

# *The New Orphic Review*

*Editor-in-Chief*  
Ernest Hekkanen

*Copy & Associate Editor*  
Margrith Schraner

*Managing Editor*  
Michael Connor



Nelson

Canada

Contents Copyright © *THE NEW ORPHIC REVIEW* for the authors  
First North American Serial Rights Reserved

ISSN 1480-5243

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

**EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICE:**

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

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

Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of *The New Orphic Review*.

**SUBSCRIPTIONS PER YEAR (2 ISSUES)**

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

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

Individual issues \$15.00 CAD or USD as applicable.

**ADVERTISEMENTS (BLACK & WHITE CAMERA-READY ONLY):**

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

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

Cover art by Taio 'Bundles' Schraner-Eldor. Photo by Klea Schraner.

# Contents

Volume 7      Number 2      Fall 2004

Ernest Hekkanen 4 *The Power of a Good Hoax*

Cody L. Stanford 9 *Alexandra's Cat*

John Cloutier 26 *Four Poems*

Margrith Schraner 29 *To Travel the Distance*

Daniel Mills 40 *Two Poems*

Johnny Frem 42 *Self-Portrait*

Priscilla Long 49 *Two Poems*

*Featured Poet / 51 / Robert Cooperman*

**Primitive Tribes, Exotic Practices**

Daniel Willbach 61 *Rebecca's Gift*

Wenting Liao 73 *Three Poems*

Michael Bullock 75 *Seven Poems*

Arlene Tribbia 78 *How to Grow a Human Heart*

Mary Carroll 92 *Two Poems*

Marc Miller 94 *On the Phone*

Michael Woligroski 102 *The World's Lousiest Landlord*

Ernest Hekkanen 108 *The Old Dog's Opera Company*

ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of thirty-four books. The most recent are *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street*, *The Big Dave (and Little Wife) Convention*, *Up & Coming (In Seattle)*, *The Misadventures of Bumbleberry Finn*, *Man's Sadness*, *Dementia Island* and *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*.

## The Power of a Good Hoax

Ernest Hekkanen

IT IS PROBABLY unwise of me to admit this in print, but one of my favorite literary subgenres is the hoax. The hoax has a well-regarded and indeed honorable (perhaps, I should say *dishonorable*) history in American literature and one of its best practitioners was Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49). On April 13, 1844, his story “The Balloon-Hoax” was published in the *New York Sun*, a newspaper which specialized in running real news stories alongside false ones, and it took full advantage of the public’s gullibility.

Initially, “The Balloon-Hoax” wasn’t published under the title it now bears. It appeared as a broadside or ‘Extra page’ in the newspaper and the headline declared: “Astounding News! By Express Via Norfolk! The Atlantic Crossed in Three Days!” The story was so successful, that day’s edition of the *New York Sun* sold out in a matter of hours, much to Poe’s annoyance, as he was unable to secure a copy. The story caused such a sensation, it was reprinted the next day in the *Sunday Times* and, according to Harold Beaver, the editor of *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* (1976), the author “single-handed[ly] managed to divert his contemporaries from the raging controversy over the admission of Texas into the Union.”

The editor who approved publication of Poe’s story was none other than Richard Adams Locke who, “nine years earlier in the same newspaper, had perpetrated a similar editorial hoax, about a telescope that revealed life on the Moon,” Harold Beaver reports in his commentary. Locke’s story was entitled “Discoveries in the Moon” (1835) and it

appeared three weeks after the publication of Poe's "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall," much to Poe's chagrin, by the way, because Locke's hoax surpassed Poe's in its ability to stir the public's imagination.

Nowadays, if the hoaxes of Poe or Locke were presented to us as true stories, they would soon be outed for what they in fact are and the editors of such newspapers would be summarily fired. However, today, such stories don't stand a chance of being mistaken for fact. Times have changed. Scientific knowledge is now so all-pervasive, we are no longer duped by such hoaxes.

Well, very rarely, anyway.

Not long ago, a religious cult that believes we are descended from aliens claimed that it had cloned a human being and news agencies rushed to cover that ruse. Oftentimes, in order to get grants, scientists will stretch 'facts' having to do with their research, only to be outed weeks, months or even years later. And, of course, there is the famous example of Piltdown man, presented in 1912 as a genuine fossil linking us to the great apes, but which, in 1953, was discovered to be a hoax.

Unlike a lot of people who express outrage whenever they are taken in by such hoaxes (outrage which is usually directed at the perpetrators), I am inclined to fault the public for being so gullible. Were people better trained in the techniques employed by fiction writers, they wouldn't be fooled quite so easily or quite so often.

Early last fall, I was sitting on a bench at Lakeside Park in Nelson, British Columbia, enjoying one of the last really pleasant days before winter closed in here in the Kootenays. The ochre sunshine created a sweet, melancholic ambience that justly deserved my admiration, when along came two fellows dressed in dark suits, one of whom had a leather briefcase clutched in his right hand. The moment I saw the two fellows, I suspected them of being Mormons and, indeed, my intuition proved to be correct.

The two Mormons asked my permission to present me with some 'facts,' and soon we became embroiled in a rather lengthy discussion. Sometimes I relish such encounters and sometimes I don't; it depends on how playful I am feeling, and that day I was feeling playful.

"Excuse me," I said, "before you go any further, I'd like you to clarify a few things for me. First of all, who founded your religion?"

In truth, I was already fairly familiar with the so-called facts surrounding the Prophet Joseph Smith's life. At age eighteen, after a bout of fervent prayer and supplication to the Almighty, the rarified personage of Moroni appeared to him at his bedside, surrounded by bright light. Moroni disclosed the whereabouts of some gold plates inscribed

with the account of the former inhabitants of the North-American continent, “and the source from whence they sprang.”<sup>1</sup>

Moroni told Smith that when he got his hands on the gold plates he shouldn't show them to anyone. Moroni, son of Mormon, appeared to Smith three times that night, and again the next day. According to the well-known tale, young Mr. Smith was laboring in a field with his father; however, he felt weak from all of the ecstatic revelations of the night before and so he decided to go home. While crossing a fence to leave the field he fell helplessly to the ground and at that point the whereabouts of the gold plates were revealed to him by Moroni. Upon regaining consciousness, Smith reported the episode to his father who, in turn, told him “to go and do as commanded by the messenger.”<sup>2</sup>

Young Mr. Smith hiked up a hill near Manchester, New York, and there he discovered the gold plates hidden in a chamber under a large stone. Four years later, he proceeded to translate the gold plates while under the ecstatic thrall of the divine. Here, we have to cut Mr. Smith some slack, because his storytelling becomes a bit transparent. The gold plates that he found under the rock weren't, in fact, real gold plates; rather they were metaphorical gold plates. That is, the gold plates didn't actually exist and so there was no need for Smith to hike up the hill known as Cumorah in order to discover them. This becomes abundantly clear upon reading the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (1992). Because Smith was in bad need of some witnesses who could verify the veracity of his claims, “the angel Moroni appeared to Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer and showed them the gold plates while a voice from heaven declared that the translation was done by the Power of God and was true.”

Obviously, Mr. Joseph Smith's accomplices knew it would benefit them to get involved in the scam. Smith's translation of the fictitious gold plates was published as *The Book of Mormon* in 1830 and then the angel Moroni conveniently absconded with the gold plates, which so often happens in such tales.

Joseph Smith's tall tale obeys a short story form typical of revelatory fiction. “If I'm not mistaken,” I told the two immaculately dressed Mormons at Lakeside Park, “Mr. Smith walked the face of the earth from 1805 to 1844 and one of his contemporaries was Edgar Allan Poe.”

“Is that so?” said the taller Mormon.

“Yes, that's so,” I told him. “Now, do either of you have any idea what the favorite literary form was, back then?”

They looked at each other and then shook their heads.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Mormon*

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Mormon*

“The favorite literary form was the hoax. Back when Smith was alive, hoaxes were widely circulated in newspapers as true stories and I suspect Smith was simply dabbling in that tradition. So, when you read a text like *The Book of Mormon*, you should take into account the social and literary context which gave rise to it, otherwise you’re going to end up believing in a lot of piffle, now, aren’t you?”

Although scientific hoaxes are fair targets when it comes to being outed, religious hoaxes are treated a lot more reverently. In a free society, it seems, we are entitled to take the worst sort of nonsense for God-given truth. However, when utter nonsense motivates an entire nation, it has the potential for creating a considerable amount of harm.

The hoax that Joseph Smith and his eleven accomplices perpetrated isn’t the only religious hoax. Even earlier, around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., some Christian zealots decided to create a historical Jesus Christ, and the latest book to deal with that hoax is Tom Harpur’s *The Pagan Christ*. And, of course, there are the Ten Commandments reputed to have been passed by Yahveh down to the fictitious Moses, as well as the equally fictitious parting of the Red Sea. In addition to the above stories, there is the one about Muhammad having transcribed Allah’s message in the form of the Koran. Likewise, I could maintain that every story I have ever written was divinely inspired; nay, that I was simply transcribing what was presented to me by an angel or by God Himself. I could set myself up as a ‘channeler’ of prophetic insights and gather unto myself some disciples who would be all too willing to suspend their disbelief. No matter the era, a guru’s success depends upon having a vast supply of people who are prepared to take nonsense quite seriously, and right now we are living in an age full of gurus – be they political, financial or spiritual gurus.

Over the span of my life, I have come to the conclusion that history is little more than a series of elaborate hoaxes perpetrated by the few and played on the many, for reasons that have to do with creating in-group/out-group behavior. Those who are *chosen* (as opposed to those who aren’t) end up with all the juicy booty, and *history* (perhaps that should read, *holy*) books declare that this is the correct course of events and, moreover, that it is God’s will. How do I know this to be true? Well, I guess I could claim, like so many prophets before me, that I received my insights by opening my ears and heart to the divine, but, sooner or later, I’m sure somebody would come along and claim that I’m a schizophrenic megalomaniac, which is probably the case with every prophet who has ever walked the earth.

Not long ago, I went to see Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In Moore’s documentary, there’s a woman by the name of Lila Lipscomb (an employment counselor with a strong Christian bent) who counseled not only her son but many other young people to go into the military. Later on in the documentary, Lila is portrayed in the bosom of her fami-

ly, reading the last letter written by her son, who was killed in Iraq. By the end of his rather short life, her son had come to believe that George Bush Junior's war in Iraq was a total fraud. He wrote that Bush "got us down here for nothing."

Lila, the dead soldier's mother, is devastated. She goes to Washington, D.C. and there, outside the White House, she breaks down; at first, I thought she was going to vomit on the sidewalk. She has been utterly disillusioned, but now she has a focus for her rage and that focus is the nation's capital. However, while watching the film, I got the impression that Lila was devastated a lot less by her son's death and a lot more by having been duped by the Bush Administration's hoax, which led her to counsel many young people to go into the military. The weight of her guilt must be enormous, indeed.

For a hoax to work, it must be plausible and yet farfetched enough to titillate the imagination. Every good scam artist knows that this is true, and George Bush Jr. and his cronies (the elite whom he refers to as his 'base') are excellent scam artists. Although the claim that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction was a hoax (a very transparent one to those of us living outside the U.S. of A.), it was plausible enough for fearful Americans to be taken in by it. Americans, who have been trained to buy everything from blue toilet-flush to the outrageous claims of the Christian right, bought President Bush's hoax – hook, line and sinker, as it were.

The reason why the Americans (I'm an expatriate American, by the way) were so powerless to understand the nature of George Bush Junior's hoax has to do with their pitiful ignorance and their willingness to believe every farfetched notion that comes down the pike. They were powerless to perceive that they were about to become the victims of a hoax and, in turn, would victimize other people in its name. Had they been well-schooled in the techniques employed by fiction writers, politicians, prophets and salesmen of every stripe, they might have seen through Junior's ruse.

People who are powerless to perceive that a hoax is being played on them end up empowering the hoax; however, when they finally discover they have been duped, and duped rather royally, too, they have no one to blame but themselves, in my opinion. It is their *willingness* to suspend their disbelief which is at fault. That's why fiction should be studied and studied very thoroughly. It can teach us a lot about human gullibility.



CODY L. STANFORD lives in Overland Park, Kansas, and at present works in an advertising and publishing company. He attended the University of Missouri at Kansas City and is fascinated by history, politics, mythology and other forces that shape who we are.

## Alexandra's Cat

Cody L. Stanford

ALEXANDRA'S CAT was named Safiyyah, and on that cold November night she hung in a weathered canvas bag underneath the trestle of an old railroad bridge.

The bag dangled from a rope slung over a V created by two steel girders. The V dropped down to join another girder that formed the topmost part of the arch supporting the bridge, flung two hundred feet above a ravine. The steel, once painted a lively green, was now exhausted with the rust-pits of old age. The four-lane highway below the bridge sliced through the ravine, hastening on to better places.

Alexandra stood in distress at the side of the highway and strained to see her cat by the light of distant streetlamps just outside the ravine. Safiyyah's bag rocked back and forth in the dark. Alexandra turned tearful eyes on her sister Hedda, fifteen, one year older than Alexandra. Older sister was big, blonde and sadistic. "What did you do to her?" Alexandra shouted.

"Aw, she's okay," Hedda said, her voice the sort that never lost its not-so-hidden sneer. "F'now, anyway. Gonna freeze tonight. Kitty might *die*, Alex. 'Course she might fall first, right down to the highway. Splat!" Hedda's rattling laugh brought to Alexandra's mind the possibility of rocks rolling around in Hedda's empty head. It was a delightful insult Alexandra had never dared to use.

Hedda blew an impertinent pink bubble that popped in Alexandra's face. "How you gonna get your little pussy down, hmm, Alex?"

Alexandra spied the dim shadows of her three brothers atop the bridge. The boys teamed with Hedda in an ongoing plot to torment Alexandra the freak, Alexandra the weirdo, Alexandra and her books and

what their parents called ‘airs.’ Plus, her cat with the queer name and the green-gold eyes always watching them. The children’s game was to throw Alexandra’s books in the creek; push her into the mud in her new dress; break their father’s empty beer bottles against the side of the house and blame it on Alex; tie her cat up in a bag, attach a rock at the other end of the rope and drop it so it precariously balanced at the top of the arch under the old bridge. “A hell of a plan,” Hedda had claimed with pride upon presenting the idea to her siblings.

“Jonas!” Alex cried up to her older brother who had, at Hedda’s urging, performed the difficult feat of dropping the cat in the V. “Why? Why are you helping?”

No answer came. Hedda kicked rocks and dirt at Alexandra. “Ain’t no way to get kitty down, buttface. ’Less you climb up there and get her yourself.”

Alexandra’s eyes followed the plunge of the steel arch down to its bed in a concrete pier about thirty feet above her on the rocky hillside. She rubbed her bare legs together under her knee-length skirt. She had on only the skirt plus a thin blouse, a ratty old jacket, and a brown tweed cap to insulate her against the tumbling temperature of the clear, moonless night. Not even gloves to protect her hands, and all that rock awaited her. And the cold steel.

Alexandra sniffled and glared at her sister. “Fine. I’ll save her. Just you watch, you . . . you *bitch*.”

Hedda popped her gum. “Gon’ tell ma you swore, mush-for-brains.”

“I’ll tell her what you did to Safi.”

“Your word against ours and she’ll never believe you, princess. Go on, hurry it up. I wanna see you fall and die before it gets too cold out.” Hedda made a big show of shivering, then laughed like rattling rocks again.

The real rocks on the hill had tumbled in big, broken chunks down from the cliff above; their edges were sharp, the grade steep, the footing sure to be precarious. The climb would be doubly dangerous for bookish Alexandra. She walked over to the hill, sighed, then dug in her feet and pulled herself up with her hands. “Safiyah, don’t be afraid,” she whispered to herself. “Don’t be afraid of the height.”

## Ω

Aunt Claire understood how things were. Once a month she invited her niece, Alexandra Chestnut, to come stay with her for a weekend in her expensive eighth-floor apartment on the Plaza in Kansas City. Aunt Claire never invited the other Chestnut kids, which infuriated her sister-in-law. Mariel Chestnut always threatened her daughter, Alex, that if the girl didn’t behave, she might never see Aunt Claire again. Alexandra always behaved and yet was always picked on, was always singled

out for punishment by her parents. Alexandra was sure it was another part of the plot against her. Still, the abuse mattered little since Aunt Claire showed up with annoying regularity, as the elder Chestnuts considered it, on the third Friday evening of every month to rescue her niece.

Alexandra told Aunt Claire of her mother's threats. "Don't you worry about that," the woman replied. "She wouldn't dare. Not unless she wants her neck broken by your . . . by Ormond."

Aunt Claire's pause hinted at secrets, and Alexandra grinned in spite of her fear of her father's violent temper. Ormond hated her, his bookish Alexandra. Somehow, in her auburn beauty, he made her out to be the runt of the litter, unlike her ordinary, pug-nosed siblings. Alexandra wondered why Aunt Claire thought Ormond Chestnut would defend his 'rusty' daughter; rusty nail, rusty trap. Insults he gave her, instead of love.

Aunt Claire always let Alexandra bring her cat along. Safiyyah was a grey tabby, three years old, found by Alex as a nearly-drowned kitten in the creek about half a mile behind the Chestnut house. It had been Alexandra's eleventh birthday, and Hedda had hurled the new books from Aunt Claire into the rushing, rain-swollen waters. Alex ran to rescue her books and found the kitten instead. She loved the kitten and the kitten loved her back. Safiyyah became Alexandra's only real friend, the only friend who had never sided with Hedda against her. Along with Aunt Claire, of course.

"Safiyyah?" Aunt Claire exclaimed the first time Alexandra brought her pet along. "What kind of name is that?"

"Arabic." Alexandra's long red hair whipped in the wind as they drove toward the city with the top down in Aunt Claire's lemon yellow, vintage 1968 Mustang. "It means pure and serene. I read it in a book."

"You and your books," Aunt Claire chuckled as she scratched the kitten behind its ears.

Aunt Claire didn't mind the books and didn't think Alexandra was a freak. Alex had no words for the love she felt for her aunt, a tall and slender woman who held her greying head high against the troubles of the world. Alexandra's love revealed itself on each of those weekends at five o'clock Sunday evening when the girl would beg, "Can't I stay here with you? Forever?"

"No, hon," Aunt Claire replied, taking the girl into her arms to fortify her for the month ahead. "No. I'm no good for you, believe me. Just ask your mother."

"No! I *hate* her."

Claire Donahue smiled and didn't add, *I hate her, too.*

The rocks cut Alexandra's knees when she slipped and almost fell back to the highway. Alexandra held on and kept going. A trickle of blood ran down her right shin. She cursed as she recalled how none of the typical injuries of childhood had come to her from play. She was hurt only through bullying from Hedda and Jonas. The two little ones, Whitley and Benjamin, had lately begun to add their own share of torment, too.

Alexandra stood beside the concrete pier and ran her hands over its rough-textured surface. She would have to shuffle up the hill a bit more and climb onto the tall pier from above. Then she could mount the steel that arched away from it into the dark sky.

Alexandra gazed up at the sad package dangling far above her over the highway. "Safi?"

The cat yowled and struggled. The bag swayed in turn, balanced by the rock. On the highway below, a truck rumbled past. The driver blatted his horn at Hedda, who stood beside the road hunched in a petulant simmer.

Alexandra waited for the truck to pass, with the hope that the driver might stop and find out if the young girl he saw, perhaps tempting to him, might need a ride. Then maybe he would discover what was really going on beneath the bridge. But he didn't stop, and Alexandra's eyebrows furrowed deep anger at her sister. The one time Hedda's bad reputation could have done Alex some good.

"Safi, I'm coming." Alexandra pulled herself up and around the pier.

## Ω

The high point of each weekend spent with Aunt Clair came on Saturday when the woman took her niece down to the shops on the Plaza and bought the girl a new outfit.

The Chestnuts lived in rural Missouri about fifteen miles east of Kansas City. Alexandra rarely had the opportunity to dress up at home, and when she did it only drew the attention of her siblings in the form of taunts and flung clods of mud. Aunt Claire indulged her niece, having seen the looks of longing Alex gave to the woman's own fine clothes. The outfit purchased, Alexandra put it on and spent the rest of the day feeling wonderful, alive, and simply pretty. Alex could not give words to her happiness, but the emotion shattered her usual shyness and made her babble gaily of other things, circling around love so rare to her. As the day ended, Alex returned with her aunt to the apartment and sat in Aunt Claire's terrace garden on a bench surrounded by flowering bushes. Safiyyah nestled on Alexandra's lap, cradled in her arms. "Do you like my new outfit, Safi?" Alex whispered, and the cat purred approval and slept.

Because Alexandra's happiness was precious and delicate as crystal, Aunt Claire left her alone in the garden for a bit and lay down to take a nap before dinner. So much activity with the young girl wore out the woman, who felt every ache of her fifty-seven years and longed for the usual sustenance she took after a hard day. But Aunt Claire resisted. Alexandra's joy was worth the sacrifice; the tormented, picked-on girl saved for two days from the hell of her home.

The knowledge of secrets burned in Aunt Claire's memory, the reasons for Alexandra's suffering. But what could the woman do about them? In the nightstand was a gun, a .38 snub-nose. Claire had thrown away the bullets years ago, lest her anger once again tempt her. This time – she pictured it; and who would say revenge is cold who has felt it warm them so – she would kill the Chestnuts, save for Alexandra, and raise the sweet girl as her own. Which, in a roundabout way, Alex almost was.

But no. The plan was so impractical and so vicious. Besides, one killing had been more than enough for Aunt Claire.

## Ω

Safiyyah lived a dangerous existence. Alexandra had barely received permission to keep her when, like everything else that belonged to Alexandra, Hedda began to hate the cat. The older girl detested having to share *her* bedroom with Alexandra in the first place and, now, here was this thing. "The Beast," Hedda called it. Alexandra tried to keep her belongings, including the cat, packed tight into the small corner of the room that Hedda allowed her – to no avail. Safiyyah developed quick reflexes from dodging the kicks aimed at her by Hedda, and from evading the other rough treatment dished out by Ormond, Mariel, and the boys. The Chestnuts felt as if the unblinking eyes of Alexandra's cat were judging them for their mistreatment of Alexandra and that perhaps, in response, Safiyyah was pondering their punishment. The absurd fear made them lash out even harder.

Alexandra protected Safi as much as possible. When alone with Safi, Alex told the cat all of her secrets and troubles. Safiyyah listened, but not in the idle way cats have as they wash their bodies while one tries to talk to them. No, Alexandra was convinced: Safiyyah *listened*.

At the back of the worn-down Chestnut house was an open crawlspace under the dining room floor, accessible only from the outside. Safiyyah patrolled the artificial cave to rid it of mice and other vermin, and when it was clear, she introduced her mistress to it. Alexandra crawled into the dark after her cat, holding her nose against the smell of dead things and animal droppings. With discordant yowls, Safi warned Alexandra of the dangerous, long nails that hung like rust-bitten fangs down from the floor of the house. Deep inside the crawlspace was

privacy, and it became Alexandra's only sure hiding place. The girl held her cat close in the dirty hole, and stroked the animal's fur. Safiyyah purred, soothing Alexandra's distress. "We're safe here, Safi," the child whispered.

Ω

Alexandra stood atop the concrete pier. Her fingers had been scraped and cut in several places by the rocks. She ignored the pain, and the chill air helped numb the sting down to a bearable ache.

Alexandra was afraid to look up at the bridge. From here, it was all up and out over the highway. Her pale fingers stroked the huge girder with hesitation while she waited vainly for a reprieve. Then Alexandra held her breath and gripped the steel. As she did so, two cars passed by going in opposite directions. The hollow, nighttime roll of black rubber tires over the worn asphalt reminded Alex of what awaited her, should she slip. A quick, heart-stopping glance up at the bag only intensified her fear.

"So?" Hedda called to her. "You goin' up or not? Meeeeow, mommykins."

Alex heard one of her younger brothers, still up on the bridge. "Jonas." It was Whitley, ten years old, every bit as nasty as Hedda. He pointed down at the bag. "Let's throw rocks at it, huh?"

Alexandra's voice echoed in the deep ravine. "Don't you *dare*, Whitley Chestnut!"

"Scaredy cat, scaredy cat." Whitley hollered back. "Afraid to climb, turdbrain?"

Jonas was seventeen and should have known better in the first place. Alexandra thought she detected a tiny touch of doubt in his voice. "Whitley, whyn't you shut your little sissy-face up?"

Whitley was defiant and fired the f-word back at Jonas, daring his older brother to trash him the way Ormond did whenever the man heard his children curse.

Alex heard a slap, skin on skin, followed by the sudden blubbering of a small boy. She shuddered and tried not to smile. Violence was no good, she believed. Jonas was probably having doubts; he was probably able to visualize clearly the body of his sister flattened on the asphalt. Still, he'd never back down and rescue Safi, not in front of the others.

Alexandra hugged the steel and began to climb.

Ω

"What in the hell are you *doing* to that girl?"

One Sunday evening, Aunt Claire's voice carried out of the house to where Alex sat in the yellow Mustang parked in the Chestnuts' front

yard. It was late spring of that same year. Alexandra gazed with terror at the weathered grey boards of the old farmhouse. ‘Farm’ was a silly word to use but the Chestnuts all called it that, even though Ormond’s father had sold the farmland when Ormond was a boy and had left only the house for his son. Ormond survived on a strenuous, hopeless factory job outside the city. He drank, cursed his father, and blamed the auto factory for his despair.

The weekend just completed had been horrible. Alexandra’s siblings had waged a campaign of terror against her the previous week that, during her visit with Aunt Claire, had left Alexandra a bawling mess. Alex hated her self-pity but couldn’t shed it despite her tears. She refused to let Aunt Claire take her anywhere, but only sat in the garden with Safiyyah and tore through boxes of Kleenex. “It was them,” Alex finally blurted out Sunday afternoon, “Hedda and Jonas and Whitley and even little Benjy. Everything! I got pushed and shoved and punched and then Whitley tried . . . tried to set *fire* . . . to Safi . . .”

Aunt Claire held the girl over the protests of Safiyyah, who was getting squished in Alexandra’s lap. “And what did your parents do?”

“*Nothing!*” Alex sat back to fill her lungs for another sob, and Safiyyah took advantage of the moment to break free. She leapt off her mistress’s lap and landed at the girl’s feet. Settling into a prim feline posture, Alexandra’s cat washed herself while her protective green-gold eyes remained, watchful, on Aunt Claire. “They didn’t do anything,” Alexandra said. “Mom thought it was funny when they hurt me, and Dad . . . he’s so damn drunk all the time, he never helps me . . .”

Aunt Claire flinched and held the girl tighter. “I’ll talk to them,” she whispered. “I will.”

And that Sunday evening when Aunt Claire returned to her car in front of the Chestnut house, breathing hard from her anger, she smiled at Alexandra. “It’ll be better now, I promise.”

Alexandra waved to her aunt as the woman sped away, then walked toward the house with her small suitcase clutched in one hand and Safiyyah nestled comfortably along her other arm. Something about Aunt Claire infuriated and frightened Mariel Chestnut. Alex dared to hope. Had she won even a tiny victory?

Once through the front door Alex saw her father, roused from his alcoholic stupor by the shouting of the two women. His eyes were small and burned red from drinking. His mouth tightened with anger. Behind him Mariel stood with the triumphant expression of a dog who had only been pretending to play dead moments before.

Alexandra cringed and dropped her suitcase. She saw that she had won nothing.

Ormond came toward her in the hallway. “You complainin’ about us to that high-rent whore sister of mine?” Then Ormond’s fist found Alex’s face, and she dropped her cat.

Afterwards, Alexandra lay in bed and cried. She ignored Hedda's cruel giggling while she whispered prayers to a God she had given up on years ago. This prayer was important, though, and worth the chance: Alex pleaded for the bruises to heal before the month was out so her parents would let her see her aunt again.

## Ω

The steel girder pressed deep along the inside of Alexandra's thighs, like a cold razor slicing into her skin where her skirt had slid up her legs. She was too terrified to let go of the steel to adjust the skirt. Her cap flew off and she watched it flutter down to earth like a forlorn bird seeking safety.

Hedda stood below her. "I can see your underwear, you slut. Don't you ever wipe yourself when you take a dump?"

Alexandra was halfway up the arch now and she saw her goal more clearly: her cat dangling in mid-air from girders about thirty feet beneath the train tracks. Safiyah's struggles continued to swing the bag; she yowled her fear into the echoing air. The bag slipped lower, ever so slightly, with each particularly strong sway of the rope. Alex saw the bag slip, and her throat cramped tight in fear.

Between the girders where the I-beams joined, Alexandra was able to rest with her feet on the ends of jutting bolts that secured the steel. She still felt insecure against the emptiness that surrounded her at this height, halfway up the arch, and she was too afraid to relax much. Her legs were rubbed and sore; her muscles ached dull fire. Once already, a joint where support girders from the ravine wall met the arch had forced Alexandra to the outside edge to climb around it. Another joint waited up above at a more precarious angle than the first.

Alex twisted her head around and up. She could no longer see her brothers above her on the bridge, though she could still hear their voices. Beside the highway, Hedda sat down on a rock and chewed her fingernails with growing impatience. Alexandra rested her face against the girder. The cold steel soothed her fiery, frightened flesh. The acrid smell of chipped paint and bitter rust filled her nostrils. Rusty nail, Ormond called her. Rusty trap. He laughed at that one, thinking of . . . what? Alex shivered.

The night was clear but Alexandra felt drops brush past her hair. Oh God, no, not rain, not now, *please*—

"Whitley!" Jonas's voice, angry, followed by the sound of a fist smacking flesh. Whitley's cruel laugh turned into an exhaled puff of fear and the rain stopped. Alexandra could smell it now, and wrinkled her nose in disgust — she would have known it was Whitley's urine even if Jonas hadn't shouted his brother's name. The boys were always piss-



ing against the trees in the yard, doing it in front of Alexandra because it embarrassed her. She knew each boy's scent too well.

"Get the hell off the bridge," Jonas ordered. "And take that baby Benjamin with you!"

Whitley resisted. Alex heard another thump, and Whitley began to sob. The sound of his crying faded as he walked off the bridge. His blubbering finally disappeared beneath Benjy's wail as the youngest boy took his own share of hurt from Whitley.

"Sorry, Lex." Jonas shortened her name as much as possible, blunt and to the point. He had never apologized, though. Not before this.

Alexandra tried to grin but she couldn't. Her body had begun shivering like an object outside her control. "Jonas is scared," she whispered, and let the vengeful thought warm her. She gritted her teeth and tensed her muscles to calm their spasms. Too much shivering and she wouldn't be able to hold on to the steel.

Hedda stood up again. "Oh, just get on with it, willya?"

Alexandra had earlier enjoyed the echo of her own voice and so filled her lungs to cry out again. "Go to hell, Hedda!" She inched her way up the steel once more. The wind blew around her cold body. Alexandra raised her head and listened.

When safe in bed, the distant sound of a train whistle cutting through the cold autumn air conjures up a thrilling combination of comfort and excitement. But not here.

"Oh, God!" Panic rattled through Jonas's voice. "Lex? *Alexandra?*"

## Ω

The pay phone receiver trembled in Alexandra's nervous hand. She had walked down the road to the convenience store one afternoon. The store was at the highway rest stop two miles from home, on the other side of the ravine crossed by the old railroad bridge. Alex was calling Aunt Claire. She was afraid to make the call from home. It had been two days since Ormond had beaten her and Alexandra was worried. Both of her eyes were swollen almost shut and she was afraid her vision might be damaged.

Alexandra rarely called her aunt, and the surprise of hearing the girl's voice on the phone made Aunt Claire sober up a bit.

"Aunt Claire?" Alexandra said. "You okay?"

"Sure, sweetie. What's the matter?"

"Aunt Claire . . . you don't sound okay. . ."

"Pfft, is nothing. Baby, are *you* okay? Why're you calling me?"

Claire's words were slurred, and she never called anyone "baby" except in derision. Alexandra felt hot waves of betrayal burn into the ache of her bruises. The sound of her aunt's voice was too remindful of the cadence of her father's drunken words as he had stood over her the

previous Sunday night, his fists like mallets falling on Alexandra, his booted feet seeking her vitals.

“You *liar!*” Alexandra screamed into the phone. “What have you *done* to yourself? You’re all the same, all of you. You’re never there when I need you.” She slammed down the phone and fled the store, keeping her face hidden. If anyone saw her bruises, if anyone became suspicious, Ormond would beat her even worse the next time.

## Ω

The cold had numbed Alexandra’s fingers so much she wasn’t sure how tight a grip she had on the girder. Alex hoisted her body with quick pulls of her thin arms while the train approached. She crawled around the next joint of arch and supports to where the girders leveled out somewhat, her fear of the train erasing for a moment her terror of the dizzying fall below her. Alexandra was now about fifty feet from where Safiyyah hung. The bag swayed and Alex could see only too well how, bit by bit, the rope slipped a braid on every other swing.

Jonas had run off the bridge at the sound of the whistle. The bridge began to vibrate from the train’s approach; the steel hummed as if coming to life. Alex stretched her arms as far as possible around the I-beam, just able to clutch the flat edge opposite. “Hold on, Safi,” she hollered, as if the poor creature had any way to hang on at all.

The cat’s yowling grew more frantic. Safi also felt the bridge tremble, the steel agitated like an angry, wild-eyed dog.

Jonas appeared down below from around the wide corner where the ravine expanded outward. Benjy and Whitley were with him. Each boy kept a wary distance away from the fists of his next older brother.

The train’s rumble blurred the few words Alexandra could hear. “. . . *your* stupid idea!” Jonas shouted to Hedda, who fired back “. . . threw the cat over the side so it’s *your* fault if she dies.” Whitley’s voice aimed an insult at Alex: “Baby!” The seeming innocence of Benjy’s treble cut through the train’s approach like a sharpened icicle, proud of his part in the deed. “I found the rock.”

“. . . caught the cat for us.” Jonas’s final words on the subject to Hedda. “If she dies it’s *your* fault, butthead!” He turned hard on one heel and ran back around the corner of the ravine. Alexandra knew he would return to her, up the trail the boys must have used to get to the top of the bridge. She pictured them on that journey, laughing and smirking: oh, an excellent prank to play on the weirdo! Safi, poor sweet Safi, must have struggled in her bag while Hedda, sent away to fetch the true victim, kicked Alex’s shin in the Chestnuts’ front yard and sneered with triumph. “Boy, do *we* have a surprise for you. Seen your kitty lately?”

Alexandra tightened her body’s grip on the bridge as the train’s approach sent thunder down the rails. The steel beneath her began to buck

like a horse at a trot, moving faster by the moment. Alexandra closed her eyes.

Above Alexandra, the train cleared the trees on the top of the hill and hurtled across the sky.

## Ω

By the time of Alexandra's next visit with Aunt Claire, after her beating, the girl's black eyes had healed, and she apologized to her aunt for the rude phone call. Aunt Claire was far more forgiving than the frightened Alex had hoped. But Alex spent the entire weekend pleading with the woman to tell her: "What is it about you that makes Mom and Dad hate you so?"

"Secrets," Aunt Claire whispered.

"What secrets?"

"I drink. You know that now. Only when you visit do I give it up and stay sober. You give me a reason."

"But why do you drink?"

"Because your mother knows, because of something I did. But she stays silent because I know something, too."

They were sitting in the terrace garden on Alexandra's favorite bench, watching the sun slide down the sky in the west. Alexandra would return home late that evening but she didn't care. Let Mom and Dad get angry, she thought; this is *my* world here. Safi purred in her lap, as content to stay put as Alex.

"My husband Milford was a lawyer," Aunt Claire went on, "a full partner in his firm. He left me everything, which is why I can afford to be so good to you. What he saw . . . what that S.O.B. saw in that mule-faced mother of yours, I don't know." She smiled with a slight touch of guilt. "I'm sorry, Alex. I shouldn't talk that way."

Alexandra shook her head. "I don't mind."

Aunt Claire let her smile hold back her laughter. "Well, Mariel *was* pretty once. Sorta. Milford met Mariel at their wedding; your Ma and Pa's wedding, I mean. My brother, Ormond. The bully. He made my childhood a living hell, too, Alexandra. Mariel and Milford met at the wedding and carried on together for six years. He'd go out of town on business, he'd say, and take Mariel with him. She'd tell Ormond she was visiting her sister in Sedalia. Ormond didn't give a damn, not 'til the babies came along, anyway. Then Mariel and Milford had to meet afternoons, usually at your house while Ormond was at work. And I had no idea! Neither did Ormond, but he was so drunk all the time they coulda done the nasty under his nose and he'd hardly a noticed."

Alexandra was too fascinated to giggle, even though it amused her when Aunt Claire's rural roots revealed themselves in a slip of speech.

“Ormond woulda killed ’em if he’d found out. He never did, though. But I found out. And. . .” Aunt Claire raised her right hand and gently stroked Alexandra’s hair. “When I learned what was going on . . . I did. I killed Milford.”

“Oh.” Alexandra stared at her aunt for a moment, then hid her eyes and concentrated on petting Safi.

“Make you think less of me?”

Alexandra raised her head and shook it. “Huh-unh.” She grinned, but the feel of it was false and she broke it.

“Still a lot to think about, though. You were still a baby, back then. I shot Milford. Right here in the apartment. Made it look like a burglary and, oh, did I cry crocodile tears! It worked. The cops believed me. They never knew about the gun Ormond owned. Mariel only knows I did it ’cause I was stupid enough to brag to her. But if she snitches, Ormond’ll find out why I did it and he’ll kill her. You know he would.”

“Mom. . . and Dad. . .”

“Buncha God damn white trash bastards.”

Alexandra grinned, and this time it was genuine. Then a cautious curiosity like that of her cat returned to her eyes. “How did you find out about them?”

## Ω

The train’s passing had thrown down clods of dirt and small rocks. Alexandra shielded herself from the debris as best she could, her body tight against the cold steel. Only when the train was gone did she dare open her eyes again. “Oh, *no!*”

The bag containing Safiyyah had slipped even lower due to the rumbling of the train. Another foot or two of rope and the rock anchor would be up to the V of the girders. The bag wriggled as if alive, the cat inside mad with fear.

“Safi, hold on, oh *please* hold on. I’m coming.”

Alexandra hoisted herself up the last few yards of the arch as quickly as she dared. “Safi, please hold on.” Pull. “Safi, please hold on.” Pull. “Safi, please hold on.” Pull again, to the rhythm of her fear.

The arch had leveled off until it was almost horizontal. Alex reached up and touched the girder that formed the near upright of the V. Holding on to it, she slid her legs under her body and sat up. She only had to reach around—

The bag slipped several inches and stopped. Alexandra screamed.

“Lex!” Hurried footsteps pounded above her, accompanied by Jonas’s voice. “Lex, what’s wrong? Are you all right?”

Alexandra’s lips trembled between fear and outright bawling. She *had* to get to the rope and. . . what if her arms weren’t long enough to reach around the girder to the center of the V?

She bit back panic. “What the hell do you *think* is wrong Jonas?”

“Aw, please, Lex. I’m sorry, I really am. Look, if you let me—”

The overhang of the trestle blocked her view of Jonas but she could hear him directly overhead. “You can’t get down here from there. You gotta come up the other way.” She looked down at the highway and caught her breath. “Like I did.” A whisper now. “Like I did.” She clenched her jaw and gripped the upright girder with her left hand, while with her right hand she reached around carefully for the rope.

“Aw, hell, Lex.” Jonas lay on his belly and peered over the edge at his sister. “Don’t fall, oh please, oh God, oh Jesus, Lex. Oh God, Mom and Dad’ll. . .”

“Will you just shut up, Jonas?” Typical of him, Alexandra thought, getting deep into trouble and only then worrying about the consequences, about whether or not it was right in the first place.

Safi fought against the bag with mighty kicks; the rope slipped; the rock clanged on the other side of the girder and began to come through the V. Hedda cheered when Alexandra screamed.

Alexandra’s hand shot out in reflex; *my cat*, she thought, *Safiyyah!* She grabbed at the rope and it slipped through her fingers. She lunged for it again, letting go of the girder, and the rock smacked her hand. Gravity pulled her body forward from her perch.

Too far forward, and Alexandra slipped off the steel arch.

## Ω

Mom and Dad had been angry that Sunday night, the night of Aunt Claire’s confession, but they had left Alexandra alone. When she came through the door they could see in the girl’s eyes something of her own that would be dangerous to force out of her.

At bedtime in the room she shared with Hedda, Alexandra huddled under the covers. Safiyyah nestled close in her arms. Never an aloof cat to Alex, Safi knew in her uncanny way that of all nights, the girl needed her tonight. Alexandra had learned a secret and she repeated the joyous news to Safi in a conspiratorial whisper. The cat purred and licked Alex’s face.

The secret was like a seed planted in Alexandra’s cat. It would soon grow into as much revenge as a domesticated predator could conceive.

## Ω

“Hedda and Jonas.” Aunt Claire invoked the names of the beasts while sitting in the garden after her confession, and chuckled. “They definitely have Ormond’s pug-ugly looks, don’t they?”

Alexandra giggled, thinking of the dun-colored, blunt features of her older siblings.

Aunt Claire's right hand reached for Alexandra's red hair again. "But my Milford. . . he had hair as red as a penny just beginning to lose its shine."

"Aunt Claire?"

"It's what tipped me off, when you were born. That hair. Ormond's not your daddy, honey, and I think he suspects it. That's why he hates you."

## Ω

Alexandra Chestnut's red hair waved in the weakening wind that blew down the ravine, through the girders under the bridge where she was barely holding on to two lives.

Hedda watched her, jumping with excitement. "C'mon and fall, you idiot!"

Alex tossed her hair out of her eyes. Her left arm was thrust through the V where she had just barely caught herself before falling. With her right hand she fumbled for the rope she had snagged between her legs. Benjy's rock perched uneasily above her knees. Her fingers were slipping from their hold on the girder. She could put her feet on the flat edge of the top girder of the arch, but she would lose the bag if she did.

"Safi." Her voice pinched tight into a terrified whisper. "Safi."

Under the rock, she finally grasped the rope with her right hand. She pulled it up, brought her knees together again, and grabbed hold lower on the rope. Now she pulled up both the rock and her cat, again and again, closer, higher. Her fingers on the girder slipped too far. She heaved the bag over her shoulder and lifted her feet to set them in the girder. Her arms shot out for balance – no handhold!

"Lex! Oh, jeez!" Jonas lowered a hand, far away and useless.

Alexandra steadied herself, clutched the girder again, then reached around and took the wriggling, angry canvas bag in her free hand. "Safi, shh. It's me. Settle down. It's over."

Safiyah heard Alex, jerked twice as panic fled her body, then remained still. Alexandra climbed into the V for safety. She looked down past her feet at the highway aiming west, toward the security of her aunt's home. Alexandra's chest heaved once, then she forced her tears away.

"Lex." Jonas watched from above. "Oh Jesus, Lex, are you all right?"

"Go away, Jonas." Alexandra untied the rock and dropped it to the highway. She watched it fall, and saw Hedda's bitter eyes follow its long descent. "Wish it'd hit that pig in the head," Alex muttered, and Safi yowled agreement. The rock thumped hard onto the asphalt, with a thud like a punch in the gut. Alexandra's cat yowled again. "Shh, Safi. I'm here."

“Lex. How’re you gonna get down?”

Alexandra examined the trestle. There was no way to go up without risking her life even further than she already had. “How d’ya think?”

“Oh man, Lex, can’t you—”

“No, I can’t. Just go on down, Jonas. Before another train comes.”

“Can’t you throw me the bag and I’ll—”

“*You?* You expect me to trust you with Safi after what you did?”

“Lex. . .”

“Any of you touches her again and I’ll kill you. I mean it. Get the hell away from me, Jonas.” Alexandra turned from her brother and circled the rope around her stomach, then hitched it so Safiyyah was held in the bag at her side. She stroked the cat’s body through the canvas. “I have to leave you in there for now, Safi,” she whispered. “Please understand.”

Alexandra climbed out of the V and inched her way slowly backward, down to the ground. She talked to Safiyyah the whole time about their secret hiding place; about playing together in the wildflowers during the summer; about their beloved weekends with Aunt Claire; about anything at all except hanging in the sky far above the hard earth on a cold autumn night.

At the bottom, Jonas helped Alexandra climb down the rocks from the concrete pier. The others watched her, silent and sullen, their plan a failure. Alexandra untied the rope from her body and opened the bag, and took Safiyyah into her arms.

Hedda watched Alexandra kiss her cat, croon to her, and stroke her fur. “You had enough lovin’ yet, spithead?”

Jonas stepped toward Hedda. The big girl flinched and backed away.

Alexandra faced her siblings, her dark green eyes staring hard with fury. Safiyyah’s green-gold eyes glared at them also, knowing and wise and a bit frightening. Benjy saw the eyes of Alexandra’s cat on him, and he began to snuffle.

Alexandra tried not to shiver from the cold. She stood as straight as her sore body would allow. “I hate you,” she said to her sister and brothers. “I hate all of you.”

She let Jonas walk alongside and a bit behind her on the way home. He would protect her now, and for his repentance he was allowed to live.

## Ω

Hedda always had the best ideas and when impressionable, impulsive little Benjy stole one of them and added rat poison to a can of tuna fish, all the while smirking at the innocent, watchful eyes of Alexandra’s cat, he didn’t think twice, after kneading the poison into the fish by hand,

about licking the mixture off his fingers. As soon as the convulsions left Benjy's lifeless body, Safiyyah sharpened her claws on the soles of his sneakers.

The following spring, Hedda was caught outdoors with friends when a flooding downpour burst over them. She became separated from her friends, lost in the woods behind the Chestnut house. When her body was found in the creek, it bore strange scratches that ran down her closed eyes, the faded red marks dug deep into the conjunctiva of her lower lids. The scratches were made while she was still alive, when she must have encountered some poor, doomed fellow creature in the flood. Like a cat, the coroner noted, and sent Hedda to be buried alongside her little brother.

Early summer, and Safiyyah burst full tilt into the front yard one lazy afternoon, all raised hackles of fast frightened energy. A Rottweiler followed her in rapid pursuit. Whitley was in the yard when he saw his chance, and he tried to catch Alexandra's cat to give to the dog. Safiyyah dashed through Whitley's fingers. The dog disliked the boy's interference. From a tree limb Safi watched and cleaned herself while the dog mauled Whitley. The animal's first bite was deep into the boy's crotch.

After the third funeral, Ormond became angry. He was no fool. The cat's eyes revealed that she *knew*; the beast was fully aware of what it had done. So he chased Alexandra's cat through the house and into the yard, around back and then into the crawlspace where the beast had fled to escape him. Ormond followed on his belly and was startled when the cat leaped out of a dark and dirty hole at him. When his head jerked up it met one of the rusty nails that hung from above. He was found that way, impaled on the spike, eyes wide open in final surprise at the animal's cunning.

Jonas knew also, and he ran away from home after he awoke to find Alexandra's cat on his chest one midnight, the night after his father's death. The cat's fierce eyes told Jonas to flee and that this would be his only warning.

Mariel returned from burying her husband and slapped Alexandra. After the girl fled in tears to her bedroom, the woman fetched Ormond's ill-tended old shotgun from the back of their bedroom closet. In the hallway to the kitchen, Mariel found Alexandra's cat sitting still and quiet, its serene eyes sparkling with curiosity at the woman and her odd toy. Mariel lifted both barrels to the cat's eyes. The gun exploded in her face.

Autumn again, and fifteen-year-old Alexandra Chestnut sat in her aunt's garden, with Safiyyah purring in her lap. Alexandra lifted her head and, from under the brim of her new hat, she smiled at the golden-rod and tangerine sunset while her burnished copper hair flew confidently in the brisk wind.



Aunt Claire brought them tea and sat down beside her niece. Safiyyah stirred and licked the woman's hand.

"She likes you." Alexandra beamed.

Aunt Claire nodded and pulled her lips into a grim smile. She knew what value came attached to having the favor of Alexandra's cat.

"I don't have to go home now," Alexandra said. "Do I?"

Aunt Claire tucked a lock of red hair behind Alexandra's left ear. "No, honey. Home is here now. For good."

JOHN CLOUTIER, twenty-five, is Ottawa born and bred. His work has been accepted for publication by *Canadian Writer's Journal* and *Poet's Podium*.

## Four Poems / John Cloutier

### The Mountain

one line makes the mountain  
 sunlight shimmers through blowing leaves  
 heavy footsteps dig heel deep into the earth

a few steps further the gnarled root takes away balance  
 a hypnotic silence shatters from the first sound  
 as the echo returns so does silence

building with every moment  
 a few steps further there is a feeling of distance  
 distances wax and wane on this day

moving toward night the pursuit persists  
 the mountain waits for no one  
 the harvest moon looms like darkness before dawn

a few steps further the woods dissolve and there is space  
 between the mountain and the forest  
 a man stands alone

it is day and I have not eaten and am not hungry  
 clouds play games with the sky and I am watching  
 each step take me closer

## Relentless

the sky bleeds like feet torn  
by thorns the valley has had to offer

evening falls on uneven ground  
a place where wounds are wiped down

the mountain whispers names through the darkness  
circles attach themselves to circles in the silver puddles along the way

hands slip then grasp the wet jagged rock  
a deep breath and the body pulses in pain

strength summoned from God knows where  
another step into the hour before the dawn

the mountain and the moon and stars  
a part of together we are

learning the secrets the mountain has to offer  
in the morning light a flower unfolds

I see you dancing in the morning light  
and am blessed to be a part of this moment

## Renewal

the wound ran deep as the scab rubbed thin  
 an ocean without water  
 a coarse layer of brown clay

each crack a hollowed vein  
 the ground thinned with each gust of wind  
 a benevolent sky opened and made mud from clay

the ocean rose  
 plants took form between the cracks  
 their roots sewed the wound shut

waves shimmering  
 the horizon dances its reflection

## The Fight

finely chiseled men fight  
 to put food on their tables  
 many people watch  
 many people watch the people watching  
 the people  
 caged like animals  
 throwing uppercuts and rabid punches  
 in between rounds  
 wounds are wiped down  
 bikini clad women hold numbers up  
 concessions are bought and sold  
 the bell rings  
 the electricity builds  
 with every punch  
 a flurry to the solar plexus  
 sweat flies through the air  
 judges chickenscratch their points  
 the executioner's right hand  
 smashes the temple  
 transfixed and stunned  
 they are watching  
 a man crumble

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*. Set in Switzerland, *To Travel the Distance* is a novella-length work in progress that deals with the nostalgic longings and nagging dislocation of Ulyssa Segantini, a character who first appeared in Schraner's short story, "Dream Dig," selected for inclusion in the *Journey Prize Anthology, 2001*, and again in the much longer story, "Blue Skies Over Savognin" (*NOR*, Spring, 2002).

## To Travel the Distance

(The Serialized Saga of Ulyssa Segantini)

Margrith Schraner

### Chapter 3

"IT'S SO DIFFERENT from what I remember," Ulyssa said to Tomas, climbing the last of the knolls up to the castle grounds. She paused to catch her breath. The castle coming into view was a stone-walled enclosure capped with a formidable roof. It appeared rugged in the fierce light of the afternoon. "I can hardly believe I'm standing here, in front of the very castle I visited when I was a child. Is this really the *Rhaetia Ampla*? I must be dreaming. Somebody pinch me – quick!"

Tomas was laughing like a boy, ready to oblige with a quick pinch. But she dodged his hand, whereupon he snatched the straw hat off her head and gave it a quick spin. It skimmed through the air like a Frisbee and landed in a patch of stinging nettles.

"That wasn't very nice of you," she scolded him, running to retrieve her hat. Tomas stood there, scratching a spot at the back of his neck that always got itchy when he was hot. His head was inclined at an odd angle – *sheepish* was the word that came to Ulyssa's mind.

"Ouch!" she fumed, loud enough for him to hear. She applied several dabs of spit to her burning knee. "Nettles have a nasty bite – especially ones that are past their prime."

"Just like you older ladies, eh?"

Looking up, she caught him grinning broadly at her across the gravel path. He had gone too far, grouping her with older ladies, she thought. His occasionally crude, Finnish jokes were barely tolerable to begin with and this one, she knew, had been made at her expense. She resolutely crossed the gravel path. "It was cruel of you to toss my hat

into the nettles," she said and swatted him on the backside of his shorts. He responded with an exaggerated leap, which made the coins in his pockets jingle merrily. For a brief moment, she was caught up in the humour of his antics, ready to spill an entire bellyful of laughter. But the urge to scold him proved stronger.

"From now on, leave my hat alone," she said, using the curt style normally reserved for talking to dogs. Her reprimanding seemed to have fallen on deaf ears, however; he simply refused to hang his head.

"Over here, mosquito," he taunted her, dancing up and down like a prize fighter ready to spar. "Come, pummel me with your probiscus." She turned away from him, disgusted. But his voice followed her; it was now at her back. It sounded surprisingly tender, almost confessional. "I've always loved nettles," he said. "I used to eat them when I was a kid. My *Mummi* used to cook them into spinach for us in the spring-time."

How clever of him, she thought. Even a blind person could see that he was changing the subject the way other people changed lanes, to get back to a less encumbered stretch of road. It was obvious to her that Tomas wanted to re-establish the easy, conversational tone they had both grown accustomed to, over the years.

"Too bad those nettles have gone to seed," he said, waiting for her to respond. It was all his fault, she thought. She would take her time and make a show of bending down to dab more spit on the spot where the nettles had left a nasty welt. Her resentment was festering close to the surface now, ready to erupt like a dark mood. She was loath to admit to him that she, too, longed for the comfort of a certain normalcy of exchange between them.

"Which granny was it who cooked nettles for you? Let me guess. Was it your Finnish granny," she cooed, "your one and only granny, the one who adored you so much, eh, *Tomasito mio*?"

She realized too late that she had offended him; he retreated behind a wall of silence. She was only too familiar with that wall, having bumped into it on more than one occasion. She watched as he lumbered off in the direction of the castle entrance.

"Where are you going?" she called, peeved like a child whose playmate has left to go home for supper in the middle of playing a favorite game. She ran to catch up to him.

"My granny," he said after a significant pause, "she was the greatest granny on earth. Only once, when I was particularly naughty, did she threaten to use a birch switch on me. Otherwise, she was a wonderful old woman."

His granny. Always his granny. She found his habit of placing his *Mummi* up on a pedestal annoying. And yet, Ulyssa felt bereft, somehow. As far as she knew, no one in her family was in the habit of revering people in that fashion, of remembering them with fondness long

after they were dead. Ulyssa wished she had a grandmother to speak of with such fondness. Her envy was like a wedge being pushed between herself and Tomas; it left her on one side of it, fearful and alone.

“And her bread,” Tomas raved on. “Her bread was simply the best!”

How lucky for him to have tasted his granny’s bread, Ulyssa thought. She swallowed the last bit of spit that clung to the back of her throat. To her knowledge, neither of her grandmothers was remembered for the bread they had baked.

“Her bread was out of this world,” Tomas repeated, becoming engrossed in his remembrances. She wished he would stop talking; his venerating tone was getting on her nerves. “I never tasted anything as good, ever again. Not since my granny was alive, God rest her soul,” he concluded, glancing heavenward.

How wistful he looked, Ulyssa thought. As if he half expected his dear, departed granny to put in an appearance just for him, her one and only grandson. As if he was waiting for her to bestow a smile on him, one of her beatific smiles, the hallmark of a long-lasting, undying love, the love that all grandmothers have for their grandchildren.

Indeed, he might be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of her, silhouetted prettily against the glorious expanse of cerulean blue. “My granny,” he would then exclaim, his voice amazed as it had been the day he had pulled a creased photograph from an old biscuit tin he kept on top of his bookshelf and handed it to her with an air of pride she had been unable to fathom, at the time.

*My granny.* How she wished she could say those words – words like *la nonna*, uttered with tenderness and followed by anecdotes that exalted the virtues of her grandmother, Vincenza. But simple words such as these were never available to her. They did not translate well into any of the languages Ulyssa spoke. They belonged to the dictionary of the heart.

She scanned the cloudless sky in the unlikely hope of catching a glimpse of Tomas’s granny. There was really no reason on earth, she thought, why Tomas’s granny shouldn’t be putting in an appearance, now that she had been summoned. Ulyssa was used to people putting in appearances. People were always appearing to her – out of the shadows of dreams and in broad daylight as well.

Tomas’s attention was still riveted on the sky. She followed his gaze up to where the band of deep lilac shadows ran along the underside of the eaves. A number of birds were flitting in and out of the slit-like openings below the castle roof.

Both she and Tomas held their breath, staring up.

“Black birds,” Tomas said, his voice hoarse with wonderment. “The scene strikes me as utterly medieval.” Ulyssa had the feeling that he wasn’t speaking to her at all. He seemed to be addressing an audience located in the shadows below the eaves. He reminded her of an actor

delivering a soliloquy, pedantic and infuriating. “Please, remember,” he said, “my granny was the only one who had permission to call me *Tomasito*. The right to call me by that name is a very special right. And you,” he went on, half-turning toward her and stabbing a finger at her chest, “have yet to earn that right.”

She bit her lower lip and swallowed, hard. Her throat felt dry. A bitter worm seemed to be burrowing its way into her heart, unstoppable. She instinctively placed a palm there as if to protect herself against a sudden urge to cry out loud. It was unbearable, this sudden chaos of emotions she was experiencing. It was turning into an obstacle as solid and insurmountable as the stone wall of the *Rhaetia Ampla* before her. She would have to find a way out of the misery that suddenly held her in its grip.

She stepped forward and gestured grandly at the stone tower of the fortress, like a tour guide showing off a national treasure. She pointed up to where the line of parapets met the sky. “Speaking of medieval, isn’t this a most splendid example of medieval masonry, Tomas?” She thought about calling him *Tomasito*, but resisted the temptation. “Have you ever laid eyes on walls as impressive as these?”

Tomasito blinked in the sunshine as he considered the question, craning his neck this way and that, like a dutiful tourist. He spoke only after much deliberation. “I must admit, the chance of coming upon such magnificent boulders, stuck together as skilfully as the ones before us, is rare, indeed.”

She nodded. For the moment, at least, she felt satisfied with his assessment. “Just look at the height of these walls. It’s awe-inspiring,” she said. “All you have to do is take one good look to realize that what distinguishes *this* country” – she paused dramatically to ensure she had his undivided attention – “is the fact that it has *architecture!*”

She had spoken with authority, emphatically and with conviction, and she was proud of it. She took a step back.

“The height of these walls is awesome, indeed,” he conceded. “But not nearly as awe-inspiring as the tall cedars in the painted forest of Emily Carr – not by a long stretch.”

She hadn’t expected him to compare the height of trees to the sheer drop of castle walls. But it made sense, considering all the years Tomas had worked as a naturalist, roaming the forests in the far North of Finland and training his binoculars on the wildlife there, before coming to settle in Canada. Now that he was a writer, he preferred to observe human behavior, but he continued to feel intensely passionate about the forest.

And so did Ulyssa. The trees in the primeval forest painted by Emily Carr now rose in her mind – giant red and yellow cedars on the West Coast of British Columbia, ones that stood massive, like sculptures, all around her. In a recent dream, Ulyssa had wandered through



an opulent growth of salal and stood under one of these gigantic cedars. She had leaned her hand against its bark and let her gaze climb upward, all along the bark's vertical ridges to where the dark, green crown touched the sky. Through the mass of undulating cedar fronds she thought she glimpsed at the very top a large thunderbird – or was it a raven? The coastal rainforest in its vastness, she discovered, was the repository of many such cedar columns, the place where many such totems were hidden.

Ulyssa leaned her body into the castle wall to steady herself. Here was a vastness of an altogether different kind, she reminded herself. Here was a loftiness and grandeur unique to architecture. She rested her palm on the rough-hewn stone and let her fingers trace the mortar which felt surprisingly warm. Although porous, it still held the rocks in place.

The land that boasted such walls used to be her homeland, the country where she had spent most of her childhood. And now she had come back to it as a visitor, forcing her to relegate the land of ancient, sculpted cedars to the world of dreams.

For the time being, she had managed to leave the cedars behind – but to what end? To embark on some dubitable journey? Tears welled up behind her eyes when she thought of the giant red and yellow cedars on the West Coast. She averted her gaze, not wanting Tomas to see that she was sad of heart.

“These castle walls are probably no more than seventy-five feet in height,” he said, forcing her to respond, to put on a straight face.

“More like twenty-five meters,” she said. “We’re in Europe, after all.” But what did it matter in the end? She shrugged. “Measurements didn’t mean anything to me when I was a child,” she told him. “What stands out for me in retrospect is how I had to arc my neck all the way back to see the top of these walls.” The memory invigorated her; she flung her head back to demonstrate. “They towered over me, like this, *magnificento*. And the battlements reached all the way up to meet the sky.”

“Lovely image, that,” Tomas said. “Did you borrow it from somewhere?” He didn’t give her any time to respond. “You’re such a romantic,” he added. “Don’t you think it’s about time you stopped living in the past?”

“It isn’t as easy as you think,” she said, overcome by a sadness she could not seem to get to the root of. “I liked the castle a lot more when it had rugged walls that were open to the sky, when there was no entrance to speak of. The castle was a mere shell, then, open to the wind in all directions.”

Now a solid arc of stonework all around the door gave the entire structure a forbidding look. She had the impression that they were being barred access.

“What I remember is the crumbling plaster and the heaps of rubble, the day my cousin Maria Teresa and I wandered in through the large gap in the wall. I managed to scare some chickens that were pecking around in the rubble and the weeds.”

“Chickens?” Tomas was incredulous.

Ulyssa wasn’t sure why the chickens had been there, in the castle enclosure. They had seemed out of place, even then. It was odd, but she hadn’t given the matter much thought at the time.

She stopped talking. It was probably unwise to recount the details of her first visit to the castle, when she had caught sight of someone else, too, someone she had never seen before and would most likely never see again. She had been no more than seven years old at the time, but her child’s mind had clearly perceived a man wearing dark trousers and a white shirt. Or, had he worn a painter’s smock? She wasn’t sure anymore. What she remembered most clearly was that he was working at an easel. She had been mildly surprised by his presence. Ulyssa’s mother, however, had been unduly alarmed upon discovering that Ulyssa was staring off into vacant space at something – or rather, at nothing she herself was able to discern.

Ulyssa had watched the painter pack up his things and disappear. *Vanish* was a much better word. Or dissolve – disappear in broad daylight. For quite some time afterward, she had wondered about the identity of this stranger who had made a point of appearing to her in broad daylight, and yet, as if out of a dream.

“Chickens?” Tomas repeated. “Inside the castle enclosure?”

“Inside, yes. Don’t forget, it was just a ruin, then, full of magic, full of possibilities.”

“Ruins are always full of *something*. Full of many things, in fact.”

“It’s disappointing to see the transformation that has taken place. Aren’t ruins supposed to become more decrepit over time?”

“You’re disenchanting because some big, bad workmen have come along to ruin your lovely childhood dream of castle walls towering high into the sky.” His comment seemed oddly devoid of sympathy.

Ulyssa shook her head. “The castle seems much too perfect, now.”

Tomas tried to reassure her. “Restoration is wonderful. But it’s a lot of gruntwork, too. Lots of toil and trouble.” He made a sound as if he had just finished helping a stone mason lift a slab of granite into place.

She became distracted by the sudden movement of dark shadows – several of them, in the shape of birds – passing overhead. She watched them dart in and out of the regularly spaced openings under the eaves.

Tomas shielded his eyes against the sky’s brightness. “Agile little creatures, aren’t they?” He seemed captivated. “Do you happen to know what kind of birds they are?”

She couldn’t say for sure. “It’s rather hard to tell from down here. Too bad I left my binoculars at the *Trais Fluors*.”

“Well, to my uninformed eye, they appear to be rooks,” he said. “But judging from those squeaky, bickering voices of theirs, they might be jays, or even whiskey jacks.”

“I remember, now,” she said. “They’re called mountain birds. Giovanni Segantini used to put them in his paintings.”

“Mountain birds? Is there such a classification?”

Ulyssa smiled. She didn’t want to tell him that it was a name she had invented for them, that their real name was daw, or jackdaw. “These birds were favorites with many painters of the *Graubünden* region, painters like Giovanni Segantini and Alois Carigiet, for instance.” She spoke with urgency, as if her memory of the birds might slip from her grasp. “Take *Afternoon in the Alps*, for instance, one of Segantini’s better-known paintings.”

She saw the puzzled look on Tomas’s face.

“We saw it a couple of days ago, at the art museum in St. Moritz. Remember the one featuring the shepherdess in the blue dress? I mentioned that the shepherdess reminded me of my favorite aunt, Rosina. I pointed out the three black birds that looked like kites.”

For as long as she could remember, she had been fascinated by those birds – three distinct, black squiggles, placed just so – afloat in a painterly sky of the clearest blue. “I think Segantini put them in the painting to draw our attention to the dizzying heights, to remind us that everything in existence eventually disappears from view, or ceases to be graspable.”

Tomas placed a finger on his upper lip, as if he had just now remembered something of vital importance. “Birds are often symbolic. In paintings as well as in poetry, they tend to be harbingers,” he said. He held his palms cupped in front of him, as if other secrets might come raining down from the sky.

Harbingers? She considered the idea.

“I know the painting you just mentioned,” he said. “But its title – if I may correct you – is actually *The Windy Day*. A commentary, no doubt, on the shepherdess, who is holding on to the brim of her straw hat, lest it be blown away by one of Switzerland’s strong, alpine breezes.”

Ulyssa looked at him, perplexed. There it was again, that boyish grin on his face. He was about to reach for her straw hat and send it spinning off a second time, but she caught him just in time. “Don’t you dare!” She waved her hands to shoo him away like some pesky fly. “I’m not going to fall for that again. Not this time. And besides,” she said, “you’re dead wrong about the title of that painting. There is no wind at all, not even a breeze. In fact, there isn’t even a *hint* of a breeze!”

If only there was a gust of wind, right now, she thought. She would welcome it with open arms. The walls of the castle seemed to have soaked up the entire summer’s heat; it came cascading down on her, making her limbs feel heavy, limp and lifeless.

She thought back to *Afternoon in the Alps*. What was memorable about the painting was the quality of airiness and light – the intense light of the midday sun and, above all, a certain brightness that made you want to shade your eyes. It was all around her now, that very same light. She remembered it from the day she had first set foot on the castle grounds. The summer air around the *Rheatia Ampla* had seemed so calm, then, right up to the moment she and her cousin had stepped through the large, gaping hole in the wall, frightening the chickens.

“It’s as plain as day that the shepherdess in the painting had her hand raised to shade her eyes from the midday sun, to contemplate the far-off hills and distant mountains,” she told him, compelled to prove Tomas wrong. “The entire canvas, if you remember, gave off a tangible feeling of ultimate calm.”

It was high time that they left, she thought. She should tell Tomas. However, her words failed to cross the noisy, towering barrier that seemed to have built up like a wall inside her head. It was futile, she thought. In the end, she would be powerless to prove her point, as powerless as trying to stave off the mounting surge inside her head.

The stone walls of the castle, she noticed, had taken on a glistening, sweaty look, as if they were made of pure silver. And what were those sickening, plum-colored shadows that hung below the eaves and around the castle entrance, looking like spider webs? She felt an insistent prickling at the back of her knees, as if her skin were being assailed by a myriad of tiny, sharp needles. She wished she wasn’t wearing shorts.

“We should take refuge inside the castle for a while,” he said. “It’s bound to be a lot cooler in there.” Tomas’s words reached her as if from a great distance away. He went to draw back the cast-iron ring that served as a handle on the wooden door, but try as he might, the handle refused to budge. He took off his yellow baseball cap to scratch the itchy spot at the back of his neck; his hair was mussed up and standing on end. He pointed to a large placard fastened to the wall beside the entrance. “I wonder what that sign says.”

She blinked. How come she hadn’t noticed the sign until now? Bright sunlight bounced back at her from its white surface; she could barely make out the text.

“It’s some kind of narrative, a chronicle written in German, tracing the history of the castle, I think.”

“Could you read it to me?” He sounded eager, like a boy waiting to hear a good story.

She squinted at the chunks of text that stood out darkly on the glistening, white background. “There are far too many words to take in, right now,” she said, “and besides, this light is blinding me. I forgot to bring my sunglasses.”

“Here, you can use mine,” Tomas said. “I can’t make any sense of the text, anyway.”

His glasses were a poor match for her eyesight, she discovered, but her own curiosity was now taking over, urging her to grapple with the text. "I'll have to make a long story short," she said.

He nodded.

"It was in the dead of winter, 1226 to 1227," she began, translating directly from the German, "when the sound of axes could be heard far and wide, ringing throughout the forests of this region..." She cleared her throat. It was hard to concentrate. The light made her eyes water despite the sunglasses, forcing her to close her eyes. But she forged on. "A great number of trees were felled at the behest of the two brothers, Albero and Bertold von Wangen, who hailed from Bozen, in the southern region of Tyrol. The trees were felled for the purpose of erecting what would in due course become one of the stateliest, most majestic strongholds of the region..."

"Impressive," Tomas interrupted.

"What?" Ulyssa gave him an uncomprehending look.

"One of the stateliest, most *impressive* strongholds."

"That's what it says, here." She did not like it when Tomas interrupted. "A *majestic* stronghold," she reiterated, "to be erected upon an auspicious site, namely the prominent hill overlooking our present village of Riom."

"How fascinating," Tomas said.

Ulyssa felt mesmerized by the black lettering on the placard. For some reason, it had changed in appearance and looked thinner now. Unnaturally thin, she thought. Moreover, it seemed to have become detached from the glaring, white background. The letters seemed to be hovering in the air like insects in a swarm. She stared at it, spellbound.

"Fascinating," Tomas repeated. She wondered if he was referring to the skinny letters she saw hovering in the air.

"What do you find so fascinating?" she asked.

"I find it fascinating that with a few, simple brushstrokes you have managed to fill me in on events of such great importance, events that took place centuries ago. And, moreover, I marvel at the animated way you have chosen to tell the tale."

"I have chosen *nothing*," Ulyssa said, gesturing at the sign. "It's all right there, in the original text."

"Well, in that case, I'll simply say I appreciate the author's narrative style," he said, giving her a little nudge. "A style masterfully rendered, I would like to add, by our able translator, of course."

She allowed herself to bask in the warmth of his compliment.

"But it is rather evident to me that you dolled up the text with some flourishes of your own."

She rose to the bait, unthinking. "How dare you question the accuracy of my translation," she said and yanked the sunglasses off her nose.

Her eyes met his in a combative stare, as if she were trying to size up an enemy.

Tomas took a step back. “What passion, your Ladyship,” he said, mocking her by clapping his hands together and bowing.

“Translating,” she said, paying him no heed, “has always been *my* forte – not yours.”

“I am not contesting that fact, your Ladyship.” Tomas directed an ingratiating smile at her. “Pray, continue.”

He was well-versed in the ways of flattery, she thought, at least when he wanted to be. And for the moment, she was mollified. She put his sunglasses back on her nose and peered at the text once more. “Ah, yes. Where was I, now?”

She realized too late that she was now translating from an altogether different part of the narrative. But she continued; Tomas would hardly know the difference.

“In the course of many, many years,” she read, “the stronghold has been subjected to a number of restorations, the most recent of which was carried out under the auspices of the Society for the Conservation of Monuments.”

“Conservation of Monuments?” Tomas cut in. “What kind of expression is that? Don’t you think it should read *Preservation of Historic Buildings*?”

“Who is reading the text? You? Or me?”

Tomas shrugged. “All I’m saying *is*” – he was speaking loudly, as if intending to override any objections she might possibly have – “that I’ve been led to assume – “

It was Ulyssa’s turn to cut him short. “Assume what?”

His gaze evaded hers. In fact, his eyes seemed to be seeking out the purple shadows around the castle entrance. “Well, to put it bluntly,” he said, “I’m of the opinion – ”

She waited for him to formulate his thoughts.

“It’s rather obvious to me that there has been some kind of translation flub.”

She lost her control. “That’s it,” she fumed, barely able to keep herself from stomping up and down. “I give up. I’m ready to quit! I’ve done more than my fair share of work, today!”

The day had indeed managed to defeat her. “Conservation, preservation, who the hell cares,” she said. But then, she adopted a conciliatory tone. “Let’s just call it *Upkeep of Monuments*,” she suggested lamely. She hated squabbles, especially about matters of terminology. After all, what was terminology, if not a matter of opinion? It was unconscionable of Tomas to keep her standing there, in front of the signboard, for even one split-second longer than was absolutely necessary. What if they were to continue arguing and defending themselves all afternoon, splitting hairs endlessly, until the cows came home? Her pa-

tience, she knew, would run out long before his did, and the merciless eye of the blazing sun would continue to stare them down, hour after hour, without even the promise of a sunset in sight.

She sighed. There was neither shade nor shelter, and the heat was insufferable. How she longed for a breeze, a stiff alpine breeze that would lift the straw hat off her head, a breeze so cool it would soothe her burning cheeks. She looked down at her hot and swollen feet. Her ankles were puffy from the heat. She took the sunglasses off her nose and carefully folded the temple pieces back against the lenses before handing them back to Tomas. She wiped at the dampness on her forehead; her pulse was beating tersely in her temples.

“Let’s go.”

Tomas hesitated. He seemed unable to pull himself away from the signboard. “Did you notice the large number in the text? What does it refer to?” he asked, mystified, as if it were the repository of some untold secret he had been looking for all his life. “120,000,” he mused. “It stands out like a sore thumb amidst all that verbiage. Let me guess; it probably has something to do with the total cost of renovations carried out on the castle – in Swiss francs, I would bet. Am I right?”

“Nice try, Tomas, but no cigar.” She couldn’t help laughing. “It actually refers to the number of larch shingles that were used to cover the new roof of the castle.”

“The mind boggles at the very thought of it.”

“Just think, entire forests razed to the ground,” Ulyssa said, shivering despite the heat. She did not feel like completing the thought. Details such as these would have to be attended to later on – after they had been jotted down in her notebook.

She was rummaging through her packsack for pen and paper, when she heard the sound of crunching gravel behind her and abruptly turned around to find herself standing face to face with a young, frocked priest.

DANIEL MILLS's poems have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Sojourners*, *Fireweed*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. His chapbook, *Gold: Daniel Skach-Mills's Greatest Hits, 1990-2000*, appeared in 2001 from Pudding House. A former Trappist monk, he holds a certificate in graphic design from The Kootenay School of Art, a BA from Marylhurst University and an MA from St. Martin's College. He and his partner live in Portland, Oregon.

## Two Poems / Daniel Mills

### **This Town**

Nelson, B.C. – Canada

I could be fir or mountain aspen  
standing in the longing of this evening's light  
that's osprey-ing its final dive now  
behind Pulpit Rock—

that's extending the west arm of the Kootenay  
into this glimmering handshake of tributary fingers  
fanning out to welcome the deeper sleep  
of nightfall and Columbia—

that's reminding me, on its mountain wend,  
how my life inclines toward this town...  
the streets, like tongues, panting up  
the sides of the Selkirks  
and down again  
to the lakeshore to drink;  
turrets on the main streets  
rounding off edges in me  
wherever they bend—

to pull behind it all  
as familiar as the creak of the old clotheslines  
grinning, pulley to pulley, over something,  
close as skin, being held in secret  
between them and the alleys.



## Crickets

Think of them as tiny blades  
silvering away the last jagged edges of day  
from the smoothly sanded surface of the night.

Imagine them outside your window now,  
their tiny trellis of sound ascending  
to the waiting sill of your room,

each chirp creaking like a polished hinge  
you throw open the doors of your ears to let in;  
wings twinkling and glinting

like invisible stars, chirring berries  
your senses reach out to pick off  
nightfall's tangled branches;

hidden grace notes shimmering,  
black as onyx, music that cannot  
be sight-read —even in moonlight—

but only where darkness rubs them,  
yes, that is where  
they sing.

JOHNNY FREM is the organizer of the long-running *Bolts of Fiction* reading series in Vancouver, B.C. A promoter of literature and writers, he bucks the effete, literary trend by working out as a roofer.

## Self-Portrait

### Johnny Frem

IT'S A DARK and stormy night. Yes, that's right. It's not original, but it is a good line for the beginning of a story, despite what most people say. And besides, it's the truth. It was a dark and stormy night when it happened, so that's how it starts: It's a dark and stormy night. The bars have shut down and you're driving home. Two o'clock in the morning. Dark, did I mention that? It's really dark because it's two a.m., yes, and it's extra dark because it's a cloudy sky and it's drizzling a bit. There's been some lightning, some thunder and a bit of rain while you were in the bar, but that's over except for some sprinkles. In fact, you haven't even had to turn on your wipers.

You're probably over the breathalyzer limit, but you've taken the side streets home and you've crept along undetected and then you look up and . . . damn it, you took a wrong turn and you're on one of those streets with a traffic diverter at the intersection, which steers everything off to the left.

You didn't see it until it was too late. You nearly ran into it. So you're trying to just quietly reverse away from it, when your back tires go up over the curb and onto someone's lawn. Your bumper clunks as you drop off that. Okay, you notice a little alley, which will take you around that damn diverter. The side of your car scrapes on some bushes as the alley turns sharply to the right, which will send you back in the same direction you came from. This is no good at all. You put it in park. Better sleep the booze off right here even though you're almost home.

You turn off the headlights. You remember to take the keys out of the ignition and you lean up against the driver's door and stare into your right hand. You close your eyes.

A little while later you wake up – kind of cold, kind of stiff. Where is this? Oh, yes. All right. Don't you just hate streets that keep sending you around in circles? City planners make them this way to frustrate people who don't actually live here.

But you know if you swing through all the traffic circles and orange plastic diverters and one-way streets, if you just follow all the traffic signs without breaking any rules, you'll eventually find your way out of this cul-de-sac of side streets.

You speed up and you're halfway down the alley, but before you can react there's someone running out in front of your car. You jam on the brakes, but you hear a sickening crunch and the guy goes down. And then you wait anxiously. But you don't see anyone getting up. Now don't freak out. You didn't kill him, you hope. You wish. You make deals with God. You'll do anything. Whatever it takes. And you open your door. Holding onto your steering wheel, you lean your head out the door and down to the pavement to look under the car. And then you see it. One desperate hand clenched to the corner of your bumper. You plead with God not to do this.

You can make out some tousled hair and some shoulders and another hand with something white in it? What is that? A white pamphlet of some sort lit up by your headlights. And the paper is rustling in the breeze. What is that? You want to know. No, wait. That's not the wind. His arm is moving. Thank God. He's looking along the ground toward your head. His mouth opens, struggling. "Stacey," you think he said.

"What's that?"

"Story. I want you to read my story." He's smiling, and he's sitting up – like he's not hurt in the slightest, which is a bit disconcerting, so you use the steering wheel to pull yourself up so you're sitting in the driver's seat. You close your car door. Shit, you just want out of here.

Your headlights shine up and the shadows stretch up across his forehead, making a jack-o-lantern of his face. He gets up and is waving his arms frantically as he comes around to your door. He looks desperate and he wants you to roll down your window. And you want to help him, but it's two a.m. and this could be a scam, just a ploy to get you to open your door, but you look into those eyes and you study the desperation there. He's not faking that, but then so what, it could still be a scam. Maybe he's so desperate he has to scam you.

He looks fairly small. Physically, he's not very threatening and his face looks honest and his pleading eyes are just pleading enough that you take a chance. You roll down the window an inch.

"Are you all right?"

“Yeah, I just slipped and fell under the front of your car. Good thing you stopped. I’m okay.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I was going a bit fast.”

“Naah, I should know better. Everyone’s always speeding down this alley. Ever since they put up those cement blocks by the corner.”

“It sounded like I hit you.” You want to be sure he’s okay – just in case he might sue later or something.

And now you notice he’s really quite old and frail – not threatening at all. You roll down the window some more and you see there’s a big tree branch sticking out into the alley, roughly where it would go under the front wheel. You didn’t see that before. That must be what made that crunching sound.

He’s still leaning on your car. And it looks like he might fall down again. But he catches himself and rests an elbow on your hood.

Okay, be careful, just stay with him. Don’t leave until he says he’s feeling okay. But don’t give him your insurance papers unless he totally insists on it.

“Just rest a minute, sir. You’re gonna be okay.”

“Yeah. Just a bit dizzy there.”

He’s flipping through his pamphlets of white paper again, rubbing his neck and rolling his head around as if to see if everything is working right.

“You just relax there for as long as you like.”

“My stories,” he says. “I was wondering if you would like to buy one of them.”

Maybe this doesn’t make sense to you. “Buy a story?”

He’s rummaging through his pamphlets. He takes one out and hands it to you. “You’ll like this one. This is how I make my living, see? I’m a writer and these are some of my short stories.”

“Uh-huh,” you say, feigning interest.

“Yeah, well, they’re actually part of a novel, but a novel takes years to write and I have to survive, so I’m selling it chapter by chapter as short stories.”

“Are you sure you’re not hurt anywhere?”

He insists that he’s fine and you’re wondering when he’s going to get off your car, but he’s not moving.

You look him up and down, trying to make sense of this. He’s fairly well-dressed: a clean beige cardigan over a black turtleneck and black dress pants. He’s wearing wire-frame glasses that are several years out of fashion. The clunky tortoiseshell half-moons on the top give him an extra set of eyebrows. Other than that one rather interesting feature, he’s a fairly nondescript white guy – short thin grey hair, neat beard. He’s also a bit gimpy and has a nervous tic, which makes his eyebrows twitch (all four of them).

And he wants to tell you a story, whatever it is. And now that he's talking to you, you're not scared at all. He's quite likeable, once you've really noticed him – has a bit of a twinkle in his eyes and a winning smile.

You roll your eyes, wondering what you've done to deserve this. It's obvious his situation is not life-threatening at all AND it's two in the morning AND you have a life, too. You'd like to get home to bed, but then you look into his eyes; in addition to the twinkle, you see the desperation again. Where's your humanity?

"Go ahead then," you say. "How does the story go?" And as soon as you've said that, you ask yourself if you're crazy. You want to go home to bed, yet you may have just given this guy permission to tell you his life story.

"But make it quick," you blurt, "and it better be good."

"Sure, sure." He stares wide-eyed at you – afraid, it seems that you might hurt him, afraid, you sense, of your impatience. "I'll keep it brief – won't waste your time, but it's like this," he says. "I was working on my novel and it was just things that happened to me, most of it true, but some of it made-up."

"So what are you trying to say? There's got to be more to it than that." But you stop. He's anxious to get on with it – actually looks terrified he might be wasting your time, so you let him go on.

"Well, I was writing a novel about my life and it was the true story of a writer who was writing a novel about his life, see." He looks expectantly at you, as though you might think that's such an utterly fascinating and original idea.

"I bet that's a real page-turner," you sigh.

"No, are you kidding?" He flaps his hand at you. "Boring as hell. Nobody was interested at all. I sent the manuscript off to publishers and it always came back with a form letter – not what they were looking for at the present time."

He looks so pathetic and you just want to pull out, even though he's leaning on your car. No, you want to pull out because he's leaning on your car, because you know that he knows you wouldn't drive away while he's leaning on it and, just for manipulating you, monopolizing your time, especially so late at night, you feel like gunning the engine and leaving him to sort out his stupid story by himself. You don't pull away, though. You resign yourself to giving him at least the courtesy of a few minutes of your attention, but unconsciously your foot lays a little too heavy on the gas – only a touch, a minimal amount, but enough to be heard when the engine revs a bit faster. He jumps back nervously from the car.

"Oh, sorry," you say, but he's terrified. He's standing well back from the car, scowling at you – very angry, indeed.

And justifiably so, don't you think?

"It's okay," you say. "Didn't mean to scare you. Relax." But he isn't relaxing at all. He has the look of a frightened animal, a cat maybe – one of those ones who won't let you close enough to pet it. So you turn off your engine and the tension releases from his shoulders.

"I've wasted too much of your time already," he says. "I think I'll go back inside."

"No, no. It's fine," you insist. "Come on. Really. I'm not in a hurry. I'll make time."

He relaxes a bit, comes closer. "The novel is actually much better now. This version." He has some papers in his hand. "Lots of people have bought stories from it. I have some chapters of it for sale here." And he comes over to the window. "See. Here's the last chapter."

And he passes you a thin, ten-page pamphlet. You flip it over and his picture is on the back cover. He looks different, much younger and healthier, not so thin and weak as he appears tonight.

It says Danny Something under his picture – you can't pronounce the last name – something foreign. It begins to rain much harder than before and he's getting drenched and shivering.

"Come on. You're getting wet," you say, no longer feeling threatened. "Get in." You pat the front seat. "And tell me about your writing."

"You like the picture?" he asks. "It was taken a long time ago. I used that photo, because I don't like how old I look now."

"So what's happening with the novel?" you ask, perhaps a bit too forcefully.

"Well, I'm pretty sure I've finally finished it. I was kind of stuck on this one particular chapter called 'The Accident.' This one. Ever since I started writing this chapter I've been stuck on it, not working on anything else. Actually, if something hadn't happened, it would have been a pretty dull story, but I got inspired by a dream I had and I finished the last chapter and it was brilliant."

"Well, don't tell me the ending."

"No, I wouldn't. It's new. I want you to read it and tell me what you think."

And when you're almost through reading it, he says, "So, you wanna buy one?"

"How much?"

"Whatever you want."

You're feeling pretty guilty, so you take one pamphlet and you give him a ten-dollar bill.

"Oh, no. That's too much."

"No, keep it. It's okay." You push it into his hand.

"Then here," he says, and he counts out a few more chapters. "Take ten chapters."

As he puts the money away, you notice his wallet is thick with cash.

“You actually make your living this way?” you ask. “Stopping cars out here in the alley and asking people to buy stories?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, there can’t be very many cars that come down this alley?”

“Oh, no.” His head shakes spastically and his eyebrows start twitching again. “You wouldn’t believe how much traffic comes down this alley because of that cement curb in the middle of the intersection and the other ones on the next street over. It’s called traffic calming. Everyone tries to avoid it by coming down this alley. Cars come speeding down here at all hours of the day and night.”

“Even late at night?”

“Oh, yes, even late at night. Well, you, yourself. . .” He puts the wallet back inside the breast pocket of his jacket.

“I thought I killed you.”

“Yeah, that was close. I’m lucky to be alive.”

“So that’s what you do?” you ask him.

He nods.

You hold up the copy of the last chapter. “And this,” you say jokingly, “is the story of a writer who stops cars in the alley to sell his story, which is the story of a writer who stops cars in the alley to. . .”

“Yes.” His eyelids lower for a second, then he gazes back up at you. “But there’s more to it than that.”

“What else is there?”

“Well, something happened and I guess that makes it more interesting. See, I had written the last chapter over and over a hundred different ways. It had a good beginning, but not much of an ending. At least that’s what I thought. Nothing seemed to work. People bought it, but I think they were just feeling sorry for me. Then I had that dream and when I woke up I realized I had the perfect ending for the last chapter. In the dream I was drunk and I was driving a car down this alley and this guy . . . well, I don’t want to spoil it for you. Anyway, I wrote out the story and I knew people would love it and I didn’t want to wait until morning, so I came running out into the alley, waving my arms in front of the first car that came along. It was a dark and stormy night.”

“So what happened? Did you sell one right away?”

“No, the driver panicked – stepped on the gas instead of the brakes. At least that’s what was said afterwards.”

“Afterwards?”

He looks hurt.

“After what?”

“Well, I can’t tell you,” he says. “It would give away the ending, but it makes for a good story and I hope you enjoy it,” he says, opening the passenger door. “And I hope I didn’t waste too much of your time.” He gets out of the car and walks slowly around to your side of the car.

“Thanks,” you say.

“I hope you enjoy your story,” he says, “and thanks for listening to me.”

He picks up a cane leaning on the fence. “Well, anyways, I’ve got to go now,” he says and then you notice he’s looking kind of pale and he’s limping as he goes through the gate and up between the fence and the garage and he disappears.

And you sigh with relief. You’re still feeling quite drunk and you rest your head on the driver’s door again, stare into your right hand.

The alley is empty now. And it’s much later. The sun is coming up and you yawn and look around the alley. Where is this? Oh, yes. And you remember and you wonder if that was just a dream. And you look in your wallet. It’s nearly empty, but you don’t know. Did you spend all your cash at the bar again? Or what? And where’s that story?



PRISCILLA LONG is the author of *Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America's Bloody Coal Industry* (Paragon House, 1989). Her work appears in *Ontario Review*, *The Southern Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Southern Humanities Review* and many other magazines. She holds an MFA from the University of Washington, teaches writing at UW Extension and serves as Senior Editor of the online history encyclopedia of Washington state.

## Two Poems / Priscilla Long

### Rune

to Muses, Bards, Visionary Spirits . . .

Hunger me down the oldest roads.  
Smolder me into the clinker of fires  
kindled by the long dead  
before these dead dissipate  
into smoke and dream.

Scatter me into notebooks, dreambones,  
childhood's milkweed pod.  
Stir the mind's dark fish  
darting ripples in shadows and coves.

Slumber me into archaic rivers  
where bodies dissolve into darkness,  
where eagles soar, where I – mute  
as dolmens or ruins – speak.

## How to Make a Poem

Follow with your fingers  
the hollows and hills of letters,  
follow their curves  
to their peaks and gurgling  
wells. Keep your fingers feeling  
the dips and downs,  
the holes and dales of letters themselves.  
Follow the fat,  
loop the skin of the letters themselves.  
Feel how words bump  
ding, dip, and bop  
across the slippery silk.  
Feel how they rush into whiteness.  
Dip your fingers into their furls,  
into their indigo blood.  
Feel how they want  
your fingers to curl their loops. Feel them  
whisper the page. Feel them  
curl to the kiss of the page.

*Featured Poet*

*Robert Cooperman*



**Primitive Tribes, Exotic Practices**



ROBERT COOPERMAN'S latest collection, *Petitions for Immortality: Scenes from the Life of John Keats*, was published by Higanum Hill Books in early 2004. *The Widow's Burden* was runner up for the Willa Literary Award for 2003. *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* won the Colorado Book Award. His latest chapbook, *Not Too Old to Rock and Roll*, was published by Snark Publishing. He lives in Denver, Colorado.

## The Joys of Formal Poetry

Robert Cooperman

THE REVELATION HIT me in a college Literature class on the English Romantic Poets. It was the first time I'd ever read John Keats's last great, heartbreaking poem, "To Autumn." It probably didn't hurt that the season was indeed autumn, the last week or so of October, when the leaves were sadly a bit past their kaleidoscopic splendor, and it further didn't hurt that I'd just had my heart broken, as college boys who want to write poetry are almost required to do. And now we were studying a poem written by a guy barely older than I was, only he probably already had an inkling that he was dying, and that he'd never live to see another spring. Oh, and the other difference between Keats and me? He was a terminally tubercular genius of unbelievable precocity and I was just a poor dumb schmuck in the most clichéd of post-adolescent situations.

I had always wanted to write poetry, but had written very little of it to that point, and certainly nothing that I would want to show anyone. But after I read and read and read that magnificently melancholic ode that begins with the immortally lush line, "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" and whose final stanza opens with the resigned acceptance of "Where are the songs of spring . . . think not of them," I knew what I wanted to do: write great poetry, really, really great poetry, something to rival this poem that made me cry— and not just because I'd just had my heart stepped on— every time I read it. No, I wanted to write something that even Keats would've sat up and done a double take over and exclaimed, "This is fine!"

Well, I do the best I can right now, writing poems about myself, my wife, my family and friends, about current events that really get under my skin, about quirky characters drawn from the Old West, mythology, and from history. But as often as I'll reread a poem I've written and murmur, in astonishment, to myself, "Bob, you are really good!" I know in my heart of hearts, I ain't John Keats.

Who is? you'll ask. Shakespeare, Milton, Spencer, Chaucer, Pope, and maybe a couple of others. Certainly no one writing today, as much as I like to protest to scoffers that we are living in a very fine, maybe a silver, age of poetry. But so what? To be Keats isn't the point, to want and to strive (to borrow a word from another great poem, Tennyson's "Ulysses") to be Keats, or the best poet you can be, that is the point.

But the question is this: how do we possibly get there when I've already stated that no one, except for a few of the Immortals, is Keats? Here's the secret, at least for me: formal poetry—rhyme and meter.

We live in an age of free verse, spiritual children of Whitman, Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. We want none of the fetters of meter and rhyme chained to our poetic feet, but demand to be able to say what we want without any restrictions or the discipline that is gained only in formal verse. We view formal poetry as reactionary, a tool of the Ancient Regime, both poetically and politically, a dirty medieval torture device of the New Formalists, whom we accuse of being politically a little to the right of Bush II and Margaret Thatcher or Pinochet. We want to be able to rant and spew and shock our readers out of their complacency, or just to shock them, like kids understanding the power of four-letter words for the first time. We have come to believe that only free verse is the way to really express ourselves.

But I am convinced the path to true immortality and to true expression lies through the narrow and dangerous mountain passes of formal poetry. Sure, Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark" is a marvelous poem, one of the very best of the post-WWII era. And any number of poems by Margaret Atwood can stand muster with anything written in the past twenty or thirty years. And there are countless examples of truly lovely, beautiful, and even great, great poems written without the "crutch" of rhyme and meter. But come on, be honest, in your heart of hearts, do you think any line of poetry by either Stafford or Atwood, or any other contemporary poet you can come up with is the equal of, or even close to, the heartbreak of Shakespeare's "That time of year thou may'st in me behold" or Milton's towering righteous rage in "Avenge O Lord, thy slaughtered saints!"

It's the very structure and discipline that is a requirement of formal verse that is responsible for its power. Kids know this instinctively: they rhyme without even half thinking about the fact that they're rhyming, and love the sounds coming out of their mouths. The repetition of rhyme, the varying and regular patterns of meter create a pleasure in the

ear, the heart, and the mind that no other form of written or verbal communication can come close to. I'm not talking about rap, forget about rap, which is only another form of doggerel: simplistic in its emotion and thought, crude past the point of barbarity in its formal execution. I mean honest to God couplets, quatrains, sonnets, villanelles, or the wildly inventive verse forms that Keats, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and others have created. Take something traditional and conventional, at least in its verse pattern: for instance, the opening quatrain of Thomas Hardy's quietly majestic poem about the longing for lost innocence and religious faith, "The Oxen": "Christmas Eve and twelve of the clock./Now they are all on their knees,/An elder said as we sat in a flock/By the embers in hearthside ease."

It's an old truism, but that doesn't make it any the less true, that before we can run, we have to learn to walk; before we can dance ballet, we must learn the various steps and movements and positions. Before we can play at Carnegie Hall, we must practice, practice, practice. It should be no less the case that before we write free verse, we should, if only as a courtesy to the Immortals who came before us and upon whose shoulders we pygmies stand, or teeter, and from whose wisdom we have much, much to learn—that we should at least learn to write a competent sonnet or villanelle or the form I find most daunting, a sestina. But we don't.

A year or so ago, a friend who teaches creative writing told me he had his students write a sonnet, as an exercise. He went on to say that he felt guilty making them do it while he just sat back and waited, so he wrote one himself and sent it to me for critiquing. In turn, I felt guilty glibly telling him this line doesn't work, the meter is faulty here, so I wrote one too, admittedly not a very good one, but I thought it only fair that he have his critical innings on me. And then something truly weird and lovely happened: all I could think about writing for a month or two were sonnets. They poured out of me, and though none were any threat to the Immortals, I began to see the great value and beauty of the form.

I also saw something else: that when serious poets claim, with a straight face, "It's harder to write good free verse than good formal poetry," they are so full of crap it's coming out of their ears, nose, mouth, and every other orifice you can think of. To write even a marginally competent sonnet, you sweat blood. I can knock out a decent first draft of a free verse poem in twenty minutes, a finished draft in an hour. But to write a sonnet, the questions and doubts leap at you like guard dogs: "Is that rhyme too stilted?" "Does the meter of this line sound too much like prose?" "Should there be more internal rhyme?" "What about assonance and alliteration? Am I overdoing them?" "Does the damn thing make any sense?" "Does the blasted thing say anything worth saying?" "Should I go for a slant, as opposed to an exact, rhyme

in this line?" "What in God's name am I going to say in the final couplet?" And on and on and on.

You'd be right to come back at me with, "But a really good free verse poem can take just as much time and effort and force you to deal with some of the same strategies and issues," and you'd be right. But there is something about getting a rhyme just right, about carving a line of iambic pentameter that gives the illusion of having been perfectly sculpted without any work or effort, that is indescribable, almost, I'd say, as good as sex, chocolate, or chicken curry, maybe even better. So now that I've mastered, in my half-assed way, the sonnet, something in me craves to write poetry with my own verse forms, something invented by me, the way Keats created a whole new stanzaic form in "To Autumn." I haven't figured out what that stanza will look like yet, and have contented myself, for the time being at least, with churning out my usual free verse poems, mostly about crazed gunmen of the Old West or, my current poetical obsession, Lord Byron. But one of these days, the second revelation is going to hit me like a brick. What I write might be complete and utter garbage, but at least I'll be stretching, trying to exceed my grasp, because I've found the kind of poem that I write painfully easy to crank out, and art, as Dylan Thomas remarked in "In My Craft or Sullen Art" should be hard, even if no one pays any attention to it.

Someone once asked me, "What's your ambition as a poet?" I thought for a second and replied, "To be read in another hundred or more years." To be, in other words, in my hubris, an Immortal. But how to arrive at that exalted position? For me, at least, the answer is to write formal poetry.



## Photos of the Dillon Pinnacles: Blue Mesa Reservoir, Colorado

Of course these photos—  
taken with a disposable camera—  
don't do justice  
to those volcanic pillars,  
two of which are capped  
by stone mushrooms  
that, we held our breath,  
tottered above the scrub desert.

We had stood dwarfed,  
at the climax of our hike,  
sublimely silenced  
by the fantastical magma  
that had been spewed out  
millions of years ago,  
and confidently snapped away.

But it's the old problem:  
these photos are too small  
to capture that rococo enormity,  
two tiny people staring up  
at these giant gray columns  
grafted one to another,  
reduced to 4 x 6 pictures.

Nor could we crowd the entire  
geological formation together,  
like those extended family photos  
in which one distant cousin  
or aunt is always miffed  
for smiling beyond the frame.

Still, we examine each photo,  
remembering: better this way,  
we tell ourselves,  
since photos, one way  
or another, always lie.

## At the Grave of Arthur Clough: Florence, Italy

Clough, the subject  
of your doctoral dissertation,  
the cemetery was closed that afternoon,  
so you turned disappointed steps away,  
the tour bus adamant at dawn.

When you returned to Texas,  
you wrote the cemetery officials,  
explaining your frustration,  
asking for a photo of Clough's grave.

Their reply immediate:  
"Alas, had you only rung the bell,  
dear Sir, we would have gladly  
opened the gate and given you  
a tour of Signor Clough's too early,  
but justly famous grave."

You lament the irony of hindsight,  
that this is how the world is lost:  
the lack of knowing there's almost  
always a bell that will signal admittance  
into the sanctum of gods and heroes.

Younger, undeterred that the estate  
of James Boswell—your first literary hero—  
was boarded up, you crawled in  
through a loose shutter:  
choking dust and tides of rats;  
but an aura, as well, of the great writer.

Time turns us all timid as the mice  
twittering in spider-calligraphied corners.  
Still, you have a photo of Clough's grave,  
and assure yourself,  
"That's enough, that's enough."

## Primitive Tribes and Exotic Practices

She slipped into the seat beside Doug  
for this famous slide show  
of primitive tribes, exotic practices.  
Her hair brushed his neck,  
and as the lecture progressed in the dark,  
her arm was warm, her thigh persistent,  
her mouth—against Doug’s ear—  
hot and sweet: a pagan priestess  
of casual lubricity.

“God,” she groaned, “his jeans  
really stink,” she nodded  
to the guy on her far side,  
Doug’s private movie of middle-aged  
adultery going blank, in an instant.

But Doug breathed relief, as well:  
Cindy reading a bedtime story  
to their small son and smaller daughter,  
and Arthur, his wife’s golden retriever,  
condemning him with his sad eyes.

Doug shrugged at this woman’s  
copper hair, her lips made for biting kisses,  
her breasts, “Oh, forget her breasts,”  
he delivered a mental slap to his face,  
sighing, “Thanks, I needed that.”

“I’m sorry,” Doug whispered back,  
chivalry perhaps not dead, but no intention  
of trading seats, and suddenly desperate  
about what he’d tell his wife  
when she’d ask about this lecture.

## Brotherly Advice

“Hymie,” your older brother  
called you to your shared bedroom,  
“I wanna show you something.”  
He held his penis, as if a rare  
scientific exhibit. “If yours  
ever looks like this, see a doctor!”

“He had the clap, of course,”  
Hyman laughs over lunch,  
reminiscing to seventy years ago.  
“I still don’t know if it was advice  
or showing off the size of his schlong.

“Then after World War II,  
when he took me out to supper  
at some fancy New York restaurant,  
he asked, ‘So now that you’ve saved  
the world from Hitler,  
what will you do with your life?’”

“‘A reporter,’ you declared, ‘like you.’”  
He fixed you with a rattler’s stare,  
leaving you sweating, afraid  
he’d pull out his penis again  
for some mad object lesson.

“‘Hymie, it ain’t so easy.’  
‘I know,’” you jumped in,  
‘First, I’ve gotta get a degree  
from a good journalism school.’

“‘First,’ he shook his head,  
‘you gotta change your name,’”  
Hitler, dead, but still commanding you  
to come clean with your Jew prick,  
for all the world to see.

DAN WILLBACH grew up in New York City, attended Antioch College and received a PhD in history from the University of Michigan. He has worked as a psychotherapist. He lives with his wife and daughter in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and currently teaches high school history and psychology.

## Rebecca's Gift

Daniel Willbach

WOULD PAM HAVE gone to her room? *Her room*, how strange that sounds and then Susan's overwhelmed, sorrow wells up again and the tears come again, it's awful, *awful*, Pam didn't deserve to lose her mother. Rebecca's lost, not coming back, she's *dead*. Susan leans against the door. Tears run down her cheeks in paths darkened with eye shadow. She's been crying a lot but refuses to stop wearing makeup; if she stopped who knows what else she might stop. She might not do anything and that's not an option, not with Pam.

She gropes in the pocket of her dress for a packet of tissues and blows her nose, takes another one and, tilting her head in front of the open glass door, tries to catch her reflection as she wipes the sticky stains from her cheeks. A deep breath. Another one. She can't keep losing it like this. Stuffing the tissues back in her pocket, she walks down the hall to the living room.

Pam is on the couch where Susan left her. They give each other weak smiles. Susan sits down next to her, puts her arm around her and hugs her.

"I'm all right, Susan," Pam says, smiling down at the couch, glancing at Susan a few times. Pam's thin fingers constantly worry at a single thick braid that drapes in front of her. She stares straight ahead out of the big picture window at the Palisades, a ghostly row of cliffs across the Hudson that seem to reflect the lights of Manhattan.

Susan hugs Pam again. "Oh, honey, it's so nice of you to say that. But you certainly have every right to be upset."

"I know," Pam says, glancing at her again, nodding her head.

Susan rubs her shoulder, feeling bones. “How are you?”

“I’m OK. . . I really am.”

“I want you to be at home here, as at home as you possibly can,” Susan says, stroking Pam’s thick black hair, following it down to where the braid begins. Pam must do it herself, Susan reasons hopefully, unsure if she’d be able to do it as well. “I know it’s going to be hard,” she adds.

Pam looks at her again. “Thanks, Susan.” She nods her head.

“Let’s go see your room,” Susan says. “It’s the one you always stay in. God, it’s late,” she adds, glancing at her watch. “Ten-thirty already! How did you sleep at Uncle Simon’s?”

“OK. . . Not so good.”

For the last two nights Pam had slept at Simon and Sylvia’s house in Scarsdale. On the night of the crash Pam had been staying with her grandparents in Manhattan. Her parents had been visiting friends in Philadelphia and were killed coming back, on the New Jersey turnpike. Susan learned about the crash while in Italy, an early morning phone call from her agent.

On the flight back Susan kept going over and over in her mind her memory of Rebecca, seated in her kitchen, suddenly saying she and Carl thought Susan would be the best parent for Pam if they were to die. “You love her, it’s obvious, and she loves you and you’re wealthy – you know what I mean, you have enough money – and you live five blocks from us. And you’re family.” Susan had agreed. Without hesitation. Rebecca Stein was Susan Stein’s first cousin, they had gone to college together and since they had lived near each other had become best friends. She could see the reasons why they would give Pam to her. It made sense, a kind of crazy sense, because of course they weren’t going to die.

“Let’s see if we can both get a good night’s sleep,” Susan says. “We’ll try to make everything as comfortable as possible. Do you want some warm milk?” Susan remembers Rebecca giving Pam warm milk, but that must have been when she was four or five and Susan’s frightened of the memory, it might set her off again. Besides, Pam probably doesn’t drink milk any more. God, she’s twelve, almost a teenager.

“OK.”

“Good. Let’s go to the room first, then I’ll make some milk for us.” She suddenly feels exhausted. I’ll take mine with rum and a few benedryls, she thinks. I’ve got to sleep.

“Are you tired?” she asks Pam as she forces herself up.

Pam shrugs and gets up and follows Susan around the grand piano and down the hallway to a back bedroom; two suitcases Susan grabbed from Pam’s apartment sit at the foot of the bed.

“Here, let’s open this one,” Susan says as she hauls the bigger one up onto the suitcase rack. “I think your nightclothes are here some-

where.” She unzips the top and rummages around in the clothes. “Here!” She holds up a pair of white cotton knit pants with little gray elephants printed on them.

“Those aren’t pajamas, Susan.” Pam smiles. “They’re pants, part of a pantsuit – I hate it – I never wear it.”

“Could you wear it as pajamas?” Susan asks.

“Let me look in the suitcase – it looks like a lot of my clothes, I can find something.”

“OK, you look through there and put something on for bed. You know where the bathroom is, right next door. Is that OK, honey? I’m going to change, too.”

“OK,” Pam nods.

“Come into the kitchen when you get ready and we’ll have some milk and maybe some cookies.”

“OK.”

## Ω

Pam appears wearing an oversized tee-shirt that falls to her knees, with WEST SIDE COMMUNITY MUSIC SCHOOL printed on it over a music staff, which elicits cries from Susan, “My shirt. Darling, what a great nightshirt. I love it!” Susan is a violinist and helped start the school. What she doesn’t say is, “My God, you have breast! Why didn’t I ever notice?”

Pam sits down next to Susan at the counter that runs the length of the narrow kitchen. She picks up one of the cookies in the blue ceramic bowl in front of her and begins to take tiny nibbles around one edge.

“Have some milk,” Susan urges.

Pam nods and takes a sip.

“How’s the temperature?”

“OK.”

Pam closes her eyes and tears glint below the lids. Susan reaches over and caresses Pam’s forearm, saying, “You miss your Mommy and Daddy, it’s OK, it’s OK to cry.”

Pam looks straight in front of her, eyes tightly shut, and shakes her head. “If I start to cry I won’t stop,” and then her face scrunches up, her thin lips stretch in a grimace as the tears fall. “I’ll . . . feel . . . worse!” she manages between sobs and then buries her face in her hands, shoulders shaking. Susan gets up, bends over and hugs her and feels her whole body jerk with the sobs, gasps for air, more sobs, more gasps, over and over, as if Pam’s trying to rid her body of something terrible. How do I comfort her? It’s not fair. For the thousandth time, Rebecca, come back. I can’t do this alone! . . . Susan begins to cry, too. She lets go of Pam and moves blindly over to the paper towel rack and pulls off some sheets, returns to her seat and offers some to Pam.

Pam continues to cry but lifts her head for a second and grabs the towel. Susan wipes at her own tears and thinks that in some ways Rebecca had been a mother to both of them.

“We both need a good cry,” she says to Pam.

She blows her nose, thinking about Rebecca. She had been everyone’s mother but because Susan was in her forties and divorced, had no kids and lived alone, she was a particular target of Rebecca’s mothering. Sometimes even her matchmaking. It could drive Susan crazy. But God, she needed it now.

The phone rings. Pam looks up, tear-stained face and red eyes; they stare at each other for a second.

“It must be Jason,” Susan says.

Pam quickly reassures Susan. “I’m all right, really, you can talk to him.”

Susan picks up the phone; Jason asks if it’s all right to talk.

“Wait a second, honey.” Susan cups her hand over the phone. “I’m going to call him back.”

She tells him ten minutes. She sits down again with Pam, who has dried her eyes and is now consuming a cookie.

“I’m really OK, Susan. You can talk to him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Really, it’s OK. I have a book, in my knapsack – I have to read it for school.”

Susan understands her solicitude. For the last five years Pam has known Jason as Susan’s boyfriend. She probably thinks of him as her new father. He’s certainly the closest thing to a husband Susan’s had since her divorce.

Susan leaves Pam reading in bed.

“It’s me. We’re just about to crash here.”

“Sorry I called.”

“No, I want to speak to you. It’s been tough.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me there?”

“Yes. Yes. I think it’s important that Pam and I face this . . . It’s just that I’m so tired, you wouldn’t believe.”

“God. I can’t believe any of it, even after the service and that thing up in Scarsdale.”

“Sitting shiva. My side of the family doesn’t know much about this stuff, either.” Susan laughs.

“It was actually nice, I thought. People could eat and talk together.”

“I was so mad that Joe couldn’t be there.”

“Your brother? He lives on some island in Alaska, right? That’s pretty far.”

“And of course my father wasn’t there, he can’t travel, so it was just me and Nate from the family. It was nice to be able to talk to you. Look, Jason, I’m so tired. I should get back to Pam.”



“OK. When am I going to see you?”

“I don’t know. . . I have to play it by ear. I don’t even know what day it is right now. When do we have rehearsal?”

“Sunday. Today’s Wednesday.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow, by ten, eleven at the latest. Maybe you could help me get more of Pam’s stuff over here?”

“Sure, I should be in. Love you.”

“Love you.”

## Ω

When Susan enters Pam’s room the light is out and Pam seems to be asleep. She walks over to the bed, careful not to make noise, and stands there. Light from the hall reveals Pam, eyes closed, head thrown back on her pillow, thick black hair loose in long wavy strands over the pillow and sheet. The way she lies accentuates the white porcelain of her long neck, outlines a stretched tendon and hints of blue veins. So precious, so vulnerable, Susan can’t leave, overwhelmed, and tears begin to move down her cheeks again. She has a child.

The following day Susan helps Pam spruce up her room.

“Pam, this looks nice!” Susan exclaims. The bed is now along the opposite wall and stuffed animals are placed strategically around the room. Susan points to the one perched on the arm of the chair she dragged in this morning, a brown, furry animal wearing jeans and a yellow sweater. “Who’s that? What is he?”

“That’s Arthur. He’s an aardvark. Aunt Roz gave him to me a few years ago. He’s on TV. . . Susan, can I have a TV? I had one in my room at my parents’ house.”

“You know we’re getting your things. The movers are coming on Saturday. You had a TV in your room? I don’t really remember. What sorts of things did you watch?”

“I don’t know. *The Simpsons*. Sometimes I still watch *Arthur*. It’s really a little kid’s show. It’s on Channel 13, the one with *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers* and all those kinds of shows.”

Susan smiles. “That’s the only channel I watch.” She sits down on Pam’s bed and Pam sits opposite her in her new armchair, Arthur in her lap.

“Did you have a limit, a certain amount you could watch?” Susan asks.

“An hour, usually, after I did my homework, but I think my mother was going to let me watch more.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “She let me stay up for a few movies near the time . . . before the accident.”

Susan feels Pam skate around her parents' death and she instinctively follows.

"Were they good?" Susan asks.

"What do you mean?"

"The movies."

"I don't know, one was good, I thought it was good – *Funny Girl*, it was, with Barbra Streisand." Pam gives her a sheepish smile. "Could we get my TV, Susan? Please."

Susan's impressed by Pam's persistence. Maybe this means she's getting better. Susan suddenly remembers a visit to Rebecca's a few months ago. She never saw Pam the whole time she was there. Rebecca said she was being "stubborn" and was "sulking in her room."

"Maybe we could pick it up today," she suggests. "We're going to grandpa and grandma's, we have to take the car, maybe we can stop for it. You sure you want to go over to your old place?"

Pam nods her head, yes.

In the late afternoon, Susan drives Pam up to Mike and Shirley Stein's apartment in Inwood, at the very top of Manhattan. It's a brief, strained visit. She feels them trying too hard to be cheerful, and not to mention Rebecca. I'm not this bad with Pam, am I? she asks herself. On the way home, they stop at Pam's old apartment.

"I don't really want to go in," Pam says after Susan has double-parked. "Could you just get it, Susan?"

"Pam, I asked you about this. I can't just leave you in the car. We don't have to do this. The movers are coming on Saturday afternoon, that's forty-eight hours from now. Until then you could watch the TV in my bedroom."

Pam makes a face. "I really want my own TV," she pleads. "Please, could you get it? Just lock all the doors. Nothing will happen to me in the car."

"I just can't leave you in the car, not in the middle of Manhattan, I'm sorry, I can't do it, I won't do it," Susan says, getting annoyed.

Pam says loudly, "Could anything worse happen to me than has happened already?" Susan is taken aback as Pam, face contorted, continues, "What do you think?" and then screams, "I DON'T THINK SO," and bursts into tears.

When Susan reaches over to comfort her she squirms away, pressing herself against the door and slapping at Susan's hand, making grunting noises. Shocked, Susan stares at Pam, who is cowering away from her, hands over her face, half crying, half screaming words that are unintelligible, her long braid bobbing to the rhythm of the ugly sounds.

"Pam, don't get upset," she pleads. "Please. I hate to see you this way." Susan's at a loss, she's never seen her like this.

“Look, we’ll get a TV,” Susan says. “Maybe we could rent one?” she muses. Pam looks over, hands slipping down her face as she nods in agreement, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Oh, Pam, I’m sorry I got angry. Look, why don’t we just talk to what’s-his-name? Manny. You could stay with him. That would be OK, wouldn’t it?”

Manny, the doorman, who’s been playing Solitaire as usual, offers Pam a quick hand of Rummy while his handyman goes up with Susan and helps with the TV. When they return to Susan’s they manage to set the TV up with the help of the janitor in her building. Susan leaves Pam watching *Nickelodeon*. She writes an e-mail to her youngest brother Joe, the one in Alaska.

For the first half of her life, Joe had been her child – she’s ten years older and took care of him when he was little, babysat him when her parents went out, protected him from Nate. At some point, probably when her marriage started going sour, the balance shifted and her little brother, now an adult living on his own, became the recipient of Susan’s confessions.

“J, you wouldn’t believe what’s happened – in the midst of Rebecca’s death – intimations of happiness. After all these years I have a child!!!! You never knew this, but I had an abortion when I was at Harvard. Never told anyone, it was before you and I began to get close – a sophomore, 20 years old. At the time, there wasn’t any question of keeping the child but then of course I thought I was going to have kids later on, like everyone else. That was before I understood the Curse of the Steins – my divorce, Nate’s divorce, your hermit life. J, I’m panicked. I want this kid so much and she’s going through Hell and I can’t help her. It feels awful.”

## Ω

On Saturday, Susan arranges a playdate for Pam while she and Jason oversee the movers. After they’re finished Susan goes to get Pam while Jason stays at Susan’s. She’s decided it’s time for Jason to make an appearance.

As Susan and Pam enter the apartment they hear Jason playing Brahms, romantic and melancholic, but when they appear in the living room he smiles at them and switches to boogie-woogie, hands moving furiously over the keys, upper body dancing in a blue work-shirt. Susan smiles; with his frizzy hair and foolish grin, playing this music from the twenties, he looks more like Harpo Marx than ever. Susan rushes over and kisses him, then grabs Pam’s hand and swings it to the beat. Jason sings to Pam, “Let me show you your new room,” stops playing and the three of them go to take a look.

They sit and admire Pam's room. Amidst boxes piled against one wall and pictures in stacks ready to go up, the books are already in the bookshelf and Pam's new chartreuse IMac computer is set up on her desk. Susan announces they should all go out to eat, in celebration.

"Where should we eat?" Susan asks Pam.

She remains silent, sitting on the bed, working at her braid. "What about the Carnegie Deli?" she suggests.

"It's Saturday night. We'd have to wait outside for hours."

"Yeah, it's going to be a little tricky," Jason agrees. "Saturday night. What's your favorite kind of food, Pam?"

"I don't know." She shrugs her shoulders. "Not Italian – we never ate in Italian restaurants. Mostly, like, Chinese, any Asian food, really. I know the Carnegie is real crowded."

"What about the Hunan West? It's just down on Broadway," Susan offers, turning to Jason. "It's huge, there won't be a line at this time of night. You know the one, I think it's at Eighty-fourth?" She turns back to Pam. "It's right near where you took ballet, you know, Olga's, at Eighty-sixth."

"Yeah," Pam remembers. "We used to eat there. It's good."

## Ω

They enter a cavernous space that has been home to a succession of restaurants. A mezzanine swings around two sides overlooking the main floor; they are escorted up to it and Pam urges them to take a table with a view – "I like to watch the people down below."

Seated at the railing, she studies the floor below. "Look," she nods, "you can even see what people are eating."

"Anything look good?" Jason asks.

Pam smiles at him. "Egg rolls."

"Too much fat and cholesterol for me," Jason tells Pam. "But I used to love them."

"I really didn't see any," Pam confesses. "Can I have them?" she asks Susan. "I always start with egg rolls."

"Of course," Susan agrees.

A stocky, smiling waiter takes their order and, at one point, after Pam has requested her egg rolls, wonton soup, sizzling beef and soda, kids her, "You might not have enough to eat!"

"Did he know you?" Susan asks after the waiter has left.

"He looked familiar. Maybe we had him . . . I ate here a lot with my parents."

"I like this place, too," Susan agrees. "Do you remember when it was *Bon Appetit*? French kind of bistro thing. They put a big stove downstairs, made it look rustic."

"I didn't come here then."

“It wasn’t very good,” Jason remembers.

The waiter arrives to pour the drinks, beer for the adults and a Coke for Pam.

“Pam’s back at school,” Susan says to Jason after the waiter leaves.

“You’re at the Friends School?”

“Yes.”

“I met her teacher. I thought Mrs. Douglas was very nice. Pam’s in sixth grade.”

“We call her Marjorie. I liked my teacher last year better.”

“Who was that?”

“Connie. . . I have to go to the Ladies Room.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“Yes, downstairs.”

“Can you go by yourself? Do you want me to come?”

“No, I can go by myself.”

Pam gets up and Jason watches her walk to the staircase, then turns to Jason. “I don’t know the simplest things, like does she go to the bathroom alone. I feel like an idiot.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. Both of you have to feel out this relationship, living together.”

“Isn’t she a lovely kid, though? She’s so strong; the teacher said she cried once at school, that was it.”

“Yeah. She seems so mature.”

“Actually, I remember Rebecca saying only kids tend to be more mature, they spend more time around adults.”

“What’s it like to have her out of the blue like this, so suddenly?”

“It just blows me away. I know, I haven’t even thought about us, about the group, how I’m going to travel, if I can travel.”

“Don’t worry about it, we’ll work it out,” Jason reassures her. But he gives a little shrug as if he doesn’t know how they will work it out and gazes off beyond Susan, a worried look on his face. Susan’s silent and worried as well. Susan and Jason are two thirds of the Manhattan Trio, started with much fanfare last season; it’s just about to begin a new one. How is she going to travel? She has not let the tiniest thought about this enter her mind until now. Jason fiddles with his chopsticks, trying to use them to pick up his napkin. He puts them down and looks at her.

“Don’t you think this Clinton thing has gone too far?” he asks. “You heard that Starr proposed articles of impeachment in front of the House Judiciary Committee today. He’s totally out of control! Did you see Anthony Lewis’s column in *The Times* yesterday?”

Susan shakes her head, no.

“He’s incensed about Starr and he’s right. A mountain out of a molehill. It’s a Republican coup.”

“Jason, I can’t believe you’re talking about this. Why? Talk about a mountain out of a molehill, for me this has become a distant speck on the horizon, it’s the farthest thing from my mind.”

“Sorry. I don’t know, it just gets me upset.”

“Obviously, and if Rebecca hadn’t died and I didn’t have her orphan it might make me upset.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s because I feel like I’m a little distant from this, from what’s going on, from you. You’ve kept me at a distance. Have you thought about me staying over?”

Susan looks at Jason for a second, then shakes her head and says, “No, I really haven’t. I feel like I have to work this out with Pam first. Don’t push me on this, Jason.”

“I didn’t think I was pushing.”

“Well, I’m just saying, our relationship’s going to change. You’ve got to be patient. I’ve just been handed this incredible commitment. By the way, where is she? Where’s Pam? Hasn’t it been a while?”

Jason shrugs his shoulders. “What do you think?” he asks.

“I don’t have a good feeling,” she says, her voice rising. “I’m going to find her.”

As she enters the Ladies Room she sees an old woman washing her hands at the sink; then, above the sound of the running water, she hears a faint snuffle and muffled crying in the direction of the stalls.

“Pam? Is that you?”

The woman washing looks up. Silence. Then a sob and a snuffle.

“Pam! Are you all right?” Susan calls out as she walks over to the stall door.

“I . . . don’t. . . know,” comes from inside.

Susan is able to see her through the crack next to the door. Pam’s sitting on the toilet seat, fully clothed.

“Pam, let’s talk. Please. Come out, we can talk. We’ll wash up, go for a walk.” A woman walks past staring at her. “Pam,” she continues in a fierce whisper, talking through the slit. “Come on out, we’ll talk.”

“OK. . . just a minute.”

Pam comes out and washes her face and they reenter the restaurant.

“Wait here for one second while I go up and tell Jason we’re taking a walk. Then we’ll talk. Do you want to? I think it would help.”

“OK.”

Susan runs up and gets their coats, telling Jason they’ll be back soon.

“What about the food? Susan, what are you doing? Where are you going?” he asks, half-rising out of his seat.

But Susan, who is already heading for the stairs, turns back and calls, “Have them keep the food warm.”

Jason stands, hands and shoulders up in a what’s-going-on-here gesture, a puzzled, angry look on his face. As Susan hurries down the stairs

she wonders if Jason's going to stay now that Pam's in the picture. Maybe not.

Pam is crying, carefully, trying not to be noticed, and Susan leads her out onto Broadway. It's a warm night for November and the sidewalk is crowded. Susan hugs Pam. An elderly man wearing a long, dilapidated coat shuffles up, holding out a paper cup. He appears to be begging, but he stares straight ahead, talking to himself.

Susan puts her arm around Pam and they walk towards downtown, steering around a group of teenagers in black leather and heavy metal. Salsa music blares from the open door of a parked car. Susan leads Pam around the corner where it's less noisy and they walk slowly towards Amsterdam Avenue.

Her arm still around Pam, Susan bends down to her. "Could you tell me what got you upset, Pam? Was it memories of your Mom? Maybe we shouldn't have gone to that restaurant. It was too familiar."

Pam gives a few long snuffles and wipes her eyes. "Do you have a tissue?" she asks and stands there, sniffing and twisting her hands together, trying not to use them to wipe her nose.

Susan turns to face the breeze as she digs in her pocketbook for tissues. The wind pushes into her open coat, hitting her body. It always blows from this direction, from New Jersey. When she first moved here she had a vision that stayed with her, of the constant wind from the West sweeping across the continent, touching her and then moving on, to Brooklyn and out to sea. Susan takes out a packet of Kleenex, pulls several out and gives them to Pam, who blows her nose.

They begin walking again and Pam turns to Susan. "I think really it's, I think, Jason, being there."

"What do you mean? I thought you two seemed to like each other."

"He reminds me of my father."

"Really?"

They begin walking again, the wind at their backs, coats still open, it's so warm. Susan's surprised. Carl and Jason? She had never seen a resemblance. For her, Carl had always been the studious one, a little overweight, nice but off in another world. He was a Columbia professor. She found him hard to reach, had never felt close to him.

"What was your Dad like?"

Pam shrugs her shoulders. They walk a few paces in silence.

"I knew him, of course," Susan continues. "But, you know, I was more your Mom's friend. She was my cousin."

"I know," Pam says.

"What was your Dad like, Pam? To you, I mean?" Susan asks.

"He was nice to me. . . at the restaurant. . ." She begins sniffing again and is silent as they near the corner of Amsterdam, its lights and people. They turn and walk the short block uptown, past a Korean grocery lit up under an awning thrust out on the sidewalk, neat pyramids of

oranges and grapefruit, pebbled skin gleaming, rows of nestled bok choy, mounds of cauliflower and broccoli fresh white and green in the midst of the night.

They turn the corner, starting back towards Broadway; the wind feels colder as they push into it and they stick their hands in their pockets and tug their coats more tightly around themselves and Susan has to raise her voice to be heard.

“Pam, if your Dad was nice to you in the restaurant and he reminded you of Jason, could you tell me about it? I always like to hear nice things about Jason.”

Pam smiles up at Susan. “We sometimes had an egg roll race – who could eat it the fastest.” Pam wipes her eyes.

“Wow, honey. I didn’t know your Dad.” Susan laughs. She bends down slightly to speak to Pam. “Hey, look, could you tell me about him? When you feel ready to? I mean, when you’re ready, I’d like to get to know him – through you.”

Pam remains quiet as they continue to walk into the wind; after a while she moves closer to Susan, reaches into her coat pocket and takes her hand. Susan looks down and they smile at each other. With Pam’s hand tight in hers and Pam’s shoulder bumping against her arm, occasionally their inside legs tangling, they proceed up the block. As they turn onto Broadway, their legs move forward at the same time and they’re laughing at what’s become a herky-jerky stage walk. But a confrontation with a fat man in a hurry makes Susan give up the hands-in-the-pocket walk. She puts her arm around Pam and steers around him.

They enter the restaurant and Susan looks up at the mezzanine and cannot see Jason at their table. She worries as they walk up the stairs, but when they reach the top he’s heading towards them, waving and smiling, and she feels a flood of relief and embraces him.

They sit down at the table and Pam tells Jason about their walk. For the first time since receiving the call in Italy, Susan thinks about the violin. Rehearsal tomorrow, the slow movement of the Brahms, the most difficult. She’ll look at Jason, he’ll smile, nod and play the opening chord. Shirley will bend over her cello, her curled fingers next to her face digging into the strings, and then Susan will begin her slow run up the G Minor scale to reach high above them. How very quiet the music has to be, how gently she must play.



WENTING LIAO was born in 1974 in Jiangxi Province. She obtained her MA from East China Normal University in Shanghai. She is now a PhD student in the Asian Studies department at UBC. Her thesis will be on the history of Chinese theatre. She is the author of many poems and short stories in Chinese. These are the first of her works to be translated into English.

MICHAEL BULLOCK and WENTING LIAO have jointly translated the following poems. (See page 75 for Bullock's biography.)

## Three Poems / Wenting Liao

### Black

In the jet-black room  
 Someone is wearing black  
 Behind the deep black glasses  
 There hide a pair of eyes  
 In the profoundly black sky  
 The sun and the clouds are also black  
 Over the boundless black earth  
 Grow fields of gleaming black wheat

The owl perched on the branch is black  
 The moon is a black wreath  
 Hanging from the sky  
 Who sent the bouquet of black roses  
 Standing on the windowsill?  
 The hearts of the roses are weeping  
 Their tears are black ink  
 Someone is kissing someone with black lips  
 In the deep black night  
 Someone threw a pebble into the lake  
 Creating black ripples

You said black is death  
 But I see newborn babies that are black  
 You said black means despair  
 Yet countless black shadows are walking in the sunlight  
 You said you would take me somewhere far away  
 But I didn't know you bled black blood  
 You fell asleep without a word  
 And I discovered that your heart is like a raven

## **Dreams of the Flowers**

The flowers are silently sleeping beside the wall  
Opening the intricately folded petals  
That were wrapped around  
Their secret sensitive places  
A lost ant  
That strayed into the house of the flowers  
Crawls into the deep serpentine labyrinth  
Its fine toes are like the tip of the tongue  
Touching the petals  
Arousing vibrations  
That are transformed into a chain of dreams

## **The Woman in Red**

The woman's naked body  
Is floating on a river of blood  
As she stretches her four limbs  
The gurgling river rises to her throat  
Her black hair spreads out in the flow  
Steeped in deep red  
Dyed by the blood  
She becomes a magical scarlet woman

The scarlet woman slowly sinks  
And swims in the depths of the river  
Her swaying hair is waving waterweed  
Her blood-red eyes see huge red flowers  
Swept away by the blood  
That clothes her from head to toe  
She drifts on lost in the world of her dreams

MICHAEL BULLOCK was born in London (UK) in 1918. From 1968-1983 he taught Creative Writing at UBC. He is the author of more than 50 books of verse and prose, two plays, numerous essays, two videos and an audiobook, as well as some 200 translations of books and plays from German and French. His own work has been translated into many languages, especially Chinese. He is also a visual artist. His most recent exhibition was *Michael Bullock and His Universe* in London (UK), celebrating his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday.

## Seven Poems / Michael Bullock

### Wenting and the River of Blood

Wenting swims into view in a river of her own blood. This tragic situation fills me with despair. But Wenting herself is singing. Her song has the plaintive quality of a lament for the dead – but no one has died. Nor does Wenting seem at all depressed. Perhaps the blood is an illusion, perhaps it is only the reflection of the setting sun on the water. I am relieved by this realization and begin to sing to myself. But my song is black and Wenting's is red. Red and black, blood and iron, so far apart, so close together. Joined by difference. Our songs now intertwine like a vine embracing a tree. This happy outcome brings the apparently tragic situation to a felicitous conclusion and we leave the scene hand in hand, confident of the future. Meanwhile the river sings a song of its own as it flows on toward some distant sea.

### Perfumed Blossom

For Wenting

Perfumed blossom  
 hiding behind its leaves  
 working its magic  
 through its dream-filled scent  
 murmuring a poem  
 that bewitches like the touch  
 of a sorceress's fingers  
 of shadow silk and moonlight

## Sunset

The falling sun  
is bleeding to death  
on the tightrope  
dividing sea and sky

Its frantic fingers  
clutch at the waves  
its sighs echo  
in the voice of the water

Darkness is waiting  
to cast its capturing net

## Winter Evening

Surrounded by my plants  
I curl up in a womb of leaves  
the fire flickers  
soothes me with its whispered words  
the splashing fountain  
sings a lullaby

Within this green womb  
I await rebirth

## Cat

For Katie

White orange and black  
soft and silky  
her fur like satin to the hand  
her purr pale purple  
her plaintiff mew  
a ray of silver light  
her questioning eyes  
forest pools shaded by green leaves

## **Autumn Garden**

(Saint Philip's Church)  
for Miriam

In the autumn garden  
the flowers are bidding farewell  
to the summer and each other  
exchanging scents like tokens  
pledges of enduring love  
promises to meet again next year

I leave the garden  
filled with nostalgia  
for summer moments  
passed among these flowers

## **Autumn Berries**

Red berries  
the nipples of mother earth  
are lying on the ground  
rotting on the branches

The teeth of winter  
will grind them into mush

ARLENE TRIBBIA grew up in Chicago and has written for the *Chicago Tribune* for a number of years. Her poetry and short stories have appeared in literary journals in the U.S. This is her first published work in Canada. She's working on a novel, *Silent Light*.

## How to Grow a Human Heart

Arlene Tribbia

THE TRUTH IS, I'm trying to concentrate my energies and learn how to put out fire with my mind. It all started because I wanted to read auras. My mother saw something on *Oprah* and I couldn't help but listen as she described the flash of carnival-colors supposedly swirling around each of us, parading our truest natures before the world. I mean really – how cool is that?

To see my boyfriend Graham's aura and have a secret portrait to study for his truthfulness? Sign me up. He's my fifth *serious* relationship. I can't deal with a broken heart again. I have to get this love thing right. I'm twenty-six years old and basically I'm a short skip away from thirty and what's that? I'll tell you what it is – it's vintage.

If deciphering auras could help me out with Graham and, as a bonus, remedy my work situation, too – heaven. Knowing who the backstabbers in the office were could leap frog me out of the muck of the many, right up into editorial instead of languishing as one of the health/fitness writers. I *despise* doing health tips. Most of the time when I'm writing them, I'm chugging Starbucks chai lattes – extra cream, plus whipped – and smoking cigarettes that I have to take breaks and go outside for because the *Chicago Tribune* is a smoke free office. Talk about unaccommodating.

Anyway, the problem is, it's not easy to read auras. It's just not. But, I had to find out more. Once I started looking, I discovered there was no shortage of classes addressing all kinds of farfetched supernatural interests – aliens, angels, astral projection, crystals, crop circles

(thank you for *that* one, Mel Gibson) and sprites. *Sprites?* Chicago was a new age mecca. I didn't realize all I had been missing. Who knew?

Ω

"I'm not seeing anything," I tell Natasha, a psychic who's supposed to be guiding me in aura vision development on Wednesday nights.

"You can't rush this. Breathe. Focus." She eyes me suspiciously. What if she's reading the annoyance that's spewing out of my aura? Am I aura-smacking her in the face with my distrust?

People like Natasha who read auras like they're scanning a Denny's menu, basically made lying unnecessary. You're exposed. And Natasha could read thoughts. Or so she claimed. Kind of a curse, I figure, once I thought about *that* for a while. But somehow she always managed to get some hits about my life and I was supremely weirded out, like: *how could she know all of this stuff?*

To read auras, you need to relax. We tried meditation. I couldn't sit still. I hated watching my thoughts galloping and chasing after memories I'd conveniently forgotten.

"Gaze into a candle flame. There's nothing like it for developing concentration," Natasha told me one evening after a particularly trying session.

"How long does it take to work?" I wanted a deadline. I had them at the *Trib*, why not here? She was exasperated, I could tell.

It's not that I didn't trust her, but I admit to thinking that perhaps she might give me some lame exercise simply because she read me and knew precisely how I felt about her. Worse, maybe she *had* read my thoughts and felt I deserved some kind of weird penance. *Candle gaze for four pointless hours a week. See where that gets you, Missy.*

"As long as it takes," she continued.

There was definitely something penitential going on.

"It'll be good for you. Yogis use it to train children."

"Children?"

"They're taught to put out fire with their minds."

"I never heard of that before."

"It's not done in America. We're not advanced in these matters, you know."

"Fires?"

"Of course." She smiled at me.

Now how cool was that?

Ω

The best way for me to execute Natasha's assignment is to start small. With this in mind, one day after work I head over to the Walgreen's and

pick up the latest *Vogue* and a few packages of blue votive candles – my favorite color. Four to a pack. I calculate that it shouldn't take more than twelve candles to master this fire putting out business.

It's like running the four-minute mile – a record that for years people thought couldn't be beat until one runner did it and after that, even highschoolers were hustling four-minute miles. So I figure the fire barrier has already been broken for me by those precocious kids in India. *Me. Putting out fires!* I charge out of Walgreen's with a jaunty step, feeling the invincible rush of having a totally cool challenge.

How difficult will it be really? After all, I'm starting out with a tiny flame that won't be much bigger than a candle on my birthday cake. And what can possibly be so difficult about extinguishing an itty-bitty flame when mere *children* are capable of doing it? My attempt will be a breeze. I'm hoping.

## Ω

“Do you think there's life after death?” I ask Graham one Sunday afternoon when we're naked, lying together in his bed. He's a seminary student dropout – he might have some insight into metaphysics or philosophy.

“Nope.” He seems pretty clear about it as he glides a finger along my thigh.

“How about reincarnation?”

“Give me a break.” His touch makes my aura stagger, drunken in pleasure.

I sneak a sidelong glance at his face in the fading light and his profile is so perfectly da-Vinci-chiseled that I think it's truly a shame and a waste his good looks will last only this lifetime. When I first started seeing Graham, I thought we might have some interesting philosophical discussions because of his religious studies. But as it turns out, he's never very keen about talking – about anything – he's more attentive to the sexual nature of our relationship.

It doesn't take me long to figure out that our relationship has a doomed kind of one dimensionality about it, but I still can't bring myself to stop seeing him even after one of our biggest fights when he leaves the sliding glass doors open in my apartment and my cat, Sunshine, scampers off – her impromptu pilgrimage to catnip nirvana. Whenever I try to lose myself in the flame of my votive so I don't have to ruminate over him, his carelessness, his disinterest in my interests, the flame sparks brighter. A taunt. And yet, Graham is the easiest thing I do nowadays. Despite him.

## Ω



Our magical minds help us perform so many tasks with ease. However, as the days flicker past, I think putting out fires is just not one of those tasks. And I was so confident. But every morning when I return like a hapless moth, seduced by a bright beckoning light, my confidence falters, my faith disappears and my belief in the power of the human mind to accomplish anything falls far short of adequate. Why is this so difficult?

My mind doesn't even have the energy of a sigh or the flimsy puff of a sleeping baby's breath. The damn candle flame in front of me devours all of the endless breaths I mentally heave upon it. Over and over.

I feel duped. And I'm still only on my first candle. What was I thinking of when I bought twelve?

Ω

"Natasha, I don't think the candle exercise you gave me is working," I tell her one evening after work. I'm trying not to be too accusatory.

"How so?" She's never one to waste time by making idle chitchat or asking lots of questions. Probably a result of her mind reading ability.

"I haven't been able to concentrate on anything more than how it's not working. That's what I think when I look at the flame." That and Graham, but I figure she already knows as much.

"You've been brainwashed culturally. If you had grown up in India, you wouldn't have this problem."

Fine, but at this point, there's nothing I can do about my American blockheadedness. Why do I so feel like screaming?

"Natasha," I calmly say, using great restraint, "have *you* ever put out a fire with your mind?"

"I don't need that kind of training. I have other avenues I'm exploring."

"As difficult as this?"

She doesn't answer.

Ω

The following day, I learn that David Doore, a fortyish Pulitzer Prize winning reporter, is doing a series of stories about a seventeen-year-old Naperville girl who sees visions and heals people. This girl might be the closest thing America has to a child putting out fire with her mind. And she's right here in the neighborhood. How lucky is that?"

A lot of the other writers in the office are jealous of David. Maruek, my friend who writes obits, informs me one day during our cigarette break: "*The* David Doore? He's stuck up. He probably won't tell you much of anything – that is, if he even consents to talk to you, dude. I

hear you have to be royalty before he'll let you inside his office." David had an office with a view. The rest of us, we worked in cubicles.

Still, what can it hurt to try?

David Doore must think I'm crazy because the moment I come upon his office doorway, I'm startled to see colors laying all over him – his aura! It swarms about him in great plumes of yellow and swirls of blue, a comfortable wash of warm beach sky I'd like to picnic under forever. It undulates toward me like a warm wave sweeping past on the ocean floor. Do I taste sea wind? I believe I can. And warmth of the sun? It melts on my shoulders. His office at the *Tribune* is so full of his nature – it's as if I'm tossed like a beach ball into another reality. I am as taken with his aura of energetic loveliness as anything I've ever seen. There might be iron and concrete buildings outside his office window, but it's the tantalizing beach and glorious blue sky of him that waves me over.

David looks at me strangely. "Yes?"

As I draw closer, his aura fades. By the time I am standing in front of his messy desk of papers, he's become plain old David Doore, Pulitzer Prize winning reporter.

"I'm Edie. We haven't met. Do you have a minute?"

## Ω

"Edie, are you there?" I've taken to calling her sometimes when she gets home after work, but more often than not, I talk to her answering machine. I wonder why she's never home. Edie is twenty-six, a grown woman, and yet, she's still my little girl. It must be true what they say that even when your kids are fifty years old, you keep worrying and telling them what to do. An invisible umbilical cord stretches around the world between a mother and her children no matter how many miles apart they are. In our case, we're not so far: a couple of hours by plane. Chicago to Florida.

I'm worried about her. I know she lives on Twinkies and coffee and I'm positive she burns the candle at both ends. And I'm sure this latest boyfriend is wrong for her because she's been known to date men with, shall I say, *issues*? She ended up supporting her last boyfriend, an artist.

I'd never tell her this, but I believe her trouble with men is because of Peter. She'd never admit it, *but I know*. Maybe they'd be married by now if he was still alive. I could be a grandmother. It was an accident that he died. Edie came home from college for the weekend and brought Peter to meet us. I knew it was serious because she never brought anyone home while she was at Northwestern.

She took off for a quick trip to the grocery store – oregano and French bread, leaving Peter behind to help Warren fix something on his bicycle. I suppose Peter was just trying to be kind to her brother. He was thoughtful. That's what got him killed – his good-hearted nature.

One minute he's bending over with Warren, holding a wrench, and in the next, he's gliding across the grass, flying to grab a stray baseball that one of the neighborhood kids hit onto our lawn. The sunlight is flashing off his streaked blond hair and just when he bends down to pick up the ball, he's flipped back, as if in seizure. Struck by lightning. He lay there in the sunshine, the smoke trailing off his body in a nonchalant, lazy way and didn't move – it was eerie. I sensed a gathered power – of what, I couldn't say. A force, maybe. A wild, invisible force that grabbed him and tossed him up to the gods.

I ran out of the house to him. My heart fast-kicked me across the street into a screaming sunlight. When I knelt down beside him, I had to turn away, I smelled the smoke of him. For a split second, I had the craziest thought: *Were his bones electric? Can I touch him?* His sandals had shot off his feet and landed across the street near the lamppost. By the time the paramedics came, he didn't have a pulse.

When Edie came back, Peter was already being spirited to the hospital. "Is he going to be all right?" The look of horror developing on her face like an awful Polaroid twisted my heart when I told her.

It was so random – as if his time was up and there wasn't a single thing any of us could do. Why Peter and not one of the boys who were playing ball across the street? Why wasn't anything else struck? A tree, even? Why at that moment? It wasn't lightning. There wasn't a storm, maybe a bit of thunder, that's all – nothing to send you inside the house. Yet, somehow, a single streak of lightning spit out of the blue nowhere and he was wrenched away from Edie, but not really, because I believe Peter will always cast a shadow across her heart.

Who could blame her for having trouble falling in love again? Anyone would be reluctant. Do I ever ask her about Peter? No, I don't want to bring him up unless she does first. And she hasn't – she'll talk about other guys she dates, but I know none of them measures up to Peter. How do I know? I know because what is lost is always better than what you have. There's no contest in what could have been.

*Edie, it's me, call me when you get the chance. I love you.*

She'll call me back, but it won't be for three days.

## Ω

My sister Julia annoys me – always has – but it was worse when we were kids and she was a pushy little brat. Now she listens to motivational CDs and has miraculously managed to channel her unfortunate tendencies to bully me into a salesman's kind of cheery good-heartedness. She has a closet full of CDs that cost her thousands of dollars. She wants to power influence people and learn the negotiating secrets of millionaires. It's true she's kinder to me than she used to be, but I think of Julia as *Julia* – coveting money and a spectacular career that

somehow manages to be far more glorious and compelling than my job could ever be. That's the Julia I *know*.

*You write for the Tribune? So what. I graduated from law school.* Yeah? Well, it's not as if it's Yale or anything.

"Edie," she tells me one day as I open her closet to find a sweater, "you should listen. You'd be surprised at how these CDs help you get your life on track. After all, if you fail to plan, you plan to fail." What makes her think my life is screwed up just because she's on some self-improvement rampage? She should have a *real* undertaking like mine, she should try putting fire out with her mind.

Secretly, I think she needs to fill her head with all of these strangers' voices so she won't have to give much thought about what she's missing in life. She's missing one main ingredient: love. In that regard, we *are* sisters.

At least this is the thought that flickers through my consciousness one morning while I'm concentrating on my candle flame. Julia needs to fall in love – smooth out the edges of her steely careerism. All of her CDs are fine, I'm sure, and maybe they might even help her with some convoluted legal argument, but I'm learning from Natasha that there's more to this life.

If only I can put out this teeny tiny candle flame, then so many of the other things I'm unhappy with will be conquered as well – everything that's bothered me over the years: my desperate cravings for chocolate, my impatience over lazy cosmetic store clerks, my disjointed relationship with Graham, my annoyance, okay, my jealousy of Julia, my faltering ambition, my manipulative mother, all of these irritations will be swept away once I induce the damn flame to go out. If I do that, the rest is easy.

I have to spend more time practicing. It's the only way. I'm still on my first candle. And while I haven't given up, even I can see that my progress leaves something to be desired. It might be time to follow Julia's counsel and set a goal.

I'll practice in the morning and evenings after work. I'll practice until I conquer that beautiful pattern of electrons floating silently inside radiant waves of energy. Eventually, I will put out this fire with my mind. I will. Damn it.

## Ω

David Doore has invited me to go with him to see the Naperville girl. *Me!* He probably wants me to witness her visions. After snooping around the office, I discover that David is going out on a kind of journalistic limb with this series of stories. No one in the office believes Visionary Girl is for real.

Maruek gives me the scoop during one of our cigarette breaks. “Dude, she’s scamming David. Editorial thinks he should uncover her fraudulence and how she’s deluding people. Do an exposé. You know, parlay a con artist into a Pulitzer.”

“She’s scamming?”

“What do you think?”

I don’t need to read Maruek’s aura to know what he believes.

## Ω

David has blond hair. It reminds me of Peter’s. So I try to focus on something else about him – like his aura. But I can’t glimpse any color surrounding him; in fact, I can’t see anything but David and these crazy hints of Peterness. He looks like an older, granted a much older, Peter. But it makes me wonder what David looked like in college. Probably an athlete. Peter was an athlete.

In David’s Jeep, on our way to Naperville, I’m giddy despite myself. I might not be able to see his aura, but *I have seen it*, so I decide to find other things about him that might be as lovely and fascinating. He doesn’t have on a wedding ring. Maruek was telling the truth, he is divorced. I study his hands turning the steering wheel – maybe my concentration *is* developing from candle watching. Oh, his long, slender fingers are beautiful – made to hold fine writing instruments, wine glasses, women. . . . I can hear my mother now, saying: *Don’t let a man see you swoon over him. You’ll regret it. He’ll know he has the upper hand. Men want to hunt after a woman. They want the chase, Edie.* But he’s so sweet. And old. Sixteen years older than me, according to Maruek, and devoted to his work. Exceedingly devoted and driven. Too bad Julia isn’t around to meet him. They’d have something in common.

“I liked your story about stretching,” David says.

*David won the Pulitzer.* And he’s complimenting my story. *My story.* I’m shaking.

“You did?”

“Yeah, I hate stretching – what a waste. But you convinced me. I’ll give it a try.” His grin makes my heart flip.

I knew he worked out. I could tell. I only hoped that he wouldn’t be able to smell cigarette smoke on me. I admit it, I smoked a few since I was a little nervous about being with him. When I’m nervous, I smoke. So kill me. I immediately promise myself I’ll stop smoking.

Naperville is a suburban leafy town, full of shrubbery and stretching lawns. And I can’t help but notice how empty the streets are of people. Did everyone evacuate? The empty sidewalks lead to nowhere the residents want to go apparently.

Visionary Girl is meeting us for coffee at the McDonald’s where she works. The McDonald’s here is brick, very storybook villagey. It’s not

McDonald's – it's home. We take a seat in a booth and wait until Summer has her break. That's her name, Summer.

She's stunning. Long blond hair, a radiant smile. And if I could see her aura, which I can't, I'm sure it spouts rainbows and unicorns. Who did I expect? I'm not sure, but I wasn't thinking she'd be celebrity beautiful. Is she doing this to grab attention? A newspaper story, then a television appearance and before you know it, *Playboy*, Hollywood. My mind somersaults down Summer's slick career path.

"I don't get much of a break," she says, sliding into the booth beside David, causing me a stab of jealousy. He could be her father, he's that much older. *But still*. "What can I tell you? There's not much to say." Her voice is sweet, sure and summery.

"Your visions, what're they like?" David casually slips a slim silver tape recorder onto the table, presses the on-button.

Summer shrugs. Her shoulders are small under her garish uniform. "I want you to know I'm not like religious. But you can't print that because of my mother. She's Catholic. She'd kill me. My grandmother would murder me. Say I'm spiritual if you want the truth. Or loving. It's all about love."

Interviewing teenagers requires a certain kind of knack because they often speak in circles.

"Spiritual?" David asks, leading her on.

"I've always felt close to nature – clouds, flowers, animals, bugs, birds, little kids, rocks."

*Rocks? Oh, please.*

"People come to me. They're so like *drawn* to me. But I can't take credit for healing them. We're like all in this miracle together."

And here she was, little miss rainbow, soon to be Miss July working in a McDonald's and having visions on the side – Maruek was right. She was a fake.

Did she realize I was dissing her? She glanced at me and I couldn't help it, I swam deep into the sea of her green eyes toward a faraway stillness. Her eyes held an aurora of endless, swirling specks of color and I drifted into them as her voice fluttered through the air. I was content to listen to floating sound: her fluttery voice, then David's loopy one. Their tennis match of words volleying across the table made me woozy. Boundaries slid aside until the edges of my nature melted. The filmy veil that separates this reality from the next parted and the knots of my consciousness slipped free. And then, suddenly, she was getting up to go back to work. *What? Where had I been?*

"What did you think?" David asked as we made our way back to his Jeep. "Is she for real?"

"Interview her some more and find other people who will talk about her." I, of course, missed her how and why explanations because of, *because of what? What did she do?*

“My sentiments exactly. I heard she makes old photographs change. Who could prove that? I wanted to bring a picture, but I figured it might be too confrontational since this was our first meeting. Maybe next time.”

He hurries to open the door for me and as I wait, I see flocks of birds twittering and chirping in the trees around us. Hundreds of them. I hadn't noticed them before. And the street is slick. How could that be? It rained? When did that happen? The air is alive, vibrating with promise and possibility. I feel connected; even the trees smile. David accidentally grazes his finger across mine and it's electric.

Ω

It's dawn. I'm gazing intently at my candle flame and I'm inside the glow of the fire – what it must feel like to be inside a nothingness of an empty, silent space and why, oh, why do I think of Peter? It's a flicker of him, where he might be now – and it scares me.

Ω

“Mom?” She's called me three times. I can't put it off any longer. I phone her one day from the office. “I don't know why this is happening to me now, but it's crazy, I'm getting these reminders of Peter and I don't understand it because nothing like this has ever happened before.” That's the beauty of family – you can spare them conversational niceties and jump right in with your problems – mothers especially love this.

“You never grieved for him.”

I'm quiet for a moment, unsure of what to say. “How do you know?” I don't know if what she's telling me is true – because I did cry at his funeral, *didn't I?* I've forgotten. But I can see the truth of her words. Maybe.

Ω

“Natasha, what happens when you die?”

“Is this about Peter?”

See, these are the kinds of hits she'd have that kept me coming back. I never mentioned Peter to her. Graham, yes, but he was another story.

“No, just in general,” I lied.

“Well, in general, you go to a different realm of consciousness that people here on earth call heaven.”

Well, *la dee da*. “Okay, this is about Peter.”

“You don't have to feel responsible for his dying.”

“I don’t.”

She stares at me intently.

“I mean I never thought of it that way.” I hesitate, take a deep breath. “Okay. The thing is, he shouldn’t have even been with me that weekend. He had a game. He was a baseball player at the university. He had a scholarship – baseball – it was his life. I talked him into giving me a ride home from school. He missed practice because I needed a way home. I liked him, yes, but not as a serious boyfriend or anything.”

“You didn’t love him?”

“I don’t know. No.” I hedge. “I never thought about *that*.” A lie. She knows.

We sit in silence for a few minutes. With Natasha, I was always the first to speak. It was better to blurt out what I wanted as opposed to letting her read what *she* wanted.

She finally says, “He chose to go with you.” She hesitates. “Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

“You can’t control someone’s choices.”

She knew I wouldn’t have asked him had I known what was going to happen. Of course, she had already read my mind.

“And when you die, Edie, it’s not so bad. It’s like living your best moments all at once, if you can imagine. If Peter never pitched a perfect game, I’m certain he felt like he did when he died.”

I know I was used to her hits, but I never mentioned to her that he was star pitcher.

## Ω

How many days have I peered into that damn swaggering flame? Too many. My mind is scorched, blistered from trying. I persevere because every once in a while I glimpse possibilities of what might be.

Deep inside the flame is another shining world, in fact many other worlds and inside there are noble pasts, beckoning presents and gleaming futures. Maybe in one of these worlds I’ll find Peter. Find Peter and tell him how sorry I am.

## Ω

I’m reminded of Peter everywhere. He reaches out to me in weird kinds of off moments, when he’s furthest from my mind. He’s been dead four years. *Light years*. I’ll see him in the turn of a stranger’s smile when I’m walking down Michigan Avenue and in the lovely way blonde hair falls on the easy tilt of a boy’s forehead. Sometimes, when I pass the park after work and hear a ball cracking on a bat, it’s as if he’s there, a



voice calling. And I miss him. How can I not miss the sweetness of a guy who skipped his ball game for me? *For me.*

Ω

I decide to meet Graham for drinks. I need a break from my solitary peering into the quiet flame. I need a break from Natasha. I need a break from thinking about Peter. I need a break from my lame exercise stories at work.

Walking down Wacker Drive, I spot some men working construction high above on a scaffold on one of the skyscrapers across the river and I imagine Peter as one of them – fearless and tranquil up there, doing skywork, eclipsing those of us walking on earth. He’s there in the silhouette of assembled outlines of people against the pale sky. He’s in the space between earth and sky, the space between life and death, a pure space between the two of us.

Ω

We’re standing on the observation deck of Sears Tower. The 103<sup>rd</sup> floor. Graham’s arm is draped along my waist and we peer together at the lights blinking below, mesmerized by the flashy light show. It was his idea to come here.

“Let’s get our picture taken again. I don’t like the way the other one turned out,” he tells me. They photograph everybody waiting in line to go up to the top of the building, then you get the photo once you’re on the Skydeck. Personally, I thought our photo was okay. It strikes me that Graham is vain – a ludicrous character trait for a seminary student – even if he is a drop out.

“Do we really need to?” I figure we’re not going to look any better because the cameras are so obviously like something out of the driver’s license bureau of institutional photography. It won’t matter what angle they shoot us from. The lighting is hideous, the photographer is blind – what can you reasonably expect? Exactly the picture we have.

“They should have a real photographer. Not some ten dollar an hour guy who’s never been in a darkroom.”

Graham does have this tendency of whining. Why is he annoying me? We’re supposed to be having a good time tonight. That’s my plan. I want to smack him for ruining my mood. *Graham cracker.* And later that night when we’re lying together naked in his bed and he’s about to fall asleep, I can’t restrain myself. I slap him across the face.

“What the hell?” He’s more startled than mad.

“*That* is for losing my cat.” It occurs to me that my Dr. Seuss accusation is the simple truth, but it contains so much more.

I'm on my fourth candle. I haven't any expectations that I can put out fire with my mind. I go to the fire out of habit. I just do it. I peer into the burning and watch as it devours itself over and over endlessly, this fire that breathed Peter into ashes and dust.

I have thoughts like that. I have thoughts like this: in this new century and with all the technology we have, why can't the scientists do something, anything, so that my broken heart can be replaced with another that doesn't have cell memories of Peter stored deep inside it, always ready to be awakened by random remembrances of him? Hey, Mr. Scientist, I'd like a new heart, one that has the memory of Peter, but not his death. Mr. Scientist, all you have to do is grow a human heart that can't be broken by the vicissitudes of life. How hard is that? Come on, you biomedical guys at MIT, get on it, already.

David has asked me to take a photograph to Visionary Girl to see if she'll do her changeling act on it. He figures she might be naturally receptive to me. A girl thing or something. I decided to ask Julia to tag along. Why not let Julia's unsentimental legal mind take a swing at Summer's visions? Her logic isn't open to a Britney Spears kind of miracle worker. She'll automatically judge Visionary Girl a fake.

As for me, I'm doing this for David. But to make it somewhat enticing, I bring that Sears Tower photo of Graham and me. Just to see what she can do. If she can do something with that wretched photo, then maybe there is something to her visions.

When I hand Summer the photo, she takes it, closes her eyes and cradles it to her heart for a few seconds, then hands it back to me. Julia and I both peer at it as if it's a crystal ball, expecting, *expecting*. . . what, I'm not sure. It's nothing but a picture that Graham didn't even want – a reminder of another love lost.

Graham and me. And then, there's more. There's a lotus blossom of faces inside Graham's face, all of the males in my life, past, present and future – men, boyfriends, my father, uncles, cousins, boys I knew in school, teachers, friends, grandfathers – others I don't recognize – but I understand them to be ones who have or will play a role in my life. I see them all in the photograph and it's a true knowledge that fixes itself firmly inside my heart as their faces petal away, a rose unwinding endlessly.

Julia grips my arm. For once, she's stunned. The photograph has Peter inside it. It's Graham, yes, but no, it's Peter. And he has his arms wrapped around my shoulders, and we're both smiling, looking very much like a young couple in love, giddy at venturing upward into the

Sears Tower to see the sun set over Chicago, where we'll watch the evening's graceful circle bounce once, twice on Lake Michigan, then fall back upon itself, us all. How cool is that?

A native of Pennsylvania, MARY CARROLL moved to California at the age of seventeen. She is a perennial student there, working and going to school until finally, at the age of forty-three, she obtained a BS in molecular biology.

## Two Poems / Mary Carroll

### Bon Fire

When lightning strikes  
 bring it to the front of your mind  
 tie it down and spirit it to the  
     immense space you find  
     before your eyes  
 Lightning is to share  
     not merely to experience  
     in the shadow of our thoughts

My mind was set on fire  
 when I lifted this pen  
 It smolders with the scent  
     of blackened marshmallow  
     and heated sage  
 There, on the tips of that thought,  
 do you see?  
 Does the bonfire light illuminate  
     the green forest, the darker wood?

Here, take my hand  
 Let me pull you through the window  
     and we will sit together  
     in the warmth of my illusion

## Desires

A hunger is in me  
for wildberry wine  
    and artichokes  
for riotous living  
    and late nights out  
an appetite  
to hold someone near  
    and say here is the  
    substance of my heart

But I hold back  
I drink my tea and  
    carefully fill my hours  
    with creative hobbies  
    and quiet contemplation  
monitoring my pain  
watching my body age  
    faster than  
    my garden turns its leaves

There is no good solution  
to this ambiguous  
    state of being  
I fear that if I choose to sate  
    my fond desires  
they would turn to ash,  
attach themselves to the  
    present and soon be gone  
but as long as I keep  
them only in my sight  
then they will last,  
forever

MARC MILLER was born and raised in Montreal where he earned a BA and MA in Eastern European Jewish Studies at McGill University. He is currently completing his PhD in Yiddish Studies at Columbia University, where he has taught Yiddish language for three years as part of his university fellowship. In addition, he has taught courses in Holocaust literature and American Jewish literature at McGill and Rutgers Universities.

## On the Phone

Marc Miller

I JOINED the company at a transitional juncture which led to the final stage of the entire industry's existence. Here's how it worked. Tony was an independent contractor who served telemarketing companies. Thanks to morons who give away their addresses at the drop of a hat, usually filling out grocery store or shopping mall coupons for promotional items or useless product information, these companies had the locations of their suckers, all over America. But, according to the law, they could not request people's telephone numbers. So they sent Tony their lists of thousands of names and addresses, and he was responsible for procuring for them the corresponding phone numbers. Since acquiring the numerous phone books of the major metropolitan and minor rural areas, and then looking up the various names by hand, was an impractical and time consuming task, Tony had devised a more efficient way of getting the job done. He cleverly figured out that hotels charged for local information (411), but dialing long distance information (AREA CODE + 555 1212) was free. So he rented a few rooms in a shitty downtown hotel and had his employees work around the clock. Since I was lowest man on the totem pole, the F.N.G (Fucken New Guy), I started at the midnight to eight a.m. shift.

By the time I began working for Tony, he had minimized his costs by renting a small conference room in the same hotel. The first night I completed five hundred leads in seven hours. That wasn't bad. You got paid a dime for each lead – U.S. dimes – and so I had made fifty American dollars that night. My friend Peter, a veteran in the business (he

began working for Tony six months earlier), averaged a hundred leads an hour.

I only worked that one night in the conference room. Later that week, the hotel wised up, or the phone company changed the rules, I'm not sure which. In any case, there were now only two options: working out of a hospital room or using pay phones. Since the former proved to be impossible – not that Tony hadn't tried to make it happen – we were given our leads and instructed to find our own payphones. Peter and I scouted comfortable locations where we might set up shop, and finally settled on the phone bank in the basement of McGill University's library. Since it was summer, there was relatively little student traffic. We sat on wooden chairs, the kind which had arm desks attached on the side, and called information in area codes all over the United States.

One of the benefits of this new system was that the work was no longer limited to shifts. You could work whenever you wanted, wherever you wanted. When Tony got his lists, he would call and ask how many leads we could handle by the deadline, usually seven days later. I took no more than three thousand per week which meant between thirty and forty hours of work, depending on how much I did and how much I embellished.

You had three options in completing a lead. If the operator found the number you needed, terrific, you wrote it down next to the person's name. If the operator told you that, at the customer's request, the number was not published, you wrote "N/P." Finally, if the operator could find no corresponding match for your lead, you marked "N/A," attesting that the number was not available. After a while, and with the help of Peter's mentoring, I learned that there were certain leads which would almost always prove to be unavailable. Any lead that contained the person's name but no street address, for example: "Andrew Gonda, San Dimas, CA," you could go ahead and mark it "N/A" without wasting time to get corroboration from the operator. So whenever I received a fresh batch of leads from Tony, I right away took care of at least ten percent of the leads. Peter always claimed he was never as aggressive as me, but I think he actually cheated more than I did.

Tony had some real characters working for him. One guy was a fifty-eight year old drunk who spent most of his time trying to get the operators to talk dirty to him. There was Van, Tony's oldest and most ambitious employee, who took twice as many leads as Peter or I and claimed to work one hundred hours a week. My favorite was Abdul. Invariably, forty-eight hours before each deadline, Peter and I would get calls from the guy who always bit off more than he could chew.

"C'mon, man, you gotta help me. I can't do it, man."

"Cry me a river," Peter would tell him. "I got my own problems."

The job was boring and repetitive. You usually got a batch in the same area code, but the operator only gave you two numbers per call.

Since pay phones do not have redial buttons, this meant you had to dial the same number over and over again. You had to ask for “two verbal listings,” or “verbals,” otherwise the operator would put you right through to the computerized voice after the first query. After a week, I had it down to a science.

12125551212. “Hi, could I have two verbals in Manhattan? The first is Boyarin, B like boy, O, Y, A, R, I, N like Nancy, on West Seventy Third. . . . Okay, thank you. The next one is Campbell, C, A, M like Mary, P like Paul, B like Boy, E, L, L, on Hudson . . . . Thank you.”

Hang up. 12125551212. “Hi, could I have two verbals in....”

It was very rare, but sometimes you got a flirty or friendly or bored or lonely operator who, in return for some conversation, would give you more than just two. Peter claimed he got them all the time. In the four weeks I worked for Tony, it only happened to me once.

“Could I have two more?” I asked after the first two, as I often did, just to see.

“Sure, sugar,” the woman said. She sounded southern, or black, I wasn’t sure which.

After the second two, I pushed my luck.

“Just keep readin’ ’em and I’ll keep lookin’ ’em up,” she said generously.

I completed one hundred and eighty leads – nine full pages – in about twenty minutes. The tenth page had fallen to the floor and, as I paused to pick it up, she asked me:

“You all callin’ from Canada?”

“Yeah,” I replied, a little nervous. “How’d you know?”

“Ah, we get a lot of calls from you guys.”

Apparently, free long distance information for American numbers only worked from Canadian payphones, not domestic U.S. ones.

“In fact,” she continued, “I was just talkin’ to a guy over in Vancouver yesterday.”

“Oh, yeah?” I feigned interest, trying to think of a way to get her back to the numbers.

“Yeah. He was nasty. You ain’t nasty, are ya?”

“What?” I said.

“He was talking all kinds of dirty talk to me. *You* ain’t like that, are ya?”

“No, no,” I said. I wanted her to know that I appreciated our business relationship, that I would in no way jeopardize this important connection.

“You sure?” she said leadingly.

“Yes,” I reiterated in my most sober voice.

“Good, because he was asking me like all kinds of things about my pussy and like, telling me all about how big his cock was and how he



was gonna make me come. You ain't gonna talk about *those* things, are you?"

Did she *want* me to talk about those things? I was beginning to think she did.

"You know," she continued, "because I got a tight little pussy and it gets all wet when I talk to handsome guys. What you look like? You got a big cock?"

I had just completed about two hours of work in twenty minutes. I figured I could take a little break.

"I got a big, black cock for you, baby," I said.

"Sheet," she said. "You a brotha?"

"Black as night, sista," I said.

"Get the fuck outta here," she laughed. "You ain't no muthafuckin' brotha. You white as Vanilla Ice. Quit playin'. Now, you got a big cock or what?"

"I guess," I said honestly.

"You guess? Alright. That sounds good. Now, what about my pussy? You wanna suck it?"

Suck? I'd never sucked one before.

"Don't you mean lick it?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure, lick, suck, whatever," she said impatiently.

As you can probably tell, this was my first experience with phone sex. I was never into dirty talk, not because, God forbid, it's something I'm morally opposed to. It's not that at all. It's just that I could never take it seriously. Anytime a girl had tried it on me I had giggled, which always had disastrous results.

"Umm . . . Could I ask you a couple of numbers?"

"Numbers? Ah, all you Canadian boys the same," she said, exasperated, and hung up.

Getting back to work was now completely out of the question. I looked at my watch. Six-thirty. I decided to go for a walk. I brought my leads over to Peter who was sitting at the other end of the phone bank. He liked to work alone. When he finished the call he was on, I asked him to watch my stuff for a while.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, not looking at me. Then he turned, his head at the level of my crotch, and mock-screamed. "Eeyow! You trying to put my eye out?"

I looked down at the bulge in my pants and realized that I had gotten aroused by my bizarre phone call.

"Maybe you need to go take care of business," he laughed, pointing the hard plastic receiver at my now embarrassed dick.

"Maybe," I laughed and headed up the stairs.

I went down to St. Catherine Street and started walking east. I was so damn lonely that a horny operator, probably hundreds of miles away, distracted me to erection. None of the relationships I'd had that summer

had lasted, the promise of Yael always fucking things up. And even she wasn't around. She was on a camping trip in the wilds of northern Quebec for two weeks. Camping. *Goyishe nakhes*. Sometimes I teased her that she was switched at birth. She certainly looked like a *shikse* with her red hair and light green eyes. I called her Fiona because she could have easily passed for an Irish girl. God, I missed her.

Lost in thought, I didn't pay much attention to the street and when I finally looked up, I was at the corner of St. Catherine and St. Laurent (or, as we call it, St. Lawrence or, as our parents call it, the Main), in front of a cheesy burger joint which I remembered as a Harvey's. The former tenants had moved and now it was a generic looking knock-off. My friend Darren would be happy, I thought, smiling. He hated this chain because he sincerely believed the hamburgers were made from squirrel meat. As proof, he noted their orangish tinge. I'm not kidding.

At night, the corner of St. Catherine and St. Lawrence is the hub of Montreal's red-light district. Here, and on a few surrounding blocks, whores stood in doorways, bored, lazily smoking cigarettes. Since it was still light out, there was relatively little activity, but there were still a few ladies for rent. Most of them were not attractive. I kept walking down St. Catherine until I reached St. Denis. There, I made a right until Rene Levesque (which we all still call Dorchester), where I made another right back at St. Lawrence. Up the Main, I turned again on St. Catherine. I must have walked this square at least twelve times. Each time around, I saw the same women – some of whom I was sure were men – and I knew, with each passing turn, they recognized me.

On the last stretch of what would be my final turn, I passed a group of three ladies who, by this point, had stopped trying to conceal their giggles. One of them finally called out to me:

“*Bubbele*, you're gonna give yourself corns.”

*Bubbele?* I stopped dead in my tracks. I took a good look at her and realized, yes, my God, she was Jewish. She looked like she could have been one of my friend's mothers, just a lot more used-up looking. I guessed she was in her mid-to-late forties, yet she looked at least ten years older. But how'd she know I was a Jew? I never thought I looked especially Jewish.

“You looking for a little *shstuppie?*” she smiled. She mumbled something to her fellow employees who took a walk. She dropped her cigarette on the ground and strolled over to me. “*Nu?*” she said, putting her arm through mine.

Wordlessly, I let her guided me up the street and into a nondescript hotel. I'd passed the building so many times, I didn't even know it was there. There was a man at the front desk.

“Give him a twenty, *bubby*,” she instructed me.

I gave the man the money and he gave me a key attached to a hunk of dirty wood. There was no elevator. The Jewish prostitute led me up a

flight of stairs and into a small room halfway down the hall of the second floor. Inside, there was a big bed with a small night table next to it. That was it.

“Sit down,” she said. “I’ll go make myself pretty for you.”

She threw her purse on the night table and went into the bathroom.

I sat on the bed and then immediately jumped up. What the fuck am I doing? I thought. It had all happened so quickly. I had paid for a room and engaged the services of a hooker. What if she was an undercover cop? I went over to the door and looked through the peephole. The hall looked clear. What can I do? I thought. If I’m busted, I’m busted. It’s too late now. If there’s a SWAT team ready to burst through the door, they’re probably already in the building and it’s too late for me to escape anyway.

The bathroom door opened and my date emerged wearing a black, see-through, crotchless negligee. She had a fantastic body, a flat belly and *zaftik* breasts which still rode nice and high. She spun around and showed me her firm *tukhes*.

“You like?” she asked, her hands on her hips.

“Yes,” I answered. This was the first thing I had said to her.

“Oh, it has a voice,” she smiled and went over to the bed. “Why are you all the way over there?” she asked, patting the mattress next to her.

I was still at my post by the door. I gave one last look through the peephole (still all clear) and came over and sat next to her on the edge of the bed.

“You’re shy. That’s cute,” she said and began pulling off my shirt.

With my t-shirt still tangled in my arms raised over my head, my eyes blocked, I felt her run her expert tongue over one of my nipples while she softly pinched the other one with her thumb and index fingers. It felt incredible. I moaned.

“You like, huh?” she said as her other hand reached for my crotch.

Startled, I moved back and fell off the bed. I lay on the floor, still blinded by my shirt, trying to wriggle free. When I finally managed to uncover my eyes, she was lighting a cigarette and chuckling into her palm. I took my shirt off and joined her on the bed.

“A little nervous, are we?” she said, exhaling a wide train of smoke against my chest.

“Well, maybe a little,” I confessed. “It’s just that I’ve never been with a . . . .”

“No shit?” she said sarcastically, but not in a mean way. “I couldn’t tell.”

“Ha-ha,” I said, a little more relaxed.

“Here, maybe this will help,” she said, reaching into her purse and pulling out a joint.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “That stuff usually makes it worse.”

“No, this is some mellow shit. I promise. My hand to God, *bubbele*.”

Well, I might as well get stoned, I reasoned. If I was going to have sex with a Jewish prostitute who was old enough to be my mother, how much more terrifying and bizarre could getting high make the experience?

She was right. For the first time in my limited pot-smoking career, the weed actually *did* mellow me out. I felt completely relaxed. But, instead of liberating my libido, the stuff made me pensive and curious.

“Can I ask you a question?” I said after the joint was finished.

“Uhh. . . we’re kinda on the clock here,” she said.

“How long we got?” I asked.

“Depends what you wanna pay.”

“How about if we talk for a while first?” I proposed.

“It’s seventy-five bucks for twenty minutes,” she said.

I reached into my pocket and examined the contents of my wallet. All I had was sixty. I handed her the three twenties.

“Can we do it for sixty?” I asked.

“I guess.” She frowned and snatched the money from me.

“How much time we got left?” I asked.

“How about let’s start the clock now. What the fuck,” she said. “So, whadda ya wanna know? Wait, lemme guess. What’s a nice Jewish girl doing in a place like this, right? Okay. You want the long story or the short story? The short story’ll leave room for a fuck ’n suck, but if you wanna hear the long version, you’ll only have time left for a rub ’n tug.”

“That’s fine,” I replied. That was all I really wanted anyway. “But, actually, what I was going to ask you was what’s your name?”

“Oh, that’s sweet. It’s Shirley, honey.”

I frowned.

“I know,” she said. “It’s a horrible name. But what’cha gonna do?”

“Oh, I don’t think it’s such a terrible name,” I said. “It’s just that I used to go out with this girl whose mother’s name was Shirley. What a horrible cun. . . . Oh, I’m sorry.”

“What, you think I never heard that word?” Shirley laughed. “Don’t worry, *bubby*, it takes a lot more than that to offend me. You think just ’cause I’m Jewish I haven’t been around the block. Sweetheart, I’ve swallowed more paste than you’ve jacked off in your lifetime.”

Imagining the build-up of semen in her colon made my remaining hard-on vanish. She sensed my disappointment.

“I’m sorry, I was just trying to make a point. I’m not your typical *yidische mama*.”

“How’d you get into this?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, lighting another cigarette. “It’s not what you probably think. I wasn’t one of those runaways who got raped by her stepfather or any shit like that. I actually had a pretty nice childhood. My par-

ents were among the first Jews to buy a house in Hampstaed. That's where I grew up. They still live there today."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Me, too."

"Uh-huh," she replied like she was either bored or she had already assumed this information.

"So, what happened?" I asked.

"Nothing really," she said. "I was never really a slut in high school and, besides a little weed, I was never really into drugs."

"Where'd you go to high school?" I asked.

"Achad Ha'am," she said.

"Me, too!" I replied.

"Oh yeah?"

This seemed to interest her a bit more than our Hampstaed connection.

"I guess it would look strange to go from that to this," she said as she looked around the dingy room. "Alright, now that you've made me feel like shit, you ready for your handjob?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to. . . ."

"Yeah, yeah. It's alright, *boychik*."

She peeled off her slip, completely revealing her damn good body. But the last thing I was feeling was horny.

"Um, it's okay," I said apologetically. "I'm not really in the mood anymore."

"Whatever," she said, pulling the teddy back down. She reached over for her purse and pulled out the thin wad I had handed her. "Here."

"No, it's okay," I said.

"Hey," she said angrily. "I'm not some charity case, you know. I probably make more than your father."

Since my dad was a taxi driver, I didn't argue with her.

"But. . . your time," I said.

"Get the hell outta here," she snapped. "And don't let me catch you around here again."

When I got back to the library, the doors were locked. I spotted the clock over the circulation desk and saw that it was ten-thirty, a half hour after closing. There was a janitor mopping the floor near the entrance. I banged on the glass and he looked up and mouthed: "Closed." I motioned for him to come to the door. He unlocked it and I told him that I had forgotten some books down in the cafeteria, promising him it would take me less than a minute to retrieve them. He rolled his eyes and told me to make it quick.

At Peter's phone I found a note attached to the receiver.

"Dear Retard. Hope you at least got your rocks off. I took your leads home. Gimmee a call."

MICHAEL WOLIGROSKI is a writer living in Nelson, B.C. His book of short fiction, *Gardeners in Paradise*, published in 2003, was well received critically across Canada. His next collection of short stories, tentatively entitled *Walk Walk*, is coming out in February, 2005, with Deep Water Press.

## The World's Lousiest Landlord

Michael Woligroski

THE WORLD'S LOUSIEST landlord liked to brag that for twenty years he had never stayed in one place more than six months. He appeared to regard this flaw in his character as virtue. To his restlessness he ascribed a saddhu-like quality, as if by being non-attached he had stumbled into the inner path. In his honest moments, however, those which he kept silent and locked in a dark cubicle of his soul, he felt he had lost his way, irrevocably and forever, and he had, stumbling in his panic of being hopelessly lost, offended all his gods except one.

It was this god who took pity upon him and found him a wife. She had come with one apartment building, inherited from her father who had been a small town barber in Southern Montana. Unlike many barbers in the 1970s, his father-in-law was a true democrat. He cut all men's hair, no matter their nationality or skin color. One morning a large Indian came into his shop and told him he wanted it cut short. While the barber was cutting his hair the Indian told him where he had seen oil bubbling out of the ground. It was in Canada, he said, across the line, about sixty miles from Sweetgrass. The barber went on clipping and massaged oil into the scalp. He noticed a large blue welt on the back of the Indian's brown neck. An abscess, he thought, or perhaps a knife wound long healed. "So tell me again," he asked, "how do you get to this place?"

For two years the barber thought about the story the Indian had told him. How the hot black oil had bubbled up from the soil and into pools black with pitch. His fingers had been hurting him more and more, and they ached in every joint and knuckle. His lower back was injured and

after complaining about his sore back his doctor had sent him for an x-ray. There was nothing wrong except that his vertebrae showed the deterioration of an older man, a man of seventy or more, said his doctor.

“What can I do?” asked the barber.

“You stand on your feet all day and walk in a half circle with a radius of less than three feet. You bend this way and that with your arms slightly raised, the fingers of the right hand operating a pair of steel scissors, the left poised with a comb. You are displaying all the results of occupational injury.”

“I know that much, doc. I can’t quit. I can’t afford to.”

“Then cut back your hours,” said his doctor, smiling. “You’re smart, you’ll figure things out. You give that body a break for awhile and you’ll recover.”

“Sure,” laughed the barber, “I’ll cut back my hours by half and double my prices.”

## Ω

That summer the barber went to Alberta and followed the map the Indian had drawn for him. He took his wife and his daughter, who was thirteen, and explained the adventure as a camping holiday. His daughter and he followed the map, while his wife looked cross and smoked cigarettes. She maintained the camp while they set off on foot. The barber’s daughter was skinny and myopic with a large nose and her favorite dress made her look like a weird Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz. Most of the time she wore boys’ clothes and she drew her hair back into a long ponytail, so that at a distance you could not tell she was a girl. Her father called her Kip which was somehow derived from Catherine and treated her like his best friend. They had found the oil exactly where the Indian had said it was and her father staked a claim. That is how, twenty years later, she would inherit an apartment building in Canada. Her father had bought it, as he had bought many other things, as an investment, but he had forgotten about it since it yielded what he had set up as his daughter’s college fund, and which he was loathe to gamble in his new-found career as independent speculator with eight rigs pumping twenty-four hours a day.

## Ω

The barber died and left his daughter the remnants of his estate. Although he liked to pretend he was still rich he had lost title to the rigs and almost everything else except the apartment building in southwestern British Columbia. His daughter was now thirty-three years old and had done well in New York City, taking up her father’s trade and specializing as a hair colorist, a job which paid her enough money to get

cosmetically altered with a perfect nose. The rest, however, she left alone. Her small breasts were perky, as a boyfriend had described them, and she was somewhat relieved that she did not need a bra to go jogging in Central Park. Her gangly legs were now fashionably long and her boyish butt had rounded out enough to look womanly. She was good-looking, although not a beautiful woman. She imagined she had come into her good looks later than most women and would come into her beauty even later, when, she ruefully thought, it wouldn't matter as much.

She no longer enjoyed her job as a colorist although she took pride in being one of the best. She had become allergic to the chemicals and a rash had broken out on her wrists and lower arms, so that she could not wear her favorite silver bangles. She began to dream about wide-open spaces, or at the very least a small town where she could open, not a hair salon but a health food store. She'd find a tall, silent man, a rancher perhaps, and have his children. She was fed up with the soft males in Manhattan and the hard ones were absurdities. She was ready for a change.

She flew back to Montana to visit her dad when she got the call from the hospital. Her father had had another stroke and was in a coma. It was a dreadful week for her. Her father had opened his eyes at bedside and had said something. He said it over and over but she could not understand a word. Then she heard what sounded like, "my box, my box" and she knew then it was his safety deposit box he was talking about. The other words "Keyhomehome" became evident. "Okay, dad, she said, "I'll get your safety deposit box." He gurgled and closed his eyes. She sat there holding his hand for an hour. It seemed forever and she needed a coffee. She was used to having a coffee at this time in the afternoon. She patted his hand gently and said, "I'll be back real soon."

She would never forgive herself for that last act. She had met a young man in the cafeteria. He was getting off shift, a handsome intern with sandy blond hair and dark brown eyes, and she found herself laughing and chatting with him, forgetting entirely about her father who was gasping his last breath. Finally, she said, "I really must go," but not before they exchanged telephone numbers. She walked back to her father's room and saw the bed was empty.

She was still suffering from guilt and exhaustion in the bank vault when she opened the box. At the top of it was her father's last will and testament leaving all to her. Beneath this was the deed to a two-storey, ashlar stone apartment building in a place called Nelson, British Columbia. The rest were penny mining stocks, many she knew were worthless, but which her father had kept against all hope.

There were sixteen suites and the average income from each suite paid five hundred dollars a month, or so she read in the documentation. There were other things like taxes and a caretaker and maintenance



costs but it still left a good amount. Later that afternoon she went to the Internet at the village library and keyed in the letters of the town. The city was on the edge of the west arm of a large lake and it had a history of silver and apples, two things she liked very much. It was also, so the site claimed, the number one small arts town in North America. Her heart began to beat quickly. Then she read how it had once been the capital of pioneer British Columbia but had now shrunk into three main streets of boutiques in some of the oldest buildings in the province. She bought a map and located the small city. The closest airport was in a mill town some thirty miles away. The city itself was equidistant from both Vancouver and Calgary, a long day's drive from each. The closest large city was Spokane. She'd fly to Spokane then, and rent a car. It was important, she convinced herself, to see this place before going back home to New York City.

## Ω

John Niles arrived in Nelson with a packsack and a sleeping bag. He had crashed his old car on an ice patch and had left his worldly belongings, except for his packsack and sleeping bag, in a ditch on Highway 6. He got a ride all the way to the Oso Negro café and found about twenty or so kindred spirits drinking coffee and smoking tobacco on the street. Some of the people were sitting on the sidewalk and one was playing bongos. "This is my kind of place," thought John. He walked up to the coffee bar and stood behind a thin woman with streaked hair and nice legs.

John, who would later become my landlord, considered himself a ladies' man. He had soft curly chestnut brown hair and beautiful teeth. He was yet slender and had not grown his pot belly because he did not eat well. He lived off coffee, cigarettes and instant noodles. He was forty-two years old and looked ten years younger since he had never held a job for more than a few weeks and had never entertained a responsible thought. He had tried tree planting, fruit picking and a season in the Nass valley picking mushrooms, but he had found such work too rigorous and settled instead for selling dime bags of highly potent hydroponic bud to clients who wandered the neighborhood of Commercial Drive in Vancouver's East End. He had once tried to grow dope but this had been an exhausting experience involving lights, timers and nutrients, and he much preferred hanging out in coffee shops sizing up his prey. He was, however, tired of this work. His source had been busted and his name was known to the narcs.

"The coffee smells so nice," he said to the woman in front of him.

"It's the best in town," she said.

"You have an accent," he smiled. "I know, Boston. You're from Boston, aren't you? I love that city."

“Montana,” she answered with a curious look of appraisal, “I’m from Montana.”

“No,” he said, “that’s impossible.”

“I spent the last fifteen years in New York.”

His eyes lit up and he smiled again, “That must be it,” he said. “Combine a Montana accent with New York and it comes out sounding like Boston.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said. “I thought I sounded Canadian.”

“I’m John Niles,” said John, who knew how to close a sale. “Why don’t you join me for coffee? I’m newly arrived in town and I intend to stay for awhile.”

“Sure,” said the woman.

John Niles never considered himself a low-life drug dealer, no more than shit stuck to the bottom of his shoe could determine his direction. He was, after all, born of good family. His father had been a professor at McGill University and his mother was a librarian and writer of bad juvenile literature. He had a Bachelor of Arts degree and he would spend as much time in the library reading books as he did waiting for clients in a café. He had come to love libraries for in his mind they were warm places to get out of the rain and in those awful times when he had been living out of the back of his car or leaning on someone for space in a room, the library had been a true friend. He had also read an enormous amount of books and became an expert on most subjects.

I don’t know why John Niles attached himself to me. I had been living in the building for a long time, seven years, and subsisted on a disability pension. Unlike him I had raised a family and had held the same job, a teacher of grades four and five, for twenty years. We had little in common. I was sixty-one years old, a widow, estranged from my children who were leading their own industrious lives and my hobbies, other than taking coffee in the morning at the Oso Negro, were limited to four hours a day surfing the internet and taking walks with my dog, along the waterfront dog walk. I suppose it was my very ordinary and stable lifestyle which attracted that part of him that needed confession. I’m a good listener and at times, I found his predicament, so different from my own, quite fascinating, a study, if you will, in absurdity.

John Niles had swept Kit Anderson off her feet. He serenaded her with soft white lies, but it was more than John being so good a liar; he reminded her of her father – he had a barber’s facility for small talk of knowing something about everything. He told her that he had studied design and building systems. He also had an intimate knowledge of accounting processes and public relations, which his last job in commodities had sharpened.

“But can you do carpentry and other repairs like drywall, replacing windows, broken steps and so on?” she had asked.

“I am a master carpenter,” he said. “I have worked on ships and wooden boats. I am a carpenter’s carpenter.”

Within three months they were married in a ceremony on the small lawn on the side of the building by a justice of the peace. From that time on John Niles was given the administration and caretaking of the building. He was a hopeless repairman. He screamed and yelled, but did so only when he was sure she was not around. His fingernails were blistered with hammer blows and he sometimes talked to himself when he was alone in the dark dungeon of the basement. Once he came to my apartment in tears. He had gained twenty pounds in the first year, most of it around his gut, and he appeared to have collapsed into his age. He hated everything about the apartment building and was barely on speaking terms with most of the renters. “They’re filthy, dirty pigs,” he would say. “They are hobos and degenerates and have never done an honest day’s work in their lives. Do you know how many are on welfare or on some pension or another?” he asked, and then he answered his question, “Ninety percent of them, and I caught two of them selling drugs. Selling drugs out of the apartment, for chrissakes!”

His love life was also not going well. He had gone down from four times a night in their first week of romance to twice a month. “I’m too goddam tired,” he said, “this place wears me out. There’s always something breaking down!” I’d offer him more tea and biscuits and he’d sit there and sigh. By year three, he was absorbed by his part, tolerant yet suspicious of everyone who lived in the building, but about him there was a middle-aged complacency. He seemed to take pride in his sufferings, as if all along he had waited for such a claim upon his errant soul. For now, at last, he appeared closer to the truth of things.

“I’m the world’s lousiest landlord,” he said to me one day. “I’m terrible at fixing things and I really don’t understand people.”

“Well, John,” I told him, “at least that’s a start.”

“It feels more like an end,” he returned.

He would often bring his youngest child up to my apartment and sit him on his knee while he drank the tea I poured him. “I’m too old to be a father,” he would sigh. “I never thought it would come to this.” That is when he would reminisce about his exploits of travel, of never tying himself down in one place or to one woman. Those were the good old days, he would tell me. But I knew he was wrong. Although he raved and ranted as before (although not quite as much), he no longer felt it necessary to lie and bullshit about things he did not understand. He had finally found his place in the world. He had married the wealthy barber’s daughter and had found contentment as the world’s lousiest landlord.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is the Editor-in-Chief of *The New Orphic Review*. His novella, *The Life of Bartholomew G.*, will appear with Deep Water Press.

## The Old Dog's Opera Company

Ernest Hekkanen

FOR THREE YEARS, I had lived in the Old Dog's boot room and borne just about every insult one can imagine. But I had shown perseverance and apparently, from what I had heard while working as a choirmaster on the Upper Bothnia Coast, the Old Dog valued perseverance as much as he did one's talents as a composer and librettist.

Six years earlier, when my father had first heard of my plans to present my opera, *North Star, Red Sea*, to Ensio Hyske, the Artistic Director of the state-run Lönnrot Opera House in Helsinki, he had let out a sarcastic snuff. "Why present it to that Old Dog?" he said. "He will take what you've created and twist it to his own liking. A modest success with my brother's opera house in Kokkola is better than the opportunity to debase yourself in the big city."

"A modest success in Kokkola is equivalent to obscurity in the rest of the country."

"Yes, but before that Old Dog will even look at your opera, you will have to prove you are an obsequious toady."

"Don't tell me you believe all the rumors you've heard about him?"

"Does a dog dance?"

"I guess it could be trained to dance, given enough time."

"Well, there you have your answer, Heikki. Make of it what you will."

Ω

Despite my father's warning, I went to Helsinki to present the Old Dog with my opera. The proper procedure, I felt, was to go directly to the

Lönnrot Opera House and present my work there. However, when I tried to do that, I was told in no uncertain terms that I should go to his place of residence.

“Surely, you must be mistaken? Surely, you’re playing a joke on me?” I said, knowing that people from the Upper Bothnia Coast were thought of as quaint and unsophisticated.

“Mr. Hysrke never jokes when it comes to entertaining new work.”

“Yes, but won’t I be imposing on him?”

“Mr. Hysrke is used to dealing with such impositions.”

“Yes, but isn’t there some sort of protocol that must be observed?”

“What sort of protocol do you have in mind?”

“Don’t I need a letter of introduction or something of that nature?”

“Oh, no, it’s much more casual than that. Just take a place in line.”

I was given the address of Ensio Hysrke’s home and immediately set off in that direction. Back then, I was on vacation from my job as choirmaster and could afford taking a taxi. When I got to the eminent Artistic Director’s house – it wasn’t far from late President Kekkonen’s palatial home – I discovered a long queue outside the front door. Oddly enough, those at the rear of the queue were fresher-looking and better dressed than those at the head of it; indeed, those at the front of the line were rather grimy and frayed around the lapels.

“So, is this where I line up in order to be received by the Artistic Director, Ensio Hysrke?” I asked the fellow at the tail end of the line-up.

“Indeed, it is.”

I raised my right eyebrow. “It looks as if there are about twenty-five people ahead of us. Do you think we will be received today, or do you think it might be better to come back tomorrow?”

Inclining his head in my direction, the fellow gave an ironic snort. “By tomorrow, the line-up might be longer than it is today.”

“Are there that many composers and librettists in Helsinki?”

“No, but the Artistic Director has refined the art of taking his time.”

“So, how long have you been in this line-up?”

“Four days.”

“Four days! Surely, you must be joking?”

“I wish I were, I wish I were.”

I nodded in the direction of the man at the top of the steps, near the door to the boot room. “How long do you think that bearded, scraggly fellow has been in the line-up?”

“I’ve heard rumors to the effect that he’s been waiting for two years now.”

“Two years!”

“That’s the rumor, all right.”

“Surely, that can’t be true. The winters are too long, too cold. No one could possibly endure them.”

“I guess one’s ability to endure such things depends on how determined one is to be received by the Artistic Director.”

Ω

At fourteen-hundred hours, a man with slicked-back, dark hair and a waxed mustache swung back the door and filled the opening with his immense body. He stood on the top step, held onto the lapels of his tuxedo and surveyed the aspirants in the line-up. Then, with deliberate, ponderous steps, he came down the stairs. He walked like a general inspecting troops, taking a brief moment here and there to examine someone in the line-up. His expression was one of disdain, of utter contempt.

“Is that the Great Man himself?” I asked the fellow in front of me, although I suspected it wasn’t, judging from photographs I had seen.

“No, that’s the doorman.”

“The doorman?”

“He runs interference for the Great Man himself.”

“Interference?”

“Yes, one doesn’t get past him without first paying one’s dues.”

I soon found out what the fellow meant. When the doorman confronted me, he lifted his upper lip in a nasty-looking snarl. “You’re new here, aren’t you?”

“Yes, indeed, I am. I’m hoping to get an audience with Mr. Ensio Hyske, the Artistic Director.”

“On what business?”

“I’d like to show him the score to my new opera.”

His gaze drifted down my chest and abdomen to where I held a leather briefcase in my left hand. “Is your score in there, by any chance?”

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

“Give it to me and I’ll see that he gets it.” He looked me in the eye. “Mind you, you’ll have to pay a processing fee.”

“A processing fee?”

“You’re not of the opinion that Mr. Ensio Hyske offers his services for free, are you?”

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t know what to expect.”

“Well, now you do. Have you got the processing fee on you?”

I took my wallet out of my coat pocket. “How much is it?”

The doorman grabbed my wallet and helped himself to every bill inside. “That will do,” he said. “Give me your score. I’ll take it in to Mr. Hyske.”

Ω

Each day, at approximately sixteen-hundred hours, two men would leave the house and get into a black limousine parked in the circular driveway. Invariably, even on overcast, gloomy days, the taller of these gentlemen wore a pair of dark sunglasses. His large, floppy ears and snouty appearance suggested that of a dog. The second man's job was to hold a parasol over the utterly bald dome of his companion, come rain or shine.

"Who's that?" I asked, upon first catching sight of the duo.

"The man with the parasol or the man with the sunglasses?"

"The man with the sunglasses."

"That's the Artistic Director."

"No, you've got to be kidding. He doesn't bear any resemblance to the man I've seen in the newspapers."

"That's because the newspapers use photos of him when he was a lot younger, when he still had hair on his head."

"Who's the man holding the parasol?"

"That's the composer, Väinö Salonen."

"That's Väinö Salonen?"

The fellow in front of me screwed up his face. "Excuse me, but where have you lived all your life, pray tell?"

"On the Upper Bothnia Coast."

"No wonder. It takes several light years for any sort of news to get up there."

## Ω

So, I waited in line. I waited and waited, and then I waited some more. It wasn't easy developing the right sort of patience. After several days, the small of my back began to ache from so much standing around. Also, my arches began to sag and my feet to spread like wax in hot weather. I had to march in place to keep the blood circulating in my veins. Fail to take that precaution, and one is liable to fall over in a faint and die of a clot which forms in the legs and moves on to one's heart. Over the two years and three months that I stood in line, I witnessed several aspirants die in this fashion. Each time, an ambulance would arrive to take away the body. Tall people, it seems, are more inclined to die in this manner, and so it was with the fellow directly in front of me.

At the one-year, seven-month mark, Aku unceremoniously keeled over on his face, almost taking me down with him. By that time we had become good friends and it was horrifying to see him depart in this manner. I threw myself on my knees and pleaded with him to move his limbs, which he failed to do. A little while later, the doorman came outside to see what all the fuss was about. He took one look at Aku's wide-open eyes, removed the Nokia from the inner breast pocket of his tuxedo and called for an ambulance.

“Stop slapping him on the face like that,” he told me. “He isn’t going to come around.”

“Aku,” I pleaded. “Wake up, wake up!”

“I told you to stop slapping him like that. You’re making a mockery of his death.”

The doorman dragged me off Aku’s body and tossed me roughly aside. By then, I had lost a lot of weight – down from eighty-four kilos to sixty-seven kilos. “Stand up,” the doorman shouted at me. “The Artistic Director hates it when aspirants sprawl themselves on the ground like that.”

As I said, Aku and I had become good friends. Frequently, we had relied on each other for support. In his prone, dead condition, I recognized what might become my fate. Perhaps, I should have given up, right then; perhaps, I should have cut my losses and left the line-up. It seems to be a truism that the more time and energy one puts into a venture, the less likely one is to give it up as a lost cause.

So, I stayed in line. By that time I was six aspirants away from the boot-room door. The boot room, it seemed to me, was next to paradise. Doubtless, by that time, I was no longer in my right mind. Waiting around can do that to one, especially in a harsh climate.

During the winter it took every last cent of my savings to stay warm. I had to rent a thermal booth from the doorman in order to stay alive. A thermal booth is approximately the same size as a telephone booth, and comes equipped with an electrical cord which is then plugged into a meter fastened to the Great Man’s house. The fee for the thermal booth is astronomical, but one has no choice except to pay – that is, if one wishes to be received by the Great Man himself.

If not for my family, I could not have afforded to remain in the line-up. Periodically, my father, mother and sister dropped by to see how I was making out. “Are you sure this is the best way to get your opera performed?” my father would invariably ask.

“I’m beginning to wonder about that myself.”

“Come home with us,” my mother would plead. “A modest success in Kokkola is good enough. Really, it is.”

“I wish I was able to think the way you do, but I can’t.”

“You look twenty years older than you did last year,” my sister put in. “I almost didn’t recognize you when we came up the walkway.”

Had my family been able to afford it, I would have hired a stand-in to take my place. That’s what many aspirants do; they hire proxies to stand in line for them. When the proxy is about to be admitted to the boot room, the aspirant comes to take his place. On one occasion, this led to some confusion. After nearly two years spent standing in the line-up, the proxy came to think he was the aspirant. The rightful aspirant had to submit evidence in a court of law to prove he had been paying the proxy to stand outside the Artistic Director’s house. Finally, the



police were called in to rectify the situation. They dragged the proxy, kicking and screaming, down the flagstone walkway and threw him in a paddy wagon idling in the circular driveway.

“Cheat,” we yelled at the rightful aspirant. “Softy! Degenerate, little Momma’s Boy!”

A year later, when the rightful aspirant was shown the door and had to walk dejectedly past us on his way to the street, we spat on the ground in front of him – to demonstrate our disdain.

## Ω

After two years and three months, I was finally admitted to the boot room of the Artistic Director’s house. I knew from observation that one usually spent a year in those confines before being admitted to see Ensio Hyske. However, as luck would have it, a former aspirant, one who had stood in the very same line-up I was now standing in, had an opera, *The Saga of Minna Canth*, produced by the Old Dog’s Opera Company, and it ended up becoming a huge success.

“Come in, come in,” the doorman told me, gesturing for me to enter the boot room. “Make yourself comfortable over there on those rags. I should tell you right now that you’ve come at a bad time. The Lönnrot Opera House has quite a hit on its hands, and lightning very rarely strikes twice in a row. So, the odds are against you – badly against you.”

“I’ll take my chances just the same.”

“Here are the Great Man’s boots. Make sure they’re polished to perfection by the time he’s ready to go out in the afternoon.”

Occasionally, the doorman and I would exchange scurrilous looks through the windowpane of the inner door. When he had nothing better to do, and became so bored even he couldn’t stand it, he would yank back the inner door, fill the opening with his monstrous presence and proceed to level an accusation at me – one which was totally groundless, but usually had something to do with spreading myself or my meager possessions beyond a certain demarcation that existed in his mind alone. And then, before I could properly cower, he would hawk a glob of phlegm at me. My suit had long since been ruined by these ejaculations, especially along the right sleeve of my once expensive jacket, which I would raise to stop the hideous secretions from hitting me squarely in the face.

“Get back to work polishing the Great Man’s boots,” he would growl. “That is, if you don’t want me to kick your sorry ass out of here.”

And then, he would spray me with foul laughter.

The truth is, I’d hardly pull the Old Dog’s boots off his feet, when I would set upon them with lots of spit and polish. I buffed them so well

with my brushes – brushes my family had to purchase for me, by the way – I was able to see my hunger-ravaged face reflected in the black leather of the toes.

Whenever the Old Dog’s boots began to show the slightest signs of age, they were packed off to a thrift store. At least, that’s what I was told by the doorman, when, one day, he dumped the aged pair into a gunnysack. My sister checked every thrift store in the city to see if she could spot the boots that I had kept sparkling like black diamonds, but she was unable to find them. I came to suspect that the doorman sold them on the black market. The discarded boots of Ensio Hysrke, the Artistic Director, would fetch a good price, I am sure.

Every now and then, while I was tugging with all my might to get the Old Dog’s boots off his feet, I would sneak in a small reminder that he still had the score to my opera in his possession.

“Yes, yes, yes. Don’t bother me with that right now. I’ve already got a smash-hit on my hands. Just get those boots off my feet, and get them off quickly. My toes are in bad need of some fresh air.”

The Old Dog’s feet smelled like pickled herrings on the verge of going off, I suspect because of all the rich food and expensive wines he poured down his gullet.

“My opera’s called *North Star, Red Sea* and it’s very good. Exceptionally good, if you ask me.” Pulling the second boot off his foot, I fell against the doorjamb and banged my head rather roughly.

“Another remark like that last one, and I’ll have the doorman toss you out of here on your ear,” the Old Dog said, glaring at me as he wagged his big, floppy ears.

And so, I bided my time. At the beginning of each month, my sister would drop off a copy of *The Opera Roundup and Review*. At one time, I had been an avid reader of that tabloid. However, for nine months running, much of the review had been devoted to the smash-hit, *The Saga of Minna Canth*, and that festered like an infected wound under my skin.

Every facet of the opera was examined in exhausting minutiae. After extolling its musical virtues, the tabloid compared the opera to Minna Canth’s actual life, then it proceeded to examine the lives of the Artistic Director and the composer/librettist, Eino Haapaniemi, whose photo appeared in the newspaper (I remembered thinking I would never produce an opera by anyone who wore such thick eyeglasses), after which it did exposés on the lives of those who comprised the cast.

Even after a year and a half, *The Opera Roundup and Review* continued to sing a high note of praise for *The Saga of Minna Canth*, reporting that it was now doing well abroad – in places like Paris and Florence.

I couldn’t look at the review without feeling my guts twisting into knots. The praise went on and on – in an undying fashion – lengthening

the days, weeks and months I had to spend in the Artistic Director's boot room. However, by the third year, *The Saga of Minna Canth* was beginning to wear thin with the public, and soon after that, the doorman advised me that I should prepare myself to be received by the Great Man himself. By that time I was enfeebled in body, embittered in spirit and tattered in appearance – in other words, not a proper sight to behold.

“You're certain you are Mr. Heikki Lindqvist?” The doorman peered down at me on my pile of rags.

“Yes, I'm the one and only Mr. Heikki Lindqvist, composer and librettist of *North Star, Red Sea*.”

He hawked a glob of phlegm that narrowly missed my face. “It seems to me, if I were about to be received by Mr. Ensio Hyrske, I would've come here looking much better groomed.”

“That is, indeed, the way I arrived – over five years ago! However, during the interim, I've run into a bit of bad luck.”

“Yes, well, I suggest you find some way to better your appearance, because the Artistic Director has a rather sensitive nose and does not like casting his eye on anything that is the least bit unpleasant.”

“And how, pray tell, do you suggest I go about doing that?”

He removed the Nokia from the inside breast pocket of his tuxedo. “Call your family. Explain your circumstances. I'm sure they'll be more than glad to help.”

## Ω

Arriving with a large metal tub and several carboys of tepid water, my family proceeded to give me a bath right there, in the boot room.

“You've gotten so thin,” my mother said.

“Almost like you've got rickets,” my sister observed.

“Really, you should have your hair shorn right down to your skull,” my father added. “Those head lice are disgusting.”

“I brought some special shampoo for that,” my mother told him. “It's in my handbag. Get it for me.”

Once I had been cleaned up to perfection, they dressed me in a suit of clothes I hadn't worn since working as a choirmaster on the Upper Bothnia Coast. Over the past five years I had lost a lot of weight – down to fifty-six kilos now – and that suit of mine was practically large enough for me to hide in.

“These trousers will never stay up on his hips, even with a belt,” my mother despaired.

“Let's safety-pin them to his shirt,” my sister suggested.

“I'm a lot more worried about his collar.” My father stepped back to survey the sight I made. “He's become such a shadow of his former self, it looks as though he's wearing a safety ring around his neck.”

“We’ll cinch his tie extra tight. That will solve that problem.”

“Here, eat this crust of bread,” my mother told me. “Otherwise, you won’t have enough strength to be received by the Artistic Director.”

Ω

Two days later, the doorman yanked back the inner door and glowered at me. I raised my forearm to avoid being hit by a glob of spit, a gesture which provoked much laughter in him.

“What’s the matter? You act like a dog who’s been hit too many times with a rolled-up newspaper.”

I peeked over my raised forearm. “The Great Man’s boots are polished and awaiting his feet.”

“Excellent, excellent. Today is the last day you’ll have to worry about that. Mr. Ensio Hyske is prepared to see you, now.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now. Please follow me.”

I was so weak I found it difficult to push myself to my feet. In his impatience, the doorman grabbed me by the scruff and set me on my pins. “It’s beyond me why so many of you aspirants go on fasts just prior to seeing the Artistic Director. Me, I’d prefer to be in the flush of good health.”

I followed the doorman down a hallway flanked by dark wainscoting and was told to make myself comfortable in an overstuffed armchair in the parlor.

“Mr. Hyske will be right with you. Help yourself to some pickled herring and some *villi*, if you like.”

“Thank you.”

Half an hour later, the Artistic Director blew like a fresh gale into the room, full of enthusiasm and good cheer. Rising to my feet with great effort, I was nearly knocked down by the force of his jolly presence.

“You should take better care of your health,” he told me, pumping my hand in such an affable manner I feared my arm might unhinge itself from my shoulder. “You’re Mr. Heikki Lindqvist, I presume?”

“Yes, indeed, I am that very person.”

“Well, I’m pleased, thoroughly pleased, to make your acquaintance, Mr. Heikki Lindqvist. I assume you know who I am, given the fact that you’ve come here to present your opera, *North Star, Red Sea*, to me?”

“I’m inclined to believe that you are the eminent Artistic Director, Mr. Ensio Hyske?”

“Correct. Correct. You’ll be given ten points for that answer.” He chortled so exuberantly he shook all over. “Sit down, sit down. No need to stand on ceremony, now.”

I fell back into the embrace of the armchair. Mr. Hyske sat down across from me, on a plush, red chair with knitted white doilies on the armrests. Väino Salonen rushed forward from the shadows and poured the Great Man a cup of coffee. I hadn't noticed the composer's presence in the room; he had been sitting in an alcove, partly hidden by a bookcase and a grand piano.

"Let me get straight to the business at hand," the Artistic Director said. "I'm full of admiration for your opera. In fact, I think it is the best thing I've come across since our smash-hit, *The Saga of Minna Canth*." He turned to speak over his shoulder. "Wouldn't you agree with me on that point, Väino? By the way, have you met Väino Salonen?"

"No, I haven't. Not officially."

"Well, the two of you must make one another's acquaintance. Mr. Väino Salonen, please meet Mr. Heikki Lindqvist, and Mr. Heikki Lindqvist, please meet Mr. Väino Salonen."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise. I think we'll work well together."

"Work well together?" I inquired. "What do you mean by that?"

"You have a good – possibly a great – opera on your hands, my dear Heikki." The Artistic Director looked at me with enlarged, very round pupils. "May I call you by your first name, Heikki?"

"Please do."

"Good. You have a great opera on your hands, perhaps an even greater one than *The Saga of Minna Canth*, our most recent smash-hit, but it will need some refining here and there, and that is where Mr. Väino Salonen comes in. He will help you smooth out the rough passages."

"The rough passages?"

"Yes, the rough passages – like the one at the train station, when the Reds are encouraged by the Whites to board those boxcars. That will need a little reworking so as not to offend the sensibilities of the public. Also, I suggest that you give your opera a new title. How about calling it *Upper Bothnia Picaresque* or something like that?"

"Why a new title?"

"Because, quite frankly, the current title isn't, well, very fashionable."

"I guess I could entertain changing it. Sure."

"Also, there are a few other things that need improving, things that have to do with staging such a dramatic work, but that will be taken care of over the next two years of rehearsal."

"I'm overjoyed that you think my opera is worthy of so much attention."

"I think it is a good opera – possibly, a great opera, Heikki. May I call you, Heikki?"

I guess he must have forgotten that he had already asked my permission to do exactly that.

“Please do, Mr. Hyrske.”

“Call me Ensio. Think of me as your surrogate father. After all, we’re going to be working very closely together.”

“Thank you. I hope I warrant such closeness.”

“There’s no doubt about it, my good fellow. None, whatsoever. You have a good opera on your hands, possibly a great opera, one I am certain will be received with as much enthusiasm as *The Saga of Minna Canth*,” he said, rubbing his palms together. “Have you tried any of those pickled herrings, by any chance?”

“No, not yet.”

“Well, please do. Also, try some of those smoked meats and some of that *villi*. They’re excellent, just excellent. The whole spread is excellent, in fact. Afterward, we’ll discuss your contract. We’ll sign on all of the proper dotted lines and then we’ll toast our arrangement with a glass or two of French bubbly.”

“Things have moved along so slowly until now, and now they’re moving along so quickly,” I said, spiking a pickled herring and putting it in my mouth. “I’m a bit dizzy, to tell you the truth.”

“If you feel a bit dizzy right now, I suspect you will feel ever dizzier come opening night,” the Old Dog guffawed, slapping his thigh.

He skewered several pickled herrings and shoved them into his mouth.

“As to the contract,” I said.

“Yes, as to the contract,” the Artistic Director said. “Väino, would you break into that bottle of champagne for us?”

“My pleasure.”

The cork hit the ceiling and the champagne flowed into three long-stemmed crystal glasses.

“Basically, because the Lönnrot Opera House will be fronting the costs of the production, and you won’t be risking anything except possibly your good name, you will receive two-percent of what comes in at the box office – after, of course, the costs of producing your opera have been written off. Upon signing the contract, you will receive a small advance in good faith. In other words, it is the usual contract presented to first-time composers and librettists. Isn’t that right, Väino?”

“As right as rain in the spring,” Väino Salonen said, handing the Artistic Director a number of stapled-together sheets that, in turn, were handed to me.

“This is an extraordinary opportunity for you, Heikki. Make the most of it.”

“Shouldn’t I read this document?” I said, squinting at the fine print.

“It will only result in the champagne going flat in our glasses, but, sure, go right ahead,” the Artistic Director said. “I’ve made everything

as clear as I possibly can in my little preamble. Once you have signed – please call the doorman in to witness Mr. Lindqvist’s signature, Väino – I and Mr. Salonen will sign, and then we’ll toast our coming collaboration.”

Soon, the doorman appeared. While I was signing my name to the document – my hand shook so terribly I could hardly make it perform the task – Mr. Ensio Hyrske skewered several more pickled herrings and shoved them into his mouth. He buttered some hardtack and layered it with smoked meats and cheese.

“Excellent, excellent,” he mumbled, pushing the food around in his mouth while rubbing his palms together. “Please, my special quill, Väino.”

Väino Salonen presented him with a quill adorned with an eagle’s feather. As he was about to dip the nib in the pot of ink that Mr. Salonen held out to him, Ensio Hyrske’s eyes widened as though he had glimpsed a vision of some kind. He dropped the pen and began to clutch at his throat as though an obstruction was lodged there – a piece of hardtack, perhaps. His face turned purple and he began to produce horrible gurgling sounds.

“Mr. Hyrske, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, my God, he’s having a heart attack,” Mr. Väino Salonen, the composer, cried out.

Before anyone could restrain him, the Artistic Director fell face-forward toward the floor, roughly knocking his head on the corner of the low table in between us. The doorman removed the Nokia from the inside breast pocket of his tuxedo and called the ambulance. Meanwhile, Mr. Salonen rolled the Artistic Director onto his back and began to perform mouth to mouth resuscitation.

“Tear open his shirt and massage his chest,” he yelled at me between breaths. “That is, if you know what’s good for you and your opera.”

The ambulance arrived too late to save the Artistic Director’s life. His heart attack was so massive, emergency measures weren’t able to work any miracles.

## Ω

Two years later, I settled for a modest production of my opera, *North Star, Red Sea*, at my uncle’s opera house in Kokkola. It was seen by friends and family and half the population of that northern city – after which, quite predictably, it sank out of sight.

It was the first and last opera I ever wrote.