

# *The New Orphic Review*

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of thirty-two books. The most recent are *Up & Coming (In Seattle)*, *The Expulsion*, *The Shipwrecked Heart*, *Exhuming Carl Jung*, *The Misadventures of Bumbleberry Finn*, *The Radio Interview*, *The Clown Act*, *Harbinger of Fall*, *The Well*, *The Lambing*, *Man's Sadness*, *Sometimes I Have These Incendiary Dreams*, *The Island of Winged Wonders*, *Dementia Island* and *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*.

## Wrestling with Demons

Ernest Hekkanen

ON OCCASION, I teach short story and novella writing at the Nelson University Center, usually to complete novices who labor under the assumption that fiction has something to do with life writing – a genre that is slightly more ambitious than diary writing, from what I can discern.

Sometimes my classes resemble five-step recovery programs more than they do writing classes. When my students select material to write about, they go no further than their own lives. They unpack their domestic, relationship, employment and addiction problems and expect them to be of interest to readers. Quite often, the main characters are thinly disguised stand-ins for themselves.

Usually, I reply that the material is worth dealing with, but it begs being developed. How can the author get the most out of the situation that his characters find themselves in? How can he maximize the stress on his characters and so force them to act on the page – to create a sense of drama? How can a greater sense of moment be brought to the story, in order to involve me, the reader?

Often, after tossing off a few suggestions, I will get a look of incredulity or even shock, followed by an utterance that might go something like this: “Yes, but it didn’t happen that way. It happened the way I described it in my story.”

“Fiction is the art of letting characters do what you wouldn’t ordinarily do – what you might not countenance doing yourself,” I reply. “What you’ve got to do is raise the ante – put more at stake.”

Many of my students have picked up the adage, “Write about what you know,” and have made the mistake of assuming that that means they should slavishly write about themselves, in situations they are familiar with, without employing the least bit of imagination. Novice writers often cling quite stubbornly to events in their own lives, without realizing that they are boring the hell out of their readers. They are so attached to a particular trauma, dramatic episode or dysfunctional relationship they have experienced, they are unable to have fun with it on the page.

On one occasion, after a student unpacked the details of her rather harrowing childhood, around which she hoped to concoct a novella, I said something to this effect: “Great. Wonderful material. You should consider yourself lucky to have had such a traumatic upbringing. You’ve got a trunk full of treasures you can now draw upon for stories. All you have to do is find a way to sustain *our* interest. What do you conceive of as the thread of continuity in your story? What do you foresee as the climax?”

Because such writers see themselves as the hero or heroine of their dramas (or, in current pop-psychology parlance, *a survivor of trauma*) they find it difficult to come up with a climax or end point to their stories, mainly because they haven’t stumbled upon that end point in their own lives. For me – or anyone else, for that matter – to suggest how they might unfold events to best advantage and so supply their dramas with a satisfactory finale, well, that, to them, amounts to fabricating or lying about events – that is, fictionalizing them.

I’ve come to the conclusion that such individuals live in fear of what their imaginations might disgorge. They are wary of their imaginations leading them into uncomfortable territory and, as a result, they cling to the so-called facts out of fear that they might be judged to be giving false testimony. To paraphrase Farley Mowat, they allow the ‘facts’ to stand in the way of a good story.

‘Lying’ or ‘stretching the truth’ has always been frowned upon – if not condemned outright – by most major religions, and yet, those same religions often engage in the most flagrant fabrications, especially when it comes to shoring up the so-called truths inherent in their belief structures. To ensure that followers abide by the ‘truths’ encoded in a particular system of thought, the devout will go to great lengths to persuade others, including the use of threats, extortion, brainwashing, excommunication, torture and violence. Freedom of thought, let alone expression, is contraindicated. To employ the imagination for anything other than memorizing scripture or patriotic platitudes is seen as subversive.

Having practiced the art of storytelling for several decades now, I have acquired a pretty good feeling for when a ‘lie’ is being passed off as a ‘truth’. Indeed, most of the ‘facts’ we cling to are little more than versions of what we think of as facts – that is, they are mere projections.

By ‘sticking to the facts’, novice writers manage to avoid a thorough exploration of the material lying dormant in their own psyches. They fear acquainting themselves with their demons and being forced to engage in a vigorous wrestling match with them, as Gerald does in *Women in Love*, for instance. The mere idea of participating in such a leviathan struggle exhausts them and so they try to avoid it at all costs.

As a practiced, professional writer of fiction, I have, for greater or lesser periods of time, allowed myself to ‘become’ a variety of characters, some of whom I have found to be genuinely disconcerting. By doing so, I have come to realize how changeable or, perhaps I should say, how fluid personality is. A large part of what we believe to be quite solid and unshakable in ourselves changes depending on the circumstances we find ourselves in, and that is exactly what novice writers fear most – the relative nature of their perceptions and personalities.

Do enough writing and you will eventually discover that your personality is built on quicksand. At any moment, what appears to be a solidly grounded personality might sink out of sight, into the generative muck of the underworld, where uncertainty and dissolution also reign. If this issue of *The New Orphic Review* can be said to have a theme, this might be it.

MARGRITH SCHRANER began writing short fiction in 2000. Her short story “Dream Dig” was chosen for inclusion in the prestigious *Journey Prize Anthology* (McClelland & Stewart, 2001). Since then, she has been developing further material for a short story cycle based on the fictitious life of Ulyssa Segantini. “To Travel the Distance” was originally conceived of as a short story and companion piece to “Blue Skies Over Savognin” (*NOR*, Spring 2002). However, it has since become a novella-length project, slated for publication in 2004. The excerpt featured here includes the Prologue and lead-in chapter. **NOTE:** *Riom* is the name of a village, pronounced ‘Ree-ohm’.

## To Travel the Distance

Margrith Schraner

*Salve la cretta digls babungs  
Salve igls usits vigls e bungls  
Raste fidevels agl sulom  
Noss li nateiv, noss tger Riom*

Keep the beliefs of the ancestors  
Retain the old and valuable customs  
Remain faithful to your goods and chattels  
To our native place, our beloved Riom

### Prologue

DARKNESS WAS FALLING on the mountain village of Maloja, settling like fine mist in the valley between jagged, snow-capped peaks. Despite Ulyssa’s fear that she would get to the cemetery too late to view Giovanni Segantini’s grave by the light of day, she felt unable to move on. An overwhelming tiredness kept tugging at her, urging her to sit down somewhere – anywhere – so why not on the wooden bench right beside the road? After all, she and Tomas had been traveling all day, after very little sleep the night before, and now it was nearly twenty-one hundred hours, according to her wristwatch.

“It feels like I’m walking through water,” she said and plunked herself down on the bench. “You don’t mind if we rest here for a while, do you?”

“You’re the one who was intent on seeing the great man’s grave. Not me.”

She found his tone mildly irritating. By now, he should have known how important it was for her to visit the place where Switzerland's most revered painter of the nineteenth century had found his final resting place.

Segantini! The name had always conjured up feelings of relatedness in her, as if remote familial ties existed between them, ties which her family, for whatever reasons, had kept secret from her all these many years.

Tomas took off his daypack and set it between them on the bench. She watched him rummage through the contents and pull out the map they had picked up earlier that afternoon, at the hostel. She expelled a sigh. He seemed to always be burying his face in some map or other.

"I'm glad we've finally arrived," she said, trying to get his attention. "I mean, isn't it amazing that we're here, amidst the very mountains we saw only yesterday, in the paintings at the museum in St. Moritz?"

She let her body slump to one side, and her head flop down on top of Tomas's packsack.

"Nice pillow," she said. "I only wish I could go to sleep now. I have absolutely no energy left."

Tomas glanced at her without lowering the map. "What's the matter, Granny Girl? Has Grandmother Time tied you down with her apron strings?"

"Tomas!" She slapped his arm lightly, as if brushing away a nasty insect. "You're always mixing things up. As far as I know, Grandmother Time doesn't exist. If it's Old Man Time you meant to say — well, that is altogether a different matter."

"Old Man or Old Woman, what difference does it make?"

"Old Man Time waits for no one. My only hope is that he won't overtake us anytime soon. Right now, I feel I so worn out from all the traveling, I could easily fall prey to him."

"You're the one who insisted on setting such a frantic pace. We could have stayed in St. Moritz for another day or two — but, no, you had to hurry on to Maloja — to get to the bitter end of the Segantini saga. If you ask me, you're conducting this pilgrimage in a backwards sort of fashion — starting with his grave, rather than with his cradle." He shrugged. "But then, who am I to judge?"

"*You* are to blame for slowing us down," she told him. "It was *you* who wanted to stop over at Sils-Maria, to see where Nietzsche hatched the idea for *Thus Spake Zarathustra*."

His face had disappeared behind the map again. He used to tease her about being map-dependent; the inference was that she had to consult a map before going anywhere or doing anything. Since coming to Switzerland, there had been a reversal; *he* was the one who was always consulting a map of some kind.



“You’re wheezing again,” he remarked without looking at her. He lowered the map and pulled a water bottle out of the side pocket of his daypack. “Here, have a drink.”

She grabbed the water bottle and propped herself up on her elbow to sip from it.

“There’s a street that heads off to the left,” he told her, “not far from here, I’d say. The great man’s grave can’t be far beyond that.”

The great man, Ulyssa thought. Tomas had chosen his words well. The day before, in the Segantini Museum in St. Moritz, when she had finally stood face to face with the *Alpine Triptych* in the upstairs cupola, she had felt a sudden, intense connection with the painter. The splendour of his panoramic paintings had brought her to a place in herself where she had suddenly understood how important the mountains had been for him. The mountains had inspired him with a lasting passion, one that had never left him, not even as he lay dying, at the age of forty-one, in a stone hut on *Schafberg* mountain, at an altitude of 2731 meters above sea level. His work was interrupted when a sudden illness overtook him in the midst of creating his masterpiece.

“*Voglio vedere le mie montagne* — I want to see my mountains.” Reportedly these were words spoken by Segantini — the artist’s dying wish. He had implored the doctor, a friend of the family, to push his bed closer to the window so he might cast one last, parting glance at his beloved mountains — mountains set ablaze by the last rays of the setting sun.

Ulyssa heaved herself up to a sitting position on the bench. She scanned the chain of mountains before her and was struck by the sight of that same blaze, created by the last rays of sunshine striking the snow-capped mountain peaks — far, far above the valley now being eclipsed by shadow. She let out a sigh of appreciation. Weren’t life and art simply sublime, joined together, as they were, at this very moment?

“It does feel good, being here,” Tomas said and put his arm around her shoulder. She basked in the reassuring presence of his body. She would have loved to sit like this forever, to sip at the water bottle, to feel his arm around her. The wheezing in her chest had not gone away, and that worried her. She chalked it up to allergies, to having eaten too much bread and cheese and chocolate during the past few days — food that did not altogether agree with her. She suspected that sensitivities such as these and others, too, may have contributed to her need to distance herself from the country of her birth, back when she was a young woman.

Tomas let out a sigh, too, only his was meant to demonstrate his restlessness.

“I think we better get going,” he said. “The cemetery can’t be more than a hop, a skip and a jump away, and it would be a lot nicer to view it in what little light is left us, rather than in the dark, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” she said and pushed herself wearily to her feet.

Hers was more than a simple, physical weariness, she feared. She had first felt it creeping over her shortly after visiting the place where her birth-father’s grave was said to have been. For many years, she had dreamed of standing at the foot of that grave and sensing her father’s presence. But her dreams had been dashed — wildly dashed.

They had now reached the intersection. Tomas read the name on the street sign and consulted the map once more. “Yah, this is it. What did I tell you?”

It seemed to her that since their arrival in Switzerland, Tomas Kurikka’s Finnish accent had become more pronounced, as if by his inflection he was forever mocking how Ulyssa’s mother tongue sounded to his ears. Now and then, when he made a rare attempt at speaking Swiss, his accent was downright comical — as if he was intentionally trying to misconstrue the tongue. At home, in the Kootenays of British Columbia, they spoke English together most of the time and so had gotten accustomed to each other’s accents — to the point of no longer noticing.

The crunching of the gravel beneath her feet reverberated loudly in her head. She could feel the rhythmic throbbing of her pulse at her temples. Even a gradual incline such as this was exhausting to her. Her chest felt unusually constricted and heavy, as if stuffed with wet cotton batting. But soon, I’ll be there, at the cemetery, she reminded herself.

The gate was wide open, as if they had been expected. It was a fairly modest cemetery, even by Swiss standards, on the smallish side, with a cut-rock granite wall that rode the uneven ground. Quite close to the gate was a monumental-looking stone sepulchre that held the remains of Segantini’s entire family.

“Well, there it is, the object of your wanderings,” Tomas said. “The tomb of your beloved painter and compatriot. It’s a lot larger than I figured it would be, given the picture in the guidebook. Is it everything you hoped for?”

Ulyssa stood in silence, awed not so much by the presence of the tomb itself as by the fact that she had actually managed to set foot there. A few months ago, it had been little more than a figment of her imagination — a mere dot on a map, at best. She allowed the moment to lengthen, and waited for its significance to deepen, to fully register.

“Well, is it?” Tomas said.

“Is what, what?” she asked.

“Is the great man’s grave everything you hoped it would be?”

“I would say so.” She knew from his tone what he was referring to and wondered why he was bringing it up at this particular moment. Was it to dampen her delight? Or was it to needle her? She took note of the names engraved on the large, polished marble plaques. With night falling, it was more difficult now to see all the details. But she was able to

discern the names of Giovanni and his wife, Bice. She read the names next to them: Gottardo, Alberto, Mario, and Bianca.

"Imagine," she told Tomas, "they had four children, all of them born in the space of four years. What a burden it must have been for Bice, to raise them after his death."

Tomas seemed preoccupied. He was rummaging around in the outside pocket of his daypack and pulled out a flashlight.

"Here. You won't have to squint so much at the Roman numerals," he said. "Just make sure you don't shine the beam on any ghosts and end up scaring yourself to death."

"Actually, I wouldn't mind running into a ghost," she told him. She flashed the beam on Giovanni Segantini's stone plaque. The year of his death was inscribed there – 1899. "I'd love to meet his ghost," she said. "I'm in that sort of mood, tonight."

Giovanni Segantini, Ulyssa recalled, had died of peritonitis at the age of forty-one. She had read somewhere that the cause of the disease could be linked to eating mouldy cheese or bread. He must have run out of fresh food to eat, Ulyssa surmised, when he had stayed in his studio on *Schafberg* mountain to paint for ten days. Her own father, Ridolfo Segantini, had also died at the age of forty-one, as a result of stomach cancer. He had been a far less remarkable man than Giovanni, his art being that of a master chef, his palette comprising no more than a handful of culinary delights.

She glanced at Tomas who, strangely enough, was pointing at the moon. What was he trying to tell her? That the moon was almost full, that a mantle of diffuse light had clothed it in a mysterious radiance? The sky was a lovely ultramarine blue now, steadily growing darker. The last of the sun's rays glanced on clouds resembling a school of fish whose pink color was reminiscent of hand-tinted photographs Ulyssa had seen in her grandmother's family album. There, the photographs with their pastel-pink hues had always struck her as unnatural, somehow, because of the way they had clashed with the black cardboard pages on which they were mounted.

On the horizon, where a profusion of pink clouds were bunched together, she caught sight of a massive mountain, decayed-looking like a molar, and beneath it, at its base, a gentle slope covered in everlasting snow. The sight of snow in August never ceased to amaze and delight her.

"Just have a look at the pink sheen on that snow," she told Tomas.

"Much too saccharine for my taste, the embodiment of pure kitsch," Tomas said. "Go ahead and take a picture of it, though, if you must."

She hastily removed the lens cap and crouched down with the camera to frame a shot that would feature both mountain and tomb. She wanted something that would express what was eternal, what was immutable, and yet speak of transience and impermanence.

“You’ll have to act quickly,” Tomas told her. “The legendary alpenglow is fading pretty fast.”

A steady hand would be required to hold the exposure for longer than she was used to, but it would be well worth the effort. She positioned the camera on her raised knee and looked through the viewfinder. Yes, that was the composition she wanted: Far off, in the distance, at the top of the picture, the stately snag-toothed mountain rising from an expanse of glacial snow. To fill in the middle ground, two or three branches of the *pinus cembra*, the beloved swiss stone pine of her childhood – their elegant upsweep providing a much needed, almost musical sense of movement. And finally, at the bottom of the picture, a close-up of the length of polished marble that ran along the upper edge of the sepulchre, with the words *Arte ed amore vincono il tempo* sharply engraved.

She found the race against the fading light oddly invigorating. Crouching down even lower than before, she steadied the camera on her knee and held her finger on the release button for what seemed an eternity. Then, it was done. Already, the light around the base of the mountain was being extinguished, leaving behind a mere suggestion of pink on the clouds. Her left eyelid twitched as a result of the effort she had just made.

“Well, were you successful? Did you capture it?”

“I sure hope so,” she answered, her eyes again focused on the inscription on the tomb. “Art and Love Conquer Time,” she said. “What do you make of that aphorism, Tomas? Do you think it’s true?”

He took an inordinately long time to come up with an answer. She got the impression that he was reflecting for much longer than was absolutely necessary. She had always considered him to be a great writer. He could be quite eloquent on the page, but in person, he was much more frugal with words. More often than not, he would either hesitate for a long time or chose to remain stoically, infuriatingly silent.

“I guess, I would agree – in general, anyway – that art has a way of conquering time,” he began. “It does endure, at least until it’s destroyed — by war, for instance, or by disaster, or by time itself.” He shrugged. “As for Giovanni Segantini’s work, well, you’ve seen it in the museums in St. Moritz and elsewhere. It seems to have survived until now, anyway.”

Ulyssa was far from being satisfied with his answer. “Yes, that’s true enough,” she conceded. “But when you consider the essence of that aphorism, would you, in fact, be able to conclude that art and love ultimately remain victorious, that they survive the ravages of time?”

He took the flashlight from her without a word and shone it on the inscription, as if to verify that she had, indeed, translated the adage correctly. Despite the many years he had spent living in Canada, he had remained a Finn at heart. Once upon a time, about four years ago, when

she had questioned his love for her, he had replied with the standard Scandinavian joke about the man who had been asked that very same question by his wife. The man apparently thought about it for a good, long while and then made the following reply: “I told you thirty years ago that I loved you. If I change my mind, I’ll let you know.” Ulyssa, upon hearing the joke, had been uncertain whether she should laugh or cry.

“Well, to answer your question,” Tomas said, snapping off the flashlight and turning to look at her in the dark. “It depends on your perspective – what you hope for, and how much you are willing to delude yourself. If the universe were to explode right now, do you think art and love would endure? You’ll have to decide that for yourself. As for me, I think all things are relative and you’ll have to view that adage in terms of the relativity of things. But, I must admit, the words on the tombstone express a rather nice sentiment.”

She was appalled. How typical of him, she thought. In all the years they had known each other, she had never heard him speak eloquently to her on the subject of love. An Italian man would never have left his wife in the lurch like that – left to decide on her own! An Italian man would have been more valiant and, above all, more expressive of his feelings. He would have jumped at the chance to exalt the virtues of love – Ulyssa imagined something along the lines of Dante praising the heavenly Beatrice. She still harboured fond memories of reading the unforgettable cantos in which the poet had celebrated his enduring love.

But Tomas! – Tomas could come up with nothing better than a pronouncement about the relativity of things. He could be so exasperating. Trying to pin him down on the subject of love was like shadow-boxing. She watched as he nervously reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

“I wouldn’t smoke in the cemetery, if I were you,” she told him. “You only have to look at the dry pine needles on the ground to know that one spark would set the entire cemetery on fire. Besides, it hardly shows proper respect for the dead.”

He sounded disappointed. “Oh? We have something against having a little corpse barbeque tonight, do we?” Smirking, he put the cigarette pack back into his shirt pocket. “That’s too bad.”

She smiled in spite of herself. “I wish I was capable of as much irreverence as you,” she said. “You’re really very lucky.”

“What’s there to be so serious about? We came here to praise Segantini, not to bury him.”

“That’s just what I mean,” she told him, wresting the flashlight from his hand. She directed the beam at the tomb’s inscription once more. She felt that more should have come of their visit to Segantini’s grave. She *wanted* there to be more. But, as before, with her own father’s grave, she was being let down – in less than subtle ways.

Beneath the swiss stone pine and very much part of the burial site, nestled among its ominous-looking roots that grasped the sparse soil like a griffin's toes, she spotted a short, white candle set inside a protective, red glass cylinder. It reminded her of the seven-day candles usually lit before the images of saints, to honour them.

"Can I borrow your lighter?" she asked Tomas.

"Not so *you* can light the barbeque, I hope?"

"No, I want to light that candle."

She tried in vain to light the candle stump deep inside the cylinder, and cried out when her thumb nail got singed by the flame. It was infuriating.

Tomas took the lighter from her. "See, there's nothing to it," he said as he lit the candle.

"You're so handy. No wonder I keep you around," she said. She flicked off the flashlight and stood watching the eerie glow cast on the surrounding dry mosses and pine needles – which, in effect, were the grave's only embellishment. Where were the bouquets of flowers? Where were the adornments? Why did everything look so spare? So bereft of attention? So unloved?

The lack of loving attention made her think of her father and that, in turn, reminded her of his grave. She felt a sudden urge to cry. Hadn't she been grieving his loss for years already? It was Tomas who had originally suggested that they go to Switzerland and visit the site of her father's grave, hoping, perhaps, to shed some light on the source of her grief, or to soften her sense of loss. She sniffed.

"So?" Tomas said.

"So — what?" she answered.

It was a game they often played, the So Game.

"So, is this a suitable substitute for the grave your father was so rudely turfed out of?"

Sometimes, Tomas's method of cutting through circumstances to get at underlying motivations resulted in her cringing right down to the marrow of her bones.

"I didn't come here because of that," she told him. "I came here because I have to research Segantini's life."

"Which Segantini – the Greater or the Lesser one?"

"Why refer to them that way?" she asked.

"Well, there's obviously a ranking system here in Switzerland. The anonymous, unacknowledged lesser dead are exhumed from their resting places after thirty years, ostensibly to make room for the newly dead. The historic, famous dead, on the other hand, are allowed to occupy their sites until the end of time. Now, how is that for art and love vanquishing time, eh? Quite the social commentary, if you ask me."

"You always manage to make things seem so starkly defined. So black and white."

Tomas was examining her out of the corner of his eye. His features looked waxy in the dim light of the memorial candle.

“Well, aren’t most things black and white – to varying degrees, depending on the circumstances?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Well, if I were the one writing the Segantini Saga, I would make certain the property rights of the dead was a major theme.”

“You’re not the one who’s writing it.”

“True, true enough.”

However, she had to admit that there was a smidgen of truth in what Tomas was saying. For several weeks prior to leaving for Europe, Ulyssa had found herself conjuring up possible scenarios for a visit to her father’s grave. At night, her dream mind would seek out the place where she knew her father to be buried, and in the morning, she would wake up sniffing, with the lingering scent of wild meadow daisies she had been picking in her dream still clinging to her nostrils. These nocturnal dream forays to Ronco became more frequent the closer they got to the day of departure. Sometimes, she would wake up late, with bright sunlight piercing the slats of her bedroom blinds, and in her fingertips would be a lingering but vivid memory of what it had felt like to brush over the bristly texture of the bright orange or yellow or brown lichen she had touched in her dream — lichen she had seen growing on a tombstone bearing her father’s name. And always, in her dream, she would be trying to decipher the sequence of Roman numerals she saw inscribed there, which she vaguely knew referred to her father’s dates of birth and death.

She narrowed her eyes. Would she ever be able to tell him that his prolonged absence had played havoc with her life? It seemed no longer possible now, since there was no grave left for her to deposit any flowers on.

“You’re steeped in thought,” Tomas observed.

“I’m thinking about what you just said – about the way the anonymous and the famous dead get treated. It seems rather unfair.”

It was only a short week ago since they had gone to seek out Peregina, who had come to Switzerland as a young woman, crossing the Italian Alps to be wedded to Ulyssa’s father. Peregina showed them around the house first, and then took them upstairs, to the bedroom she had once shared with Ulyssa’s father. She pointed to a picture above the bedside table, on her side of the large featherbed. It depicted a bride and a groom, eternally young, eternally smiling.

“Your father, he was a very beautiful man, a lovely man. My widow’s heart yearns for him to this day,” she told Ulyssa. “Why God gave him cancer and left me with four children to bring up, I’ll never know. Never, never, never!” She looked up at the ceiling, as if the answer to her question could be found there.

Ulyssa had stepped closer to examine the photograph on the wall. She noted her father's dark, inquisitive eyes set beneath a pair of bushy eyebrows and his mop of dark, curly hair that seemed even darker when compared to the white satin bowtie below his adam's apple. Beside him stood Peregina, the entire length of her magnificent, bridal veil gathered up in the crook of her right elbow.

"The Church of Mary Immaculate," Peregina said. "We got married there." Her voice sounded sweet, like that of a young girl. "Why I had to lose him, I'll never know. But sometimes it is not for us to know such things. No?"

Ulyssa and Tomas nodded, at a loss of what to say.

"Come, I'll show you where your father was buried," Peregina had said.

On the way to the graveyard, located on the outskirts of the village, the ominous-looking clouds overhead began to let down a persistent, heavy drizzle.

"Saints preserve us!" Peregina had muttered, and grabbed two umbrellas that she saw leaning against the doorway of a house they were passing. "They belong to my friends," she explained, and handed Tomas one of the umbrellas to share with Ulyssa.

Peregina had walked in front of them with a determined gait, and they had walked behind, observing a respectful distance. The walk to the graveyard was shorter than they had expected. Peregina's shoes sent up spray around the soles as she passed a small allotment of ground for the dead to be buried in, next to a small stone chapel. Then, she stopped abruptly, halfway across a piece of soggy lawn and spun around. Her umbrella bumped into theirs.

They took a few steps back, as if to give her some space. She looked as though she was about to make an important announcement.

Ulyssa had instinctively taken Tomas's arm – in order to better brace herself.

"Well, this was it, right here," Peregina said, planting her feet apart as widely as they would go.

Ulyssa looked at her, uncomprehending.

"This is the place where he was buried, right in the ground, under here, between my legs," Peregina said, and pointed down at the undisturbed lawn.

Ulyssa finally understood. What Peregina was showing her, in fact, were the two ends of a grave – the head end and the foot end – and what was more, it was the grave where Ulyssa's father was buried. She found herself thinking what a short grave it was.

"His grave, it was right here, in this spot, for the last thirty years. Too bad you didn't come, last year. You could have appreciated his grave for yourself – with the tombstone, flowers, and everything."

Ulyssa was shocked. "And so, he is no longer down there?"



“Oh! No, no, of course not. When it came time to dig up the remains of Signore Segantini, your father, the priest from the All Saints church asked me if I wanted to lay claim to his tombstone, but I told them, don’t be ridiculous. No one would know what to do with such a crumbling piece of stone, no?”

She looked at Tomas and Ulyssa as if she half expected them to come up with an answer.

“And so, what did you do?” Ulyssa ventured to ask.

“I told the priest, I’ll be glad to take a few buckets of that soil from my husband’s grave to my house.”

Ulyssa looked at the ground beneath Peregina’s feet.

“You see, Signore Segantini, your father, was a very beautiful man who appreciated beautiful things — flowers, women, fine delicacies — and I thought it only natural that some of the soil from his grave should be mingled in with the flowers in front of our house.”

Ulyssa looked at Tomas, and then at the lawn beneath Peregina’s feet. Her father was no more, she thought.

“So, I came here with my grandson,” Peregina told them, “to load several buckets full of your father’s soil onto our little, green wagon, and then we brought it back to the house.”

Peregina must have observed the stricken look on Ulyssa’s face.

“Your father’s soil grows the most magnificent flowers, Ulyssa. The best in the whole village. Each year, when the sunflowers get big and tall, and turn their lovely faces to the sun, I am reminded of Signore Segantini. That’s when I see him most vividly.”

## 1

“Did you have a nice, little snooze, Granny Girl?” Tomas asked.

Ulyssa, who was slumped in the window seat next to his on the postal bus, had no idea where she was.

“You fell asleep shortly after Bivio,” he told her while fanning himself with a brochure picked up in Maloja. “Savognin should be next, if I’m not mistaken.”

Ulyssa’s left cheek felt hot from leaning against the window pane and her throat was parched. Had she been snoring with her mouth wide open again? She closed her eyes against the intermittent slivers of bright sunlight and watched them turn into a frantic dance of green and red arrows behind her eyelids. What a strange country, she thought. How come there was no air-conditioning on postal buses? Why had they bothered putting in that extra, narrow pane at the top of the window, when it couldn’t even be opened properly to get a breeze going? Her body longed for the cool comfort she had experienced while cross-

ing the prairies at the height of summer on a Greyhound bus in Canada, not too long ago.

“Water,” she said. The word rose from her throat, a mere squawk. Tomas must have heard her, though; she promptly felt the weight of a full bottle of water being deposited in her lap. She closed her fingers around it, unscrewed the cap and took a couple of sips. The water tasted flat and tepid.

“It isn’t anything like the cool, crystal-clear water that came out of the fountain,” she said. Her words could hardly be her own, she thought. They sounded so hollow.

“The water that came out of – what fountain?” Tomas asked. He sounded patient, but just the same, she disliked his prodding question. He would probably never understand, not even if she were to explain it to him. But she could give it a try.

“You know what fountain I’m speaking of,” she said and took a sip from the water bottle. “I’m referring to the fountain with the three spouts.” She had yet to turn her head and look at him. “I had my camera focussed on the girl – the one in the blue peasant dress, who stood next to it, cupping her hand as if she was about to have a slurp of that cool, crystal-clear water – but it was strange. Each time I wanted to click the shutter, the light changed. It was so frustrating.”

“The light changed? What light?”

She realized, then, that she had been dreaming. Her dream had been convincing in every detail – so convincing, in fact, that when she had looked through the viewfinder, she could not only see the girl’s face, she could see her blinking in the sunlight.

“That’s peculiar.” She sighed. “The girl by the fountain was so alive. I could have sworn I heard her breathing.”

“Really?” Tomas often feigned amazement, sometimes to please her, but more often to lead her on, as if prompting a young child who had been telling tales to tell more of them.

She gave in to the temptation. “Everything was so vivid... I could hear the water trickling from the spout into the girl’s hand.” She searched her memory for descriptive superlatives. “Everything was extremely real – so real, I found it almost painful.”

“Exaggerated,” Tomas volunteered, “or hyper-realistic. That may be an even better way of describing it.”

“Evocative,” Ulyssa said with finality in her voice. She was growing tired of words. Their relentless use only served to confound her and to carry her away from the dream, the girl, and further still, away from the fountain.

“Let me get this straight,” Tomas said, scratching a spot above his left ear. “You had a dream, and in this dream you saw the girl by the fountain – who, by coincidence, happens to be the same girl we saw

yesterday, in the painting, at the Segantini Museum in St. Moritz. Have I got it now?"

She shrugged. The logic of his words had an effect similar to that of waves on a beach: they yanked her away from the dream, erasing whatever fragile impressions had been left behind in her memory, erasing them more quickly than footprints left behind in the sand. She felt suddenly bereft, grasping at straws.

"Let me ask you a question," Tomas said. She heard his insistent voice riding above the rumble of the bus motor and moving closer to her ear. "Which experience did you find more vivid – the dream you just woke from, or coming face to face with Segantini's painting for the first time, yesterday?"

She finally turned her head and looked at him

"I loved seeing that painting," she said. "If only I could go back there again. It felt so much like home to me."

"Don't let me be the one to keep you from going back. Feel free. Please."

As soon as she closed her eyes, she was transported back to the Segantini Museum, where she sat alone in the silent room on a bench once more and studied the painting of the girl at the fountain – finding herself absorbed by it, really. She was fascinated by the painter's technique, by how the brushstrokes had been applied – they were bold and broad and above all, visible – to suggest the loose cotton weave of the girl's blouse. A half-formed question hummed inside in her mind: How could a blouse such as this one exist simultaneously in the realm of paint and of fabric? And what gave her the impression that it belonged to neither category completely? She had looked around the room for Tomas; she wanted to draw his attention to the play of light on the blouse, to the mysterious brightness she saw hovering there, among the folds of the sleeve. But Tomas was upstairs, in the cupola, where he had gone to view Giovanni Segantini's monumental *Alpine Triptych*.

"Masterful," she whispered, when he finally joined her on the bench. The silence in the room was tangible.

"You seem mesmerized," he said, keeping his voice subdued.

"I am, indeed. I've been looking at the light on the girl's sleeve. It has such a rich, creamy texture, it looks almost buttery."

"I think the blue of her dress has a lot to do with creating that impression," he said. "Did you notice how Segantini's paintbrush has carried that same blue pigment up into the girl's hair?"

"Oh, it's so lovely. Isn't it sublime?"

"Yeah, just sublime," he echoed her.

"You're not mocking me, are you?"

"No, no. I love the way you see things. It's so refreshing."

She turned to view the painting again. "I could sit here and look at it forever."

“Forever’s a long time.”

“Forever is what I feel when I look at it.” She basked in the painterly sunlight and watched the silver stream of water as it cascaded into the girl’s cupped hand and then escaped in tiny rivulets through the spaces between her fingers. Pure illusion, Ulyssa thought. And yet, it felt as if refreshing droplets of spray from the fountain were cooling her face.

She got up from the bench after what seemed an eternity and went to inspect the small card affixed to the wall, next to the painting. “The date of that painting is eighteen-eighty-eight,” she told Tomas. “Segantini lived in Savognin, then.” She went to sit down beside him again. “Just imagine it. That same fountain may still be there, even as we speak.” She leaned her head against his shoulder. “Savognin,” she said languorously. “I can hardly wait to get there...”

“Next stop, Tinizong.” The suddenness of the bus driver’s announcement pulled Ulyssa away from her reverie. The postal bus drew to an abrupt halt and the rear door opened to let someone off. Ulyssa felt a surge of heat brush against her face, while her ear was momentarily met by the soft throb of chirping crickets. Then, the door closed and the bus moved on.

Tomas looked out the window. “Did you see a station anywhere?” he asked. “I didn’t.”

Ulyssa looked out the window. All she could see were meadows bordering both sides of the road, meadows as far as the eye could see, luscious green meadows dotted with daisies wafting in the breeze. Was anyone really living here? It was hard to imagine.

As the postal bus continued to snake along the road toward the northern part of the *Oberhalbstein* valley, Ulyssa craned her head to look over the seats just in front of her. She wanted to be the first one to spot the castle of Riom, to point it out to Tomas. Hadn’t she, after all, written a story in which the castle had figured prominently?

“It should be coming into view any minute, now,” she told him, “around the next bend of the road, and if not, then the one after that. It will be up on the hillside, off to the right somewhere, if I’m not mistaken.”

In *Blue Skies over Savognin*, she had described the castle as looming large on a prominent hill — a well-wrought image that had since become so firmly ensconced in her own mind, she missed seeing its counterpart altogether, when it finally came into view on the opposite side of the valley. In fact, it was Tomas who saw it first.

“That must be it, over there,” he said, pointing out the window. He was leaning so close to her that she could feel the stubble on his chin brush against her cheek.

“Wait a minute,” she protested. “How can that be? I clearly remember the castle being located off to the right.”

“Maybe you came at it from the opposite direction, last time,” he said. “Either that, or your memory is left-handed.” He nudged her. “I bet you’ve never thought of that, eh?”

“No, that can’t be right.” Ulyssa felt more confused than ever. She was grumpy, all of a sudden. “It matters to me that I get my directions right, especially when it comes to writing.”

“I thought you said it was a castle,” Tomas observed. “It looks more like a fortress to me.”

Ulyssa had to admit that from their vantage point on the bus, the fortress up on the hill looked more like a toy castle, and was a poor match indeed for the magnificent ruin of the *Rhaetia Ampla* described in her story.

She tried in vain to hide her sense of disappointment. “That hill seems so puny. It isn’t the way I remember it at all,” she lamented. “And look at the village! If, indeed, it’s the village of Riom, it’s much too close, built practically right on top of the castle, and not a fair distance away, which is how it’s etched in my memory.”

“In your story, as I recall, you described yourself dragging that stick of yours a pretty long way along the road, away from the village. Was there an end in sight? I only remember that, as a reader, I waited and waited for you to reach the castle.”

“Oh, really? What an error.” She felt herself blushing. The mistake was embarrassing. How many other details had she gotten wrong? How many had been misrepresented? How many had been fabricated?

She puffed up her cheeks and forced her breath out through pursed lips.

Tomas leaned over, as if to team up with her in a confidential manner. “You know what they say, don’t you,” he said and nibbled playfully at her ear. “Distances have a way of shrinking as the memory grows longer.”

She shook her head, uncomprehending. Something must have been lost in translation, she thought, or else, the heat was getting to her. But then, she turned to him and laughed.

“That sounds like one of those crazy Finnish sayings of yours – you know, the ones that have been passed down to you from your ancestors.”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t remember where I picked it up – it could have been from my granny. That’s memory for you, though. At best, it’s incomplete, in-absolute. How’s that for a creative approximation?”

Ulyssa tried in vain to wrap her mind around what Tomas had just said. She found the heat insufferable. Her brain was probably on the verge of a meltdown; her memory seemed insubstantial, a mere nuance shimmering in mid-air, about to float out the window....

She heard the driver announce the next stop.

“Did he say *Cresta*?” she asked. Her voice sounded strained, even to her own ears, in an effort to override the drone of the bus motor. “Wasn’t the next stop supposed to be Savognin?”

“I think you’re right,” he said, after quickly checking the brochure on his lap. He jumped up from his seat as though hit by a bolt of electricity, and dragged his laptop computer down from the overhead luggage rack. “I completely forgot to tell you,” he added and hastily pulled his pack from beneath the seat. “Cresta is the stop they suggested getting off at, in the brochure. If we get off in downtown Savognin, we’ll have to walk back a long ways to get to the Bed and Breakfast.”

She retrieved her pack from the luggage rack and checked the space below their seats.

“Tomas! You almost forgot the walking stick you carved for Franz,” she said, and fished it out from where it had slid down behind her seat.

VANNEAU NEESHAM is a Vancouver writer. She has worked as journalist, teacher, and editor in Europe, Africa, and North America. She is currently working on a biography of Kai Beckamegook, Ojibway artist and healer.

## Vanneau Neesham / **Four Poems**

### **A Non-Person at John Vorster Square**

In a small dark room on the ninth floor  
 Where the brave and the fearful scream in the night  
 Where old stains form a map of pain  
 Where secrets are found and named  
 And the rivers are named by the drowning lovers and brothers  
 Floating in water so dark and dreamlike  
 Its direction cannot be known.

In that same room, through iron bars  
 With space between no wider than a wrist  
 You leapt to freedom in your quest for silence.  
 In that final arc, solemn faces  
 Recorded your passage with lidless eyes  
 That could not see.  
 Sacred vows were spoken when broken tongues  
 Whispered your name.

The ghost silhouette of a non-person  
 Appeared in the morning paper.  
 With their coffee and rusks,  
 All could marvel at your deception  
 To move through an iron grill,  
 Already the shadow substance you were to become.  
 Your feat of transubstantiation was clearly subversive.  
 Only the weeping wife who claimed your broken body  
 Could say otherwise.  
 Her shadowed moon face carefully held  
 While her violent eyes kept their secrets  
 Waiting for history at ground zero.

## Ernesto

In memory of Ernest (Ernesto) Wilson

Ernesto, who walked the Red Road,  
Spun words as elaborate as wishes  
Wrote poems on horses and fish  
Carved rattles and drumsticks  
While children called out his name.

Ernesto, you cut off your hair  
On the day of the birth of your son  
To adorn the face of the mask  
To be worn at the time of his naming  
As he took his place by your side.

Ernesto, you made us your drums  
From the skins of the elk and the deer  
To sing with the songs from your memories  
To play with our young men and women  
With all of your patience and love.

Ernesto, you told us your struggles  
Walking on stones with heart broken  
Where pain is bottled and sold  
And oblivion cheap as the death  
That breathes like a dog on a chain.

Ernesto, you dreamed of the Thunderbird  
That rose from the sea like a song  
Your spirit singing the dream  
That brought you home from the street  
To our hearts where your future still lies.

Ernesto, you chose your own death  
Went into the smallest dark room  
With the belt that you beaded yourself  
With your name and the face of a wolf  
Encircling your neck with a prayer.

Ernesto, you spoke to your ancestors  
Stretched beyond death to the light  
Your dreams and your wounds left behind



For sad hands to dig in the dirt  
 To return them to ashes and dust.

Ernesto, we remember you well.

## Northern Journey

for David

The Grandfathers sang down the aurora borealis  
 As cold night air dropped over the indifferent deep wash of the sky.  
 Ice queens danced, luminescent green  
 Wide hems moving crystalline harmonies  
 As planets swayed in their orbits.

Your name was called by the Grandfathers  
 Down the undulating curves of snow.  
 Oceanic tides of northern spheres  
 Dreamed your vision of grace.  
 The sun, pale as a moon of ice,  
 Spun along the horizon heralding the curve of Earth.

Did you feel the breath of Sedna as she waited for the night?  
 Calling your name as you tumbled through the dying sky.  
 Sedna whispers through your consecrated fingers,  
 "Touch your beloved's face and know it always  
 In memory and imagination  
 For another makes her claim."

Alone on a ribbon of wild country  
 Where chrome and technology fail,  
 As a tender plant dies beneath the snow,  
 Sedna took you for your dreaming face  
 As Shamans combed her tangled hair beneath the Arctic Sea  
 And Fulmars wheeled and sang their songs of loss  
 Above your fragile hands.

## We Would Make Love

We would make love like angels  
 Breathing trembling words lighted by incandescent insects  
 In spontaneous flashes in dark places  
 Where doubt and old dreams sleep.  
 We would lie, limbs loose, beneath my postcard of  
 Che Guevara and Our Lady of Sorrows  
 Marveling, our beautiful bodies entwining each other  
 Choreographing unbearable desire and strange histories.

We would make love like horses  
 Powerful, running through rain in dreams of wild places  
 Lost in floods, water rising.  
 Your body crested with muscle, sloping earthward,  
 Always falling away  
 Striking teeth, tangled hair, sheltering breath.

We would make love like refugees  
 Desperate for home  
 Speaking our mutual language of desire,  
 Whispering old mantras  
 Mapping lost countries on one another's skin  
 Singing our sad anthems in borrowed beds  
 The smell of dead memories.

We would make love like old friends parted a lifetime  
 Together again in astonishment,  
 Our passion for the known seeping into broken days,  
 Where all the years have taken us far from our longing  
 On the other side of time.

We would make love like the dead  
 Insubstantial as dust, colder than deep oceans  
 Sadder than lost planets  
 Listening for the silence of voices drifting in particles  
 Dispersing like ashes down endless streams  
 In a dark fall of time.  
 Only our eyes blooming as white camellias

Beneath water so dark and heavy  
No living thing marks our descent.  
Our implosion is silent.  
We vanish like hours, like dead stars.

We would make love.

LON SCHNEIDER lives in St. Louis, Missouri, where he has been writing short stories and poetry for about ten years now. His work has appeared in *Collages & Bricolages*, *Sivullinen*, *Firm Noncommittal* and *Sheila-Na-Gig*.

# The Chief Inspector

Lon Schneider

The machine is very complex so something or other is bound to break down or tear, but one mustn't allow this to cloud one's overall judgment.

Kafka, *In The Penal Colony*

## 1

THE CHIEF INSPECTOR gazed down at the body. He was standing in a small field on a plateau that overlooked a much larger field.

— No water this time, said the assistant.

The chief inspector didn't say anything. Gnats were swirling about the girl's face, and that more than anything served to confirm her death.

— You grew up around here, didn't you? asked the assistant.

This time the chief inspector had to reply.

— Not far from here, he said.

The assistant asked a lot of questions. He asked a lot of questions and he made observations because that was his job. He drew no official conclusions, however, because that was the job of the chief inspector.

— Think it's Davy Jones? asked the assistant.

The chief inspector didn't hear the question. He was looking at the still surface of a pond, broken only by the intermittent splashing of toads. He recalled the description of the police psychiatrist who provided the race, gender and approximate age of the killer. Aside from the mania, he had a borderline personality which allowed him to function reasonably well in society. The chief inspector thought the description was probably accurate, though not necessarily. And virtually anyone could have made the same sketch. He was looking once again at the

pond. This time the body of a teenage girl was floating beneath the surface.

The police photographers arrived and took pictures of the body. Then the journalists arrived and were allowed to photograph the investigators and crime scene once the body was removed. The photo that appeared in the paper was of the chief inspector. He was standing in a small field on a plateau that overlooked a much larger field.

## 2

The chief inspector could not find the killer in the telephone directory. He had realized the identity of Davy Jones as he stood in the field near the grounds of the high school. The girl lying in the tall grass was a signature killing. Only the chief inspector could have known that. It was, in effect, a confession. He was asking to be caught.

The mother of the killer was listed in the directory. She was living at the same address. He would not tell her that her son was Davy Jones. She would never learn that. No one would. Cases such as this sometimes went unsolved. The killings suddenly stopped. There were no more headlines. The chief inspector hoped he was not living at home. That would make things more difficult. He had lost track of him after high school, as he had with most of his friends. It was a big city; he could be living anywhere.

## 3

At the south entrance to the horseshoe-shaped subdivision was a low brick wall that had not existed when the chief inspector was growing up. He drove slowly along the lane that bisected the two legs of the horseshoe and stopped before his childhood home. Then he pulled into the driveway next door. Once he had known nearly every family in the neighborhood. Now there were new occupants in every house, except for the one he was about to enter. The woman opened the door and recognized him immediately in spite of the intervening years.

— Won't you come in, she said.

She led him through the hallway to the family room. He took a seat in the chair where her husband had been confined throughout his illness. As a small boy, he was served many lunches at the large, hexagonal table by the window. A high shelf, only a few feet from the ceiling on the opposite wall, displayed the model airplanes her son had made. There were battle ships and vintage automobiles as well, all constructed with neat precision.

— Everything must seem so small now, she said.

The comment disturbed the chief inspector. If she could so easily read his thoughts, it would be futile to lie to her. Even so, there was no choice. He told her he was contacting friends for a summer softball team. It was a plausible pretext. He had been athletic in his youth and a leader of the kids in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, her son had never been athletic. That was one of the things that isolated him from the others. There was no such thing as a perfect lie. He knew that from interviewing hundreds of suspects over the years. The purpose of this one was to place her son in a group, rather than single him out.

— He doesn't have a phone, she said.

She walked over to a small table in the vestibule by the washer and dryer and jotted an address on a notepad. The chief inspector recalled the room where her son had been paddled when he had misbehaved. The door was closed. There was a quick succession of swats followed by the child's wailing. The woman returned and handed him a slip of paper which he tucked in his coat pocket with hardly a glance. It was a habit he had acquired over the years whenever receiving written communication, a means of preventing the betrayal of an unpredictable response.

She offered him a cold drink. He sensed the perspiration on his brow and upper lip. His mission had been a failure, his motive obvious, his lie transparent. The woman saw only the good in people, but the discovery of the fourth victim of Davy Jones less than a mile from her house, followed by the sudden arrival of the chief inspector, could not be sheer coincidence. The chief inspector had blundered. It was not the first time. He knew that any investigation comprised a series of errors that ended only with a coerced confession, a tip from a confidant or a lucky break. Though he was thirsty, he declined the drink. He had the information he needed. Staying longer would only make matters worse.

— Drive carefully, she called from the screen door as he walked down the steps to his car.

#### 4

Instead of leaving the subdivision, the chief inspector turned onto the steep hill he had coasted his bicycle down as a child. He parked his car in the cul-de-sac that branched off near the bend of the horseshoe. He walked to the narrow, paved path bordered on each side by tall poplars that blocked the view of the surrounding houses and yards. He followed the path down to the concrete bridge spanning the creek. This was not the route he had taken earlier when he had made the trip with his assistant. Then they had taken a parallel boulevard, parked in the lot of the high school and walked down a service road to the large field.

The chief inspector walked over the bridge and then cut across the field until he came to the short, steep hill leading to the plateau where the body was discovered. He paused to catch his breath and then trudged up the hill. The first time he had ever been to the pond, his neighbor had taken him there. They skipped stones off the surface of the water and tried to catch crawfish. In winter, when the pond froze, there was skating and ice hockey. A fire was built on the bank where the children roasted marshmallows.

It had happened on an autumn afternoon. A group of high school students gathered at the pond to roll joints after the football game. Camouflaged by a surrounding thicket, the pond was a safe place for illicit activities. It was a typical adolescent prank. He was small and frail and an easy mark for the upperclassmen. The chief inspector, who had a reputation as a tough kid, had done nothing to stop it. Among the other spectators, he watched with mild amusement as his neighbor waded into the pond to retrieve his pants. Some of the senior cheerleaders were present, girls who were then the same age as all the present-day victims. He had never forgotten the accusation of betrayal in the eyes of his friend as he emerged from the water. He had never before or after that day seen anything like it. The year the chief inspector graduated from high school, the pond was drained.

## 5

The chief inspector selected a revolver from his collection of untraceable weapons. He would be alone, of course. He might even be waiting. There would be no trophies or incriminating evidence to destroy. Killers motivated by revenge did not take trophies. The chief inspector, always calm and methodical, experienced a rare flash of anger, having postponed until now a response to the realization that the killings were a personal affront, a challenge to his authority. The final victim was left in his own backyard, an unmistakable message intended only for him.

The two-lane road narrowed to a one-lane road, which gave way to a gravel road in a remote area of the west county. Among sparse, ramshackle houses, obviously built ad hoc, one dwelling stood out by virtue of its solid construction. As he approached the house, the chief inspector could hear the television. The front door was open and the screen door unlatched. He was not surprised. When he was young, most houses in the subdivision remained unlocked during the day.

He had gained weight. He was not the skinny kid the chief inspector remembered. There would be no confrontation or reckoning. He was asleep on the couch. The chief inspector held the gun to his right temple and fired. He wiped away his prints with a handkerchief and clasped the right hand around the revolver. Then he let the revolver fall to the floor.

He turned the television off. Two days later, he returned to the house. In the official report, the chief inspector was paying a visit to an old friend when he happened upon a suicide.

## 6

One week after the funeral, the chief inspector was surprised when a teenage girl was found one morning in a public swimming pool. It was the first time Davy Jones had chosen an artificial body of water. On the evening newscast, the local anchorman announced that Casey Jones had claimed another victim. It was an easy mistake, substituting a mythical figure of folklore for a simple figure of speech.



LINDA BOSSON was born in England, grew up in Australia, lived in Canada for a few years, and finally settled in the United States. She has worked as an artist, a factory worker, a word-puzzle creator, and a nurse's aide. She is now an editor at *The New York Times*.

## Linda Bosson / **Four Poems**

### **then**

someone who used to be dead  
 was telling me the other day  
 he'd found the secret formula  
 something to do I believe  
 with relativity – in other words  
 the more relatives you think you have  
 the more depressed you are on holidays

the answer is, stand on your head  
 let the money clink out of your pockets  
 and roll into corners  
 they don't call it change for nothing  
 see it turn to a molten mass  
 times the speed of light squared  
 as it makes metallic conversation  
 and brushes scratchily against you  
 like the serrated fingernails  
 of someone who used to be dead.

## Sunflowers

I think of him now,  
 the man with the haunted eyes,  
 the beard as orange as sunflowers.  
 He stares into maelstroms of midnight  
 at stars that go whirling  
 and steeples that shiver in moon-ash.

I think of him now,  
 the man with the hollow face,  
 the bandage across one ear.  
 He dreams in delirium of sunflowers  
 that dance in the dazzle-gold light  
 till he paints them as bright as the sun.

I am glad he does not know  
 that the loud woman in the gift shop  
 here at the museum is buying  
 a “Sunflowers” sweatshirt, size Extra Large.

## Nous Irons

Nous irons.  
 We shall go.  
 Or we shall iron.  
 Or we shall go with our irons,  
 smoothing out creases wherever we turn.  
 Or we shall burn  
 the brown imprints of irons on walls,  
 and be dragged away,  
 ironically,  
 with our legs in irons.

## Sifting

I am stuffing my pockets with trash  
 with litter and dregs and detritus  
 and strands and rinds and bits of lint.  
 I never know when they may come in useful  
 for food or maybe insulation  
 from winds that swoop at what was once a city.

Sometimes my pockets are so full  
 I topple into rubble  
 but no matter,  
 I still can crawl.  
 It's easier then to grab hold  
 of the plastic, nylon, krylon,  
 and scrape up wads of gum  
 for sticking scraps together.

There's not much to hear anymore:  
 the swoosh of wind  
 and once a scuffling scrabbling  
 deep inside the piles.  
 Could there be another creature  
 somewhere beneath the Styrofoam  
 and polythene and polyurethane  
 and polyester polyvinyl  
 polly want a cracker?

Sometimes I sift the debris  
 and see a shred of paper  
 with marks that I no longer understand.

Born in High Prairie, Alberta, KEITH FIELD moved to the Comox Valley at an early age. Summers were spent working in his father's sawmill for university tuition. He attained a Bachelor Degree through U.B.C. and Athabasca University. Since then, he has earned a living as an electronic technician, music teacher and musician-singer.

## Do Dogs Think?

Keith Field

WELL, the whole thing began simply enough. These kinds of things usually do. It was one of those hot, muggy afternoons of mid June. We were sitting on the back porch drinking beer and killing mosquitoes; my wife Joan and myself. I was watching the chickens scratching amongst the quack grass in the backyard. We have some Barred Rocks and Leg-horns. Elmo, our combination Lab-Setter-Retriever, was lying on his burlap sack at the top of the steps, sleeping. His toes were twitching and his mouth was flapping and he was making some grunting noises like he was trying to run and bark. Back when I went to school, they taught us that animals couldn't hash things out. But Joan was telling me that when people wiggled like that in their sleep they were rehashing their day. I got to thinking about that. I think about crazy things like that when I've been sitting a while. At least, my wife thinks they're crazy. Like, what good does it do, she'll say. No good, I guess. I just do it. Now take those chickens. They can see two different scenes at once, a different one out of each eye. Now take us. We can only see straight ahead and concentrate on one thing at a time. Just try it. You'll see. Now think about this. Can a chicken concentrate on the two different scenes at the same time or does it have to switch its attention back and forth, eh? Anyway, my wife, Joan, she was lying back in one of those plastic and aluminum loungers that you can buy real cheap at Zeller's or Canadian Tire. I mean, she looked real nice lying there, snoring. She's a nice-looking woman; no kidding; shapely; long, red hair. She acts nice, too. You'd like her. She jumped when the phone rang. We have one of those

cellulars. I didn't want to get one of those damn things because you can hear them ringing, but you can't find them. But the wife, Joan, she wanted one and so that's what we got. It was sitting right between us on the old card table. When she jumped forward, she made a grab for it. Normally, she would have got it, but I guess she hadn't got woke up properly yet, because she knocked all the empty Kokanee cans off the table. One fell and rolled straight for Elmo's nose. It gave him a start. The rest clattered down the steps and scattered the chickens. I picked up the phone.

"Who?" I asked. It was a guy's voice I'd never heard before, so I said all this to him, "No. A Joan Hawkins does. Who is this, anyway? What do you want? If you're selling we're not buying...yes, she used to be a Martin, but not now. She's a Hawkins, my wife...yes, that's right, she is...yes, I know I am...look, that's all fine and dandy, but who the hell are you and how did you get this number?"

Joan pulled on the sleeve of my T-shirt and asked, "Is it for me? Is it for me?"

I leaned away a little so she couldn't quite reach the phone and I continued to talk to this guy. "You have ways? Look, fella, don't play games with me. Who are you? ...Her 'X'... I didn't know she had an 'X' ...now isn't *that* the news of the day, eh?"

"Give me the phone if it's for me," Joan said.

So I told her it was for a Joan Martin. That she's Joan Hawkins. Then I said to the guy, "Look, fella, just forget about your 'Xs' and your 'Os' and move on."

Joan yanked the phone from me and gave me a look. "Hello, is that you, Erin?" She said this in a voice that didn't sound at all like her. "Yes, that's right...I got married two years ago...oh, he's just a little touchy. Sure, I'm happy. How about you?... is that right...yes, yes ...why, of course, drop right over...oh, no, no, no, of course not. He won't mind at all...yes, you turn left off the freeway on the Mosquito Creek access road. About ten kilos and you hang a right...that's the Old Willow Valley road. We're another ten or so kilos out. You'll see the mail box...F. Hawkins...just follow the lane to the old farmhouse, that's us...you too...see you in a while...bye now."

"Your 'X'?" I said. "He won't mind? Who won't mind? What won't he mind?" I said all this calmly enough, but then I raised my voice a little to make sure she could hear me. "What the hell is going on, Joan? You never told me you were married before."

She gave me kind of a funny look, got up, opened the screen door and walked into the kitchen. I followed her, scraped a chair out from the kitchen table and sat down. She went over to the fridge and opened it. Her voice was very quiet when she said, "I wasn't." Reaching into the fridge, she lifted out a plastic container of Schweppes tonic water. "We just lived together for six years."

*What's the damn difference?* I didn't actually ask this, but the question went through my mind.

Without looking at me, she walked over to the cupboard and took out a 1.75 liter bottle of Beefeater and a couple of glasses. "Like a gin?"

Then I knocked my voice up a notch and said, "Six years. Six bloody years you lived with this guy and you never told me about him. Six bloody years...yes, yes, sure, I'll have a gin. Maybe I'll have half a dozen gins."

Joan turned from the sideboard where she was pouring the gin, and said, "So what's the big deal...he's just an old friend...now...I don't know why you're so upset."

"I'm not upset," I said. I guess just because I was talking loud, she thought I was upset.

She turned back to mixing the drinks, but of course, kept on talking. "I'm sure you had girlfriends that I never heard about."

"Not any that I lived with for six years," I let her know. Funny, but I remember I was wearing the T-shirt that I bought down at the store on the crossroads. It had 'Where the Hell is Mosquito Creek' printed across the front. I remember 'cause I looked down at the beer stains on it, 'cause it was sticking to the sweat on my chest and I was pulling at it. "So how did he get your...our phone number, eh?" I asked her. "Tell me *that*...if he didn't know your married name...that's a puzzler, eh?" I teetered my chair on its back legs and gave her a look, 'cause I figured I had her there.

"How would I know?" That's all she said. "How would I know?" Then she walked over to the table and set the drinks down, one in front of me. It slopped on my T-shirt, but I didn't care. Like I said, my shirt had beer stains on it. Then she scraped a chair into place. Once she had sat down, she just looked straight across the table at me with one of those looks of hers, took a sip of her gin and said, "Ask him yourself when he gets here. He phoned from the convenience store. He'll be here within a half hour."

I waited a while to think of something to say. Finally I said, "A half hour, eh?" But I was really thinking, *Six years, eh?* Then I scuffed my feet on the old linoleum floor and tapped the edge of my glass on the oilcloth. I don't know. For some reason, I just couldn't relax. It was like I had so much to say, but couldn't think of any of it.

Joan was looking down at her gin when I said, "I hope he has no intention of staying, because if he does he's in for a surprise."

This made her look up pretty quick. "Oh, don't be silly, Floyd. What's past is past. Water under the bridge.

*More like dirt under the carpet,* I almost said.

"I don't know what you're so upset about. Look, would you do me one favor? All I ask of you as my loving husband is this, will you do me just one small favor?"

I looked out the window. There was a couple of jays squawking and pecking at each other in the apple tree. Neither flew away. They just kept at each other. I kept my eyes on the birds when I asked, "What?"

"Be polite and nice to him," Joan said. Can you believe that? She said, "Make him feel welcome...at home."

*But he isn't welcome...he's not at home.* Of course, I never said this. I just thought it. What I really said was, "I don't understand why you have to see this guy."

"That's all I ask...for the short time he's here." Joan laid her hand on mine while she said this. It *did* feel nice, all right.

Anyway, I said to her in a stern voice, "It better be."

She just gave my hand a little pat and said, "Please, dear...for me."

I mean, Joan has a way with her. So I thought for a while and then I said, "How would you feel if I dragged some old flame of mine in here? Someone you had never heard of before? Someone I had lived with for six years?"

Then, without batting an eye, she said, "I'd have no problem with that at all." Funny, but I think she actually believed it.

So I said to her, I said, "You split up with this guy, didn't you? So why do you want to see him? I don't ever want to see hide or seek of any of my 'Xs'."

"Nor tail," she said.

For a sec, I didn't know what she meant, but then I picked up on it and said, "Oh, yeah, hide nor tail." Then I went on. "The point I'm trying to make is that when you split up with someone you should never want to see them again, ever."

"But you loved them," she said. "...supposedly...at least at one time, you did. You can't forget that."

When she was saying all this, she got this look on her face. You know how a person will be saying something, then, as they are saying it, they will start to listen to what it is that they are *really saying* and wonder about it. Well, anyway, I said to her, "I can. No problem." Then I rapped my glass hard on the table. A little harder than I meant to, I guess. . Not that I didn't have a good enough reason to rap it as hard as I wanted to. After all, it *was* my wife who had been involved in this...uh, *situation*...that we were discussing...and it *was* my table I was rapping on...well, our table. Anyway, I said, "I hate their guts. I forget every decent thing that happened between us...if any decent thing ever did. I never want to see hide or...nor tail of them ever again, ever."

Then she runs this one by me. "The very fact that you feel so strongly against them now, shows you still have feelings for them. If you

didn't, you would feel completely indifferent as to whether they were around or not."

Last year, she took a psychology course at one of these adult learning classes. You know the kind. They have them at night in some school room and they talk about all these things that are supposed to be going on in a person's head that he doesn't know about, but make him do things that he doesn't want to do, or shouldn't, and they try to see who can come up with the best guess as to what's going on in this guy's head. Sort of like one of those guessing games people will play at a booze party, except in this case no one knows the answer. Anyway, sometimes when we have these discussions, some of this stuff will come out. So, when she said all this, I thought that it could have been some of it coming out, but I wasn't sure if that's what this was or not. I needed time to think, so I asked, "Could you run that by me again?"

So she tries to explain. "What I'm saying is that if you no longer have any feelings for them...no remnants whatsoever of that love you once felt, then you should feel indifferent toward them."

"But I do feel indifferent," I said. "I hate their guts."

So she tells me that that isn't indifference; that indifference is not feeling anything at all. Not even hate.

Now I was *sure* that this was coming from those classes, so I toyed with my drink for a while to think this one over, then I asked, "So how do you feel about this guy?"

At this point, she got this soupy look on her face and when she talked, she seemed to be looking across the field at the barn, except the wall was in the way. "When I think of Erin, I think of the good times only. Of course, there were trying times as well. There always is...but I don't regret them. I learned from them. It's just that I prefer to dwell on the positive aspects of our relationship...the good times."

She didn't quite sell me on this, so I said to her, "Well, if you learned from the bad times, you should have learned to stay away from him."

Then she looked at her glass as if she was talking to it instead of me. "He brought happiness into my life for a time. We owe our 'Xs' something for that, don't we?"

I took a while to think about this notion, too. Finally, I asked, "How long ago was it that you lived with this guy?"

She peered over her glass at me. It was pretty empty by then. Then, she said, "Oh, let me see now. After Erin, there was that car salesman...then, that newspaper reporter...of course, there was the school janitor...after that, the hippie and...well, let's just say some miscellaneous husbands...so, that would have been, Jeez...nine or ten years ago."

*Hippie...let's just say, Jeez is right.* Of course, I just thought this. What I said was, "I just think we should all forget about the past."



“Well, I think *both* of us owe Erin something for the past happiness he gave me.”

“Both of us!” I yelled. I don’t remember exactly what I said right after I yelled. I guess I was too mad. Just something to do with how did I get into the picture and that I didn’t owe him a damn thing and that I didn’t care who he made happy. I must have said something wrong here, because she said, “What? You don’t care if I was happy then?”

So I told her that I didn’t know her then. How can someone care about someone they don’t even know?

“But *now*...we’re talking about *now*...you want me to have been miserable when I was with Erin.”

Now this didn’t make any sense at all, so I said, “How can I care if a woman that I didn’t even know at the time was happy because of some things that some jerk did for her, and be grateful to this jerk for doing these things when I wouldn’t even know him if I saw him on the street, and when I don’t have the foggiest idea of what they were, anyway, and when they were over and done long before I ever met her and, of course, too late for me to do anything about them if they hadn’t made her happy? It’s impossible.”

She studied me with this frown for a sec, then she said, “No, it isn’t.”

So I told her that it already happened, so it was too late to feel anything about it. Then, she just sat there for a few secs, shaking her head at me with this puzzled look on her face, then she said, “You know, Floyd, you’re not making any sense at all.”

Of course, I was making plenty of sense, but I decided to back off a bit, so as not to aggravate the situation any more than I had, so I said, “The important thing to think about here is ‘right now’. That’s where it’s at, eh? Like, ‘right now’. And right now, I want you to be happy...and right now, I’m always doing things to make you happy, eh?”

“But you didn’t want me to be happy before you met me...hm, of course, you couldn’t have, because you didn’t even know me, then...Cripes, now look what you’ve gone and done. You’ve got me thinking your crazy way. Now, give me a minute to get this straight...now I’ve got it. You want me to be miserable so *you* could have been...no, that’s not right...You wanted me to be miserable so you could come along and make yourself happy by being the big hero. That’s it...isn’t it?”

You know how something will be so simple, but you just can’t seem to get someone else to understand what you’re getting at? Anyway, I thought it would be a good idea to go back over the last few things we’d said to sort of clear up a few odds and ends. There was something that wasn’t coming off quite right here. I looked through the screen door at Elmo. He got to his feet and sauntered over. First, he looked at Joan and then, at me. His tongue was lolling out of the side of his mouth and

dripping. He slid it in and turned and walked back to his sack. Finally, I said, "I don't get it. I mean, what more could a woman want than to have a husband who does all sorts of things to make her happy? Hundreds of women would give their right leg for a husband like that."

"Right arm," she said. "But you want to be the one who does it."

"Of course, I'm your husband. I have every right to want to make you happy."

"But you do it for the wrong reasons. You do it to make *yourself* feel good."

"Sure it makes me feel good. What's wrong with that?"

"It's selfish," she said. "Don't you see? You're doing it for yourself...to give yourself the pleasure of making me happy."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked her. "You *are* happy, aren't you?"

She didn't answer for a second, then she said, "Sure, I'm happy. But I want you to try to make me happy because you want me to be happy...not because you want to make yourself happy by making me happy."

This, too, could have been from that psychology course, but, again, I wasn't sure. I needed time to think, so I didn't say anything for a long time. When I figured I had the right angle worked out, I asked, "Don't you want *me* to be happy?"

"Of course, but not by making me happy."

Now I wasn't at all clear on how I was going to make her happy and be miserable myself, but I figured I better do something to get the conversation going in a different direction, so I suggested that I fix our drinks and that we go sit on the back porch again. So we did that. But there was something about the whole thing that didn't make sense to me, so I asked, "So if this guy made you so happy, then why did you split?"

"He threw his clothes on the floor and put his feet up on the table."

"Judas Priest!" I said. "What a dastardly thing to do." Then I laughed. I guess this was a mistake because *she* didn't. She just looked at me kind of funny and said, "Oh, there were other minor problems." At this point, she seemed calm enough.

So I told her that there were, in any relationship.

"Yes, I'm aware of that," she said. "...but you know how minor problems can escalate sometimes...into misunderstandings of greater consequence."

I knew about this, so I nodded.

"...like how one thing will lead to another, eh?"

I nodded.

"...then all it will take is one incident...one bloody incident and...and the whole..." It was right about here that Joan raised her voice a notch. "Do you know what the bugger did?"

I told her that I didn't.

So she got to her feet, still holding her glass. I figured she did this so she could better explain it to me. "This...this girl that I had gone to school with dropped into town, I mean, we weren't close friends in school. It was just that she was in my class. So she phones up and wants to visit. So what could I say? I said okay. But when she comes she says her husband kicked her out and she has no place to stay. I mean, I never even liked her in school. But Erin said, sure. Stay as long as you like." Joan's face was getting a little flushed at this point in our talk. "Do you know what happened then?" she asked, moving over to where I was sitting.

I told her that I didn't. So she leaned forward to tell me.

"Next day I went to work. Erin didn't have a regular job. He was an artist...wasn't painting, though. He was waiting for inspiration. So, I got off work a little earlier than usual. I worked as a barmaid and sometimes things were slow. Anyway, when I got home, there was no one around, so I was about to go into the bedroom and Erin walks out with this weird expression on his face. I thought, *Good. He's inspired*, but then I noticed that he was doing up his pants. So I asked him where the girl was. Just then she came walking out, buttoning her blouse."

Then Joan pointed her glass of gin at me and in a shrill, accusing voice, she said, "So I asked them what the hell was going on? He said they were just talking." Joan shook her glass in my face and said, "Can you believe that? He expected me to believe that? Can you believe that?"

I shook my head. She moved her face closer. I could see the pupils of her eyes plainly now. You know how a person's pupils will dart about when they are looking for something to throw or someone to hit?

Then Joan yelled, "Do you *really* want to know what he did next?"

I didn't, but I yelled, "What?"

"He grabbed her." Joan grabbed my shirt. "And *kissed* her. Can you believe that?"

"Yes!...No!...Yes!" I yelled.

"...right in front of me. I mean, like *really kissed* her, eh? Eh?"

"Eh!" I yelled as I tried to free my T-shirt from her grip. Then she let go and swung around facing the yard and yelled to someone out there that I couldn't see. "So I told him, 'I'm history, you bastard, and I never want to see your face again.' Then I picked up a can of beer that was sitting on the table and threw it at him."

Joan used her glass of gin instead of a can of beer to demonstrate this point, but it didn't really matter. The way she fired that glass across the yard, I had no problem getting the picture. It hit the concrete side of the well and flew in a million pieces. You should have seen the chickens scatter. What a fuss. Feathers flying everywhere. Elmo raised his chin from his paw and watched Joan slowly turn and sit down. He had a

look on his face like a person will get when they watch an ant carrying something too big for itself. Then he laid his chin back down on his paw. After that, I didn't say anything. Joan didn't say anything, either. You know how it is sometimes, when you've been talking about something for a long time: like you feel you've said everything you can say about something and there's nothing more to say? Anyway, we sat there a long time. All you could hear was the odd whine of a mosquito and slap of a hand. After a while, there was the sound of a car pulling off the main road and crunching along the gravel of our lane. I guess Joan could hear it, too. It was loud enough. Elmo didn't bark. Then, the crunching stopped at the front of the house. You could just make out a car door click shut. Then, there was the faint sound of what could have been sandals scampering up the front steps. Then, there was someone knocking. We sat there for the longest time just listening to this knocking. It got louder before it stopped. Then, there was the sound of what could have been sandals slapping their way down the steps. A car door gave a loud 'thwack' just before a motor revved and there was the sound of what could have been gravel flying about. A few minutes later, there was the sound of a car taking off in the direction of the main road, then quickly getting fainter and fainter and fainter until you couldn't hear it anymore. I looked at Elmo. He lifted his head and looked at me, panting. You know how it looks like a dog is laughing when it's panting? After a while, I got to wondering: *Do dogs think?*

ANDREW PARKIN has published three collections of poetry, all of which sold out their first print run: *Dancers in a Web* (Turnstone Press), *Yokohama Days*, *Kyoto Nights* (Ekstasis), and *Hong Kong Poems* (Ronsdale Press). His fourth collection, *The Rendez-Vous, Poems of Multicultural Experience* (Peter Lang) is now available from the publisher. Andrew is a Canadian who lives in Paris.

## Andrew Parkin / **Two Poems**

### **Xi Wang Mu**

You left the Palace of the Jasper Pool,  
came down from the Kunlun Mountains  
and appeared to me at the crossroads  
hard by the salt lanes of the sea.

Intent on your best hidden purpose,  
you spared a moment to take my arm  
and turn me back to the true way,  
Queen Mother of the West.

But how will I know to follow  
the twists and turns of the true way?

## Dreamland

Mountains are chisel-toothed  
at land's sharpest rim.  
Trees grow jagged quills  
to prod inky clouds.  
The storm tries out its bold signature  
across the blank page sky.

Dreamland craves a golden sun  
embossed on a blue page.

Above the river's crazed continuo  
birds open their beaks  
to screech a descant  
while the shadows lengthen  
in all the secrecy of woods  
and the predatory world awakes.

I fear the white moon  
embossed on a black page.

At the edge of unfathomed sleep  
I'm cornered in a familiar landscape,  
where killers track me on the slopes  
as I race for the cottage on the hill.  
From a window's eye socket in the wall  
I watch as they advance now for the kill.

I observe myself judge distances  
and with perfect timing fire my rounds.  
My haunted self looks on  
seeing the hunters fall  
and in the dreamland light lie still.

BOSLEY WILDER is a fiction writer, journalist and poet. She has lived and taught abroad in Asia and Europe. Her recent book of poems, *Portraits & Landscapes*, was published by The Asia Connection. Recipient of a grant from The Rhode Island Council for the Arts, she currently directs a writing program for middle and high school students.

## Rites of Faith

Bosley Wilder

Now that you are taking my loved and only daughter  
 Away, take her somewhere into the mountains  
 Where there is joy and snow, and a trumpet's greeting  
 On her arrival. Let a soft carpet of pine needles  
 Woven in private and with the greatest care  
 By the mountain spirits,  
 And a canopy of nature's most precious stones, greet her.

Stones of imagination and nicety. Let there be truth  
 In the canopy and all of beauty in her footpath. Let  
 The greeting to this child be  
 Fantastic as a bared raw nerve of God.

OBLIQUELY, so that you were inclined not to believe the scene, the outline of the Highlands Park Hotel in Gulmarg, Kashmir, designed by an Indian architect to resemble an Austrian chalet, blended into the lines of the Himalayan Mountains behind it. Through the plastic sheeting on the glass window, which breeched any drafts coming from the outside into the bedroom, the natural and the man-made lines of the landscape wobbled and intersected to create the illusion of openings and tunnels to a cartooned fairyland. The wind layered the snow against the window.

The room was warm and comfortable, heated from the pot-bellied iron stove in the central room, which was restocked hourly with pinewood by a turbaned Punjabi, who padded in and out at will, as though his employer, the hotel management, considered him invisible. Rejecting conscious awareness of the morning, Ann lay still on the bed, thinking as always on awakening these days that she could not will herself to

cry. The clock pointed at twenty minutes before noon. She heard the outside door closing. The world was deathly quiet.

She made herself sit up, and lowered her feet to the floor, resisting the urge to creep back into the darkness of the blankets. She stepped over to the window and looked out. Eight-year-old Peter had built a snowman just outside the miniature chalet where they had been staying for the past three days. Clowning, delighted with the white world around him, he flailed his arms and flung himself with abandon into the powdery soft slipperiness. In his red and yellow wool hat and afghan shepherd's jacket, he looked like a great fat blond baby Buddha. Seeing his mother at the window, he waved and ran around the path through a row of the hotel's individual guest chalets, each diminutive one of which cautiously imitated the big mother chalet at the top of the hill.

Peter crashed through the door and summarily pecked Ann's cheek. His lips were wet and little-boy dry at the same time. From under the cap's visor, his eyes and cheeks glinted with the health and joy of play.

"The snow is fantastic, Mom!"

One of the two students staying in an adjoining room of their chalet, a bright Indian girl, Anita, who babysat for Peter, sat reading just outside on a pile of pine logs. She hunched over her book, rhythmically kicking up snow as she swung one booted foot.

Last evening, when Ann remarked at dinner up in the principal chalet that, although she had brought along to the mountains her cassette tape recorder, she had forgotten to bring any cassettes – "I do all sorts of stupid things lately" – Anita had gone off to speak to the Indian hotel manager, who kindly offered to lend her some of the hotel's tapes.

Now Peter was squealing with delight as he looked over the tapes, and inserted one into the player. The sound of Red Hot Chili Peppers zanged like a low-flying jet plane through the stillness. Ann closed the door of her bedroom, and lay back on the bed.

She had requested a chalet for her son and herself, isolated from the main building and from the other guests of the hotel. The management had complied as much as it was possible. She wanted solitude. Her daughter Tenzin Elizabeth's Bible, King James (revised) version, inscribed "to those of the Junior Sunday School class", lay on the night table beside Ann's bed because she wanted to read Isaiah. She was not a religious person. She herself wondered vaguely why the mother of an adopted Tibetan Buddhist girl, who was dead, should want to read Isaiah. *This I give unto you, myself I leave unto you.*

She felt wobbly, faint. Her husband Bob would join her in a few days from New Delhi, where he was on the staff of the American Embassy. Until he arrived, she wanted days of silence. Her husband was the kindest person in the world. But, for now, she wanted silence.

I can do no more than give you my love. She hears herself speaking. She wonders to whom she is speaking. We have to do and say certain



things to keep them ours, to preserve rituals, to observe the motions of life, common and fastidious. We have to create, or we die, too. Shortly after her son Chris was killed several years ago (how well she knew death!), Tenzin, then five years old, beginning to be known as Elizabeth in the western world into which she had been adopted and adapted, had placed a small hand on Ann's, "Mommy, I've just changed my favorite color from red to blue."

"Why, darling?" Ann's response was a cheerfully punctuated mother's routine curiosity in a little girl's routine confidence, she thought. But the child's answer made her quiver with anguish.

"Because, Chris's favorite color was blue, Mommy. Now that he's dead, someone should keep the faith for him." Elizabeth's deep, dark eyes, serious as an adult's, looked as they always did, deeply into Ann's. Where had the child found an expression like 'keep the faith'? Ann had the sense of coping with more insight than she was prepared for. How can a five-year-old have wisdom?

"Keep the faith," the child repeated. "Faith is colors."

Sitting on the side of the bed, Ann looked down at her hands. She had picked up from the bedside table and was holding a skein of white yarn, and two knitting needles. She had been attempting to knit some yarn that was part of one of Elizabeth's projects. She was knitting because someone should keep the faith. Because her daughter was dead.

On the other side of the wall, Ann could hear Peter with the two students. Anita was crooning an Indian song, Peter trying to join in. The friend Anita had invited to come along with her to this holiday, Jenny, an American girl, was playing some sort of tambourine. An exchange student at Delhi University, Jenny had long frizzy brown hair falling onto her face in what seemed to be a current fashion. She had clear gray eyes and an intelligent expression. Both the girls were teenagers. Tenzin Elizabeth would have become a teenager in a few years. "Teenager" was an expression Ann deplored, she did not understand why – some prescience that her own daughter would never reach that stage of life? She was aware how she occasionally resented the girls running and sliding back and forth along the snowed-over paths among the chalets, laughing, cheeks flushed, arms waving. But they kept Peter happy. The three of them loved to flop down and spread their arms to create snow angels.

On arrival at the ski resort, the party had been invited by the hotel manager into 'the launch' for a cup of hot tea after the jeep ride up from the Kashmir valley into the higher mountains where the ski resort was located. As they enjoyed their tea, Peter, with his little boy twang, asked how come a hotel in the mountains would name its restaurant after a kind of boat. Jenny told him that the warm common room they were sitting in was actually 'the lounge.'

“Just a matter of local pronunciation of the foreign language,” she explained.

Last evening, at dinner, Ann had met several Kashmiri men. One, a short, jovial fellow, red-faced from local rum and philosophical urbanities, she privately labeled the Kashmiri Dr. Assiz. A garrulous man, he was notoriously hung up on the idea that, although the United States of America spent billions of dollars abroad on foreign aid, he personally felt no impact from the spending.

“All you Americans want is comfort, comfort and clamor. But the true peace is the peace only of heart and mind. Only the spiritual values survive. Love.”

Love. Shortly after Ann and Bob’s elder son Chris had been killed in a freak car accident, Tenzin Elizabeth had come in to sit on Ann’s bed one night. “Mom, do you think I could take piano lessons?” Connecting with what showed itself to be the child’s growing intellectual curiosity, Ann had put down the book she was reading, and given Elizabeth her full attention.

“Since Chris isn’t here any more, nobody plays our piano,” Elizabeth went on, fixing dark eyes on Ann, “I think someone should play the piano.” She had picked up a magazine that lay on the bed, and nonchalantly leafed through it, unaware of any ghosts she had unleashed in the room. Soon afterwards, she began taking piano lessons; in an incredibly short time, the sound of her playing a Mozart sonata eerily held the ghost of beloved Chris in the house.

Love. Now Ann sat on the edge of the bed – Peter had gone off skiing with the girls – and struggled with the white yarn Elizabeth had been knitting into something still unidentifiable to Ann. Knit and purl, cast off. Cast on. She felt foolish not being able to remember how to knit a cable stitch. Elizabeth had begun to knit the white yarn into a cable-stitched sweater? The white yarn was dingy in spots where Ann had been practicing the stitches. Or perhaps, she thought, Elizabeth had unraveled part of her own work, she could not be sure. I’ll do it, Ann murmured. I’ll get a book, and I’ll learn how to make the damned stitch. It’s a color. It’s music lessons.

Each morning was quite different now. The physical quality of each day – a day of crystalline clear snow, or a gray, subdued day on which even the raucous sound of a crow carried a certain tristesse – bit into Ann almost insufferably. She felt more dependent on actual weather conditions than she could remember having ever been. The lines of her life were dulled or sharpened by gusts of wind.

The world is full of loving nonsense. People doing things for other people, dead or alive. And who is to say it is more important to do things for the living than for the dead? To whose advantage? And what does it matter? The act of dying – the art of death – is in itself such a

startling, final, direct and unequivocal act, it makes life look fumbling and naïve by comparison.

Ann looked out of the window at the tall, beautiful pines, holding snow on their branches and cradling snow in the shafts of their trunks, almost as though an act of love were involved. The pines of childhood in New England flashed into her mind, the snowfalls heavy, deep over the ground and white; the ice, freezing and slippery. The fireplace inside the house exuding warmth; the remembered smell of freshly baked bread and good food was strong.

Anita and Jenny were both out in the snow now, laughing and talking, joyous in winter holiday. Ann opened the outer door, pushing aside the quilted rug the Kashmiris used to ward off drafts that came through the chinks in the wooden door. The girls were sculpting snow figures in the courtyard, using colored marker pens to draw in the eyes and other facial features of the figures.

Elizabeth was born in the snow, in Sikkim, a small kingdom in the Himalayas that borders Tibet and India. It was a beautiful country. Elizabeth's birth mother and her father had fled Tibet in 1959, during the time of the military takeover of their region by the Chinese. The father died of natural causes, or was hanged along the way, no one was quite certain. The mother had died following childbirth, in the still snow of the mountains. At the time of her own death, Elizabeth had still borne on her arms and legs several scars from burns. When she was quite small, she used to awake screaming in the night, roused by what appeared to be memories of bright, burning fires and men with ropes about their necks. Later, she forgot she had ever known such dreams. An old man had brought the baby out of the mountains and down into the plains, tired lungs and all. She was beautiful.

Now the door of the girls' room was open. They emerged, one behind the other, laughing and carrying small objects – a vase, a ski boot – which they took outside to place before the snow figurines, much as one would place offerings at an altar. Anita had printed and laid on the snow a large placard, with some quotations from Brancusi, her favored sculptor: "Simplicity is not a goal in itself, but one approaches simplicity as one arrives at the real meaning of things. It is not the outward form which is real, it is the essence of things."

From over the slope, Peter and some friends appeared, noisily waging a pitched snowball battle. A pretty little girl of about Peter's height flopped down into the snow and lay there, placidly making snowballs and throwing them up at a pine tree.

Pulling her jacket from the coat rack just inside the door, extracting her gloves from its pockets, Ann went outside. Tentatively, she picked up a handful of snow, and molded it between her gloved hands. It became a conception. Breaking an icicle from an eave of the chalet roof, she drove a hole through the center of the snow sculpture, carefully

shaping an elongated circle. She poked a small indentation near the top of the sculpture.

“Look!” she called to the girls. “An eye, a womb. Mother and child.”

“That’s cool, Mom!” Peter had come up beside Ann. He touched the small snow sculpture lightly with the tip of one of his mittens. “Let me make a crèche for it.” Packing with his feet the ground snow in front of the near chalet window, he mounted the snow bank he had created. With a fat, quilted arm he swept a section of the sloped roof clear of snow. “Give it to me, Mom, carefully.”

Ann handed up the little snow figure, which Peter placed in the nook. It stood out, sublime, solid in the sun, shining like a piece made seriously and laboriously by someone who was concerned with making a good sculpture.

It had begun to snow, lightly. A rainbow, yes, there was a rainbow against the sunlight on the mountain. Ann felt a sense of peace. How could this sky be so clear and blue when it was snowing? As a cloud-burst leaves the world fresh with new rain, this snowburst – heavier now – was leaving the world swirled in a new wonder, oyster grey, but shining. Back inside the chalet, she let her hands play over the pile of pine logs the Punjabi bearer had stacked high beside the iron stove, which was glowing red with heat.

A photograph of the two children stood on the sill of the window in the chalet’s living room. Peter, blond, with long, yellow hair shading his eyes. On his face, a small-boy-crooked smile of embarrassment over having his photograph taken. Beside him, Elizabeth, dark-haired, dark-eyed, smiled with what Ann called always her child Mona Lisa smile, as though she knew a secret no one shared. The two children side by side in the photograph had once moved Ann to remark jokingly, “I have two delicious ice cream cones here! One of them is chocolate, one vanilla.” Peter cried, “I’m chocolate!” “I’m vanilla!” Elizabeth giggled. The eyes of Tenzin Elizabeth looked intently out of the photo, wise, pensive. So much a person. That expression as though she were more aware of life’s joke than anyone. She knew. Knew what? What joke?

In the hospital in San Francisco where Bob took Elizabeth a month ago now, when she began evincing dizziness and pains in her chest, Elizabeth had simply said a few days after she had arrived there, “I feel faint,” and died. How to say she was an uncomplaining child? At age eleven, last month, when she died, she was a stunning child of black hair and olive skin. There was in her what few favored children possess, a stoicism toward pain; in her eyes was the maturity of a very old, very wise soul.

She had come from the Himalayas; she must go back to the Himalayas. But for a little time, she was truly mine.

Last evening, in the lounge, Ann showed a miniature copy of the children's photo, which she carried in her purse, to the head ski instructor. He had sat down beside her and offered to buy her a drink in the congenial après-ski gathering. Ann said simply, "My daughter died one month ago." She had found relief in feeling she was shocking a stranger with that unexpected disclosure.

She called to Peter to wash his hands. It was time to start up to the dining room for lunch. Routines, the rituals of living, could keep one alive.

Keeping the faith involved equally as a skein of white yarn the appetite of a small, well-loved boy. Passing their table, Doctor Assiz, leather gloves in hand, fez perched over his left brow, stopped to chat.

"You are having lunch so late? And why are you not smiling – are you angry with me?" He cocked his head to show he was jesting.

Ann smiled, trying to make the gesture as honest as possible. "I am not angry with you." It is not the outward form which is real, it is the essence of things. If this is true, it is impossible for anyone to express the real by imitating surface appearances, Brancusi had written. "No," she said, "I am not angry with anyone."

It was true. She was not angry with anyone. Two weeks ago, she was very angry. Very particularly angry with God. To a lesser extent, with the entire medical profession and, after that, with all the presidents of the United States during her lifetime for their neglect of medical research funds in favor of war chests. Research on diseases of the lung might have helped Elizabeth. But now, when nothing could help, she was desensitized, suspended, diffused among the living, the animated, like a cloud of cigarette smoke in a crowded room, moved about by the movements of people and the air. Like a ghost. Like a wraith.

She could see out the dining room window how water dripped from silvery icicles hanging from the roof's edge. The weather was becoming warm. The head ski instructor had come up to their table, and was asking Peter when he could go up with him to the slopes for a lesson. "I promised last night to take you." His eyes were very ski-sky blue, as they probably should be for a ski instructor.

"I gave him my word I would coach him first-class." He turned to Ann, making a thumbs-up gesture with his gloved hand. Ann didn't recall. She did remember that when they sat at the bar and talked, he said, countering what she had blurted out to him earlier, "I want to tell you that long ago, I was in love with a Hindu girl. She was eighteen and I was twenty-three. They would not let me marry her. She committed suicide." When he said that, tears gathered in the man's eyes. "So, you see, we share tragedies and secrets."

She looked out the window at the mountains, the majestic background of eternal mountains. Her watch read three o'clock. Skiers were beginning to appear on the slopes. Like ants, the small figures trudged

persistent, determined, up the sides of the slopes. There were no lifts here; one walked everywhere. And why not walk? Why was it called primitive not to have the luxury of chair lifts? The mountains were enough of a luxury.

“It’s this wretched prohibition!” Four Indian sahibs in button-down shirts, ties and pronouncedly Italian suits, who were at a table nearby, had been refused beer by the waiter. The bar closed in mid-afternoon. “But at least we can get a hot meal here!” one of them said, his heavily accented English accent resounding in the almost empty dining room. Ann wondered whether the men spoke English habitually, or only when foreigners were in the room. She pushed her coffee aside. The fakeness of these Indian capitalists depressed her. They looked and sounded as though they were on stage, playing parts in a James Ivory film. The knowledge that the men must believe the way they were displaying themselves made them look important, she found more painful than thinking perhaps they were only playing a role for her benefit. Her even thinking about their motives was ridiculous.

The ski instructor had taken Peter off. Ann put on her coat and walked through the side door to the outside, where she tested the slipperiness of the new snow by planting her treaded boots firmly with each step. She found herself irritated with a small, local boy who was playfully breaking off the long icicles from the roof of the dining room verandah. Why should he disturb the chain of being? The icicles slowly melting into water to bleed into earth to feed the green growths of spring. Not that he disturbed Nature, which, like God, was inexorable. But by what right did he tamper? By the right of being a child, of course. He was a juggernaut of childhood.

“O, little playmate, come out and play with me.”

Walking around the chalet, kicking at the snow with heel and toe, pursuing its softness, she recalled the pleasures of being a child. How she had delighted in life. Not the public life of a house and parents, although father and mother were real enough, but the secret delight in childhood’s tall pine trees and secret tunnels into the mountains, the joy of the absolute mystery of beauty. The unsolvable and the pleasing, which is what mystery and beauty purpose to be. She had thought that when she became an adult, she would wish to have her own little girl to be a child with again, to share the beauty and the mystery of the pines and the mountains.

Well, you had a little girl, you had your little girl. For a time, truly yours, a black-haired beauty full of mirth and wisdom who, when last seen in human conception, was four feet tall, sweet and joyful. Who died. That happens.

In Tibet, when a person dies, a priest or a member of the family cuts a small slit into the forehead of the corpse, just between the eyes, to enable the spirit to escape and roam freely over the earth. Ann won-

dered whether anyone did that for Tenzin Elizabeth in the hospital in San Francisco. She didn't think so. She didn't think they bothered with conventions like that at crematoriums.

Back at the chalet, the girls were giggling again. The plywood partitions between the rooms muffled little sound.

"Did you say 'hut'? or 'hat'?" Squeals of laughter.

"Did I say hut or hat what?" A high, nasal whine from the bathroom meant Jenny was imitating Jimmy Durante, which Anita and Peter found hilarious. More laughter sounded from the room, then more giggles, then singing, "I – am – a – wo – man, la la la ... and I – want – a – ma – a – an. La la la."

Jenny, suddenly serious, stopped singing. Through the wall, with startling clarity and a touch of befuddlement, Ann heard, "The rhinos and the hippos have had it, haven't they?"

From the bathroom there slushed a great splash of water mingled with a screech, "Shit, this water's hot!" Then, "Well, you evolved, they didn't."

"Yeah." A guffaw. "But why? – The rhinos, not the hot water."

I have strength. I am determined to survive. Someone said, always be happy before you have reason to be; otherwise you may never be happy. I will be a child for Elizabeth. When you stop being a child, you are dead, too.

She drew on her coat and boots again, then pulled aside the quilted rug at the doorway and stepped out of doors. As she walked away from the lighted chalets, she felt the dark pines and the snow isolating her from all living creatures. That was how she wanted it to be. Stars were everywhere. Far below, a few single electric lights twinkled in a village. A fairyland, not real. The matchlessness of the falling snow thrust anguish to the side. The cold air was fresh, exhilarating to breathe. It occurred to her that for the first time in months, she was happy. Happy, giddily happy, idiotically happy. Was it the air? The thin air, this high in the mountains, could make one giddy. Later on, she would be sad again. Or perhaps even mad. Exhaustion is creeping in, exhaustion is creeping in again exhaustion is creeping nobody knows my name tell me how long the train's been gone, Ann. Her babbling suddenly made her giggle. She trembled, giggling until it made her cough. Choking, she began to cry, with shaking, raucous sobs in the soundless Himalayan evening.

She was standing before one of the tallest of the snow-laden pines. The evening was turning from twilight to dark. All around her was snow and silence. All around her was life and death.

Yes, you had your little girl. A decade of delicious years of her, as expendable as time, or an icicle, or a loaf of fresh-baked bread; as a skein of yarn; as a snow sculpture, as a prized human being.

Shall I return her to the Himalayas? She came from there, after all.

Reaching into her coat pocket, Ann took out a small handful of bone ash she had been carrying with her for many days. She imagined the pieces to feel like what the relics of saints or religious leaders must be, and she wondered why that thought should occur to her. She was holding in her hand the small pieces of bone ash that not too long ago were the living, moving parts of a child. Who loved. Who was loved. She felt her fingers rub and crush the pieces together, breaking some, turning some into dust.

She flung the handful of ash high into the snow branches of the pine tree she stood by. Softly, some white ash and white snow, dislodged from the tree by the act of her throwing, fell together to the ground.

Directly over the pine tree, Orion's belt shone. She was reminded of Elizabeth's playful absorption with astrology, how she and her friend Jini had been two small, giggly girls hunched in the back of the station wagon in Delhi – was it only a few weeks ago? – excitedly poring over the Times of India Sunday newspaper and laughing at the week's predictions: "Be careful of the stars over you this week. Do not burn yourself out. Business interests will increase. This is a good time to travel."

Slightly to the west of Orion's belt were three stars in the shape of an isosceles triangle. She could not identify them, but it didn't matter. Orion marked Tenzin Elizabeth's pine grave, if one wanted to call it a grave. She became aware she was shivering heavily, the wind driving snow out of the tree into her face.

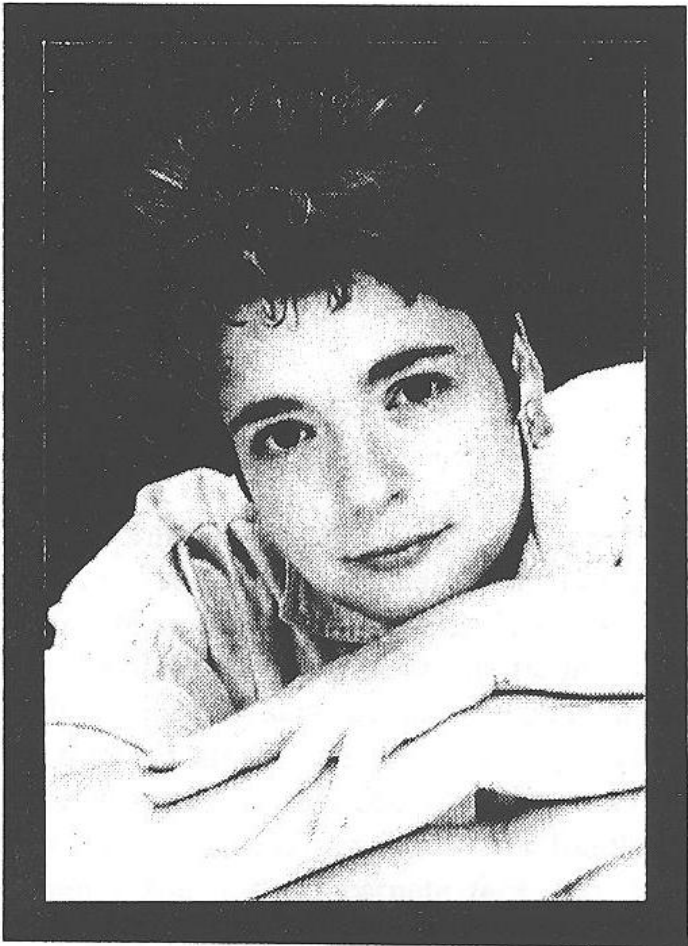
Where did the crows go at night? As the late evening turned from penumbral to black, hundreds of crows rose suddenly from the branches of a nearby tree, and squawking mindlessly, circled and pressed north, to a destination presumably known only to them.

With a small moan, because she was cold, too, Ann drew a final handful of ashes from her pocket, and threw them up and into the trees. She turned out the pocket of the coat itself, brushing the last crumbs of ash from the cloth into the snow, the way one brushes the crumbs of candy or biscuit that have clung to the lining of a child's coat that has been filled with delights. Well, Elizabeth had been a delight, hadn't she? And, like all delights, she had been consumed.



*Featured Poet*

# Unity Durieux



Dog Buries His Nose



A non-practicing chartered account who resides in Olympia, Washington, UNITY DURIEUX has had work appear in *Night Rally*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *PMS: Poem Memoir Story*, *Café Review*, *Jabberwock*, *Clark Street Review* and the *California Quarterly*.

## Writing The Bizarre, Naturally

### Unity Durieux

MY DAUGHTER sprawled on the floor, drawing what I thought was blue snow above a red rooftop, but when I asked her she said *these are your poems falling from the sky*. She doesn't know about my rape; I indulge her with happiness, a quiet secure home in a quiet secure suburb of a virtually crime-free state-capitol city; her friends are decent sweet girls and they all attend a decent sweet private school: she is growing up differently than I grew up, she isn't miserable, she has no tasks-for-tasks' sake, she isn't either ignored or fondled by the men in her life – in essence she is the incarnate *fuck you!* to the Protestant Work Ethic & typically racist & misogynist Christian lifestyle still prevalent in Y2K America.

Having been raped and beaten at late fifteen, hospitalized until sixteen, is enough of an artistic badge of honor to allow me, ad infinitum, to paint my nails black, Goth my hair, ink my skin, pierce everywhere fashionable to pierce, but these are escutcheons of decay, of victimology. I write not as a female, a non-practicing Catholic whose mother was Jewish, a “rape survivor”; I am what I *am*, which is why I am able to write the bizarre naturally. Rape made me suspicious, careful, obsessed with locking doors, bolting windows, peering around corners, but as I matured as a writer I threw away the rape poems, rape stories, rape novel, because none of it shed any true light on why we are stuck on earth waiting to die, and how we amuse ourselves waiting.

I was fortunate to have had a very brutal psychiatrist, the type rarely found in America (actually interested in healing her patients), she lis-

tened to my puerile evasions and whimpering for three sessions before exploding: *according to your sexual history you've consented to sex hundreds of times so if you want clearance and closure, if you want sanity, put the rape in mechanical terms, beyond the fact that you were young and this pig assaulted you, it is just another fuck so is this fuck going to control you forever, has your rapist won, is this your halting place?* I was stunned, but I was also cured. Unlike a war veteran, I hadn't medals for my combat, an empty sleeve flapping in the breeze at Fourth of July parades, a humming wheelchair. I had made myself the kind of victim, as some combat veterans do, relishing the role of disabled; I had halted at that place and time of my injury and grown older without growing up. I had become addicted to therapy and therapists, to not-getting-better.

I then dropped out of a Master's program because it seemed pointless after my cure to learn to teach what can't be taught: all that had any value were essay titles with sesquipedalia & colons panegyricizing more monstrous rubric, the collapsed bridge between the gap of what is known and what is necessary to impress or conform – *Ekistical Abrogated Hegemonies of Hegel: Logologies of Deceit?* ... handing in this nonsense, enjoying their quick intake of breath, later receiving an A and long note of praise for something I knew was insipid trash, bored me and I quit. Writing can only be self-taught well. Accept failure or rejection as an accident, anoint the scars with vitamin E, *account* for everything, blame no one else, depend on no one else.

Writing in the United States is an industry. If you aren't a darling of the New York publishing syndicates, university presses, or Hollywood, you are marginalized. Anything un-American in America is marginalized, including our neighbors, Canada and Mexico: the xenophobic overlords react with hostility to not corn-fed beefy apple-pie coca-cola republican WASP otherness; but especially poor Mexico (forced to accept, for the past 157 years, the invasion & occupation of an immense Mexican frontier modern *norteamericanos* called Texas, California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and bits o' Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, and Oklahoma following *la guerra entre los estados unidas y méxico*); instead of feeling grateful to Mexico there is posturing, especially in Texas and the Southwest, against native Mexican "trespassers and transgressors"; this hypocrisy, this hydrologic border, is supported by law enforcement and congress. "Illegal aliens" cross the Rio Grande, Colorado, Gila, Rio Conchos, & Rio San Juan to work the most exhausting, dangerous, demeaning and low-paying jobs. Without "wet-backs", American agriculture and domestic service would collapse. No obese suburban whitebread brat is going to drop his Gameboy Advance SP or tear his eyes away from a screen-full of animé garbage or cyberfriends beamed from his Xbox, PS2 or GameCube to chop lettuce,

asparagus, cabbage, or pick apples, peaches, tomatoes, pears, or scrub toilets, or mop floors.

Having said that, I'll say, too, that America is fun, *inferiority* complexed global bully and all; I'm an American by marriage but it's fun taking it all in, to peel back the American scalp, trepan the American skull and peer into the American brain to figure this country out: *oh my god there is no god* I argue with my stepmom, an unflinching old-school Methodist who really believes that a Dead Jew hovers in space, watching her every move and that someday this Mysteriously-White Nazarene will return to destroy the world and take her and select Jesus-lovin' cronies to heaven. This strikes me as worse than insanity, since most of the governments & corporations of industrialized nations – America and its toadies – believe this gobbledygook and pass it on to their children like an old musket or piece of eight. Yet I keep writing about God because I am bizarre, like the child I still resist reverting to in times of stress and disappointment, I desire heaven (but not hell); I have surrendered so much I want at least a fable of redemption, absolution, resurrection. Disbelief doesn't kill gods, apathy and dishonesty kills gods: we *go to assembly* without obeying the Gods we assemble for – the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment from Yahweh/Jehovah to Moses and Surah 2:179 of the Quran (re: “Law of Equality”) demand *thou shalt not kill* – all killing is murder, even self-defense, even for the glory of Islam or the righteous indignation of the U.S. military. Oh, the hue & cry, the blood sacrifice of faith, but *love*, page 47. Poems fall from the sky.

Tuesday a former best friend called me with a business proposition although he knows I'm no longer interested in business; he wants to “whip out” a romance series with me as the “chick front.” He's a retired stockbroker, still a child, actually (44), who relocated to Seattle from NYC to exist in the charmless hamlet of Redmond and write “a great novel.” He soon gave up literature because he's without talent, but intelligent and driven, to the point of obsession, with a need to “actualize” all his megalomaniac desires, so I have no doubt he'll publish soon. Hemingway also had no talent yet published many books, grinding them out with deadly (if often stultifying) accuracy to the point of convincing the Swedish Academy, in 1954, to award him a Nobel. If you golf long enough in Florida, chances are you'll be struck by lightning.

So light the fuse but be nowhere when it burns; write the bizarre, naturally, and you'll arrive at a style uniquely your own. Do not borrow horror, do not pander angst and calamity; write about yourself if you must, but do not market the misery of strangers. Jesus exorcising demons did not excite me, his casting the demons into swine excited me – I wanted to *know* those pigs and understand the larger “food chain”, if you will, of evil. It is often so close to us, so comforting in its scent and texture, we do not recognize it as insidious, and our names for it are dear and silly.

## Jesus Christ

a Pharisee asketh him in to dine & he went and ate and when the Pharisee saw it he marveled he had not first washed before dinner. And the Lord said unto him, *Now do ye Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and platter, but your inward part is full of filth, extortion and wickedness.*

Luke 11: 37-40

A beautiful name he had, not as gorgeous as *Xochipl* or *Fernand* or *Abijah* or *Leander*, *Nuada*, *Silvanus*, *Vidar*, *Gwandoya*, *Zerachiel*, but pretty for a man nonetheless: touched wormy eye to sacred skin, a demon's curse to distressed mortality; epilepsy, dropsy, the paralytic deaf, dumb & blind, the *unclean* – I wish I were dead, possessed, and he would touch me, bring me forth – *leave all for love*, he commanded, *and I will make you snares of souls*. That's what the Greek says, not *fishers of men* but men own the bible, translate their means & ends.

He loved Mary & Martha, saved an adulteress, renounced (ignored then as now) the hypocrisy of blame & misogyny – Mary caressed his feet and the rest of him, too – the Greek implies this, Jerome & James nixed it: what messiah of any use would waste his time with women? Now our pastors pray we kill our enemies, bless war, chaplains pin crosses to camouflage blouses, a blasphemy, but then men own god but they don't own Jesus Christ, though they glue-stick the pages of miracles – of the calmed sea, lepers healed, 5000 fed, money-lenders thrashed, child-abusers eternally damned, the ear of Malchus repaired, the resurrection – women loved him he loved women, the church despises women, he loved us.

**You Wanted To See Hog Butchering So  
We Stopped; I Asked What Purpose Cut-  
ting The Throat Serves When Blood Runs  
Out With The Guts But You Didn't Know**

Suppose the men cut throats because they enjoy slitting throats. "Hogs won't eat paw-paws" a gore-spattered old man told me; still don't know what that means nor do you though you wrote it down. When struck with a crowbar the fatling farts defiance.

A string of funerals casts us into  
bed – a dream shouldn't be mean –  
I love you an eternity of tomorrows  
as you desire me hooded, a stupid  
falcon ferocious yet obedient,  
a wolf spied through a crystal,  
oak roots breaking into the cistern  
to sup sewage: desposit & recycle  
me, the ALL Model 4000's gas jets  
roaring, beaverboard coffin  
collapsing onto my ruined face,  
red wig gurgling through pancake  
makeup, at home dying too the fifty  
dollar orchid I caressed like a cat,  
spritzing its rotten mahogany  
log. A flower bereft of fragrance;  
when I sniffed, anything else in the air-  
Merlot roses or smoke – was smelt.

Fried bass, christ that takes  
forever to dissipate. Was I dreaming  
a sentimental journey would forgive  
murder, bury the molting dead  
enrich the blood with rabbit & doves?  
Was I mad (crazy) enough to return  
to ozone and dog fennel, nodding  
to nonsense you collect as folklore –  
that opossums breed through the nose  
then sneeze bantlings into the pouch –  
am I mad (angry) enough to stop  
listening, stop insisting you're smart?

## I Shrink From The Wicked, The False, The Cold

*No refuge could save the hireling and the slave from the  
terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave*

“The Star-Spangled Banner”

Cobwebs gather, dank face-traps;  
gasp, swear, swipe them to shreds—  
frantic frisk, shakedown for a spider—  
I must tolerate these chambers  
since you’ve gone, richly attired  
in dress blues, eyes right, parade

rest; salute these breasts, these  
thighs, these lips—I should’ve  
been your flag, honor, duty—they  
bore you away with a love I can’t  
know, hastened our youth  
with blood & fire, some charge

you bragged about in bars. You  
doze with the metal cross—emblem  
of gentle Christ—glimmering under  
blue ribbon; why are the gaudiest  
trimmings on the warrior’s uniform  
decorations for destruction & trespass?

Why not stars for mercy, unit citations  
for nonlethal engagement, crosses  
for humane treatment of prisoners,  
medals for returning home sound  
of mind & body? *I’ve something  
to tell you* I began letters thrown

away: they lamed me too for I refused to negotiate,  
to surrender you blind in their native atmosphere.



## Good Dog

Dog buries his nose downtown  
 licking slurping  
 no telling what a dog will do.  
 I drop my burrito stop dammit!  
 the dog halts, looks guilty;  
 good dog  
 I say, and finish the burrito.  
 Sam's not the kinda dog  
 to go for help or pull you  
 from a burning building  
 but he doesn't bite or dig  
 or bark much or crap  
 on the floor. Good Dog.

I'm so sick of sayings, saws,  
 adages, those people who don't  
 know shit but think you need  
 their advice anyway—how bout  
 the contra 3 blind men & elephant?  
 One is stepped on & says the elephant  
 is god, the second sticks his fist up  
 its ass & declares the elephant  
 to be a bowl of pudding, the third  
 grabs its dick and shouts cowabunga!

God is a trampy old tramp,  
 grandfather clock full of mice  
 and click-beetles, a gravedigger  
 on a dude ranch, fairy dust  
 in a Turkish bath, the true messiah  
 with an ankle tattoo saying  
*the above is not really me.*

## To Autumn

I've traded precious years  
 for diadems, pawned them  
 to survive an arson of nerves;  
 a linden-wood bird  
 gearing out *cuckoo! cuckoo!*  
 idealized pine cone  
 oak leaf ivy bower  
 I should account for time  
 more sensibly than I do,

not follow stars foolishly  
 dye my early gray black  
 worry I own nothing (so  
 what?) read aloud  
 in a toilet stall *a sky-thrown  
 torch has kindled me to flame—*  
 who gave that doggerel—  
 Eliot? Eastman? At Barnes &  
 Noble then wash my hair

in their sink. Owned a pony,  
 an ancient Shetland, hooves  
 flaking like mica. I loved him;  
 I was a lucky child  
 loving & not loving expertly  
 for my age, joyful  
 embracing the maned neck  
 twined with flowers.

MARC MILLER was born and raised in Montreal where he attended Jewish school for twelve years. He completed a BA and MA in Jewish history at McGill University. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Yiddish literature at Columbia University. He has published several short stories in the *New York Forward*, as well as translations of two previously unpublished short stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer in *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*.

## The Keter House

Marc Miller

THE WORST THING I did that summer was try to be a writer. I took a job as staff reporter at the *Hampstead Watch*, our local paper. It was the summer after college, a time which I fantasized I would later refer to as a productive period ‘in between degrees.’ Instead, I became a pivotal figure in an embarrassing case of clear discrimination.

Like their fellow Polish and Russian Jews, Moroccans emerged from the lower class and, within one generation, began buying homes in this affluent Montreal community. I don’t know the exact demographics, but today there are many wealthy Moroccans living in our little Jewish town, almost all of them in the newer part. But the Ashkenazis still control the communal and town institutions. Our mayor and city council members are all of Eastern European Jewish descent. The newspaper where I was briefly employed was owned by Jews. Unfortunately, I was the *Watch*’s sole Jewish employee. That was the source of my trouble.

After being on the job for about a month, I received a phone call. The caller had a thick, old-country accent, yet he did not sound old.

“Hallo? Iz dis de Yidish reporta?”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Are you de reporta vot iz a Jew?”

*Oy vey.*

“Yes,” I said, tentatively.

“Vell, I gotta story fa you.”

“Go ahead,” I said.

Though I was mostly humoring this man out of boredom, I would not have minded a good story, a real story to research. I worked the Political Desk which essentially meant I attended town hall meetings once a week. To call these meetings boring would be like calling the CN Tower a tall building. It was all I could do not to fall asleep while the seven corrupt men and women decided how to allocate funds or where to erect a new *Arrêt* sign.

“De Moroccans are tinkering of pudding up a new yeshiveh. Dey alrekeh bot de land.”

“Really?” I said. That was somewhat interesting.

“Yeah. Dey got a lot of money and dere gonna pud up a Keter yeshiveh.”

“Keter?” I said, surprised.

Keter is a Hasidic sect that follows the teachings of the Vitebsker rebbe. This ultra-orthodox denomination originated around the turn of the nineteenth century in the northern Russian town of Vitebsk. The leader of this group, which is centered in Brooklyn, is the son-in-law of the previous rebbe and the fifth leader in the original dynasty. Keter is a Hebrew acronym representing the three central goals of this movement: *Kiruv*, proselytizing or ingathering, *Torah*, the study of traditional, holy texts, and *Rabanut*, the rabbinate, conferring rabbinical degrees on their students. The main institution of this movement is the yeshiva, the Talmudic academy which serves as the center for these three concerns.

Growing up, I knew many Vitebskers. From the age of five to eleven, I had attended a summer day camp associated with this movement. My parents were not supporters or followers of the Vitebsker rebbe, but the camp was around the corner from where we lived and the director, Sholem Rabinovitch, had offered to allow me to attend for free.

Although I was one of the only kids there who was not Vitebsk, I got along very well with the rest of the campers. The other boys were a lot of fun. And, except for the fact that we spent an hour at the beginning of each morning praying and learning Torah, *Beys Yisroel* was pretty much a regular day camp with the usual activities – swimming, baseball and arts and crafts.

Later, in college, I had gotten to know some more Vitebskers. Keter is probably the most prevalent Hasidic movement in North America – if not the world – with its own centers on virtually every college campus in Canada and the United States. However, I had not been interested in religion in college; in fact, that was the time my friends and I went through our anti-religious phase, performing such outrageous acts as attending classes on Yom Kippur. But the Keter House was always a warm place. I ate lunch there almost every day because the food was good and cheap. The rabbi was not especially pushy and I got to know him well. Though Keter performed its fair share of annoying outreach activities (the most irritating and embarrassing of all being on *Sukkot*

when they stood at the university gates, citrus *esrog* in one hand and bushy *lulav* in the other, asking each and every passerby the same seemingly simple question: “Are you Jewish?”), I always liked the movement as a whole. The people were friendly and up-front about their intentions.

But most people in Hampstaed didn’t share my feelings. Hampstaeders were a traditional, yet modern bunch and were not especially interested in seeing a proliferation of black hats, long black coats and dangling sidecurls in their community. So a yeshiva in our town would certainly be unwelcome. Particularly a Moroccan one. There was already enough tension between the established Ashkenazi community and the rapidly expanding Moroccan group in Hampstaed. A Moroccan Keter yeshiva? That didn’t make sense to me. Keter was an Eastern European phenomenon. Moroccan Hasidim?

“Are you sure you mean Keter?” I asked my caller.

“Vot do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean, the Moroccans...and Vitebsk?”

“Yeh, yeh. Do you believe? Anyways, I’m givink you a scoop. Go to da next town meeting. Dere gonna try and push it trou, fast-like.”

“I’ll be there,” I said in a mock-official tone and hung up.

Some scoop, I thought. I attended all the town meetings. If anything happened I would be there, anyway.

A couple of days later, I went to the meeting and I immediately knew that this night would be different from all other nights. Usually, in addition to the seven fat cats sitting along the large desk, each leaning back, like they were presiding over their own private Passover *seyder*, there were maybe eight or ten other people (including myself) in the room. But tonight there were at least forty or fifty Hasidim occupying the first five rows of the small auditorium. In addition, there was a group of about the same number of non-Hasidic Jews, filling out the rest of the auditorium. Usually, I sat in the front row and kept awake by stabbing myself in the leg with my pencil. Tonight I was forced to stand along the back wall.

The first half-hour passed uneventfully. Then the zoning motion was proposed. The Hasidim began mumbling. I was surprised to hear them speaking French. Hasidim spoke Yiddish, I thought, or, at the very most, English or Hebrew.

For the first time ever (in my brief career as a reporter, at least), the Mayor Lisbona used his gavel. He tapped it several times on the little piece of lacquered wood meant for this purpose and ordered the room silent. The Hasidim quieted down. However, after the proposal was read and the council decided to vote on whether the Vitebsk Jews would be granted the proper zoning ordinance to build their yeshiva, a Hasid jumped up and began yelling at the mayor in francophone English:

“Anti-semeete! You hate your own! We are even more Jeweesh zan you!”

“Order! Order!” yelled Lisbona.

Suddenly, the entire room seemed to stand up at the same time, with Hasidim and non-Hasidim arguing, spitting and pointing fingers in each other’s faces. Our local security was immediately dispatched and when our well-meaning but under-used French Canadian forces proved inadequate, the police were called. The room was cleared in minutes and no arrests were made.

The next day I got a phone call.

“Nu, vot did I told you?”

“You were right, my friend,” I said.

“I knew it would be sometink, but not like dat.”

He informed me that the Hasidim had bribed several of the town council members and that the vote was supposed to have been passed quietly. However, someone in the non-Hasidic camp had gotten wind of this decision and quickly established the *Neighbours of Hampstaed*. Apparently, this organization’s founding father had a cousin who worked in the realty office that had brokered the land deal. When the Hasidim found out about this mobilization and the detrimental effect it would have on their goal, they decided to swamp the town meeting and disrupt the vote they believed they would surely lose. They knew that the all-Ashkenazi council would fold under the community’s pressure.

“Dese Moks messed everytink op.”

‘Mok’ was our word for Moroccans. They called us ‘Polacks’ or ‘Voos-Voos.’

“So, you gonna write a story?”

I certainly was. It was an exceptional story. This is not to say that our town was without scandal. In the short period I had been a reporter, there had been quite a few amazing incidents involving naughty financial and sexual behavior by Orthodox rabbis. But the *Watch*’s owner (and also its publisher, editor-in-chief, as well as a former failed Hampstaed mayoral candidate) had forbidden me from reporting them. Though himself not Orthodox, Yosi Harpaz was keenly keyed in to the sympathies of the community and knew that an exposé of a heroin-dealing rabbi, a dirty prison chaplain, or a rabbi who fondled little girls in their sleep on airplanes would hurt his advertising revenues. But the Hasidim were a different story. Particularly Moroccan ones. The morning after the meeting, Harpaz made a rare appearance at the paper. He came right over to my desk.

“Ehh...*Ekh korim lekha?*” What’s your name? he asked me in Hebrew. At least he remembered I was Jewish.

“Max,” I replied.

“*Ken, ken, Max. Bo.*” Come.

He led me to his small office and closed the door.

“Listen, you were at the town meeting last night?” he switched to English after sitting down behind his desk.

“Yeah.”

“I want you to write this story.”

“No problem.”

“But a big one. I want it to be on the front page, at least one full column, and then continued in the middle, at least one full page.”

I calculated this would be about two thousand words. I had never written an article that long.

“These fucking Moroccans. They’re fucking up this town. Let them go back to their fucking caves in Africa.”

He stopped and stared at me. Or was he just thinking? Was I supposed to respond? I had no animosity towards the Moroccan community. There had been a couple of Moroccan kids in my high school class and I had gotten along with them as well as I did with anyone else. In fact, Aryeh Bohbot was one of my best friends. I loved going over to his house. That was where I first discovered Moroccan delicacies such as spicy little meat cigars, wrapped in crunchy dough, *dafina* (similar to our *cholent*) and *cous cous au lait*. I felt my own angle on this story was neither anti-Moroccan nor anti-Hasidic. Instead, I was drawn to the curious confluence of these two, traditionally separate, communities.

“I’ve been thinking about it already,” I said to my boss.

“Good, good,” he snapped back to attention.

“I was thinking of writing about the new sociological phenomenon...”

“No, no, no,” he interrupted me with a wave of the hand. “Don’t give me this college bullshit. I want a long story exposing the Moroccans and the *kha-see-deem*,” he pronounced in his Israeli Hebrew. “I heard that they bribed city council, for example. Write about those kind of things. *Hehvanta?*” You understand?

“Yeah.”

“Good. Now go. Start writing.”

I had a seventy-two hour deadline. Harpaz wanted this story in the next issue.

My first call was to Rabbi Becker, the Vitebsker representative here who would head the planned yeshiva. I found his number in the phone book. A young boy with a *shtetl* accent answered the phone after twelve rings.

“Hallo?”

“Hello. Could I speak to Rabbi Becker, please?”

“He’s nat in right nah. Who’s callink?”

“I’m a reporter from the *Hampstaed Watch*.”

“De vof?”

“The local newspaper. Do you know when your father will be back?”

“No.”

“Umm, okay.”

I figured leaving my name and number with this kid would probably be a waste of time, so I told him I’d call back later.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoore.”

“What’s your father’s first name?”

“I dunno.”

“You don’t know?” I said, shocked. “You don’t know his name? What do you call him?”

“I call him *Tati*,” the boy said and hung up.

I made some more calls that morning and came up with a few helpful facts. I discovered that Rabbi Becker had founded a small, temporary yeshiva in his basement. It was in the bottom of a duplex in New Hampstaed, across the street from the train tracks. He had converted this room into a makeshift house of study, prayer and, most importantly, ingathering.

There was a second entrance to the house, to the immediate right of the garage. I tried the door and it was unlocked. I walked down a flight of short stairs into the small subterranean room and saw about fifteen or twenty young men seated, in groups of two, around a set of wooden tables. Many of them were rocking back and forth, chanting to each other in French. Bizarre. With my private school knowledge, I could tell that they were discussing the very first page of the Talmud which delineated the time when the evening *Shma* prayer could be recited:

*“Alors, qu’est ce que Rabbi Eliezer a dit? Jusqu’à quelle heure? Oui. Et Rabban Gamliel? A l’aube.”*

A tall, skinny, yet broad-shouldered man got up and approached me. He wore the traditional long, black caftan of the Vitebsk sect, over a white button-down Oxford shirt and a pair of simple black pants. He had a long, scraggly beard and wore a velvet *yarmulke* perched on the back of his head.

*“Sholem Aleykhem,”* he welcomed me with his long, bony hand.

*“Aleykhem sholem,”* I returned his traditional greeting.

*“Vous êtes intéressé dans notre yeshiva?”* Are you interested in our yeshiva? he asked with a heavily Americanized accent.

“Are you Rabbi Becker?” I said.

“Yes,” he replied nervously, adjusting his *yarmulke*.

“I called earlier, I think I spoke to your son. I’m a reporter...”

“For the *Watch*. Yes, yes. I’ve been meaning to call you.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You obviously know about our problem.”

“Yeah.”

“Come, come,” he said. “Would you like some tea?”

“Sure.”



He led me up to the kitchen where there were about four or five kids running around, screaming at each other. I could hear more kids in the living room. I guessed they didn't go to summer camp. Rabbi Becker cleared some newspapers off the table and invited me to take a seat. He put the water on to boil and rinsed out a couple of cups.

"You see, we have an important mission here," he called from the sink.

"And what is that?" I asked, taking my pen and pad from my pocket.

He wiped off the cups, brought them over to the table and sat down.

"This community has been....How should I say it? .... Falling away from the fold."

"What community? You mean Hampstaed?"

"Well, yes, but more specifically, the Sephardi Jews. Though they are very traditional, our research shows that they have been intermarrying at a very....," he searched for the appropriate word and then found it, "*alarming* rate. And we think this is because of a lack of spirituality."

"And observance," I smiled.

"Well, of course. And so, we feel that there needs to be education."

The kettle began to whistle and the rabbi got up, took it off the element, and brought it back to the table where he poured us each a cup.

"Come," he said, putting a tea bag in each of our cups. "While this steeps, I can show you some of what we do."

We went back down to the basement academy. As we entered, Rabbi Becker handed me a thin, pointy, black silk kipa, the kind found in most synagogues and funeral homes. He led me around the room in order to observe the various pairs in study. It was so strange to hear these Talmudic dialectics conducted in French.

"*Bon, Rabbi Yehuda a dit que....*"

"*Non, non, non. Les rabbins ont décidé de....*"

Rabbi Becker touched a young man on the shoulder. When he looked up, I realized I knew him. Léon Amzalag. He had been a year ahead of me in school and we'd played on the basketball team together.

"Lulu!" I said as he stood up and embraced me. That was his high school nickname.

"*Ça va bien, nakhoubesk?*" he asked me. How are you, sweetheart?

"*Ça va, ça va.*" Fine, fine, I replied. "What are you doing here?" I switched to English.

"Studying," he smiled one of his trademark toothy grins.

Wow. This from the kid who used to get high before every game. The same guy who ran a highly successful cottage industry, cornering the high school market on stolen watches. And now a student of holy texts.

"I don't believe it," I said.

"Hey, you remember Boozy?" he asked.

"Sure," I said.

“Hey, Boozy,” he called across the room.

A cherubic young man with tight, black curls looked up. When he saw me, he produced a deep, knowing grin. This was Amram Buzaglu, Lulu’s one-time partner in crime, now his fellow cleric-in-training.

He came over, gave me a big hug and kissed me on both cheeks.

“*Ça va, fils ton?*” I said. How ya doin’, sonny?

“You still think you’re Moroccan, huh?” he smiled.

“So you also saw the light?” I asked him.

“That’s right. We’re gonna be rabbis.”

“*Oy vey,*” I laughed.

“Hey, you wanna learn with us?” Boozy asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe some other time.”

“So what are you doing here?” Lulu asked.

“I’m writing a story for the *Watch,*” I explained.

“Great!” Boozy said, and turned to Rabbi Becker before heading back to his Talmud. “*Il va nous aider.*” He’ll help us.

I spent about an hour talking to Becker, whose first name I learned was Steven. He told me about Keter’s worldwide mission and how they saw our town as one of their most immediate priorities. Since this was only our first meeting – despite the fact that my boss wanted dirt, and fast – I didn’t ask any questions about bribery or corruption. Judging from the rabbi’s sincere demeanor, I figured if there had been any dishonest practice, it was probably perpetrated without his knowledge. I focused more on what I was interested in, an issue I personally found fascinating and would try to work into my article, namely the meeting of Vitebsk and the Jews of North African descent.

“Aside from your mission,” I said to the rabbi, “I think that you have a rare opportunity here to bring together two communities which have traditionally been at odds, not only in this town, but all over the world.”

“I know, I know,” Becker said excitedly.

“I am just amazed that you have been able to recruit so many Moroccans into such an Ashkenazi movement.”

Besides Lulu and Boozy, there were several other former hooligans whom I recognized from my youth that now sat and rocked back and forth in black pants and white Oxfords. The last time I had seen guys like Eric Bensimon and Jojo Benharosh had been three or four years earlier. They worked the local flea markets, selling anything. Now they sat all day in Rabbi Becker’s basement, learning a different kind of Torah.

“But that’s exactly the point of Keter,” the rabbi said. “It’s for *all* Jews.”

When I got back to the office, I found Harpaz sitting at my desk, talking on the phone. As soon as he saw me, he hung up.

“*Nu,*” he said to me. “*Ma matzata?*” What’d you get?

“Well, I spoke to the rabbi and he told me all about....”

“No, no, no! What are you talking with the rabbi for?” he said impatiently. “He’s just going to tell you the typical Vitebsker bullshit.”

He pronounced this last word ‘bool-sheet’.

“Here,” he handed me a name and phone number. “Talk to this guy.”

I wanted to type some of the notes from my meeting with Rabbi Becker, but I knew that Harpaz meant for me to leave the office immediately. I tried anyway.

“I thought, maybe....” I waved my notepad in the air.

“What?” He grabbed it and read my notes. After about ten seconds of reading while moving his lips, he repeated his triple negative, “No, no, no! I don’t want this! Nobody gives a *sheet* about this. Your focus is town hall, bribery, scandal, corruption. Fucking Moroccans and fucking *kha-see-deem* fucking doing dirty business! Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Now go see this guy. He bought the land and donated it to Keter.”

I looked at the piece of paper.

“Simon Benoualid? Young guy, around my age?”

“I don’t know. What do I look like, a fucking encyclopedia of Moroccans?” he yelled. “*Uf mipo!*” Get outta here.

Simon was around a couple of years older than me and had also grown up in Hampstaed. He came from a very wealthy family which he made wealthier through his amazingly keen sense of the real estate market.

Although Harpaz wanted Moroccan-Hasidic bribery of town officials to be the focus of my piece, I was much more interested in the fact that Sephardi ex-hooligans were turning to Ashkenazi Keter for salvation. The bribery was really nothing new. The only thing that made it unique was that it exposed the racism of our two Jewish communities. Moks and Pollacks had never really gotten along. We came from very different cultures.

One thing that first shocked me about Moroccans, but which I then grew to ignore and even find funny, was how they addressed people – not excluding their own friends or family members – when they were angry at them. They said some of the most disgusting things I ever heard.

“Die, die, suffer, you damn whore of your race!”

“A curse on the dirty bitch that shat you out of her cunt!”

“Fuck your Arab grandmother, fuck her grave!”

The worst thing one Moroccan could call another was an Arab. It was like a Hasidic Jew from one sect calling one from a rival group a *goy*. The most fascinating thing was that these curses would soon be forgotten. I suppose it was like the way we called each other ‘Son of a

bitch,' or told each other to 'fuck off,' and then went on with our lives. At least they were creative.

I hadn't been friends with Simon Benoualid in high school, but we knew each other. I called for an appointment and his secretary granted me an immediate meeting. She said he would see me as soon as I could get there. Ten minutes later, I was shown in to his lush and gaudy office. It was decorated in a Japanese motif by his wife, a sought-after interior decorator. She had a regular ad in the *Watch*.

"*Ah, regarde qui est là,*" he said. Look who's here.

He got up and came around the enormous mahogany desk. He put his hands on my shoulders and kissed me on each cheek.

"*Alors, ça va?*" How ya doin'?

"Good, good," I said.

"Please, sit down." Benoualid pointed to one of the three chairs which faced his own seat.

"I'm so happy you came to see me," he began, sitting down. "I was just going to call you."

It seemed like everybody was just going to call me.

"Really? Why? You want me to help you get a job at the paper?"

"Ahhh!" He laughed as he wagged his finger at me. "You're still a joker, huh?"

I wasn't sure what he meant by 'still.' So far, this was the most we had ever spoken to each other.

"I guess so," I said, trying to smile.

"Listen," he said. He leaned forward, elbows on his desk, and folded his hands under his nose like a Gentile reciting pre-meal grace. "This is a very serious matter and what you write, believe it or not, can make a big difference."

"Okay," I said. "Since we're dispensing with the small-talk, let me ask you a question. Why are you so interested in seeing this yeshiva go up in Hampstaed?"

"Is this on the record or off the record?"

"What do you prefer?" I asked, smiling.

"Off, of course," he smiled.

"Shoot."

"Give me your word," he said very seriously.

"*Je te jure sur la tête de ma grandmère,*" I invoked a classic Moroccan oath. I swear on my grandmother's head.

"I hope she's still alive to hear you," he laughed, satisfied with my sincerity. "Okay. The truth? Do you know my cousin, Emmanuel Essiminy?"

The name was familiar.

"Did he go to Achad Ha'am?" I asked.

"No, no. He went to Rambam, like a good Moroccan."

École Rambam was the only French-speaking Jewish school in Montréal and its student population was almost entirely Moroccan.

“Oh, Manny!” I said. “Sure. He still stealing hubcaps?” I joked.

“Not since Rabbi Becker got him to be a good boy,” he said soberly.

“Ohh..., I get it,” I said, thinking I got it.

“Not the whole story,” Simon replied. “It’s a little trickier than that. You know that my father and uncle own this business and, at least for a little while longer, I’m what you would call a ...umm...glorified employee?”

“Gotcha.”

“So, you see, if my uncle David sees that his son is becoming a good boy....”

“Is he?” I asked.

“So far, so good,” Simon smiled. “But building a yeshiva would be like insurance.”

“Is your uncle also into Keter?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he answered. “In fact, if this yeshiva thing gets off the ground, my uncle is thinking of retiring early and studying full-time.”

“Ahh,” I said. “And then you become C.E.O.”

“Now you get it,” Simon said. “Now, what we need from you is to emphasize the race thing. How Polacks have always shat on Moroccans, even in a case like this, even when we are trying to build bridges with Ashkenazis, to make a House of Torah together.”

“Uh, huh,” I said unenthusiastically.

If I wasn’t going to push my boss’s agenda, I certainly was not going to join the Moroccan camp.

“Well, as you can see,” Simon said, motioning to the small pile of papers in front of him, “I have a lot of work to do. Thank you very much for stopping by.”

I was finished. No matter what I wrote, I was finished.

I walked into Harpaz’s office and handed him the copy. He grabbed it with a big smile and read it. I had written and rewritten the article so many times, I knew it by heart. I moved my lips along with his as I stood on the wrong side of his cheap desk. When he finished the first paragraph, he scowled and barked:

“No, no, no! This is not what I wanted! ‘Socio-economic....Racial tension....Commitment to *rapprochement*....’ It’s bullshit! College bullshit! Get out! You’re fired!”

Thank God, I thought.

The following day, the front page article “Sephardis Suspected in Slimy Scam” appeared under my name. Those of you who read the *Watch* that day already know the contents of this libelous and false attack. For those of you who did not read it, you did not miss much. I will just say that it was exactly what Harpaz wanted. And, despite the fact that I wrote numerous letters to the *Watch* editor (none of which were

published) explaining that I was not the author of the piece, I was held accountable by the entire community for the *éxposé*. I got a call later that week from Simon Benoualid.

“*Fils ton*, what did we talk about?” He sounded disappointed, not angry.

“It wasn’t me,” I protested.

“You let me down,” he said. “I thought you were with us.”

“I am....I mean, I was....I....You know what I mean,” I said weakly, realizing he would never believe me.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I never had much faith in a fuck-up like you, anyways. But don’t worry, we still have some tricks up our sleeve.”

Unfortunately, they didn’t have enough tricks, or, maybe, the right ones. At the next town meeting, the council members voted unanimously to deny Keter’s rezoning request. They claimed that the proposed building would create traffic congestion and compromise the quality of life of Hampstaed’s residents. But everyone knew the truth. There was just too much publicity. If not for the story with my by-line, the item might have been pushed through quietly.

Later that night, the phone rang while I was sitting in front of the TV, depressed.

“Hallo. Iz dis de Yidish reporta?”

“Hey, it’s my Deep Throat. You’re calling me at home now?” I said angrily. “*Ver geharget*.” Go get killed.

“Such a thing to say. Vot you so engray about? You’re a hero. You saved us fin de khasidim.”

“I feel like shit,” I said.

“Don’t voory,” he said in a surprisingly soothing voice. “Von day you gonna realize vot a good deed you did. Be well, *boychik*.”

About a month later, my friend Ken called and asked if I wanted to fill in on his softball team. He played in a synagogue league and they were short one man for that evening. I got Peter to drive me over to Hampstaed park and he sat in the stands behind our bench and watched us clobber Beth Chalom.

“Play ball,” called the umpire.

“Wait,” said David Afriat, captain of the other squad. “First we have to *daven mincha*.”

Beth Chalom was Rabbi Becker’s synagogue. Since the establishment of the Keter House was blocked by town council, Becker had institutionalized his basement yeshiva. The softball team was made up of nine of his students. They were missing one person to complete the *minyan* for the afternoon prayer service.

“We need one more,” Afriat called. “You just have to stand here. You don’t even have to pray.”

“I’ll go,” I said to the ump and trotted across the field.

“Ah, *merci*.” Afriat shook my hand. “Brother....”

“Max,” I said.

I scanned the other eight guys. I didn’t know any of them. I hoped none of them knew me, the reporter that destroyed their yeshiva.

“*Baruch haba,*” he welcomed me. He whipped out a small *siddur* and began: “*Ashrey yoshvey vetekha....*”

After the final congregational chant of “*Amen,*” the ump, himself familiar with the liturgy of his forefathers, repeated “Play ball!”

“Good luck,” Afriat shook my hand and said, “*Khazak ubarukh.*”

He kissed his two middle knuckles and winked.

By the fifth inning, we had each been up to bat seven or eight times and our pitcher Neil was working on a shut-out. Then, in the bottom of the sixth, I hit a routine pop-fly which, against any half-decent team, would have been an easy out. I didn’t even bother dropping my bat and running to first. I was sure I was out. But the Beth Chalom left-fielder was playing way too deep. His entire team yelled at him to run in. With his eyes trained on the ball, he charged towards the infield at full speed. When he saw that he had come too far and the ball was going over his head, he twisted his body in an incredibly awkward manner, turned on one heel, and broke his right leg in four places.

Neil called 911 on his cell phone before the ball had even stopped rolling into the outfield. The EMNT guys got there within minutes, driving their truck right onto the field. After the injured player was hoisted onto the stretcher and driven off – a process which delayed the game for about half an hour – the umpire called for the resumption of the game.

“But ref,” protested Captain Afriat. “We’re missing a player.”

“Then you’ll have to play with eight,” the ump ruled.

“*Non, non! C’est pas juste!*” It’s not fair, cried members of the other team.

“Those are the rules,” the ump said. “Sorry.”

“We have to postpone the game,” suggested Afriat.

“If you can’t finish the game,” the umpire said, “then you’ll have to forfeit.”

“*C’est quoi, ‘forfeit?’*” asked Afriat’s catcher.

“It means you lose,” the ump explained.

“No, no, hey, come on, ref. That’s not fair,” Afriat yelled, raising his hands over his head.

“First of all,” said the ump, “you call me ‘ump,’ not ‘ref.’ This isn’t hockey. And second, those are the rules.”

I could tell that my teammates were beginning to lose their patience. Let’s either continue the game or go home. Our third baseman, more exasperated than the rest of us, and less tolerant of foreign cultures and their understanding of the rules of the great American pastime, said: “I guess they don’t have baseball in Morocco.”

He had muttered his comment pretty softly and it wouldn't have caused much of a commotion had it passed without further comment. Unfortunately, Peter, from his position in the grandstand behind our dugout, heard the remark and broke out in his trademark cackle.

"Hyuk, hyuk, hyuk!"

I was still standing by home plate, holding on to my bat.

"What the fuck did he just say?" Afriat scowled.

This made Peter laugh even louder.

Neil must have pushed redial before getting into it, because the police showed up about three minutes after the first punch was thrown. I had crawled up to the bleachers and shared Peter's beer. We sat with the bat across our laps, just in case, while the brief race war erupted beyond our feet, on the other side of the fence.

"You know, Peter," I said. "You *are* an asshole."

"Yeah," he replied, taking a swig. "Like, it's *my* fault."



GAIL GHAI is a graduate of the University of Alberta, teacher, poet and Pushcart Prize nominee. Her poems, translations and reviews have appeared in *Epiphany*, *The Malahat Review*, *JAMA*, *Shenadoah* and *Larger than Life*. The author of three chapbooks, she now resides in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

## Gail Ghai / **Three Poems**

### **January Thaw**

It was almost slow motion  
     in the way I started to slide  
 off the mattress.  
     Your dexterous fingers missing  
 my thigh, knee, femur  
     but your alert palm  
 caught me by the ankle  
     and you yanked my body back  
 across the pastel sheets.  
     Again, you rescued me from falling-  
 falling out of my life  
     but not before,  
 in my upside down posture,  
     I got a topsy-turvy view of the wall,  
 our new December painting of Pittsburgh.  
     Splashes of Pollock, his swirled violence:  
 stains of a sexual cherry, hard strokes of cobalt,  
     mica smears of whiskey,  
 and a burnt umber pain,  
     all arched as if you painted on the floor,  
 as if your own muscular energies  
     had broken some boundary,  
 and all the colors of alcohol  
     had damned through.

## A Blue Stillness

If I come to you, if I come  
to your summer pond  
will you show me  
the pair of Great blue herons  
that roam among your amber reeds  
with their stilt-tall legs?

Those marsh dwellers  
that waded into your water  
the way I wandered  
into your waiting  
that winter of eggshell trees  
when we drifted, drifted down,

when we measured our bodies  
against the coldness.  
Which one of us whispered—  
do you know  
what this  
will ask of us?

If I come to you, if I come to your summer pond  
will you show me the pair of Great blue herons  
motionless at the water's edge?  
Their buttery eyes, their golden bills,  
their cobalt bodies curved into each other,  
a still blue oneness.

## White Asparagus

For years he talked about the white asparagus,  
 those milky stems he savored along the Amalfi Coast.  
*Succulent as breasts*, he claimed, a man not given  
 to hyperbole or excesses of the simile.

When you're there, I'll feed you those pale stalks  
 with shrimp and Chardonnay.

Today I find it for the first time, in Safeway,  
 fresh as air, it rests next to its green cousins.

Like an albino relative it's shockingly snow-white!

But why no welcoming signs?

No candles? No red pepper carpet?

I just can't stay silent, not after years of hearing  
 those tender shoot stories.

*Look*, I point out to the couple fingering the radicchio:

*White asparagus!*

They nod with cautious patience the way you do  
 when you encounter a deranged person.

But the young cashier listens politely.

She stops cracking her gum,  
 angles her auburn pony tail.

*Cool. White Asparagus.*

*Gotta check the code.*

JILL MANDRAKE, who rides a really snazzy showpiece of a motorcycle and works in the downtown Simon Fraser University library, is a Vancouver writer of long standing. "Silent Night 2001" distills the highlights of a family get-together, in order to make it through the season, she informs us.

## **Silent Night 2001**

**Jill Mandrake**

AN ALARMING smell came out of the spare room at my mother's place. I ran in to have a look. My teenage nephew had just pulled his snow boots off.

Even though it was cold outside, my mother and I took a stroll to the playground. She was tired so we sat on the teeter-totter. It was the first time I had been on a teeter-totter without feeling as though my life were at stake. I am forty-six years old.

My brother called long distance. I decided, finally, to open up about my personal life. I talked five minutes before realizing the phone was dead. A Christmas storm had shorted out the telephone wire.

STEVEN MICHAEL BERZENSKY (Mick Burrs) is now the subject of a documentary feature film in the making, one called *A Real Live Poet*; it's being produced by Wolfsun Productions of Regina. His most recent collection is *The Names Leave the Stones: Poems New & Selected* (Coteau Books). Originally from Los Angeles, he has been a resident of Yorkton, Saskatchewan since 1985.

## Steven Michael Berzensky / **Two Poems**

### **Sonnet for My Dreamgiver**

When I walk into an unfamiliar place  
 whose shoes are these in which I step? Whose light  
 makes the strange scenery shine? Whose dream  
 is this when it does not seem  
 to be only mine?

Am I a visitor to a land unknown?  
 Or does this sleeping body serve as host  
 to my guest who takes over in the night?

Push my shadow aside, climb right in.  
 Don't bother to tap on my pillowed face  
 or ring the chimes of these sheltering bones.

Guide me to another time, another space.  
 Slip your dream beneath my skin  
 with the stealthy smoothness of a ghost.

## What Is Preserved in Dreams

Words evaporate when you wake, as if the lines  
someone wrote to you were washed away by rain.  
Or the book's unopened that you found, its cover red  
and trimmed in gold, propped up on a sandy shore  
beside a meadow more green than green.

A mountain dissolves, whose rough terrain  
was made of gray and glowing stone. And you'd swear  
the ground now faded was solid beneath your feet.

But outside's inside when you sleep. A dream enshrines  
a landscape or a room so you'll ask: what does it mean?  
Some holy sites are made of such enlightened air.

And someone loved is never dead  
when she or he steps through an open door –  
or waves to you down an incandescent street.

ERNEST HEKKANEN wrote this story for John Frem's *Bolts of Fiction*, a monthly reading event which takes place at El Cocal in Vancouver. The theme for that month was The Silk Road.

## Along the Silk Road

Ernest Hekkanen

ON THE ONE-HUNDRED-and-second day of my bicycle trip along the former Silk Road, under a sky as unequivocally blue as the eyes of my Finnish grandmother, the sun as scorching as a white-hot stove plate, the landscape as rugged as any I had witnessed, with jagged outcrops of rock suddenly tearing away from the mountainsides and tumbling into the valley below, where little vegetation dared to grow and then only the meanest and stingiest of varieties, I was struck quite forcefully by the silence, which was not the sort of silence that simply dwells, but rather the kind that is imposed as though by the azure heavens. But then, that looming silence was broken by what sounded like metal rattling across the flat plain of the valley, coming toward me from the northwest, I judged, as though hurled from shadows that stood like gnarled sentinels in the deepest, craggiest folds of the mountains to my left.

I stopped pedaling my mountain bike when I heard the rattling metal sound and stood straddling the bar, not afraid, really, but suddenly roused to the point of concern by the sound which was like a stack of corrugated metal sheeting being dragged quite violently across the uneven terrain. I had been told not to swerve from the road – to stay strictly on it and not to veer as much as an iota, so, to some extent, I was a sitting duck. Well, a bicycle saddle-sitting duck, anyway. I wiped from my brow the sweat that had not been soaked up by my headband and reached into the small nylon pouch affixed to the handlebars. I found the plastic bottle containing the salt pills, jiggled one out into the palm of my hand and washed it down with tepid water from the bottle se-

cured to the strut between my legs – just enough of a sip to get the pill to go down my throat.

The rattling metal sound was getting closer and, as I now perceived, it was accompanied by two rooster tails of dust that rose up into the air. The rooster tails were coming toward me and although at ground level they were separated by a distance of maybe ten meters, they combined into one large dust cloud shaped by invisible hands into a kind of dragon, which soon wandered off to the south, I believe it was.

I had been told to stay strictly on the road and not to veer from it as much as an iota, and so there I stayed, listening to the corrugated, sheet-metal sound advancing in my direction, watching the rooster tails that funneled up from the rugged floor of the valley. It looks like the local welcoming committee, I thought to myself. Had I been a smoker, it would have been time to light up a cigarette.

As the corrugated metal sound drew nearer, I was able to make out that it was being produced by two vehicles bouncing rather rapidly across the terrain. My throat was getting dry in anticipation of what was going to occur and so I had another little sip of tepid water before replacing the bottle in its holder. At a point about twenty meters away from the former Silk Road, the vehicles diverged quite dramatically, as though to cut off escape routes to the back and front of me. By that time, I was able to see the dark, craggy-faced men in the broken windows of the vehicles, one of which was a modified Toyota LandCruiser with a machinegun mounted on the hood and no glass where the windshield should have been. Another machinegun was mounted on the roof, and sticking up through a hole in the roof was a man gripping the trigger. The other vehicle was a Nissan quarter-ton pickup, built for the human race, as they say in the ads. It, too, came equipped with a couple of machineguns. Dark, craggy-faced men were jammed in the front seat and the bed of the truck, some of them wagging their tongues in that strident war-cry of theirs.

Just my luck, I thought, putting on a brave face. I was now cut off *and* a sitting duck. I dismounted from my bicycle and raised my hands above my shoulders, to demonstrate that I meant them no harm.

The right rear door of the Toyota LandCruiser opened with a grating sound and out stepped a fellow dressed in a khaki combat shirt and those zoot-suit-looking trousers that are traditional. His head was wrapped in a black length of cloth. Men of similar demeanor piled out on the opposite side of the LandCruiser, as well as from the back of the Nissan quarter-ton pickup truck, some glowering, some with sun-wrinkled smiles on their faces. My face was as craggy and dark as theirs, after one-hundred-and-two days of bicycling under the eye of the sun, only I bet I had a lot more bug bites on my puss than they did on theirs. Unlike the dark brown or black hair on these gentlemen, mine had been blanched almost white by the sun's rays.



Did I have butterflies in my stomach? Damn right, I did.

In straps hanging from their shoulders or clasped roughly in their hands, I saw Kalashnikovs and M16s, enough of them to start a small war.

“*Hyvää päivää,*” I said.

The men fanned out on either side of me in the road, looking tough and unwelcoming.

“You’re Russian, no?” said the man with the headgear. His left eyebrow was partly missing. A scar had been left behind.

“No, not Russian. Finnish.”

“Finnish?”

“Yes, from Finland,” I said. “All I’m doing is bicycling through these parts.”

“Why do you speak English, then?”

“Why do you speak it?” I asked.

He jabbered in his language to the other men, in knife-sharp syllables heightened by the rough, jocular sound of his voice. Two of his comrades had begun to examine my bicycle.

“Finland fights the Russians, no?”

“Finland fights Russia, yes.”

He spoke in his language and suddenly there were guffaws all around. By now, one of the men had taken my bicycle for a little spin. “Good bicycle,” said the ringleader. “Costs much money, huh?”

“Many Euros, yes,”

“Finland fights Russia, no?”

“Yes, whenever it can.”

“So, why do you look like a Russian, then?”

“I don’t. I look like a Finn,” I insisted, wishing all of a sudden that my grandmother hadn’t come from Karelia, where she had been raped by Russian soldiers prior to making her way overland to Lieksa, back during the Winter War of 1939.

One of my assailants had taken my bicycle for a fairly lengthy ride down the former Silk Road.

“I hope he will bring back my bicycle,” I said. “I need it in order to get home.”

“Finland fights Russia, no?”

“Yes.”

“Can you prove you’re not Russian?”

I showed him my passport.

“This says Suomi,” he said, looking up into my eyes with his dark brown eyes.

“Suomi is the Finnish word for Finland.”

The commander whistled sharply at the men who were taking my bicycle for joy rides. He yanked his head as if to tell them to bring the

bicycle back to our vicinity. “Because you fight the Russians, we will only take the wheels.”

“The wheels?”

“Those round things on your bicycle. Those things that roll you along.”

“But my bicycle needs them in order to roll.”

The men brought back my bicycle. The commander said something in his language and immediately two men set to work on my bicycle, removing the nuts that fastened the wheels to the frame, with wrenches that materialized from somewhere inside their garments.

Were there butterflies in my stomach? You bet there were.

When the men had finished removing the wheels from my bicycle, the commander said, “Thank you for the wheels. We will be on our way now.”

I stood looking at the frame of my bicycle, which the men had left standing on its forks on the shoulder of the Silk Road. Watching my assailants getting into their vehicles and taking off across the valley floor in the direction whence they had come, I gave an immense shrug, hefted the frame of my bicycle onto my right shoulder and proceeded down the road.

## Ω

On the one-hundred-and-third day of my bicycle journey along the former Silk Road, I was forced to carry my bicycle on my right shoulder, because the wheels had departed quite forcefully the day before. I was walking through the same mean, stingy-looking terrain, the sun beating down on my head, sweating fiercely in the heat, wondering why, in the first place, I had decided to inflict such misery on myself, when I could have been home in Finland now, lying in the shade of a birch grove, birdsong sweet in my ears, my girlfriend, Kaija, lying beside me, the summer day lasting well into the night, when, all of a sudden, I heard the sound of corrugated sheet metal being dragged quite violently across the rugged terrain and saw two plumes of dust rising in the air, and I thought to myself, shit, not another welcoming committee.

I had been told to stay strictly on the road and not to deviate from it as much as an iota, and so there I waited. I set my bicycle down on its forks on the shoulder of the road and waited for the vehicles with the machineguns mounted on them to close in on me. It turned out to be the same band of men as on the previous day. Cutting off escape routes to the front and rear of me, they stopped their vehicles in a cloud of dust that took several seconds to settle. Then, just like the day before, they got out of the trucks and fanned out around me, exhibiting a wealth of small arms – enough to start a war.

“Ah, we meet again,” said the ringleader.

“Yes, we meet again,” I said.

“You have come such a small ways. What is the problem?”

“The problem is my bicycle,” I told him. “I should be riding it, but instead I’m carrying it. You see, it has no wheels.”

“You should get some wheels for it. Surely, a rich man like yourself can afford to put wheels on his bicycle.”

“Have you got any wheels you’d like to sell me?”

“No. We drive the trucks you see over there. They’re made in Japan.”

“They look like they’ve been modified to suit the terrain.”

The ringleader laughed. Several of his men were now going through the saddlebags on my bicycle frame, removing the contents and throwing them into cloth bags.

“So, what will your friends be leaving me with?” I asked him.

“Not much,” he said, lifting his lip in a snarl. “We will leave you with your bicycle though, in case you run across some wheels you can buy for it.”

“Thanks, that is very kind of you.”

He prodded me with the nose of his Kalashnikov. “Fancy duds.”

“If you like them, they’re yours,” I said. “You’d look really great in Spandex, I bet.”

“Yes, I like what you have on. Take it off.”

“You must be joking,” I said.

“I never joke.” He shook his piece of hardware. “If anything jokes, it is this right here.”

“My Spandex is yours,” I said.

I stepped out of my Spandex and held it out to him. He growled something in his own language and one of his comrades took the Spandex and stuffed it into a cloth bag. The men stood around, laughing at me. I was naked except for my shoes and my hip pack, which contained all my papers. After having a good laugh, the men piled into their vehicles and left. I stood listening to their rattletrap vehicles from Japan rattling off across the terrain, and then I hoisted my bicycle frame onto my right shoulder and headed off down the road in the general direction of Finland.

My bike was much lighter now that everything had been removed from the saddlebags.

## Ω

On the one-hundred-and-fourth day of my bicycle trip along the Silk Road, the same thing occurred all over again. The vehicles rattled like sheet metal across the arid terrain, cutting off escape routes to the front and back of me, and then the men got out, with smirks on their dark

faces – their arms, chests and shoulders laden with ammunition and mean-looking hardware.

“You are making less and less progress every day,” observed the man in the black headgear. “At this rate, your transit visa will expire before you get to the border.”

The ringleader’s English was improving with each passing day. I guess the old adage about practice making perfect has some truth to it, after all.

“I’m trying my hardest to get there by the specified time,” I said, “but I keep running into difficulties along the way.”

He glanced at the unremitting blue sky where the sun was staring down at us. “In heat as fierce as this, you should be wearing clothes.”

“Have you got some you’d like to sell me?”

He talked in his language to his comrades and they all began to laugh.

“No, we don’t have any clothes to sell you,” he told me. “We are very poor people around here, and all we have to sell is what we can scratch from the earth, and that isn’t much.”

“I sympathize with you.”

He looked at my feet in the dirt of the Silk Road. “Nice shoes.”

“Yes, and I hope they will get me to the border before my transit visa runs out,” I told him.

“On your feet, they look very nice. I wonder how they would look on mine.”

“Even better, I bet.”

He pointed his Kalashnikov at my feet. “Why don’t you take them off and give them to me,” he said.

I did as requested. He growled something in his language and one of his comrades came forward to take my shoes from me. One of the other men picked up my bicycle frame and stuck it on his right shoulder.

“Now, you look like Adam right out of your Christian Bible,” the ringleader said, and then there was a round of guffaws. When they had finished laughing at me, they got into their modified Japanese vehicles and drove off.

## Ω

On the one-hundred-and-fifth day of what had now turned into a walking tour along the Silk Road, the same scene played itself out all over again. I thought, on this occasion, that the band of men in the modified Japanese vehicles had come either to take my hip pack or to take my life. Instead, they forced me at gunpoint into the Toyota LandCruiser.

“So, where are we going?” I asked the man in the black head garb.

“Down the road.”

“To where?”

“Soon, you will find that out,” and from that point on, everyone maintained a gruff silence – even yours truly. I thought about my sister, my mother and my father, and I said a silent farewell to my sweetheart, Kaija. By now, we were traveling down the Silk Road at pretty good speed. Both vehicles were sending up rooster tails of dust and, because the LandCruiser was bringing up the rear, the men in our vehicle had to suck down the dust created by the Nissan. Here, the Silk Road was awash with ripples and potholes and so the ride was a pretty rough one. However, because it seemed as though it might be the last ride I would ever be taking, I tried to enjoy it as much as I possibly could.

Were there butterflies in my stomach? You bet there were.

We drove for quite a while, all the men in my vehicle maintaining a staunch silence. As we were nearing the crest of a hill, we slowed down and turned right onto a rutted road and drove on for a while longer. In my mind, this was where I would be yanked out of the LandCruiser – to have a bullet put through my skull.

Suddenly, the first vehicle pulled to a stop off to the left, and then our vehicle stopped, too, but somewhat off to the right, in a cloud of dust that enveloped both vehicles. Even before the dust had had time to settle, I was told by the ringleader to get out of the modified Toyota LandCruiser and follow him.

I began to say my final goodbyes to the world at large. We walked over a knoll and through some craggy rock formations before reaching what looked like a village of crude stone houses, and there, in front of me, leaning on its kickstand, was my mountain bike, now completely reassembled – with the saddlebags fully loaded down, it appeared to me. My Spandex had been draped over the seat and my shoes sat empty on the ground at the foot of the kickstand. Suddenly, there was music all around me, the traditional music of the region, echoing off the rocky walls of the landscape. People emerged from the doorways of the huts, mouths full of laughter, obviously because they found my nakedness so mirthful.

The ringleader slapped me on the back with his palm – a heavy slap, it was, too. His mouth erupted with guffaws.

“So, what do you think? Is this not a good time to celebrate?” he said. “Your bike, it is all better now. I even had my men clean it up. Come, let’s have a feast. The people of this village have all of these rocks to thank for their survival and that’s at least something, huh?”

And again, he slapped me on the back.

“I thought you were going to kill me,” I said, feeling vastly relieved.

“It was a good joke, was it not?”

“I’ll say.”

“You better get into your clothes now,” he said. “The women and girls of this village aren’t used to the sight of so much male nakedness.”

I donned my clothes and joined in the celebration. It turned out that the ringleader had attended The University of Wisconsin-Madison and still had fond memories of pranks pulled by fraternity brothers. I had taken a degree at York University, just north of Toronto, Ontario.

“It is a small world, no?” he said.

“It is a small world, yes,” I said.

ROBERT COOPERMAN'S *The Widow's Burden* (Western Reflections) was a finalist for the *Foreword Magazine* Book of the Year. *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* won the Colorado Book Award for Poetry for 2000. His work has appeared in *Windsor Review*, *Ariel* and *Sulphur River Poetry Review*.

## Robert Cooperman / **Two Poems**

### **The Four Women**

"[My father] used to say there were four women in every man's heart. The Maid in the Meadow, the Demon Lover, the Stouthearted Woman, the Tall and Quiet Woman." E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*

On our honeymoon  
 you were my Maid in the Meadow:  
 we'd hiked to a river  
 beyond a Colorado ghost town  
 and let the stream cool our toes,  
 the sky – between canopies of aspen –  
 more electrically blue  
 than Italian Old Masters  
 imagining the marriage of Cana.

Now, years later,  
 you're my Stouthearted Woman,  
 steel in your eyes,  
 like the time you stared down  
 a Texan huge as a longhorn,  
 intent on beating my head in,  
 while I sat, shocked  
 that I could offend by asking him  
 to please take off his stetson  
 in front of us in a crowded theater.

"You're a lucky man,"  
 his forefinger stabbed  
 like a Bowie blade,  
 an inch from my face,  
 as he slouched back down, hatless,  
 maybe regretting the only women  
 he'd ever known were Demon Lovers.

That night, in our big hotel bed,  
 you were tall and quiet,  
 and oh so lovingly fierce.

## Anxiety

“She was always so timid,”  
my mother reminisced  
about her mother,  
not like my grandfather,  
who even in old age  
thundered like a dark cloud.  
“When he said no to us,”  
my mother laughed, “we trembled.  
But when I said no to you,  
I was already giving in.”

Strange, how parents  
see themselves: I recall  
an afternoon I drove her  
on some errands  
and was about to parallel park  
when a driver stole the space.  
Before I could jump out to argue,  
she was shaking a small, furious  
fist in the usurper’s face, shouting  
for all of Brooklyn to hear his treachery.

“Don’t let anyone take advantage  
of you again!” she slapped me,  
my rival routed like a whimpering mutt.  
When I asked if I could borrow  
the car that night, she smiled,  
“Not until you deserve it.”

Later, I heard her  
and my father arguing.  
It hit me years later  
something had been simmering  
like sewage gas between them,  
her cowardly son a hapless bystander.



BETH TILSTON has always enjoyed reading, but it wasn't until the age of 15 that she realized she could put pen to paper, she informs us. She works in various places as an ESL teacher, most recently in Tokyo, Japan and Brighton, England. She currently lives in Brighton. She is 23.

## Ink Snapshots

### Beth Tilston

#### *New York, USA*

I SMILE as I remember that night, such a long time ago now, when I was corrupted, *Valley of the Dolls* style, in a dimly lit kitchen in New York State. With pills like children's teeth, and that woman whose name I never knew. The woman with the rich husband, and the dark hooded eyes, and that tongue. I think of that era, of eyeliner, and parties and city lights, and all the things that those avocado-colored appliances must have witnessed.

#### *Rio De Janeiro, Brazil*

I'm going to catch total shit when I come down. I'm sure that bratty little sister of mine will have ratted on me by now. You see, I met this guy on the beach. I thought he was a bit of a sleaze really. He was one of those old-time Brazilians with greased hair and sharp suits and a dangerous look about them. All the guys nowadays wear Tommy Hilfiger. He said he owned a plane, and would I like to fly in it with him? I replied, "You want me to come and see your cockpit?" and he smiled, so I went with him.

It turned out that he actually did own a plane, so that's where we are now. He let me take the controls, but then it all went a bit crazy so he took them back again. He asked me how old I was and I said "twenty-one" and hoped that he couldn't see that I was lying. My Mamma wouldn't understand why I wanted to fly in the plane. She would think

it was 'cos the sleaze was paying me, but it wasn't. I just wanted to be able to look down on my city. Not many people get the chance to see everything clearly. I am glad that I took it.

*Los Angeles, USA*

I became famous so that I could get to know Morrissey. There are no two ways about it. That is the harsh reality. He got under my skin one day when I was about sixteen and he never really left. I suppose everything I did was geared towards the day that I would meet him and he would be my friend. I tried a few careers, but finally decided that photography was the one for me. And that is what I am doing in this LA street today. Waiting to take pictures of Steven Morrissey. I should say, though, I'm pretty respected. People, famous people, ask for me to take their pictures. You probably know some of the pictures that I have taken.

And how am I feeling, you may ask? Well, strange. For one, I can't actually believe that he exists and that he walks in the street. Maybe he'll send his alien brother or something. Shit, here he comes.

"Hi, I'm Morrissey."

"I'm Jack."

"So, where do you wanna do this, then?"

"Uh, there are some pretty cool abandoned warehouses about ten minutes west of here."

We zoom off towards the warehouses. Me and Morrissey. He's looking moody in the bland sunlight. I venture a question.

"So, why was it that you moved to LA?"

"Cos people in Manchester kept looking at me when I laughed. There's only so long you can be northern and depressed."

"Uh huh." Snap. Snap.

"I became this kind of totem for people in England. Everything's OK if Morrissey's still depressed. You get sick of that. I wanted to come out here where being depressed is weird and you can fix it with a little pill."

"OK."

I drive him to his lunchtime restaurant and watch him go through the door.

*Southport, England*

My mum holds my hand as I cry into my pillow. But that doesn't matter, because one day she won't be here any more. One day I won't be here any more. Yesterday was safe, but today the world turned bad. Yesterday I was playing with Jemma by the pond in the back garden,

but today things are so much bigger than I thought they were. It's like I am fighting my way out of a pillowcase in the dark.

*London, England*

I have a friend called Cate. Not that I have ever met her, I mean she is a friend that I met over the Internet. She is one of those new American girls that favor thick, '50s style glasses and drastically short fringes<sup>1</sup> which expose their freckled foreheads. She permanently looks as if she has just finished making intellectualism a pornographic activity. She looks as if she had once been into alternative music, but is now content just to stay in with Rilke and Kierkegaard and "Oranges are not the only fruit," by Jeanette Winterson.

She has a web cam, that's what I am looking at now. She broadcasts herself twenty-four hours a day. She tells me that she likes to be looked at, because then she feels less alone. "NYC," she says, "is the loneliest place in the world." She spies on people in her apartment block and makes up little stories about their lives and loves.

I mostly like to watch her sleep. Her face reminds me of my own. It's like peeking through the door of my child's bedroom and seeing the two faces sleeping soundly, free of weight and thoughts. It's like watching an alternate version of myself, sleeping and luminescing on the other side of the globe.

*Portsmouth, England*

An officious, military-looking man in the town-square saw that we had briefly stopped and began a stilted one-way conversation with us. He seemed very anxious to tell us about the great pointless wonders of our city. Jamie patiently held my hand while this guy fidgeted and joked, but then even Jamie got bored. "Look, Carol, we have to get to Tesco's before it shuts, let's go."

Just then, the guy points to a gray cement modernist-style building with skinny little windows. To be honest with you, it's a building that I have always found ugly. Too much concrete.

"Not many people know," he said, "that the windows of this building spell out 'Welcome to Portsmouth' in binary code. Do you know what binary code is?"

I told him that Jamie was a software engineer, so code was a main topic of conversation at our house.

"Two windows together are a nought and a window on its own is a one."

---

<sup>1</sup> British English "fringe". American English "bangs".

We stared at this secretive building together. Then Jamie tugged on my sleeve. "Come on, Carol, I'm meeting Ray tonight."

*Vancouver, Canada*

I wake up after a night spent struggling with the effects of jetlag. The sun is streaming through the window. My head feels like shit. I shiver as I pull back the covers and blindly stumble into the kitchen to make some coffee. I listen to the ansa-machine as I stir in the milk.

"You have eight new messages," it informs me. I listen to them. My mother wants me to go and see her when I have the time. She says she misses me and thanks me for the presents that I FedEx-ed her from Britain.

There is one message that makes me laugh. Someone obviously getting the wrong number, apologizing and then laughing with a friend at the other end of the line.

I finish making the coffee and go and sit in the living room. Everything is the same way I left it three weeks ago, except fresher-seeming for my not having seen it for a while. I can smell the way my house smells to other people. It smells cold and fresh, like perfume that has been deep-frozen. I look out at the yard, and at my car. It feels good to be back in the New World.

*Manchester, England*

I walked past a drunken man, a tramp with fresh cuts on his face. I was carrying a polystyrene cup of coffee that I spilt all over my hand, causing me to wince in pain and swear loudly. I transferred the cup to my other hand so as not to get the coffee on my shirt. I looked at the man again. He was crouching on the floor, leaning against the wall. He was looking at a brand new book. It hadn't even been opened. He was cradling it in his upturned palms, just looking at it. He was treating it with such reverence, like a newborn baby.

Eileen from the office came running up to me, breathless, her long '70s style skirt whipping around her slim ankles.

"Afternoon, Mr. Johnson, how are you today?"

"Fine, Eileen, fine," I replied.

We walked towards our little concrete building, chatting about the love lives of our friends and colleagues.

*Los Angeles, USA*

I brush the crumbs from the Brie and tomato sandwich I have just eaten onto the gray, plasticized gallery floor. It is a strange time of day, just

after lunch, when no one seems to visit and I am alone with gallons of roaring silence and the dust motes that swirl in the sunlight. I think about the artist that I am to meet this afternoon, and the fiery paintings that he wants me to hang on these walls.

I remember the dream that I had last night about a tiger that poured itself with liquid ease through an open window of my bedroom. It paced around with terrifying presence while I did my best to pretend that I didn't exist. The dimmed orange light on the bedside table glinted in its eyes and made me think of mysterious secrets and dark, decadent worlds. Worlds like Paris in the '20s. Fireworks against a black velvet sky, a sky always threatening to go dark.

STEPHEN B. WILEY has practiced law in New Jersey since 1954, after graduating from Princeton and Columbia Law School. He began a study of poetry under Dr. Laura Winters at the College of St. Elizabeth in 2002 and recently began submitting his work for publication.

## Stephen B. Wiley / **Four Poems**

### **Time to Rest**

I couldn't part  
with my round-bladed worn shiny  
well sleeved and riveted gently beveled  
slightly angled amply eared  
silky smooth hickory-handled  
stand-up digging shovel

It now rests against the wall  
in the garage of our new townhouse  
no more barn with a garden tool room  
no more earth to be turned or let fly  
no more postholes to be dug for fences  
no more graves to be dug for dogs and cats  
fallen birds and squirrels  
or a fawn that couldn't get its hindquarters  
through the picket fence and died trying

Nor could I part with my axe  
so sharp and tough and delicately weighted  
Flashing into dry oak at 100 mph  
it was a church bell for the neighborhood  
Slice a thick root in a posthole like fresh bread  
it rests side by side with my shovel

I gave away the iron garden rake  
the loppers the weed whip with no handle grip  
the edger the flat shovel the telescoped trimmer  
the spring rake the spade the crowbars the hoe  
the splintered-handle pickaxe the pitchfork  
the unnamed weed rooter I never quite figured out  
even the big sledge and all its wedges

## To My Hands

Yes yes I do admire your solo work  
 how you throw a ball  
 write your name  
 tip your hat

And I'm proud that things are named for you  
 giving a hand to help  
 handing down your outgrown clothes  
 even handing over something you shouldn't have

But I admire you more together  
 when you wash each other in the basin  
 clip each other's nails  
 or rub each other in anticipation  
 and it's something quite special  
 when you reach outside yourselves  
 to row a boat  
 or play a sonata  
 or lift a child

## Roundings

First week in July we get a first cutting  
 nice alfalfa for the herd  
 A few sunny days  
 row it up and bail it  
 then pitch those bails onto the wagon  
 and up into the mow

In winter the herd comes in  
 the farmer breaks open bails each day  
 and drops hay down into the pen

Come spring vacation I have a job again  
 cleaning out the barn after the herd goes out  
 The alfalfa has done its work  
 and now I do mine  
 Two feet thick manure to be spaded out  
 loaded on the kicker  
 and spread on the alfalfa fields

First week in July we get a first cutting  
 nice alfalfa for the herd

## Short Order

Almost any diner will do  
Truth is we favor the shiny kind  
like the Oasis  
diners that used to be busses  
real American dog-wagons  
no tables just counter stools and booths

You give the waitress a wordy order  
and you feel a little stupid  
as she scratches a mark on her pad  
and calls it to the short order cook  
in three words tops  
asking "milk or cream" as she moves on

A counter stool may mean  
you'll be served from the back  
but you get to watch the cook up close  
He might have forgotten to shave  
but he remembers the orders without a nod  
Fully focused and talking to no one  
he breaks eggs as he turns the potatoes  
scrapes the griddle with one hand  
while he reseasons it with the other  
alternates the potato weight to keep the bacon flat  
spins out the overeasys and the straight ups  
dips and flips the french toast  
and gently nurses the silver dollar pancakes  
to a bright brown glow



ERNEST HEKKANEN is Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. “Melancholy and Mystery of a Street” is the title story of a collection that will appear in the spring of 2004. It was borrowed from Giorgio de Chirico’s painting of the same name.

## Melancholy and Mystery of a Street

Ernest Hekkanen

1

IT WAS STILL fairly early in the evening, and the sky, which had been cloudless all day, was just now beginning to acquire that sad shade of blue that was always present an hour before night started to descend on the city.

Moments ago, Eduardo Morelli, a lawyer in his mid-forties, had finished eating a light meal of salad, ravioli and grated parmesan cheese, all tumbled together, and was now relaxing at the window of his second-floor flat, looking down at the street which struck him as awfully empty, particularly for this time of day.

He had watched shadows gather like pools on the east side of the buildings that flanked the narrow street. Now, as the sun began to settle with great finality over the sea, which he was unable to view from the windows of his flat, the shadows were lengthening diagonally across the street.

Where the street opened out into a cobblestone square much further down the block, a statue stood in the middle of a fountain, where it was sprayed by water throughout the day, and even though the corner of the farthest building put the statue out of view, he was able to see the long shadow that the statue always cast at this hour of the evening and which reminded him of a menacing giant pointing a spear up in the air, although, in reality, he knew that the statue was the sort typically found in these parts of the world – namely, that of a mighty general on horseback.

As Eduardo sat staring out the window, a girl of about eleven years entered from a side street, running after a bicycle hoop that she kept in

motion by periodically applying a stick to the rim. She was running fairly quickly, judging from the way her long hair flew out behind her. Her shoes clacked on the pavement and now and then, when the hoop hit a rough patch in the street, it would make a loud, bouncing noise. Each time the hoop did that, Eduardo expected to see it spin out of control, but the girl, who was obviously very good at responding to such challenges, kept the hoop firmly on course.

Eduardo knew from experience that the pavement was pitted and bumpy to the point of being quite dangerous to tread on by seniors or by women wearing shoes with spiked heels, and because of that he was amazed that the girl was able to keep the hoop rolling down the street with so much obvious finesse. He made a bet with himself that she would lose control of the hoop at least once before getting to the cobblestone square at the very end of the street. But she didn't.

All the way down the street to the square, the girl's shadow pursued her, like a tall, gaunt stick-person with undesirable intentions. When she reached the vicinity of the square, she entered the shadow cast by the statue of the general on horseback and her own shadow was consumed by the much larger one, and then, quite predictably, she disappeared from sight around the corner, although, because the city was so strangely quiet at this hour, Eduardo continued to hear the heels of her shoes clacking on the pavement and the hoop bouncing noisily across the cobblestones.

How was she able to maintain control of the hoop on such a rugged surface? he wondered. Was the hoop, in fact, suspended from the stick? Had it all been an illusion – from the very start, when he had first glimpsed the girl emerge from the side street, to the moment when she had disappeared from sight, down by the cobblestone square?

While pondering such questions, he noticed a much smaller shadow coming down the street, a shadow that seemed as though it was being cast by something quite low to the ground. Where the taller buildings had cast shadows completely across the pavement, the shadow of the creature would disappear, only to reappear somewhat further down the street.

By now, Eduardo had risen from his chair. He placed his hands firmly on the windowsill and leaned out into the warm evening air to get a better view of the creature that was producing such an erratic, rippling shadow on the pavement. Soon, he was able to identify the creature as a cat – a fluffy Persian cat that must be feeling awfully miserable in the heat which had come to envelop the city, Eduardo surmised. The movement of its body suggested a large but very agile caterpillar rather than an animal of the feline persuasion, and this Eduardo found rather curious, for some reason.

Every now and then, the Persian cat would stop in its tracks and proceed to turn its head this way and that, peering myopically at the

buildings that towered above it, as if to orient itself in the city; then it would hasten down the street again. By this time, the cat had traveled well over halfway down the pavement to the block of flats where Eduardo lived with his songbird, Rigoletto. Eduardo kept the songbird in an extremely large wire cage that sat on a tall, narrow table near the television set. The screen of the television flickered with colorful images he very rarely paid attention to, and the volume of the set was turned off so it wouldn't interfere with the lovely prattling of the songbird.

But about a month ago, Rigoletto had stopped singing – due, Eduardo felt, to the terrible heat which had descended on the city and which began to exhaust man and beast alike shortly after the sun rose each morning above the parched, brown hills to the east. Many times during the day, Eduardo felt like falling silent, too, but his job as Prosecuting Attorney made it impossible for him to do so. Fortunately, his office as well as the courthouse was air-conditioned, although to little effect during this period of scorching heat.

By now, the Persian cat had traveled down the street to a spot roughly below Eduardo's window. It stopped in its tracks in order to survey its surroundings and for the briefest moment, Eduardo found himself exchanging a glance with the cat – a glance that suggested recognition on the cat's part. Instantly, the cat regained its momentum and headed in the direction of the main entrance of the apartment building, which the concierge insisted on keeping wide open in order to cool off her suite, despite the fact that doing so was in direct contravention of the city's fire regulations.

When Eduardo saw the cat heading toward the entrance, he assumed that it belonged to a tenant who had recently moved into the building, but, in fact, that was the wrong conclusion to be reached, because, moments later, he heard the cat scratching at the door of his flat. When he opened the door he found the creature sitting on the gray-streaked marble floor of the hallway, looking at him with a silly grin on its face, a folded piece of paper lying at its feet.

Eduardo stooped to pick up the folded piece of paper. It was moist along the edge where the cat had gripped it and it bore marks made by the cat's teeth. He unfolded the paper and read the message written in the looping, beautiful scrawl of a woman.

Dear Signore Morelli,

The meow has gone out of my life. Do you think you could return it to me, please? I would be extremely grateful.

Yours very truly,  
Isabella

“Is Isabella your mistress?” Eduardo asked the cat.

The Persian cat blinked, and then went on staring at the lawyer.

“Are you the meow that’s being referred to in this note?” Eduardo said, trying in vain to communicate with the cat. “Am I supposed to return you to her?”

The cat simply stared at him.

“I don’t understand this message. Why would your mistress send you down the street to my apartment, only to have me return you to her? Is she being confined? Is she under some sort of duress? Is that it?”

The cat did not reply, nor did its expression change, indicating to Eduardo that it hadn’t understood any of the questions he had put to it. Eduardo’s suspicions were immediately aroused. He did not want to be led into a trap of some sort. And yet, his curiosity, being the heightened curiosity of a lawyer, had been piqued.

Without any further thoughts on the matter, Eduardo slipped his feet into his shoes and tied the laces. As he shut and locked the door behind him, he thought he heard the songbird, Rigoletto, beginning to sing – quite loudly and quite beautifully, too.

## 2

Keeping to the shadows on the west side of the street, Eduardo followed the cat down the pavement toward the cobblestone square. Whenever he was struck by indecision or lagged behind, the Persian cat would turn around to give him a look, as though offering encouragement.

Eduardo felt rather silly being led down the street by a cat and occasionally he would glance around to see if anyone was watching him. However, the street was empty of pedestrians and the windows of the apartment buildings on either side of the pavement didn’t reveal any signs of human life, although every window in every flat was wide open, curtains unfurling in the breeze.

When Eduardo arrived at the cobblestone square where the statue of the mighty general on horseback was being sprayed by water, he thought for a moment that he might have lost track of the Persian cat, as it had turned the corner of the last building nearly ten seconds earlier and, initially, he expected to catch sight of it slinking down a side street that was flanked by buildings matching in every detail the buildings on his street. However, the cat had veered off its course – over to a puddle where errant spray from the fountain was being carried by the breeze blowing in off the sea, which was now visible from one corner of the cobblestone square.

While Eduardo was waiting for the cat to refresh itself at the puddle, he heard the rattle of the bicycle hoop on the pavement and, glancing down one of the side streets, he saw the girl rolling the hoop in circles

very near the end of the block. Not long after that, he saw a woman lean out of a third-floor window and call to the girl in the street below.

"It's time for you to come inside, Rosa. Please stop what you're doing and come upstairs."

"In a minute," the girl replied, continuing to roll the hoop in circles.

"No, right this instant! I'm expecting a visitor to drop by very soon now and I'd like you to be settled in for the night."

Due to the unusual emptiness in the street and the cobblestone square, Eduardo was able to overhear the clarion voices of the mother and daughter, and although he found the exchange rather curious, he was mildly uneasy about having eavesdropped on what they were saying, due in part to the fact that it made him feel like an unwilling party to a family drama. After propelling the hoop in yet another circle, the girl seized it with her right hand and disappeared into the building, and the woman withdrew from sight.

By now, the Persian cat had finished refreshing itself at the puddle and was lying on its side on the cobblestones near the fountain, its head cocked at an odd angle, watching Eduardo with unblinking eyes.

"Is this the spot where I'm supposed to return you to your mistress?" Eduardo asked the cat.

The cat simply looked at him. Even though its fur was awfully long and bushy, the lawyer was able to see the cat's chest rising and falling in a vigorous manner. Truly, in such a heavy coat of fur, the cat must be feeling awfully miserable in the heat, Eduardo thought. He glanced around the square and then up and down the various streets radiating from it, hoping to catch a glimpse of the cat's mistress. The streets were devoid of human life.

Out of habit, Eduardo glanced at his wristwatch and saw that it was now getting to be quite late in the evening. He looked at the sky, only to discover that the sad shade of blue was deepening with the approach of night.

"I'll give your mistress ten more minutes," he told the cat. "If by then she hasn't come to claim you, I'm going to leave."

The cat blinked.

"To tell you the truth, my feline friend, I feel like this has been a terrible mistake. I feel like I've been deceived. But for what purpose? Why?"

Finally, the cat rose to its feet. It inclined its body by stretching its forepaws out as far as they would go and then rose in a wave-like motion. After that, the cat began to lick its fur. Several minutes passed and still no one had appeared in any of the streets radiating from the square. Eduardo had seated himself on the raised stone edge of the fountain. He was feeling ill at ease, due to the fact that he was wasting so much time on a frivolous matter. At that juncture, the cat stopped grooming itself

and quickly took off down the street, to where the girl had earlier been playing with the bicycle hoop.

Eduardo rose rather wearily to his feet and followed the cat. He pursued it with some trepidation, anticipating, even before the cat got to the block of flats where the girl with the hoop had gone indoors for the night, that the Persian cat would turn in at exactly the same entrance.

Because he was the Prosecuting Attorney, Eduardo had come to expect the worst from human beings. There was nothing that they wouldn't stoop to in order to perpetrate a crime, he had discovered during his long years of practice; and so, when the cat turned in at the open door where the girl with the hoop had disappeared only minutes before, he hesitated, with some alarm. His hearing became more acute. His body tensed much the same way a cat's body tenses upon spotting a mouse. He did not want to be led into a trap.

The interior of the building mirrored the one that Eduardo inhabited in every aspect except one and that had to do with the stairway that ascended to the floors above. When one went in through the main entrance, the stairway was to the right rather than to the left. Otherwise, the ornate balustrade and the gray-streaked marble steps were identical to those in his apartment building.

"How peculiar," he muttered to himself, following the cat up the stairs. At each landing, the cat sat waiting for him to catch up. As soon as the Prosecuting Attorney set foot on the landing, the cat hurried up the next flight of stairs, exhibiting a great deal more energy than down in the street, it seemed to Eduardo, whose heart was now beating rather rapidly.

Ascending the last flight of stairs to the third floor, Eduardo became aware of the deep, rich baritone of an opera singer performing in a language he didn't recognize, but which might have hailed from a country off the Gulf of Finland. Climbing the last few steps to the third floor, he saw the cat hurry past him on the other side of the ornate balustrade. He took a moment to watch where it was heading – directly toward the wide-open doorway which emitted the sounds of the deep, rich baritone voice, now being accompanied by discordant, clashing music that suggested a battle scene.

The hoop that the girl had propelled down the street was now leaning against the wall to the right of the wide-open door. The cat quickly glanced back at Eduardo, and darted in through the entrance. At that point, Eduardo stopped in his tracks, uncertain whether to go any further. From inside the flat came the voice of a woman fussing over the prodigal cat. She cooed in a saccharine, sentimental fashion, as though to an infant in diapers – the sort of utterances which set Eduardo's teeth on edge, mainly because he was reminded of himself when he spoke to Rigoletto in the wire birdcage.

Eduardo was certain now that he had heard Rigoletto break into song when he closed and locked the door of his apartment, and now, in retrospect, that song struck him like a warning note.

As he stood beside the balustrade, wondering whether to walk toward the door or to head down the stairs to the street, he heard the woman in the apartment say, "But, Mr. Puss-puss, where is our celebrated guest? What have you done with him? Have you left him behind in the dust?"

Eduardo's heart felt like skipping a beat. He could neither go forward nor retreat. He simply stood there, beside the balustrade, gazing in the direction of the doorway. A little while later, the woman appeared, holding the Persian cat to her bosom. When she saw Eduardo standing, motionless, beside the balustrade, her full red lips formed a smile not unlike that of the Mona Lisa. The smile created small, barely noticeable dimples in her cheeks.

"Signore Morelli!" she said. "What an unexpected pleasure!"

Eduardo remained where he was standing beside the balustrade. He took an alabaster-inlaid, silver cigarette case out of the breast pocket of his shirt, opened it and stuck a cigarette between his lips.

"Do we know each other?" he asked, lighting the cigarette.

"Several years ago, you prosecuted my husband," she informed him. "I am eternally indebted to you for that. You see, for me, he had come to represent everything that was brutal. Brutal, and yet elegant."

"Who was your husband?"

"That is of little significance, now. Please, come in. I would like to show you my deep appreciation."

"I came here in order to return your cat to you – as per the request in your note."

"Yes, and you did so with much gallantry, too, Signore Morelli. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart. Please, come in."

Eduardo drew some cigarette smoke down into his lungs.

"I'm afraid that is impossible," he said.

"Why is it impossible?"

"Because, in a few minutes, I'm scheduled to be somewhere else."

"Perhaps another time, then."

"Perhaps."

Upon climbing the stairs to his flat and letting himself in by the door, Eduardo discovered that the door to the birdcage had been flung wide open and that his songbird, Rigoletto, was nowhere to be seen, although, at one point in his search, he thought he heard Rigoletto singing

outside in the street and hurried over to the open window to see if he could spot the bird.

By that time, the sky had darkened quite dramatically. He could not discern where the song was coming from or whether, indeed, it was that of Rigoletto. In fact, the song might very well have been produced by a songbird occupying a cage in the flat directly across the street from his apartment. There, every light was burning very brightly in every window and the songbird in question was flitting about quite excitedly in its cage. However, there were no signs of human life.

Disappointed that he couldn't spot Rigoletto in the night-darkened street, Eduardo closed the door of the wire cage, turned up the volume of the television set and sat down to watch what was being offered on the screen. There, Eduardo saw a man not unlike himself, sitting alone at a window, directing his gaze down at a street not unlike the one outside his own window.

Indeed, the show seemed to be a dramatic reenactment of events he had just experienced. The man at the window saw a girl, about eleven years old, emerge from a side street, propelling a bicycle hoop that she kept in motion by periodically applying a stick to the rim. Girl and hoop hastened down a street now congested with pedestrians, and disappeared around the corner of a building at the very end of the block.

A little while later, a Persian cat came running down the street in the opposite direction. It darted this way and that, trying to avoid being stepped on by the feet of passers-by. At a spot roughly below the window where the man sat watching these events unfold, the cat sat down on the pavement and turned its head around until its gaze alighted on the man. Then, quite suddenly, that image was succeeded by one of a woman broadcaster elaborating on events.

“From what police have been able to gather, the Persian cat delivered a note that led to the fatal undoing of the celebrated prosecutor. He was lured into the apartment of a woman who had once been married to the crime boss, Luigi DeMeo. While engaged in the act of being notoriously elsewhere, the Prosecuting Attorney was stabbed several times in the back.”

Suddenly, the television screen was full of chaotic imagery. Eduardo saw the Prosecuting Attorney being wheeled on a stretcher out through the doorway of an apartment building. His body, obviously still alive, was pushed past a crowd and shoved into the back of a waiting ambulance.

“At the hospital, the well-known prosecutor was declared dead on arrival,” the woman broadcaster announced. “Witnesses reported that....”

The television screen flickered several times, and then went blank. Eduardo rose from the sofa, walked over to the set and banged on it with the butt of his fist. The television refused to come back on.



“Damn it,” Eduardo said.

Feeling extremely tired now, but also rather annoyed, he sat down on the sofa and stared at the blank screen. After several minutes, he began to think that he must have imagined the events unfolding on the screen; indeed, he seemed to recall that the television set had been out of order for some time now, perhaps as long as several weeks.

## 4

The next morning, Eduardo Morelli went to work as usual. Driving his Fiat downtown to the office, he noticed that the streets were unusually empty. But then, all of a sudden, it occurred to him that it was the month of August and nearly everyone was on vacation. That must account for the lack of people in the streets, he thought.

At both his office and the courthouse, there was a similar absence of people. That made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to proceed with his daily tasks and consequently, after several hours of fruitless labor, he quit work and went home.

Upon climbing the last flight of stairs to his flat, he made a rather gruesome discovery. Smears of blood and clusters of feathers covered the marble floor directly outside his door. Lying in the midst of the carnage was the mauled body of his songbird, Rigoletto. The head lay some distance from the body and the body looked as if it had been partly eaten. The door to Eduardo’s flat stood ajar. His heart began to pound rather wildly. Pushing the door back as far as it would go, he peered down the hallway before entering the flat. Keeping close to the wall, he headed toward the main living area.

Eduardo had barely set foot in the living room, when he spied the Persian cat lying like a gigantic caterpillar in the bottom of Rigoletto’s birdcage. Although mute, the television screen was flickering with colorful images. As soon as the cat saw Eduardo, it sprang to its feet, lurched out through the door of the wire cage and darted past the Prosecuting Attorney’s feet, but not before Eduardo spotted telltale signs of blood on the fur surrounding the cat’s mouth.

Eduardo did not experience anger. He went to the bedroom, where he kept a pistol in the drawer of the nightstand, checked to make sure that the weapon was loaded, and headed down the stairs to the street. The pistol was now a heavy lump that rode in his right trouser pocket. He could feel it knocking against his thigh.

For some odd reason that the Prosecuting Attorney couldn’t fully comprehend, the street was now full of people. Walking with a resolute gait along the sidewalk, his left shoulder bumped up against that of somebody else. He pressed on, anyway – not with cruel intensity, but with cold determination.

At the corner where the street entered the cobblestone square, he was struck a glancing blow by a girl, about eleven years old. She had been rolling a bicycle hoop at full speed across the cobblestone square and he had failed to jump back out of the way in sufficient time to avoid being hit.

The girl wasn't as fortunate; she was thrown off balance and rolled across the cobblestones, while the hoop continued merrily on its way down the crowded street.

"I'm so sorry," the Prosecuting Attorney said, helping the girl back onto her feet. "I hope you haven't been hurt."

One of her knees, badly scraped, was beginning to bleed. She cupped her knee with both hands, wincing in pain.

"Where's my hoop?" she asked.

"Gone. It continued down the street without you," Eduardo told her.

"Yes, but that wasn't supposed to happen. That's not the way things are supposed to end."

And with that, she pulled herself away from Eduardo and darted off down the street through the crowd.

## 5

It took Eduardo several seconds to recall where he was going, and why. Not until he came to the fountain, where the mighty general on horseback was being sprayed by jets of water, was his attention drawn to the heavy lump in his trouser pocket and only then did he remember his mission.

When it came to him where he was going, and why, he set off with great certainty down one of the side streets radiating from the square. He turned left at the appropriate entrance to the appropriate block of flats and took the stairs, two at a time, to the third floor.

The door to the flat stood wide open. Feeling the pistol through the fabric of his trousers, Eduardo headed straight into the flat with the intention of putting a bullet through the head of the Persian cat. However, upon entering the main living area, he found the cat lying on a towel on the lap of its mistress. The woman was seated on an ornate armchair covered by ochre upholstery. In her hand was a straight razor that she was using to remove what little fur remained on the cat's extremely pale body. Most of the fur lay in a damp heap at the woman's feet. The fur was partly covered by shaving cream.

"It's been so hot for the past several days, I decided to give Mr. Puss-puss a shave," the woman said, smiling at Eduardo.

The cat blinked. Estimating how long it had taken him to walk down the street, Eduardo came to the conclusion that the woman couldn't possibly have shaved the cat so well or so quickly in so little time. She

was removing the last bit of fur under the cat's chin, when, all of a sudden, a songbird flew in through a nearby window and startled her. Her shaving hand jerked as though from a spasm and the straight razor slashed the cat's neck.

"Oh, my God! Look what I've done!" she screamed.

The cat leapt off her lap and ran through the open doorway past Eduardo's feet. Eduardo went after it. It wasn't difficult to tell where the cat had gone. A trail of blood went down the stairs to the next landing, where he discovered the cat lying on its right side, twitching on the marble floor.

Lighting a cigarette, Eduardo drew the smoke deeply into his lungs.

When the cat had finished twitching, Eduardo picked it up by its hind legs and returned it to its mistress. In his attempt to console the woman, he ended up carrying her into the bedroom and making love to her.

The last thing he heard was the metal bicycle hoop bouncing across the cobblestones below the open French windows.