litters of kittens, high scores at Asteroids, births of siblings, prizes in costume contests.

Even if he hadn't been looking for it, Lucy's autobiography would have stood out. She had penned her stories on stiff, vanilla-colored paper. The pages were folded and hand-sewn, then bound with a wallpaper sample. She began with the story of her birth, which was also the story of her mother's death, and ended with the death of her classmate. In between these tragedies was the pith of Lucy's life: a father who traveled, a nanny named Ruby, swim meets and summers in the Outer Banks, her own rows in the family garden, and a photography award in the juvenile category at the Rockingham County fair.

She told about how she had walked down to the river with Mark several times in the weeks before his death, how he had been teaching her how to skip rocks. "He had a secret hoard of stones," she wrote, "tiny, flat ones that he piled inside a rusty barrel near the old bridge." There was no reticent confession, and Lincoln hadn't really expected one. Mark's death had made everyone very sad, Lucy said, but her father was letting her return to her old school in Shelby after Christmas, and now he was home nearly every weekend. Her father always said that God never takes away people or things that we love without sending others, so she was sure he would send someone to help Mark's family. It was, and Lincoln suddenly wanted to believe this too, guaranteed.

That night, he dreamed he saw Lucy running along the flood mound, the dry cornstalks rattling below her. The sky stretched dark and starless, and the moon that rose behind her was ringed with haze, as before

the first snow. It was a vesperal moon, chanting to the rhythm of her footfall, bathing the school yard in an eerie, expectant light.

Ω

When Lincoln awoke, he didn't make breakfast or turn on the television. He dug through a box that Cora had left on the floor of the hall closet until he found her special résumé paper. He sat down in front of the coffee table and started writing. He wrote about the summer his family had rented a cottage on Lake Superior, about the gulls and the rocks worn smooth as shells. He wrote about the times his father used to take him to see the Northstars play in the Met Center and how they would stand next to the glass to watch the Zamboni go by. He listed all the songs he had learned to play on the trombone during high school. He wrote about the time he and Pam Bridges had gone to Tony's in their formal wear and shared a fourteen-inch sub before the senior prom. He wrote about the Fig Newtons his mother would put in his book bag each morning before he caught the transit to Concordia.

He wrote that he fell in love, for a while, with a girl who chewed ice and rattled her diet soda, and he described how Garrison looked below him when they came up over the hill, shaded and secret and almost too perfect. I lost the girl, Lincoln wrote, and one student, but twenty-three others will be back from break this Monday.

Ω

Lincoln stood for a while on the sidewalk across from Wildwood Park, holding the pages he had written. The shaded patches of Cora's lawn were still gray with frost. He could see a miniature version of himself, distorted and reflected in the Dutch windows. He imagined Cora coming out and picking each of his notes off her car, as if they were flyers for some ongoing pizza promotion. He could see her tossing them down, see each manifesto wilting curbside with the cigarette butts and rotten leaves. He put his list back into his coat pocket. Behind him, the surface of Dry River had frozen in a slick skim of ice, but, underneath, water was still trickling through. The sound of it rose like bells off the dam, and when he stepped backwards off the sidewalk, he had the sense that things in front of him were moving away, downstream.

In 1984, THERESE BEARSE entered a poetry contest on a dare, under the name, Therese Duquette. She received an Honorable Mention. After a ten-year hiatus, she's recently completed a chapbook journaling her domestic violence experiences. Her work has appeared in *Anthology*, *The Blind Man's Rainbow*, *Red Owl Magazine*, *The Rockford Review* and *Zillah: A Poetry Journal*.

Therese Bearse / **Two Poems**

Trash

The season has ended. The
hunters are gone. Waste persists in the
gutters of this peaceful dirt
road. Safe to walk again, breathe the air.

Don't have to worry about
all that traffic stirring up dust,
ignorant shells sailing
through the yard, dogs howling, confused,

lost, roaming the lands. There's crap
everywhere, three weeks of beer and
soda cans, potato chip
bags, empty, plastic jugs, cigarettes,

extinction's the agenda.

The Thrift Store Revolution On the West Side ... Ventura, CA

Bobbing like apples
along the Ventura walks,
everyone rushes
to the ethnic melting pot.

The revolution
begins when the doors open wide,
masses cannonball
to the quickie fashion shows.

Anorexic bars
are lined up awaiting ahs,
dirty hands stripping
clothes from sleek, silver bodies.

Tykes are discovered
in their secretive hangouts,
cockroaches splitting
into new corners unknown.

Spanish tongues waggle,
some discussing mutiny.
Clothes are pirated,
their revolution is free.

Goods lie like corpses
in piles at the day's end,
until tomorrow,
the uprising starts again.

Born in Mississippi, ROY HAYMOND served in peacetime USMC and then took a degree in journalism at the University of South Carolina. Now a retired teacher living in a rural village, he writes and plays tenor saxophone – in his dreams he is Lester Young.

They Had No Ox

Roy Haymond

IT WAS CERTAINLY no surprise to Aranya when she saw the man in the ornate oxcart as he came over the horizon. He looked soft and pudgy even from this distance, and he wore clothes that must have come from the city, complete with the funny, formal-looking hat.

And it may have been the same man who had come the other two times she knew about. Her parents, of course, had said nothing to her about this, and she looked at them with the contempt that had grown from this whole advent of their lives.

The material signs were very clear: they had had two oxen for a season; then they'd had one; this year they had tilled the fields without an ox. The crops were lean, with little grain materializing from the plants in the worn-out soil.

When the crops did not pay, an ox was needed to pay the rent. But her family had no ox, and the rent was due.

This had happened before, she had slowly come to realize. There was Ling, her older sister, one of only two people who had ever really mattered to Aranya. It was Ling who had always, even in her earliest memories, been a source of comfort and security. When Aranya stumbled in the fields, it was Ling who picked her up; it was Ling who somehow managed to come up with sweetmeats, even in the long, dull times of deprivation. Distant from the parents who ignored her prattle, the staid couple she was never allowed to question, Aranya found Ling a beautiful beacon of warmth and belonging.

Then, in Aranya's eighth year, Ling was gone, just disappeared. Aranya had seen the oxcart, but had not realized that Ling was in it.

This was hard to understand. There was no funeral, no mourning, and no weeping of the parents. They never even mentioned it.

Aranya, risking a thrashing, asked her mother about Ling.

"Ask not, Child. This does not concern thee. She is gone!"

This lack of explanation caused Aranya much grief, even unto nightmares.

Comfort, at this time in her life, came with a friend in a nearby hovel. Morac was the same age as Aranya and the two often found themselves working together in the fields. When things were very busy, they still found time for child play, and when work was slight, the two invented their own little games.

Then Morac left when Aranya was barely ten. Aranya watched as the oxcart carried her friend away. She managed to play a little with some of the other girls – it was not allowed that boys and girls should play together – but it was not the same as with the special friend who was Morac. For over a year, Aranya's misery and loneliness were severe.

And then Ling came for a visit!

She was elaborately adorned, perfumed, urbane. She brought lavish gifts for her parents.

This caused quite a stir. All manner of people, men and women, even children, came around just for a glimpse at her.

But Aranya saw another side of the picture by watching the grimaces of her parents and by hearing their remarks, like: "She should never have come home! Can't she imagine how this hurts the family?"

Moreover, she noticed that Ling did not accompany them to the temple, no doubt because her parents did not want her to.

Ling's stay was very short, and Aranya knew it had been painful for her. For the second time in her life, she confronted her parents. They were seated at the kitchen table, no doubt discussing Ling, when Aranya entered uninvited.

"I'm am hurt. Were you not glad to see Ling?"

A long silence followed.

Aranya spoke again, "Ling is my sister; I love her. Were you not glad to see her?"

"Be quiet, Child; you offend!" her mother retorted.

"But I must know. I had thought her dead, and she came back to us. Why did you treat her as one who is not of us?"

The mother stood up. "Shut up, you little fool! You know not of what you speak."

Aranya was indignant and determined not to leave this argument unfinished. She sat in a chair and stared alternately at the two of them.

The father finally spoke. “Child, you know not of this world, of how we must live. And it is better that you do not know of some of these things before you are required to. Life here is very hard. Sometimes we must do what we would not. Ling is not with us; it cannot be helped. We are very poor; we did what we had to do.”

“Father, I do not understand. You sent Ling away? This is because we are poor?”

“Daughter, you know we have rent to pay; every year this hangs over us. We plant; we tend; then, if the harvest is good, we pay the rent. If the harvest is very good, we buy an ox. If the harvest is bad, I sell the ox to pay the rent. We do what we must....”

“We had some good years. We paid the rent. We bought an ox, then another. Then the crops failed. We sold an ox. Then we sold another. Still the crops failed. The landlord demanded payment. We had no ox. What were we to do? If we are put off this land where we were born, where are we to go? To beg in the cities? To starve in the woods? Oh, I hated what we had to do, but there was really no choice.”

“That’s what happened to Ling? You sold her?”

“Sold? It was her duty to go; by turning her over to the landlord’s agent, the rent was excused. When they took her away, we cried.”

“But, Father – took her away, to what? To where?”

“We could not think of that; it was too painful. We just hoped for the best for her. Now, stop concerning yourself with her. You saw her; why worry about her? She is in another world now.”

“But when she came, did you welcome her? No! It was as if you were ashamed of her.”

“Of course, Daughter. The kind of life she leads now. No, she has no place with simple farm folk like us....”

“What kind of life does she lead?”

“She has men...but we can’t talk about that to you, Child....”

Aranya stared at her father, then left the room without saying anything more, her very heart filled with hatred for this couple who were her parents.

Her mind was muddled. Having been kept from playing with boys and formally knowing so little about the male sex, the remark, “she has men,” was something she had to ponder.

Of course, Aranya knew that men, even boys, liked to play with girls. When she walked by men in the village, she was often lightly fondled. And the boys who worked in the fields, some almost grown men, were forever trying to corner her, or any other girl, for this kind of thing. All this had meant nothing really ominous to Aranya – men grabbed and played; that was just a way of life.

But Ling and Morac were gone, and a strong suspicion grabbed Aranya: what men and boys did to girls – could this be the center of

what had happened to her sister and her friend, the two who had meant most to her in her lifetime?

Even friendless and alone, she felt driven to learn all she could about what men were about when they grabbed girls. This, she felt sure, was the mystery that had sent her two favorite people away.

It was some months after the confrontation with her parents when she was able to get her brother, Fattan, alone. The boy, some two years her senior, was a sullen, aloof, unkempt lad who held his little sister in very low esteem. She accosted him in a thatch well away from their home, where he was hiding lest his father should give him some work to do.

“Fattan, there are some things I would ask thee.”

“Little cow, do not raise thy voice; if we are heard, surely some task for us will be found.”

“I will not take much of your time, but I must know: what do men do with women?”

“What a question. A man takes a woman so she will work in the fields and cook rice...”

“Oh, that I know. But there is something else – like, why do men grab at girls all the time? What are they after?”

“A brazen one you are. You do not know? Really? You do not know? Ha!”

“Would I ask if I knew? Get off thy throne and tell me.”

“Ah, this is a lark. You do not know? Well, men take women to bed.”

“Take women to bed? To do what?”

“You are not just jesting? So that if I tell you this, you can scream and say that I have insulted, that I have been crass – and with mine own sister.”

“Nay. This thing I do not know, and I feel I must.”

Fattan looked all around to reassure himself that no one could be in observance. “Well, men enter women.”

“Enter?”

“Yes. Go inside.”

“I do not understand.”

“Do you want me to show you? And no screaming?”

“Yes, please show me. I will not in any way scream....”

Fattan took her hand and led her further into the thicket and up a small hill. At a choice spot, he stopped and once again questioned her. “You agreed: no screaming? Anyway, from here, no one will hear thee.”

He lifted his shift to his waist and exposed himself to her.

“Here, silly one. This is what enters....”

She stared in amazement, looking carefully at the instrument he had exposed.

“That? It enters?”

“Aye. Feel it.”

She did, noticing movement. She looked into his eyes, which were growing limpid. “Enters, where?”

“Imp, you are too little for me to enter you, and besides, you might get.... Oh, you would not understand.”

Without another word, and with her hand still on his phallus, he lifted her shift. His finger explored her pubic area. “This is where entry is made, where babies come from.”

She was more confused than ever when she left her brother panting in the thatch. She was confounded that the semen he had spewed into her hand was the material from which babies were made. Did this mean that Ling and Morac were sent away so they could make babies? If so, why didn't Ling bring hers when she came for the visit?

Because of her situation, it was more than difficult to get any more information on the matters that had her so troubled. However, an opportunity came with a maturational change in her growth: Aranya was twelve and developing; this meant she would now work in the fields with the older girls.

Days went by as she made observations to determine which of the girls in the fields with her would be most likely to give her the most of the information she sought. She never really had to make this choice, though, because when taking a little respite from the labors, she was approached by one of the girls, a big, very ugly girl named Sarad. And from the very first, it seemed that this big girl knew much of the world, and also knew something of Aranya and her family.

“You won't be with us all that much longer, will you, little one?”

“I know not what you mean. Why not?”

“How old are you? Twelve? I thought as much. Ah, they will be after you before long. If not this year, then the next.”

“Still I do not understand. Who will be after me? And why?”

“You are too pretty to stay here. What? To become a woman of one of the farmers? Nay! You will become something else entirely.”

Sarad looked her over carefully. “Good skin. Even teeth. Not bad bones. Hard to say which way you'll go, but you won't stay here. I can see that. And how I wish they'd come for me.”

“Forgive me, Sarad, but I simply do not understand all of this. Could it be that I must go away to make babies?”

“You are very ignorant, are you not? But, then, I suppose no one has ever talked to you about any of this, so how could you know? Well, you could possibly have babies, but that is not what they really want of you.”

“You are right, Sarad; I am very ignorant. If they do not want me for babies, then what? Please tell me. I beg you.”

The big girl mused for a moment, perhaps thinking she could get something in exchange for the information everybody else knew, then realizing that this child really had nothing to give in exchange.

“They will come for you... take you somewhere, I’m not sure where. But they will look you over. A man came to my family once and saw me and said he would not take me. But they will take you. Now, the very plain ones become house servants – they may have babies, because the master of the house makes use of such a girl. But as I look at you, I think it will not be thus: you will be given to a man as his mistress.”

“Mistress?”

“A man who has a wife may keep another woman in a separate house – sometimes the wife even knows of this, I am told. He would have to be a rich man to have two houses.”

“Like taking a second wife?”

“That could be, but if he should tire of you, he would sell you to a brothel.”

“Tell me what a brothel is.”

“It is a place where women stay. Men come to use them, you know, in bed.”

“You mean to enter them?”

“Yes. The man goes to a brothel and he pays money to spend some time with a woman. Little of the money goes to the woman, since she has been bought by the brothel. Your sister was here, wasn’t she? She had the bright clothes, was all painted... She must be in a brothel. Did she talk to you about it?”

“I did not get to talk to her. My parents did not allow it.”

“I saw her; she was so beautiful! And she looks to well treated. Would that I could get into such a place. I’ll be taken by some old farmer when he becomes a widower.”

The conversation ended and Aranya had much to ponder. The beautiful Ling had indeed been painted and was in bright clothes. Where was she? Could Sarad be correct, that Ling was in a place where men came to enter her? Did she make money doing this? Such could explain the gifts she had brought, but Aranya had a fierce disgust for the image of her sister being entered by men. It was many days before she was again alone with Sarad. By then some very definite lines of inquiry had formed in Aranya’s young mind.

“Sarad, I mean not to offend: I am most grateful for all you told me that time. However, might I ask how you came to know these things?”

“There was a woman. She slept in the woods, came out to beg for food. And men visited her.”

“Did you know her? Was she an old woman?”

“She did not look as our women who grow old working in the field. But she was certainly not a young woman.”

“And she told you these things?”

“Yes. She told several of us all these things and more. She had been taken away by an agent many years ago ... was a man’s mistress for a few years, until he sold her so he could get another young girl. Then she spent many more years in a brothel. Then they had no use for her – the men who come there only wanted younger women. Then, she said she tried to find work to feed herself, but nobody wanted her, not even as a servant, since it was clear she’d been in a brothel. So she came back here, where her family was.”

“And her family? Did they take her in?”

“Nay. Her family lives some leagues away. They stoned her! She wandered in the woods. Some men brought her food if she would lie with them ... and some of us brought her food if she would talk to us. What I told you is from what I heard from her.”

“Could I speak to her?”

“Ah, no, little one; she died some time ago. Some say she was killed by the wife of one of the men.”

“I thank you for telling me all this, Sarad. I now know what must happen to me. I only wish I could find my sister. Nothing you have heard could help me find her, could it?”

“I think not. The agent comes for the girl; she is taken somewhere so they can look at her and decide for what she may bring them most in monies. I have heard of a place in the city just beyond the great river, a place that looks like a palace, where women are very beautiful. Your sister could be there; she was indeed beautiful.”

Aranya spent many more days in the fields with Sarad, talked to her many times, but never got any more useful information. But she had enough to give herself a picture of what would unfold.

And she had had no doubt about the purpose and the direction of the man in the oxcart from the moment she had seen him clear the horizon. Work stopped in the fields, and slowly people gathered in front of the house of Aranya’s parents.

Her mother and father came in from the fields and stood with the small crowd, trying desperately to appear as if they knew not what all the ado was about.

As the man drew very near, it was the mother who spoke to Aranya.

“Daughter, you must leave us now. Thy belongings have been made ready. When the man gets here, you will go with him. He will take care of you.”

Aranya stood there before the house and said nothing. The man stopped near the house. He said nothing.

The father entered the house and brought out Aranya’s few items of clothing wrapped in a small cloth. These he put in the back of the oxcart.

The mother pulled her aside.

“Aranya, your sister should not have come here when she did; but, other than that, she has been a good daughter. She has sent us some of her earnings all these years. You must do the same, for, after all, we brought you into the world, and we have looked after you since you were born.”

“Tell me, truly: Would you not send me now, even if we had an ox to give for rent?”

“What, daughter? You are still talking this nonsense? We only do what we must. And, truly, it is best for you to get away from here now.”

“Best for me? Best for Ling? Yes, I go now – I have no choice. And I promise I will never return to this place, nor can you expect to be receiving anything from me ... no matter what I earn!”

She climbed into the cart without looking back at her parents or any of the crowd of watchers.

The pudgy man in the dark city suit made a wide arc with the ox to turn the cart in the opposing direction. He had said nothing during all that time.

She studied the man lightly, taking in his bloated features and his strange formal clothing.

The only decision she had to make for herself was whether to approach him before or after the horizon – on how one gets to the city just beyond the river.

ELLARAINIE LOCKIE writes poetry, non-fiction books, magazine articles and columns and children's stories. She has published three poetry chapbooks: *Midlife Muse* (Poetry Forum), *Crossing the Center Line* (Sweet Annie Press) and *Coloring Outside the Lines* (The Plowman Ministries). Her non-fiction books, *All Because of a Button: Folklore, Fact and Fiction* (St. Johann Press) and *The Gourmet Paper Maker* (Creative Publications in the U.S., and Collins and Brown in England) were released in 2001.

Ellaraine Lockie / **Two Poems**

Ode to an Ex

This wasn't your body
 I chose to bare
 Not your knees knocking nude
 below my mini-skirt
 Or your gold nugget nipples
 bragging braless beneath my blouse
 Yet you staked your claim
 Certain that the dowry
 denoted ownership
 Title transferred with
 marriage certificate
 I should have known when you
 punched Paul Cortez in college
 for standing too close
 That you were the one
 standing too close
 Squeezing me out
 so you could come in
 But John Wayne and God
 trained me good
 To see passion in possession
 They don't help me see it now
 through swollen black eye memories
 Or feel it with a blue bruised heart
 Because John Wayne is dead
 And God became a girl

Kamasutra Music

“The clitoris is a reed.”

Love in a Dead Language by Lee Siegel

And the rest of me
a wind instrument
Played to perfection
By the power of your breath
The pressure of your lips
The manual manipulation
of my valves and holes

I am the saxophone
through which you sire songs
Low below the belt
melodic moans
Former cacophonous chords
Transposed to carnal contralto
By your perfect pitch performance

Yet you've never taken
lessons on saxophone love
Studied any score
suggesting the reed's need
to be spit soaked in a moist mouth
Tongue tuned and keys caressed
Before the finale trembles to crescendo

Come then student of instinct
turned passion professional
Virtuoso of improvisation
For I lay inert in amateur arms
Until you breathe life through my body
Because I am your instrument
Played to perfection

RICHARD SCARSBROOK is a Toronto-based fiction writer and poet who also teaches, acts in and directs theater productions, plays drums and harmonica and sings. His stories and poems have appeared in *The Nashwaak Review*, *ConVersion Story Contest Winners Anthology*, *The Harpweaver*, *NeWest Review*, *Zygote* and many other magazines and anthologies. Thistledown Press will publish his first novel, *Cheeseburger Subversive*, in 2003.

The Twilight Girl

Richard Scarsbrook

(Sunday)

TWILIGHT. THAT LITTLE space in time each day when the colorful, sunlit world of normal people overlaps with my own gray existence. Twilight is when I meet with Rachel.

Rachel's tales of the daytime world fascinate and delight me, give me a glimpse into their world of color and brightness. When I look at Rachel's bronze-colored skin, and then my own translucent, waxy white shell, it is as if Rachel and I were beings from two different planets. Still, Rachel's stories make me feel, for a little while, like a light, crisp leaf released and carried from the shadow of the tree by a friendly current of air.

This evening, though, I feel more like a stone at the bottom of a deep, cold lake. This morning, something terrible happened, which reminded me that Rachel's sunlit world is one which I can never really share.

My name is Luna. For twelve years now, since I was born, I have had a condition called porphyria, which means that I am allergic to sunlight. Rachel thinks the word "porphyria" sounds like the name of a pretty, tropical flower. I told her that I think it sounds like the name of a fire-cloaked demon who melts people's limbs like candlesticks in a furnace. She shrugged, and said she was only trying to be positive.

It's difficult to see anything positive about porphyria when you see the effect it has had on my older brother. Mom and Dad, who each have a milder form of porphyria, found out the hard way that they had passed it on to Adam in a double dose. They were having a picnic lunch on an overcast spring day, one of the few days all year it seemed safe for them to go out. They sat under a huge umbrella, just in case the sun came out.

Adam was just old enough to crawl and, lured by the glimmering of a stray piece of crumpled aluminum foil, his little hands and knees carried him out from under the umbrella just as the sunlight broke through the clouds. By the time Dad got to him, Adam was shrieking as if his lungs were full of molten metal. Blisters and lesions broke out on his tender baby skin. His throat swelled up so he could hardly breathe.

And maybe, it happened as early as that. Maybe, that day, when he got all burned up as a little baby, was the day that Adam became the way he was, boiling over with anger and anxiety.

Mom, Dad, and I would try to sleep during the sunlight hours, with the air conditioners buzzing and the blacked-out windows closed tight, but Adam would tiptoe away to open a crack in the door and peek out at the daytime children playing outside, even as that slender beam of sunlight cut a sizzling vertical wound across his face. He would hear the happy squeals of the daytime children, and sobbing would burst out from deep inside his lungs. Then, one day, when there was no sobbing left inside him, Adam ran howling out into the sunlight.

The first time, he was in the hospital for a week. They had to smother his blistered skin in ointment, and wrap him from head to toe in bandages. His teeth softened and rotted, and many of them fell out. His hair grew back only in patches, like pictures I have seen of farmers' crops during a drought.

The second time, the doctors said his exposed skin was like overcooked bacon. They had to float him in a tank filled with special fluid to keep the rest of his skin from falling off. They gave him drugs to make him sleep, but I'll bet he just howled in his dreams instead.

Then, yesterday at noon, when the sun was at its highest point in the sky, Adam ran from the house again. The police found him this morning, huddled in the shade of a sewer-pipe opening, wrapped in his own arms and legs like an unborn baby.

Mom and Dad haven't said a single word, to me or to each other, since they got home from identifying Adam's body. I guess he must have looked pretty bad.

Ω

Adam used to joke, without laughing, that it would be funny if he died on a Sunday.

"*Sun* day," he would taunt, "get it?"

Rachel touches me on the shoulder, and I jump.

“You okay, Luna?”

“I guess.”

“I’ll come around to see you tomorrow, okay?”

“If you want to.”

(Monday)

This afternoon, Rachel shows up early at my house. It’s been dark and rainy all day, but I didn’t know it until Rachel showed up with her wet clothes clinging to her body and her hair hanging in ringlets. You don’t notice much about the weather when you live in a house with blacked-out windows.

“It’s Monday,” Rachel says, “the day named after the moon. You’re also named after the moon, Luna, so it’s your day, too.”

“Whatever,” I say. Rachel would have me believe that everyone in the daylight world is this optimistic, but we have TV, so I know that most of them aren’t.

“There’s no sun today at all,” Rachel tells me. “Have you got a raincoat?”

“Why?”

“We’re going on a journey. Come on.”

“Whatever,” I say.

I expect my parents to try to stop me, especially after what happened to Adam yesterday, but they just sit on either end of the couch, gazing into different regions of nowhere. Nothing can penetrate their grief.

I suppose Rachel thinks that this little walk will cheer me up, make me forget that there is only the thinnest layer of cloud outside between me and the sun which killed my brother. We walk for a long time, saying nothing.

“Look up, Luna,” Rachel says.

The whole time we were walking I just watched the ground passing under my feet, but now I look up. Ahead, open water stretches to the horizon. I have never seen a real lake before – they tend to disappear in the dark. It’s so beautiful! I am unable to exhale.

“This place is called The Beaches,” Rachel says.

I gaze out over the water. It’s much bigger than I thought. I’ve only seen Lake Ontario on TV, and in pictures. But now I am seeing the lake

for real, with my own eyes. There is enough light for me to see, yet enough darkness for me to live.

I am crying. I never cry.

“This is...so....”

I don’t know what to say. It’s too much.

Then, a fear jolts through me. I’m shivering, covered in goose bumps.

“Sunlight!” I yelp. “I’ve got to go inside!”

“Relax,” Rachel says. “It’s just a sunbeam. A ray of light breaking through a crack in the clouds. It’s miles away, Luna.”

“What if the clouds crack open right above me? My parents will be burying me with my brother, tomorrow!”

“Not very likely. But we can stand under that tree over there, if it’ll make you feel any better.”

“It would.”

I must admit, from beneath this tree that sunbeam is pretty. And bigger than on TV or in pictures. Everything out here seems enormous. And more scary. But also more real.

And now something absolutely amazing is happening in the distance, almost at the line where the water meets the murky sky. It’s ... overwhelming! The color! The beauty of it! It covers half the sky. It’s a hundred times more incredible than the starriest nighttime sky.

I have never heard such sounds coming from inside of me. I have never cried before, and now I can’t seem to stop.

“It’s a rainbow,” Rachel says. “Nice, eh?”

“Oh. Oh, yeah.” I am barely able to sneak the words in between the little staccato gasps which shake my body. “Oh. Oh, yeah. Oh.”

(Tuesday)

Last night I forgot to ask Rachel what Tuesday is named after. I also forgot to ask her if she believes in heaven. I’m still not sure if there is such a place, but I think Rachel would know.

Tonight, under the dim light of a crescent moon, we will bury my brother, Adam, and I still can’t decide if there is a heaven or not. I want to believe that there is more in store for Adam than just an eternity buried in the ground, isolated forever in the cold and the darkness he struggled to escape for his whole life. I want to believe there are sunbeams in heaven, and I want to believe there are rainbows. There has to be a heaven, so Adam can see a sunbeam, and a rainbow, and see that it isn’t all bad, that light isn’t always the enemy.

There has to be a heaven.

The Jazz Man's Girl

Richard Scarsbrook

THEY MET ON a dock on the last night of June.

He had played all night at the club just up the beach, and his sax was tucked in its case, which swung free in his right hand. The warm breeze dried the sweat on his brow, the sweat which made his top lip taste like salt. He had played hard, and he was tired, but it was that good, calm kind of tired.

Her black hair shone like the moon does on the smooth, flat plane of the lake. She heard the clip clop of his shoes on the boards, and she glanced up and said, "Hi, there."

He stopped in his tracks.

"Hi," he said.

"You played at the club," she said. "You're good. You play like you mean it. You play as if there's a line from your heart to your horn."

The sound of her voice, paired with the beat of the waves as they slapped against the pier, was just like Jazz, and it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up on end, just like they did each time he played like he played this night, in that rare way which made listeners hold their breath right up to the end of the song.

"Thanks," he said, with a grin.

"What brings you here?" she asked. "Is it the wind, or the waves, or the songs of the gulls?"

"None of those things," he smiled.

His feet stopped right there, and he sat down at her side. She kicked with bare feet at the twin of the moon, which lay on top of the still

lake's skin, and he had no choice but to take off his shoes and dip his toes in, too. Each splash of his feet made a ring, and each splash of her feet made a ring, too, and one by one, their rings touched and crossed through each other.

They walked 'til the small hours of the night, when at last he took her in his arms, and, as the sun rose once more in the sky, he said, "You remind me of Jazz, and that's not a bad thing."

She asked him, "Will you stay here with me, and play me a song?"

And stay he did. He took out his horn, and filled the night with song.

And he plays for her to this day.

ANDREW PARKER lives in Liverpool, England, and his stories have appeared in publications around the world. He has written four novels: *August in the Pool*, *Liverpool Scenes*, *Holland*, and *Lucas: A narrative*. He is currently working on the fifth.

The House of Ill Repute

Andrew Parker

YOU ARE SLOUCHED in a late-night drinking den in some back alley off the Liverpool Dock Road. It's a dark and sordid shithole, and almost certainly illegal. The fact that you are committing some sort of petty crime just by being here brings you immense satisfaction, but with any luck there will be an immediate raid by the local constabulary and your vomitous nightmare will come to an end. But that is too much to hope for. Let's face it, nobody is coming to save you. Nobody gives a shit about you or your self-induced condition. All around you there is evidence of laughter and joviality, music and passion, but you are not a part of any of it. Quite simply, you have traveled beyond illness itself. Poorly, under the weather, green about the gills: none of these phrases adequately describe how terrible you really feel. You have nausea incompatible with sentience, and it is inevitable now that puke is on its merry way. You have reached that crazy stage in the proceedings where you consider puking to be the best option. You long to puke.

The room is spinning on an invisible axis, and that just can't be right. Your brain is telling you one thing, but logic and reason -- remarkably unaffected by alcohol -- are telling you another. Rooms don't spin, they say, but the vomiting center in your medulla oblongata is winning the argument. Any more of this malarkey and you'll be talking to Huey on the big white telephone. Now what's his number...

You have only yourself to blame for this gormless intoxication. Your condition is shot to buggery because of the copious amounts of booze you've chosen to pour down your throat for the past ten hours.

You are pissed, plastered, bladdered, as drunk as a fiddler's bitch. But this was not your intention. You wanted a simple night out on the ale; a few well-placed scoops in *The Meadows* and then maybe a Chinese afterwards. But Russell, your partner in crime, who at this very moment has a Blonde Thing paying him far more attention than is decent, has been known for taking these sorts of excursions to excess. What was intended as a local event turned city-bound somewhere around the midnight, eight-pints mark. This is not the first time he's led you astray, and it will not be the last. If Drinking was an Olympic event, Russell would be Drinking for England. But he wouldn't want you on his team, the difference being that he can handle his drink supremely, whereas you evidently cannot.

Your eyes focus momentarily on Russell and his Blonde Thing, who are propped against the bar getting along famously. It was her who suggested you both visit this dump, so rightly she is to blame for everything that happens here on in. Where she actually latched onto Russell you cannot remember, but judging by the depth of her platforms and the length of her skirt, you're guessing somewhere in Bootle. This girl is the epitome of Bootledom. With her cheap clothes and nine-carat gold bangles, she may well be the principal avatar of the movement once known as Scally. You were in *The Merton* earlier on, engaged in some insane tequila competition with relative strangers; you think maybe she's one of them. But Russell does not care. His tongue is locked in a salivary battle with hers and he is tactically pushing his fingers deep into the crack of her arse. You would never be party to such ungentlemanly behavior yourself. But this girl has all the beauty and scruples of an inferior Reader's Wife. She will no doubt consider this indecent act complimentary, and boast of it to her coven at a later date. Her face has become as flushed as yours, but for entirely different reasons. You notice she has a Cheeky Devil tattooed on one ankle, and a pair of golden dice swinging from an anklet around the other. Some guys have all the luck.

Over in the well-being department, things are rapidly coming to a head. You have started to moan audibly, bringing yourself to the attention of the other patrons who clearly do not approve of your dishevelment. These people have no desire to be in the company of lightweights like yourself. If the capacity to metabolize alcohol were a measure of intelligence, everyone here would work for NASA. You are fast becoming a liability. They, on the other hand, are wondering how the hell you heard about their secret hidey-hole and which fool let you through the door in the first place. But you are far from caring. Something extreme is happening to your body. Your head is all fucked up and your guts have turned to shit. And as much as you hate to admit it, you realize it's Vomit Time. You are on the outskirts of Puke City, at the junction of Spew Street and Gag Avenue. Standing bolt upright, you grapple in the

general direction of the exit. Clear vision is a thing of the past; your eyes have become defunct piss-holes in the snow. Your hands pathetically grasp for stabilizing apparatus, but there's nothing there to save you. You are losing the race in the balance apparatus stakes. You sense people are making room, moving out of the way. Someone groans. Then you hear a familiar name being called.

"Lucas," a voice says. "Where the fucka you goan?"

You realize you are being addressed. Somebody does care! But you are on the home straight and nothing can distract you. You feel a guiding arm around your shoulder and it's your friend showing you the way. Russell to the rescue! The gratitude you feel is overwhelming as you think of what he's sacrificed to aid you in your hour of need. But that gratitude is short-lived. Once outside, you take a deep breath of what you expect to be fresh air of a curative quality, but all you get is a lungful of rank fumes surreptitiously exuded from the oil purifiers nearby. Ironically, this is aid to your cause, and you perform a yawn of the technicolored variety all over the cobbles. Russell cheers.

Your recovery is almost instantaneous. In hospital jargon, you've gone from the "critical list" to "comfortable" in the space of ten seconds. All nausea and queasiness now lies dashed at your feet. The relief is palpable; it's almost a miracle. Blonde Thing appears in the street and she's brought along her friend, Happy Shag Piece. She too will never qualify for Miss World, but she does have vaguely recognizable female characteristics. Gaudy jewellery for instance, and make-up; lots of it. You wonder if the evening could be recoverable after all, and maybe she'll put out for you. But surely she won't be interested in the derelict you've become. You're still bent over towards the gutter, spitting out remnants of vomitus. You think you can taste an ingredient of the last meal you ate. Russell is doing his best to charm the ladies into hanging around, maybe going somewhere, and considering the baggage he's got kneeling at his feet – you – they seem to be falling for it. Happy Shag Piece hands you her bottle of beer out of sympathy.

"Ear. Swill y'gob out."

"Thanks." You heed her suggestion and take a long glug, but then she rips the bottle back out of your hand. Surely she doesn't want –

"That's enough," she reprimands. "Didn't say y'could finish it off."

And so it continues. A taxi is hailed and everyone gets in. You wonder if you will soon be paying the driver a forfeit for ruining his upholstery, but fortunately your stomach feels just about empty. Not a good idea then, to fill it with any more booze. Recovery is a knife-edged thing, and you don't want any sort of relapse. You are not out of the wood yet.

Happy Shag Piece has her tongue in your mouth and an over-manicured hand cupping your balls. She does not seem to be in the least bit bothered that you have miasmatic effluent for breath. Maybe she can't

smell it. Oh, Christ, maybe she likes it. You head through the empty city towards the South End with the sun peeping up over the horizon. You feel privileged to witness this dawn and try to initiate with yourself some semblance of romantic emotion. A relaxing road trip with two lovely girls through the city you love. But, alas, you are fighting a losing battle because all you get are the first stirrings of an erection and carsickness.

The girls know of a place near Lark Lane where we would all be welcomed with open arms. Russell's main concern is the availability of alcohol; anything else is secondary to his requirements. It has been twenty minutes since it last passed his lips and he's starting to feel turkey. Blonde Thing reassures him that they've got "everything on tap" at this place and adds we'll all have a "gear time." The driver raises his eyebrows at mention of this place and you wonder what you're letting yourself in for. But Happy Shag Piece is in your face again with that probing tongue and it's hard to rationalize and French kiss at the same time.

When you arrive at the mystery destination Russell coughs up the cab fare, for he has in his possession a gangster-style roll of high-denomination banknotes. Being a time-served electrician under city council employ, he is paid the sort of financial incentives corrupt politicians can only dream about. For example, several days overtime during the last Christmas period brought him in over £3000. He has the city's poor and the extortionate taxes levied on them to thank for this nice little earner; not that he's complaining. The taxi driver gratefully accepts a large tip and in return quips, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." The insinuation triggers warning bells in your brain. You feel nauseous again, but this time it's anxiety-led, tinged with panic. Stepping out into the street, you try desperately to become un-aroused in the trouser department, but this is not a complete success. Walking awkwardly up to the entrance, you hope nobody notices.

Things become infinitely worse when you're buzzed into the place via a videocom. You are inside a semi-detached Victorian terrace on the derelict side of the street, where the front lawns are so unkempt as to be positively thicket. The windows of your house are blacked out and you can't help thinking that the proprietors do not care in the least about drawing attention to themselves in this way. You're guessing that somewhere along the line, people must have been paid off handsomely to ignore this dubious enterprise. The four of you step into an antechamber between what resembles two medieval portcullis. Now you know you're up the creek; no speakeasy you've ever heard of has security this tight. Fort fucking Knox does not have security this tight. But there must be a reason for this entrenchment and you feel you are about to discover what that reason is. Something's amiss. You look at Russell and it is the first time you have seen that look on his usually super-

confident face. It is a cross between anticipation and lasciviousness, with a dash of terror thrown in for good luck. As for yourself, it is only the terror component that reigns on your own exterior grid. Blonde Thing and Happy Shag Piece seem to be already fully acquainted with the Huge Men who stand guard at the gateway to this fortification. It's smiles and hugs all round. You get the impression that these Huge Men are more than just good friends with your girls, probably getting on towards the intimate end of the spectrum and possibly nudging the carnal. In fact, your girls have disappeared and as if by magic, new girls have materialized. It was so quick you didn't even see it happen. There are five or six of them, they're mangy and wretched, and they all have this identical look in their eyes that frightens the living shit out of you. Oh, please lord, no, you think. You have only just fully registered the dire predicament you find yourself in. There is no backing out at this late stage, and the portcullis clangs shut behind you as if to reinforce the fact. Your heartbeat has doubled and as far as dry mouths go, yours is the driest in the world. Your palate is the Sahara desert and your tongue, the fucking Kalahari. You spot a "menu" pinned to the wall advertising sexual services and their respective fee – Gratuity extra. You wonder what on earth "Half and half" could be and whether £250 is a fair price for it. Russell is avidly considering the options available to him and you suspect that all along he has known what you yourself are only just coming to realize. You are about to enter a house of ill repute.

"Drink, lads?" one of the Huge Men asks. Etiquette and protocol dictate that you must accept this kind offer. To refuse would be considered Bad Form, and would more than likely land you head first in the local infirmary. You wonder by how much you are about to be fleeced, but that triviality is offset by the urgent need you have for liquid refreshment. That dusty rag which was once your tongue needs to be re-hydrated. The Huge Men lead you both over to one side where a "bar" has been fashioned from an old bookcase. This really is an amateur outfit; supermarket-brand alcohol dominates the meager selection. But as their warm beer floods into your mouth, you feel your tongue actually re-inflate.

A Huge Man pipes up: "Alright, lads? See anything you like amongst these pretties?"

You would not have used that particular noun yourself. The Huge Man is taking liberties against your better judgment in describing them as such, but you don't feel any urge to correct him. That too would be considered Bad Form. The only urge you've got going at the moment is lavatorial. You can actually feel the internal workings of your bowels and that's never a good sign. They feel liquid and berserk, and in need of urgent evacuation. From a medical point of view, all the right things are happening to your body. You are experiencing a defensive trait in-

herited from your not-too-distant Neanderthal past, a fight-or-flight response, to power your escape from lions or tigers or some other saber-toothed abomination. The human body gets rid of everything it does not need in moments of extreme crisis, irrespective of your wishes or inappropriate social setting. In this day and age, you have no use for these ancient biological mechanisms that cannot tell the difference between hungry tigers and dilapidated whores. But this train of thought is not helping present matters. Before you can even remotely consider any sort of sexual encounter with one of the “pretties,” you need a toilet, and you need one now.

“She’s not bad,” you say, pointing randomly at the pack. “But where’s the, erm, head?”

One of the girls comes over and takes you by the elbow.

“This way to the head,” she says, but you do not register the innuendo. Russell raises his can of beer and slaps you on the back by way of congratulation.

“Go for it!” he says as you’re reluctantly led away. Then, in imitation of the wise and cautionary taxi driver: “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Ω

It’s a cold and misty eight in the a.m. and you are walking through Seton Park towards the boating lake. You are not too happy with your current mood-status, but that’s only to be expected considering recent events. An eruption of birdsong lifts your spirits, but you suspect only temporarily. So for more permanence, you toss your head back and dry-swallow your daily Lofepramine onto an empty stomach. Ah, what the hell, you think, and double the dose. You deserve it. Serotonin reserves are at an all-time low and you fear an imminent market crash.

You have decided that gentle exercise is the key to nipping the approaching hangover in the bud, and so what better tactic than a brisk walk around the park while it’s still relatively empty. Russell has decided that for him, the binge must go on and has engaged three of the prettiest pretties back at the shop to help him accomplish his profligate fantasies. Sure, you find his endurance admirable, but you can have too much of a good thing. Enough is as good as a feast. You have already discovered to your cost what “Half and Half” is, and a single helping of that is enough for any man.

As you approach the boating lake, a paddling of ducks vociferously greet you. Childhood memories flicker through that misfiring brain of yours, and you wish you had some bread to feed them, therapeutics being the name of the game. But you haven’t, so instead you take a sneaky look around to check the coast is clear, and quack back. This may look absurd to the casual observer, but to you, it feels like the most natural

thing in the world to be doing. You keep it up for a while and find yourself thoroughly entertained. But then one of the more intelligent-looking mallards catches your eye and you just know he's thinking "Who d'you reckon you are, pal, Dr. fucking Dolittle?"

You circumnavigate the lake and head towards the recently refurbished Palm House. Covered with a slight morning frost, it looks spectacular, an enormous inverted cut-glass punchbowl. You remember reading about its return to grace in *The Echo*, and how you thought such an obscene amount of funding could be better spent. It's only a fucking greenhouse after all, of no actual use to anyone, and it's inevitable that sooner or later every single pane of glass will be put through by a pack of feral twelve year-olds. You can't even go inside because the doors are chained and padlocked, and you find your feathers ruffled by this discourteous exclusion. The local smackhead consortium have voiced their annoyance too, by scattering used syringes all over the show which you're forced to tread tentatively in between. It's odds-on you've already caught one viral disease this morning; you don't want to catch another.

You walk past the derelict bandstand which is so forlorn-looking you have to divert your gaze. For a second, you think you can hear violins. Then you're heading towards a rocky outcrop next to the running track where a relative grotto has been fashioned by some creative gardening team. And once again you are privy to the flotsam and jetsam of the unrelenting junkie. Do they know something you don't? You decide that maybe one day in the future, when your brain chemistry is a little more impregnable and the weight of your wallet a little more substantial, you will treat yourself to a taster of said morphia. You've always wondered about it. But for the time being, with your constitution as tenuous as it is, any sort of self-inflicted derangement would be most improvident. You leave Sefton Park as you found it; characterless.

Squeezing between stationary traffic on Ullet Road, you wander into Princes Park via the Windermere Terrace entrance. Schoolgirls have congregated outside the private teaching academy wearing maroon uniforms that for some strange reason you recognize. But in your old school, the girls wore navy blue. Then you catch on; your "pretty" was sporting this identical garb. Your eyes widen as you hope to god her schooldays are long since behind her, and the uniform just a happy keepsake she uses to titillate sad old punters like yourself. Then you're laughing out loud and have to stifle it; you are reminded of Russell who at this very moment is receiving the most thorough education money can buy, albeit of a non-academic persuasion. You wonder just how many spondulicks his *Ménage à Quatre* will cost him, but resolve it's money well spent. And knowing Russell's powers of persuasion, he probably negotiated a "three for the price of two" deal.

But it's time to call it a day. Your mood has systematically deteriorated and until the tablets kick in, you're fighting a losing battle. The two things you need more than anything else now are elevated blood sugar levels and bed rest. You pass through the park and find Princes Avenue stretching out in front of you. Take me home, country road, you think, and take to your heels.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. He has just finished writing a comic novel entitled *Up & Coming*. It deals with a third-generation Finnish-American sculptor by the name of Steve Haavikko and takes place in Seattle, Washington. Margrith Schraner describes it as a testosterone-driven novel.

The Malingerers Bureau

Ernest Hekkanen

WORKING AT THE Malingerers Bureau for nearly twenty-five years has resulted in me having to deal with some pretty strange characters. It is my job to sift out the charlatans from the real cases of illness and disability and so, when clients appear before me for their annual reviews, they are often guarded, suspicious and more than a little resentful. With the slimming down of government bureaucracy, which has taken place over the past three years, a lot of my colleagues have been laid off or have taken early retirement, and that has increased my caseload.

One of my newest clients – new to me, although he has been in the system for five years now – is a certain Mr. Alfred Hubert Harding, whose rather thick file set alarm bells ringing in my head. Mr. Alfred Hubert Harding had come down with his particular “ailment” during his twenty-seventh year of existence – that is, five years ago. He had worked in a different department in the same building I now work in, when he began to suffer from some rather bizarre episodes. According to him, he started picking up messages – not from the ozone, as one might expect, but from seats that he sat on – and because he found the messages so disconcerting, he had to remain standing on his feet, day in and day out, week after week. Needless to say, his claim stretched my credulity so thin, I was certain that he was a malingerer and so I sent word for him to appear at my office.

Sending word to him didn’t do the trick. In the end, I had to send a worker to his current address, with instructions to print the date and

time of Mr. Harding's appointment on a piece of paper. The worker was then supposed to place that piece of paper on a chair and tell Mr. Harding to sit quite firmly on it.

When Mr. Alfred Hubert Harding finally appeared for his annual review, he was full of apologies for not absorbing the first two messages, which had been phoned in to him. "You see, my mind is in such a constant state of distraction, I don't get messages unless they arrive in the proper fashion."

The client insisted on standing in the corner near the closed door. Dressed in clothes obviously picked up at a thrift store, unshaven and uncombed and highly agitated, he seemed to be play-acting.

"Yes, as I finally figured out," I told him, leafing through the pages of his rather thick file. "From what it says here, you used to work in this building. Is that correct?"

"Yes, for four years, to be precise."

"Can you describe what your job was?"

"Yes, it was to process incoming clients. I jotted down their names and addresses, learned what I could about them, and then sent them to the proper bureaus."

"Was it a stressful job, Mr. Harding?"

"No, not particularly."

"And yet —" I consulted one of the forms in his rather thick file — "and yet, four years later, you came down with this rather curious ailment of yours."

"I think I might've sat down on a chair recently vacated by someone suffering from the same malady and contracted it in that manner."

"But according to you, people with your particular ailment can't sit down, for fear of receiving messages that will drive them crazy."

"In the early stages of this particular ailment, it is not uncommon for patients to deny what is happening to them. They go around sitting down on everything in sight, in an attempt to prove to themselves that they're normal and aren't receiving messages in such a ludicrous fashion. The chair I sat down on had probably been vacated by someone in the early stages of the disease."

I clucked my tongue. "I see."

"I'm not too sure you *do* see. If you'd like me to demonstrate what I'm talking about, I'd be more than willing to sit down on that chair across the desk from you and tell you everything you'd like to know about the client who last occupied it."

"Are you sure you're up to such a feat?"

"It's no feat at all," he said and promptly sat down on the chair. He briefly closed his eyes, assuming the sort of expression that infants do prior to filling their diapers. "Ah, yes, it's coming to me now. I would compare the sensation to an internal shiver that courses up my you-know-what. Oh, the poor thing, the poor dear. She's the mother of four

children. Her husband ran off with a young tart from the circus. Alice. Her name's Alice Turnstile. A worker from your bureau went to check up on her at her address and, well, the rest is history. She was found to be harboring a man in her tiny apartment. Indeed, when the worker arrived to check out her accommodation, she and Mr. Turnstile were in the act of trying to reconcile their differences."

"That will do, Mr. Harding. You needn't go any further."

"Yes, but I'm just about to get to the best part of this case."

"Stand up, Mr. Harding. Stand up, right now."

Mr. Albert Hubert Harding stood up. He beamed a smile in my direction. "I take it I have convinced you?"

I fought hard to maintain a straight face. "Yes, well, something *does* seem to be at work. However, I don't know whether your particular ailment qualifies you to be on the dole. My feeling is, well, if indeed you have this, ah, rare gift, and if indeed it is a genuine one – which I'm not willing to accept on faith, by the way – you should be earning your living by it, rather than by collecting assistance."

"Just how would I go about doing that, pray tell?"

"Hire yourself out as a medium. Or else, become a circus performer. I'm sure such activities would fetch a lot more than the monthly amount you're receiving from the government."

"Yes, but try to think through what I have just told you –" he glanced at the plaque on my desk "– Mr. Furlong. It is not just the fact that I pick up all sorts of stray messages whenever I sit down on anything – and let me tell you, that can be quite disturbing, because what some people allow themselves to ponder should never be pondered by anyone who is the least bit moral – it is also the fact that I, a carrier of this ailment, might inadvertently pass it on to someone else – you know, a completely innocent individual, for instance."

"Oh, come on, now, Mr. Harding. I think it stretches the credulity a bit thin to think that you can pass your, ah, gift onto someone else who might inadvertently happen to sit down on a chair you just vacated."

"Would you like to test that theory?"

"I beg your pardon?"

He nodded at the chair across the desk from me. "I invite you to sit on that chair, the very one I was occupying just a few moments ago, to see for yourself whether it is possible to contract my particular ailment."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mr. Harding. I'm not about to do anything like that."

"Why not?"

"Because that suggestion strikes me as awfully silly, Mr. Harding. And besides, I'm not the one who's suspected of being a malingerer. You're the one who's suspected of that offense and therefore, *you* have everything to prove. I, on the other hand, have only to scribble some

notes on this form right here in front of me and include it in your file, in order to have you removed from the government's payroll. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you, Mr. Harding? Huh, do you?"

"I will appeal."

"On what grounds?"

"On grounds that I might endanger the population at large."

"Oh, come on, now, Mr. Harding. That is the most outrageous thing I've ever heard anyone say."

"Oh, come on, now, yourself, Mr. Furlong. If you send me out of here, having taken away my disability allowance, I'll start sitting down on every chair in sight. Soon there will be an epidemic of people suffering from my particular ailment."

"What you just said sounds like a form of blackmail, Mr. Harding."

"It isn't blackmail. It's a promise."

Tapping my ballpoint pen on the top sheet in his rather thick file, I glanced at the clock on the wall. "I will give you two months to get off the dole of your own accord, Mr. Harding. After that, your disability allowance will be withdrawn. If you wish to appeal, that is up to you but, from what I can tell, you are a malingerer."

For dramatic effect, I took the official rubber stamp out of the top drawer of my desk, inked it on the red pad in front of me and stamped MALINGERER on his annual review form.

"I'm sorry I have to be so brutal, Mr. Harding, but these are tough, lean times."

"I won't take this lying down, Mr. Furlong."

I couldn't resist making a joke. "Just as long as you don't take it sitting down, I don't think the rest of humanity has too much to fear. You can go now."

Ω

Mr. Alfred Hubert Harding took his case to my superiors. Upon perusing my client's rather thick file, the members of the appellate body expressed surprise that he had been allowed to remain on the government's payroll for the past five years. Just the same, Mr. Alfred Hubert Harding was given the opportunity to appear before a tribunal in order to argue his case. Although he argued his case quite well, in a manner which demonstrated that he possessed a good command of language and, hence, a good command of his own mind, the tribunal upheld my ruling and denied him his disability claim.

"You're going to suffer for this, Mr. Furlong," he shouted at me as he left by the door. "You're going to suffer. Believe me."

My superiors gave me a look of sympathy. "We could have him arrested for issuing a threat," my immediate superior informed me. "After all, we all heard him say it."

“It might be the best thing to do, Ray.”

“I think he made that threat in the heat of the moment,” I said, “and besides, I don’t wish to add to the gravity of Mr. Harding’s situation.”

“It’s up to you.”

“If the threat is acted upon in any manner whatsoever, then – and only then – will I ask for help.”

Ω

I live in the suburbs, although not so far out in the suburbs one can’t get there by public transportation.

The neighborhood is that of a typical bedroom community. The man of the house drives to his job in the city. The woman of the house drives the children to school. She works part-time at this, that or the other small job, or fusses about the house all day. At five-thirty in the afternoon, she prepares supper for her family and puts it on the table by six-thirty.

My neighbors take pride in the groomed civility of their yards, all except for a newly married couple down the street. They have a chain-link fence around their property, to keep their Rottweilers from roaming at large. That yard is beaten down and scruffy-looking, but very secure.

Actually, there are very few B&Es in our neighborhood, due to the design of the community, I think. That is why, when my house was broken into during the middle of the day, I felt as if I had been singled out for such treatment. However, I’m sure most people feel the same way after a break-in.

I phoned the police, who came to survey the damage and to scour the house for fingerprints. The back door was shattered where the dead-bolt had been. Drawers were dislodged and their contents spilled helter-skelter on the floor. The closets stood wide open, clothes wrenched from their hangers and thrown around the room.

“Has anything been stolen, do you think?”

“That’s just it,” I advised the constable. “My camera is still here. My electronic equipment, although smashed to smithereens, is all accounted for.”

“So, nothing is actually missing, then?”

“Nothing except for the money I used to keep in a gallon jar on the table beside the birdcage.” Whoever broke in, killed my budgie and left its body on the green blotter on my desk. “I used to put all of my loose change in that jar.”

“How much would you estimate was in it?”

“I wouldn’t have the foggiest notion. It was about three-quarters of the way full. Every now and then, I plunder it in order to buy presents for my nieces and nephews.”

“You live by yourself?”

“Yes. I’m not married, although I once was.”

“The dead budgie on your desk seems to be a message of some kind. Are you aware of anyone who might be mad enough at you to do something like that?”

“Yes, about half the clients I deal with – the ones which I classify as malingers.”

“Anyone in particular?”

I pondered telling the constable about Mr. Albert Hubert Harding. “A client recently threatened me, but unless you’re able to retrieve any fingerprints or DNA evidence, I’m reluctant to mention his name. That’s because I’m afraid my complaint might be misinterpreted as *my* attempting to harass *him*.”

“From what we’ve been able to gather, the perpetrator was wearing gloves.”

“Well, there you go. There’s no actual proof. It would amount to *my* surmising it was *him*, and that wouldn’t wash in court, now, would it?”

Ω

I thought it might be wise to take some precautions, so I vacuumed the chairs and sofa and wiped them down with disinfectant. It took me three hours to put things straight, but only a few minutes to bury my budgie in the backyard. By the time I had finished doing all of that, I had begun to feel rather tired and so was disinclined to tackle the damaged back door. I figured I would have to phone a repairman to have a new door installed and decided to put that off until the next day.

I ordered in some pizza and took it outside to the garden in the backyard. The spring weather was beginning to turn nice and warm. In one corner of the yard are some lovely purple lilac bushes now in full bloom. A bench was sitting in a pool of shade directly below them. I took my pizza out to the bench and sat down, trying to let the fragrance of the lilac blossoms soothe my jangled nerves. Tomorrow, I decided, I would phone my superior at the bureau, explain to him what had occurred at my house and take the day off in order to have the back door replaced.

While sitting there on the bench, I started to become extremely agitated and even angry. However, it was an odd sort of anger directed largely at myself. I pictured Mr. Harding stealing into my yard in the dead of night and sitting down on the very bench I was now occupying. I envisioned the lights of my house going out one at a time. Finally, at about eleven o’clock, the feeble rays coming through the closed curtains of the bedroom were extinguished. I then visualized Mr. Harding sitting on the bench all night long, his gloved hands stuffed into the pockets of a soiled bomber jacket, his brow fiercely knitted, his eyes savagely contemplating the part of the house where I was now sleeping.

At sunrise, he got up and hid behind the garden shed, waiting for me to leave for work.

After I had driven off down the alleyway, Mr. Alfred Hubert Harding came out of his hiding place and used a jimmy bar to break into my house. He proceeded to dump the contents of my desk on the floor and then to fling my clothes helter-skelter around the bedroom. Upon spying the budgie in the birdcage, a sudden inspiration seized him. He reached with a gloved hand into the cage and squeezed the bird so hard it defecated its entrails. Then, he put the dead bird on the green blotter on my desk.

Suddenly, a shudder coursed up my spine. No, I told myself, you're imagining things. You're imagining Mr. Harding's resentment and anger.

Ω

Two months later, I went to see a psychiatrist.

"Please sit down," the psychiatrist told me, gesturing to a chair.

"To tell you the truth, I'd rather stand."

"Yes, but that means I will also have to stand. So, please, if you will, take a seat."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Why? Have you got a bad back or something of that nature?"

"I only wish I had a bad back," I told him. "I only wish it was as simple as all that."

I related the story of the client who had been summoned to my office on suspicion of being a malingerer. I told the psychiatrist how the man had been on assistance for five years, because of an ailment which allowed him to pick up messages from seats that he happened to sit down on – an ailment which I had discounted as utter nonsense. At that point I confessed that I, too, had come down with the above-mentioned ailment.

"Some of the messages I pick up disturb me so profoundly, I have to avoid sitting down anywhere except in my own house, and to make sure the seats in my house remain memory-free, I avoid inviting visitors into my abode."

"That sounds a little far-fetched to me –" he consulted his file, a rather slim one at the time "– Mr. Furlong."

"That was my opinion, too, when I first heard about the ailment I have just now described to you. I thought the man was a malingerer and so, I had him taken off the dole. However, since that time, I've learned a little something about psychometry—"

"Psychometry—?"

"—the ability to know the history of an object simply by touching it."

“A remarkable skill – if, indeed, it were to exist.”

I saw a look of disbelief on the psychiatrist’s face. “Yes, I was once of the same opinion as you. But now, I’m of a different opinion altogether. You see, I can’t sit down on anything without becoming aware of the history of the previous occupant.”

“I would have to see that skill at work to believe in it myself, I’m afraid.”

“I guess I’ll have to show you, then. May I sit down on that chair right over there?”

He gestured to it. “Be my guest, Mr. Furlong. If I remember correctly, I already offered you the use of it.”

I sat down on the chair. The impression I received was quite horrifying. “Your last client was a Mr. Maurice Lambert. From the deck of his house, he has been watching a young girl next door –” and instantly, I sprang to my feet. “I’m sorry. I’d prefer not to know what is going on in that man’s mind.”

The psychiatrist leaned back in his chair and regarded me with raised eyebrows. “Amazing,” he said. “How did you manage to do that?”

“I don’t know. However, I don’t want it to occur any more. That’s why I’ve come to see you. I want my former life to be returned to me posthaste. I no longer want to be disturbed by such thoughts.”

“Yes, but how am I to treat something I don’t know anything about?” the psychiatrist said. The shadow of a smile shaped his lips.

“You could begin by sitting down on that chair,” I told him.

“Why would I want to do anything like that?”

“Because you would soon come down with the ailment that I have, and that would allow you to know it very intimately.”

“I find that difficult to believe. Very difficult.”

“Look,” I said, “my condition has gotten way out of control. It no longer allows me to live a normal life. I can no longer even go to work.”

“Oh, *so that’s it*,” he replied, a knowing smirk on his face. “You want me to declare you unstable, so you can go on sick leave.”

“No, I’d like to be made normal again. That’s what I want.”

“And failing that?”

“Failing that,” I said, “I shall have no alternative but to do something that’s very drastic, because I don’t have any desire to know what is going on in everybody else’s mind. I don’t want to be aware of their most intimate thoughts – not without some choice in the matter, anyway.”

“As a psychiatrist, I can sympathize with you on that point –” again, he glanced at the file in front of him “– Mr. Furlong. However, you’re going to have to pay me more than one visit if I’m going to get to the bottom of what is troubling you.”

“There isn’t enough time for that,” I told him. “Something must be done, and done right now, before this condition, or whatever you want to call it, reaches epidemic proportions. Because my condition is contagious, doctor. Extremely contagious. In fact, I’m sure I’ve already passed it on to several colleagues at the bureau where I work.”

“Your bureau being —?”

“—my bureau being the one that deals with malingerers on the government’s payroll. In fact, if this ailment isn’t stamped out, and stamped out rather quickly, too, we’re all liable to end up becoming malingerers — or worse, suicides!”

“Oh, come on, now, Mr. Furlong. You’re letting your imagination run away with you. Rein it in, please.”

“Look, if you know what’s good for you, you won’t make light of my condition,” I said. “It isn’t a joke.”

“Not even a divine one?”

“No, not even a divine one,” I told him in an adamant voice.

Hysteria? Psychosomatic illness? Whatever it is, my condition seems to be spreading. And it’s leaving a tremendous number of malingerers in its wake.