

# *The New Orphic Review*

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“One person’s heresy is another person’s religion.”  
E.H.



Nelson

Canada

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Cover art: *Underwater Cave in Kootenay Lake* by RICHARD CARVER. Carver was born in England and spent most of his life not knowing what to do. Once a journalist and later a federal government employee in Ottawa, he now lives in Nelson, B.C. where his daughter and granddaughter reside. John Cooper, the artist, is responsible for Carver setting out on an artistic career.

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 35 books. The most recent are *The Life of Bartholomew G., Melancholy and Mystery of a Street, The Big Dave (and Little Wife) Convention, Up & Coming (In Seattle), Man's Sadness* and *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*. Hekkanen is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2002) and *Contemporary Authors* (Thomson Gale, 2006).

## Heretic and Infidel

### Ernest Hekkanen

BACK IN JANUARY OF THIS YEAR I gave a guest lecture at Simon Fraser University, to a class of novice fiction writers. I introduced myself as a heretic and then I said: "Are there any heretics in this class?" The students were quiet. Nobody raised a hand. I then asked the question: "Do any of you know what the word 'heretic' means?" There were the usual replies to the effect that a heretic is someone who practices religious heresy or doesn't believe in what is generally accepted by others.

"Yes, that's what the word 'heretic' has come to mean," I told them. "However, the word 'heretic' came to us from the Greek via the Latin and originally it meant 'able to choose'. So, when heretics are burned at the stake or otherwise persecuted, the ones doing the persecuting are telling us that we don't have the right to choose, that we aren't able to choose for ourselves what we wish to believe. Being able to choose what sort of stories you wish to place faith in or, more importantly, what sort of stories you wish to write should be of some importance to you. After all, do you want to be told what you can or cannot write? Do you want to be told how you must write it? Do you want to be told what sort of characters you have to deal with or what sort of details you have to include? You see, being a heretic also involves championing free thought and free expression.

"Personally, I don't want to be told how to write a story or what sort of story I must write, neither by the marketplace nor by some authority. For better or for worse, I want to be able to choose what sort of fiction I spend my time working on. Now, how many of you would call yourselves heretics?"

There was a reluctant, feeble raising of hands, about thirty percent of those in the classroom.

"I'm also an infidel," I told them. "How many of you would call yourselves infidels?"

Again, there was general reluctance on the part of the students to call themselves infidels.

"Well, as you may or may not know, 'infidel' means 'not faithful'. While I have faith in mankind's ability to tell tales, I don't have faith in any particular tale. I'm not a fideist. I'm not of the doctrine that knowledge depends on faith and revelation. I don't easily or readily lend my credulity to other people's stories. Credulity, by the way, means: *a tendency to be too ready to believe that something is real or true*. The reader's credulity is what you will be playing with when you tell a story. You must get the reader to believe in your character and the plight he finds himself in. That way, for the duration of the story, your reader will suspend his disbelief. Practice the art of storytelling for long enough and you will come to realize that almost everything comprising the social context is a matter of story. For instance, we have agreed in this society to go on the green light and to stop on the red light, and that time is money. For eons now, people have been rendered gullible by this story or that story. The more accomplished you are at distinguishing between a good story, a mediocre story and a bad story, the greater the likelihood you will become a heretic or an infidel. You will look at the stories told by imams, rabbis, pastors, gurus, priests, politicians and heads of state and you will recognize that those people want dominion over your imagination. Then the question becomes: Are you going to allow them to have dominion over that domain?

"That's why our job as storytellers is so important and indeed precarious. We are probing the belief structures of human society, and if we are doing our job properly, we are acquainting our readers with their terrifying gullibility."

Anyway, I tried to convey something of that nature to the class. In this issue of *The New Orphic Review*, there are a number of stories that deal with heretical behavior and the loss of gullibility. It is my solemn belief that people in positions of power play upon our gullibility every minute of every day and that is how they maintain dominion over us. Because fiction writers offer versions of stories contrary to official ones, they often find themselves at odds with society. Take, for instance, Salman Rushdie and his novel, *The Satanic Verses*. That piece of fiction found itself at odds with the ruling fiction in the Middle East, and as a consequence, a fatwa was leveled at the author.

I hope at least a few of the stories or poems in this issue will cause reflection, if not heretical thinking. Enjoy.

Nota bene: I am hoping to usher in The Age of the Heretic, but, unfortunately, my followers keep choosing to think for themselves.

YASSER EL-SAYED was born in Alexandria, Egypt, and grew up in North Africa, Europe and the United States. He is currently a physician on the faculty of Stanford University, and his specialty is high-risk obstetrics.

## The Landscape of Our Concealment

### Yasser El-Sayed

THEY WERE BORN in the same ancient city. As a young physician training under Salim, this bond had once generated a perception of favoritism Joseph could have done without. Salim was now retired, and divided his time between San Francisco and Alexandria, Egypt. Tonight he looked relaxed, elegantly dressed in a crisply pressed shirt, slacks and sports jacket. He was seventy-three, but appeared no older than sixty as long as telling details were glossed over in the dim light of the restaurant.

When Joseph inquired about his health, Salim leaned back with a sigh. "It's going to hell," he said. "The prostate has its own little empire, erections lost the battle a while back, and my bowels sound off at random like a mad trumpeter." It was a crowded restaurant, his voice too loud for discretion, as a sharp glance from the lady at the table next to them confirmed. Privately, Joseph blamed the Scotch on the rocks, the glass of wine that followed, a boisterous personality, Salim's hearing aid.

Salim wiped bread crumbs from the corner of his mouth; took a sip of his Cabernet. He was still a handsome man. Tall and olive-skinned with a short crop of curly hair and a prominent hawk nose; the inevitable bulge around his middle not so much as to detract from an impressive build.

"How's Alexandria?" Joseph asked, trying to move the conversation away from the apparent volatile decay of Salim's internal organs.

"Alexandria is an aging, decrepit whore," Salim said, his usual colorful English still betrayed by the trace of an accent. "It is an open sewer, a teeming, putrid slum. Alexandria has just about disappeared into

the dustbin of history. Of course I say this with only the greatest affection for that miserable place. After all, I am like you, a native son.”

“I’m not sure what that means,” said Joseph. “You have a habit of forgetting that I left as a child.”

“And what does that matter,” Salim replied with a dismissive wave of a fat paw. It had always surprised Joseph how large his hands were, and how graceful they were in surgery. It was not what he would have expected.

“I vaguely remember a beautiful city,” said Joseph. It was a past that invariably seemed more real to him around Salim.

“If it’s beauty you miss, let me disabuse you. There is none. The Corniche overlooks a litter-ridden shore, and in summer is so crowded you can hardly walk. The sea is too polluted for swimming, and the beaches stink in the heat. The summer mansions are crumbling and in disrepair – that is, if you can make them out against the swarm of shabby construction spilling over into every free inch of space.”

Joseph was surprised at the intensity of Salim’s disdain. He had only been there a year; his return a voluntary one. “Why do you stay, then?” Joseph asked. “You have a place here. This is your country. I could never imagine a move like that. I would be lost.”

“And here you are found. A member of a much loved ethnic minority.” Salim leaned back in his seat and his voice was laced with sarcasm. Then he threw up his arms and smiled. “I have made you uncomfortable.”

Joseph shrugged. “My situation was different,” he said. The waiter interrupted their conversation with the entrees. Atlantic salmon on a bed of rice and vegetables for Joseph. Rib-eye steak, medium rare, with French fries for Salim. “I remember the calls my parents used to make to Egypt. Always excited, speaking a mile a minute. Then they’d insist on putting me or my sister on the line. They’d say this is your uncle so and so, say hi. Neither my sister nor I spoke any Arabic, so of course there was no real conversation.”

Salim laughed. “They never taught you Arabic and conveniently changed your name from Youssef to Joseph,” he said.

“Well, my parents tried. It’s just that there didn’t seem to be any point. I guess I never felt out of place enough.”

“But now everything’s changed,” Salim said.

“Sometimes it seems that way,” said Joseph. “My parents’ death. My sister’s move to Texas. September 11. Everything turned on its head.”

“Even an American-sounding name won’t help you,” said Salim, wagging a finger at Joseph.

“I visited my sister last Christmas in El Paso. You know we’ve always been close, and she took my parents’ death very hard. So it was a relief to see how content she now seemed with her husband and baby girl. From their backyard I could see Mexico. I’d never been to Mexico before, and so one day on a whim, I borrowed their car and drove

across the border into Juarez. I only spent a few hours there before turning back. At the border I was asked for proof of citizenship. I always travel with my passport now, so I showed it to the officer. He said I had to go through immigration.”

“You’re a citizen,” said Salim.

“I was told it was my place of birth. Egypt. It’s on my U.S. passport. I was fingerprinted and photographed. They asked for my height, weight and eye color. I gave them all the information they wanted. I hadn’t done anything wrong, but I’ll admit I was nervous. They put my name on some data base. I kept thinking of the stories of people being disappeared. No lawyer. No access to the information against you. They were all very polite, but it still rattled me. For weeks after that I kept expecting a visit from the FBI. Later I learned that the data base is only for people from a list of specific countries who are visitors to the United States. Not for citizens.”

“So now you’re a visitor,” chuckled Salim. “Did you contact a lawyer?”

“I thought of it. But what good would it do. It’s not like they were about to delete the information. I would just be setting myself up for more unwanted attention.”

“You should have written a letter, filed a complaint, done something,” said Salim. “You’re a doctor in a privileged, protected position. Someone else may not be.”

Joseph shrugged. “Anyway, it’s too late now.”

The day before he was to leave El Paso, Joseph took a walk with his sister in the open fields near her house. There had been an unusually heavy snowfall the night before. They were bundled up in winter clothing, trudging through a partially cleared path, his sister pushing the baby stroller over the uneven ground. Joseph had come unprepared for the cold, and borrowed a coat from his brother-in-law. At one point the path ended and all there was before them was a snow-covered field, its stark glare merging abruptly into a gray horizon. “You should move out here,” his sister said. “Then we can be together. Mom and Dad would have liked that.”

“Perhaps I will,” he replied. But later, peering out his sister’s kitchen window at an overcast sky and mud-streaked mounds of ploughed snow, the feeling Joseph had was one of entombment. On the plane back to San Francisco, he was suddenly overwhelmed by a throat-gripping grief, as frightening as it was bewildering.

Salim said, “Sometimes I think I should never have immigrated.”

“You had an opportunity to study in the States. You took it and did well.”

“Yes, but there is always a price to pay,” said Salim. “That’s why knowing you has been so important to me.” Then he added with a flourish, “You are the dissipating residue of my own dislocation.”

“I see,” said Joseph.

“A fading, migratory plume in desperate need of reconstitution.”



“Such a poet,” said Joseph with a smile.

“Such a burden for you to carry,” replied Salim wryly.

In the beginning of their friendship he had quoted Joseph endless Arabic proverbs, dissecting their meaning, tracing their origin from the classical to the colloquial. Salim’s father was a Coptic Christian and his mother Jewish, but he could recite to Joseph – a Moslem by birth – long passages from the Koran, with genuine feeling and ease.

“Actually, it took a lot for me to leave Egypt,” said Salim, cutting into his prime rib. “And a lot more than an educational opportunity to keep me away for so many years.” He was silent for a moment. “There was a woman I left behind. A certain violence that changed everything. In the end I was a coward. There are things I haven’t shared with you. It diminishes how I would like to see myself. How I would like you to see me.”

“I didn’t know you were married before coming here,” Joseph said.

“No, I wasn’t. I have only been married once, and of course you know how that ended.”

Salim had married a cardiologist many years his junior. A year later she left him for a younger man. As far as Joseph could tell, the divorce – which took place before he knew Salim – was more on the scale of a perplexing irritant to Salim’s ego than a major life crisis.

“I was a resident at the School of Medicine in Alexandria when I met her. She was married to a distant cousin of mine. A wealthy, abrasive man by the name of Marwan. Some would say, incorrectly, that I exploited a bad situation.”

“Certainly risky,” Joseph said. “Especially in those days.”

Salim looked vaguely amused. “Alexandria was a strange place back then. On the one hand, an Egyptian city yet inhabited by Europeans who held on, with dogged tenacity, to the image of the Arab as servant and doorman.” Salim reached over and filled Joseph’s wine glass. “Marwan was as Egyptian as I, but somewhere back several generations he claimed some European ancestry. Unfortunately he insisted, whenever possible, on speaking a mangled English sprinkled with a deplorable French. He was pathetic, and she was of course miserable.”

“Who was she?” Joseph asked.

“Her name was Layla. Her mother was Greek, her father Egyptian. I think she was accepted warmly enough on the Egyptian side, but she and her mother were generally maligned by the other. They were always scraping by financially, and it couldn’t have been easy for her.”

“So she married this wealthy, unpleasant cousin of yours.”

“A *distant* cousin. Hardly family. I would occasionally see them together at the socials at the summer homes in the Mandarah.” Salim took another sip of wine. “You know the Mandarah, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Joseph said. “As a boy, my father spent his vacations there. They had a house on the Corniche.”

“Unrecognizable now. The neighborhood completely transformed. It took me hours to find our old house – now a five-story apartment building. Anyway. That is where I first met Layla.”

“How old were you?” Joseph asked, envisioning for a moment a much younger replica of Salim.

“I was twenty-five. She was a few years older. Maybe that was part of the attraction. She was starting a graduate program in Egyptian History. I remember Marwan was not pleased. They had just gotten married, and he made some comment to me about how she seemed more interested in the dead than the living. I replied that depending on the company that may not be a bad choice.” Salim chuckled. “I thought I was being clever. But after that I think he always eyed me with a certain amount of suspicion wherever his wife was concerned.”

“And rightly so,” Joseph added.

“No. Not at first. It was all quite innocent at the beginning. There was an attraction there, but I know for certain neither one of us could have imagined the course of events.”

Salim fell silent. Joseph peered out the window at the bustling nightlife on Post Street. From where they sat he had a bird’s-eye view of Union Square. This neighborhood of San Francisco with its converging main streets around a central garden, and palm trees dappled and lush in the evening light, had always evoked something familiar for Joseph; a vague but persistent recollection of another place. Raml Station in central Alexandria, Salim had declared in response to Joseph’s description. The Cecil Hotel. The Hotel Metropol. Café Trianeau. All in a semicircle overlooking the plaza. The same feeling of enclosure and completeness. No doubt about it, he insisted. He had been adamant amidst Joseph’s hesitant concurrence.

“You see it all started with a debate over where exactly Alexander the Great had been buried,” said Salim. “I remember the evening. We were having coffee on the verandah overlooking the beach. Layla was there, as was her husband and a few other relatives and guests. Someone made the claim, I don’t recall who, that if the tomb of Alexander was, as legend had it, near the ancient Rue Rosette now called Fouad Street, it would have been discovered long ago. That in fact his body had been transported up the Nile to Memphis and buried.”

“I gather Layla disagreed.”

“Most vehemently. She had a theory based upon the way Alexandria had been reconstructed over the centuries. Ruins of one civilization resting upon its predecessor. I don’t recall the details, but she was sure Alexander’s tomb was there on Fouad Street. She was terribly passionate about this point. A little out of character really. She was usually more restrained. But that night she caught my attention.”

“She had a point,” Joseph said. “The Ptolemaics and the Arabs, the Turks and the British. Now modern Alexandria crouching over it all. If there was a tomb, it would be difficult if not impossible to find.”

“She had mastered the geography of ancient Alexandria, and was sure the tomb was on the first main road ever built in the city – this Rue Rosette. She said the avenue had once been lined with marble colonnades. In Ptolemaic times it opened onto the Gate of the Sun. I will admit to being only marginally interested in Alexander’s tomb. Quite honestly I could have cared less where the old Macedonian bastard was buried. But listening to her fend off the cynics, suffer the expression of sarcastic boredom on that ass of a husband’s face, and transform a remote history into something so personal, I had a rush of feeling. Physically painful. I was completely taken by her. Although I had seen her several times before, that night she struck me as the most beautiful woman I had ever known.”

A pensive expression crept over Salim’s face. Finally he said, “O.K. This is what happened. You’re like a son to me, and I need you to understand.”

Joseph pushed aside his plate and settled into his seat. The waiter cleared the dishes and poured coffee. In the past they had discussed Salim’s plans to spend at least part of his retirement in Alexandria. But there was an urgency to this conversation Joseph had not detected before, as if now that Salim had actually returned there, he could finally relieve himself of an old burden.

Salim said, “Towards the end of that evening I briefly caught her alone. I teased her about the idea of an excavation for the tomb; which poor street vendor or movie house had she targeted? She laughed and offered to show me. I’ll meet you there, she joked. Back then you didn’t just go out in public with a woman. Granted she was part European and that gave her more freedom. But not much, and then of course she was married. It may sound ridiculous – a far-flung idea – but over the next day or so I got it in my head that we had this understanding. You recall the gardens at the entrance to Fouad Street, the one with the remains of the old Arab walls of the city?”

Joseph didn’t, but nodded his head anyway.

“I would bring a book, and sit on a bench outside the gardens. From there I could see Abou Eir Street to my left where the university was, and to my right and further down, the entrance to Fouad Street. I didn’t know what I wanted from her; I hadn’t worked things out in that way. I knew roughly what time she would be leaving the university, and so I planted myself there and waited.

“I did that for several days, obsessively scanning the people walking past the gardens. I had just about convinced myself of the futility of my endeavor, when I spotted her crossing the street and coming towards me. I suspected that she had been watching me all along, and only now had allowed herself to be discovered. She stood before me. She looked like a goddess in that sun-soaked haze of late afternoon. I started to get up and greet her, but she put her hand out abruptly. So I remained where I was. She walked past me into the gardens, and it was

only when she was some distance away that she looked back at me, and I followed her.

“We walked to the secluded periphery of the gardens, right up against the ancient walls of the city. She said, ‘At one time this is where Alexandria ended. Nothing but sea beyond these walls.’

“‘I wouldn’t know,’ I said.

“‘This city is my obsession,’ she said. She stepped into a narrow, shaded enclosure formed by the convergence of the walls. The relentless stream of traffic was just a few feet away from us. ‘I saw you waiting over there yesterday and then today. Why?’

“‘Your interest in this city. Perhaps it’s infectious.’

“‘No. I wish it were. For most, simply a passing consideration.’ She paused. ‘Do you know there are catacombs beneath us,’ she added suddenly. ‘Years ago a young bride fell through a manhole into the maze of catacombs. Slipped through her husband’s arms. She was never found.’

“‘Down there with your friend, Alexander.’

“‘There are worse fates.’

“‘Who told you that story?’

“‘My mother. I was a child, but it stayed with me. There is something about disappearing like that. Swept away into the decaying ruins. I think it was a warning.’

“‘About what?’

“‘Layla shrugged. ‘We should go now before we’re noticed.’ Then as if to appease me, she added, ‘Caesar’s Camp next Tuesday at 2 PM. A research project.’ I watched her cross the gardens, then turn onto Abu Eir Street and disappear from view.

“‘On the day we had designated to meet, in the neighborhood known as Caesar’s Camp, I sat outside a small café and watched her. She strolled casually among the street vendors in the open-air market. Now and then she’d stop to examine some item of clothing or jewelry and haggle with a merchant. And every so often she would throw a brief glance in my direction. At one point she stopped by a display close to where I was sitting, and we were able to exchange a few words. She said, ‘Do you know it is here that Mark Anthony fell on his sword and committed suicide?’

“‘Right here?’

“‘Yes.’

“‘Why?’

“‘Because he was losing everything. The woman he loved. The city he loved.’

“‘I would do the same,’ I said.

“‘Would you now?’ she replied.

“I shadowed her all over Alexandria. To the gardens of El Montazah, through the ruins of Ptolemaic, grounds at Shatby, and to El Silsela where Cleopatra’s palace had once stood. Layla with her notebook constructing an ever transforming thesis to justify her excursions,

and I following at a distance and increasingly drawn to her. We strolled separately, but in view of each other, around the gardens at Ptolemy's Tower. At one point she took a photograph of a crowd of tourists by the Tower. I was in that picture – barely – at the very periphery of the tour group. I told her she was tempting fate. ‘Yes,’ she replied. At Qait Bey I trailed behind her as she meandered through the chambers of that ancient fortress, notebook in hand, and ascended the stairs onto the rooftop pavilion. There, we stood at opposite ends and turned our gaze towards a turquoise expanse of sea and a streamlined horizon. I imagine we both had the same feeling at that moment – the sense that we were wandering perilously close to the edge of an abyss.”

Salim stopped and looked at Joseph. “You haven’t said a word.”

“I’ve been listening,” said Joseph.

“All these places. They’re your history too,” Salim said.

“It’s a world I hardly recognize.”

“You can’t escape your past so easily,” Salim said. He sighed and added, “You sometimes exhibit a devastating lack of imagination, romantic or otherwise.”

“How’s that?” Joseph said, trying not to sound defensive.

“Later perhaps, but let me continue,” Salim replied with an impatient flick of his wrist. “Layla came with her husband to one of the last summer socials, and I kept my distance. Marwan hovered over her the entire evening. I remember this quite distinctly. For the first time he seemed entirely consumed by her, to the point of self-effacement. There was something about him that evening that bordered on the frantic.

“It had become known that I might be leaving Egypt for the United States. And at one point over dinner it was the main topic of conversation. Layla, who hadn’t said a word to me up to then, suddenly piped in, ‘That must be hard for you to contemplate. All the people you’re leaving behind.’ She said it like it meant nothing more to her than a polite observation.

“‘Who knows, Salim will probably be introducing us to his American wife,’ Marwan said with an asinine snort, and to the accompaniment of scattered laughter.

“Layla ignored me for the rest of the dinner. The guests dispersed around the house. Most lounged on the balcony overlooking the beach, sipping tea and smoking cigarettes. I noticed Layla and Marwan were nowhere in sight, and this is what spurred me to stroll the beautifully manicured gardens that adorned the beach house. I saw them on my return as they emerged from a darkened hallway at the foot of the stairs. ‘Hello, Salim,’ Layla said, sounding surprised.

“Later, around sunset, we all walked down to the beach for a last swim. I suddenly felt chilled and stayed on the shore while the rest of the guests ran headlong into the water. I watched Layla from the beach, her body a dark blur against the setting sun. She swam away from the group and I followed her with my eyes. It was only later that I noticed

Marwan looking at me. For a brief moment he held my eyes, then I waved casually at him and walked back to the house. I left early with the excuse that I wasn't feeling well.

"A few days later I saw her with Marwan through the window of a restaurant. It was late. I had just left the hospital and was looking for a place to eat. They were at a corner table immersed in a private conversation in a glow of candlelight. Nothing I knew about their relationship changed how it looked at that moment. Watching them, I felt like an imposter, exposed and castigated by their apparent intimacy. That should have been the end of it. I could have left for America, and never looked back. But I had fallen miserably, hopelessly in love with her. Despite myself I started to make different plans, creating a temptation that became impossible to resist."

The waiter brought their check and Salim lunged for it. Joseph offered to pay, but Salim scoffed at the idea and waved him off. "Save your money, and come visit me in Alexandria," he said.

They left the restaurant and walked down Post Street towards Union Square. It was still light outside, but a chill had crept into the late summer air. They wandered through Union Square before sitting down at a park bench overlooking the Saint Francis Hotel. Salim lit a cigarette and offered Joseph one which he refused. "Good boy," he said with a laugh. "You definitely belong among the beautiful people of San Francisco."

"Go on with your story," Joseph said.

"There used to be these cabins on the west side of Alexandria, arranged in an arc curving around a few hundred yards of beach. In the summer they could be rented for a day. I had done so on several occasions, and had grown comfortable with the area; a little out of the way, but still close enough to the city center to make the travel time reasonable for an evening swim. Now, in the off-season, they were locked up and deserted. I had curried favor with the caretaker – an elderly man who lived there year round – when the previous summer, his grandson had slipped on a rock and cut his foot. I had taken the boy to a nearby clinic, and paid for his care. The old man had never forgotten the service, so when I approached him about a key to one of the cabins in return for a small amount of cash, he was happy to discreetly comply. And it was here, that Layla and I spent our stolen moments together.

"The cabin I chose was one closest to the water, at the far end of the arc, and furthest from the Corniche. It was a simply affair – a bathroom, a small sitting area with a couple of wicker chairs, a dresser with a cracked mirror and a couch. Off to one side was a kitchenette. The floor was cheap tile and the walls bare concrete. It was late fall, warm enough to be comfortable, but too cool to attract many swimmers.

"She had always been more collected than I about our surreptitious rendezvous, but when I mentioned the cabins to her, she drew back immediately. 'We should continue like we are,' she said abruptly. 'Isn't this enough? To be together like this.'

“And for months it had been. It was what I lived for every week. But I also imagined us there on the edge of the water, at a remote fringe of the city. The freedom of it all. There was nowhere else that was as safe. I expressed these thoughts to her. And I think she was frightened by the intensity that had overcome me.

“It took time for her to agree to meet me there. It still intrigues me that she did. You can imagine the implications. The possible repercussions. That she was also in love with me never seemed to factor in, and for some reason had remained untenable as a possibility in my mind. Perhaps because of her reserve, I foolishly calculated some other dynamic to explain why she was drawn to me. And for her, my possible immigration was a natural safety valve.

“We could only afford short periods together; an hour or two at the most. I lived in dread of the unexpected change in plans. Alone in the cabin, inflamed and anxious with no way to communicate with her, every rustle of wind on the walkway outside would have me standing straight as a rail, waiting for that hesitant knock on the door that would signal her arrival. Worst of all were the times she failed to appear. But whatever residue of pain I harbored was washed away by her presence. Her entry into that small, dank cabin was transformative in a way nothing else in my life has ever been. It was our secret place. Our forbidden world. She brought with her the smell of the sea, her skin cool from the wind outside, the sound of the ocean behind her like a message of deliverance; the earth and heavens giving her up to me. I was young. This is how I felt. Please, you have to remember this.

“I was also inexperienced, and she was easily amused by my fumbling attempts at lovemaking.

“‘Always in such a hurry,’ she said, laughing, and slid out from under me.

“‘When was the last time with him?’

“‘You shouldn’t ask that,’ she said.

“‘I’d like to know.’

“‘Why?’

“‘It’s my right.’

“‘Your right! Salim, sometimes I wonder why I’m with you.’

“‘Why *are* you with me?’

“She pulled back from me slowly, unfolded herself from my arms. I watched her walk naked across the room and curl herself into a chair. Her hair hung loosely over her face, a faint sheen of sweat from our lovemaking glistened on her bare breasts.

“‘Don’t make this more complicated than it needs to be,’ she said.

“‘How much more complicated can it be?’ I asked mockingly.

“‘Perhaps, I have come to believe that I’m simply my mother’s daughter,’ she said. ‘Did you know that she’d been married before she met my father? A Greek man from the same small town south of Athens. They’d lived in Egypt since they were children, but they probably knew two words of Arabic between the two of them. They put them-

selves above all that; the whole Egyptian society simply there to serve them. She was not the easiest person to live with. They had problems. Anyway, he left her, and a few years later she married my father. She was treated like a fallen woman after the divorce, and so marrying an Arab was her revenge.'

"And you followed in her footsteps?"

"She laughed. 'No, I've always been a native. But I made a similar mistake, marrying the wrong man for all the wrong reasons. And now I'm trapped. Everything truncated – half marriage, half citizen, half of me falling into this world and the other half into some forgotten past. You are just a convenience. An escape from all that.'

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

"Oh no.' She got up from her seat. 'What do you believe?' She knelt over me, her breath warm on my abdomen, her lips touching me.

"I want to believe you have fallen in love with me.'

"She laughed, squeezed me with her fist until it hurt. 'You're a doctor,' she murmured. 'You need help, doctor.'

"There were days I would go to the cabin just to recapture her presence. To see if in that sea-drenched air, I could still catch the faintest drift of her perfume. And at times, despite the encroaching chill, I'd wander down to the beach and dive into the foamy sea, surrounded by water, buoyed into life and into the vaguest hope of redemption.

"You should come with me to America,' I said once.

"I don't want to go to America.'

"We could be together.'

"Is that a good thing?"

"We'd be away from all this. All these troubles.'

"There'd be other troubles. Anyway, you strike me as the trouble-seeking type.'

"What would you have us do?"

"What we're doing.'

"Forever?"

"Yes.'

"After lovemaking I lay on the narrow couch we had just shared and watched as she walked across the room to the small dresser. She sat with her naked back to me, and brushed her hair, applied a fresh gloss of lipstick. Sometimes she would catch me gazing at her through the broken mirror. She always laughed at that. 'I'm not sure which you enjoy more,' she said, 'the doing or the watching.'

"I have become too jealous to enjoy either.'

"She sat on the edge of the couch. 'He is far too in love with himself for you to get jealous. Anyway, he's not all bad. I have more independence than most.'

"Courtesy of his European blood, of course.'

"Would you give me any less?"

"That depends.'

"Such enlightened men,' she said.



“Looking back now, I realize how narrow a world we inhabited. But over time we grew too comfortable with its limits, and with our own ability to escape detection. We were careless, and discovery was inevitable. We dined a few times at small restaurants on the outskirts of the city. Once we strolled together on a deserted beach. But to this day I am not sure exactly who betrayed us. That small detail was of utmost importance to me back then; everything else falling apart.

“I didn’t worry all that much when one day she didn’t show up for our meeting at the cabin. As I have said, it had happened before; an unexpected change of plans. But her absence again the following week was no longer something I could explain away.

“The problem was I had no legitimate way of getting in touch with her. I wandered around our first meeting place by Fouad Street. But she never came. I walked by her university department, down random corridors, but never saw her. I tried asking subtle questions to mutual acquaintances, but she was not very close to anyone I knew, and it was not unusual that they had not heard from her.

“I was growing desperate. I couldn’t believe she would break things off without warning, and make no effort to get in touch with me. I imagined all kinds of things; that she had suddenly found me pathetically lacking; that she had rekindled her love with her husband; even that she had taken up with another man. Eventually, through a chance encounter with a friend from the days at the summer house, I discovered she’d left Marwan, and moved in with her mother. There were no other details. I wasn’t sure what to think. Part of me was ecstatic. A clean break. We could be together now for good. But then I also felt ill at ease, preoccupied by a persistent foreboding.

“In the end, I decided to seek her out. I took the tram into the run-down neighborhood of Alexandria where her mother had lived for years, and where Layla had spent her childhood. It had been raining, the dirt streets crumbling into rivers of water and into gaping potholes. The sky was overcast, and the chill of a wet Mediterranean winter seeped right through me. Her mother’s house was a ground-level apartment at the end of a narrow alley. An older woman with gray hair tied up in a bun was watching me from an open window.

“I’m here to see Layla,” I said and gave my name.

“Her eyes opened wide, and then she leaned out the window and started in on me. ‘Bastard!’ she yelled. ‘You filthy bastard!’

“Before I could recover my senses, she closed the window and lowered the blinds.

“I knocked on the door but got no answer. I called out for Layla, but no one came to the window. I realized I was making a scene, and had attracted the attention of a few passersby. But I didn’t care. I was sure something terrible had happened. I kept shouting for her, until I heard Layla’s voice behind the closed door.

“‘Salim. It’s alright. Everything is fine. You should go now.’

“‘I want to see you,’ I pleaded, my face pressed against the coarse wood of the front door.

“‘Not now.’

“‘When then!’

“‘I don’t know.’

“‘That won’t do.’

“She was silent for a moment, and so I started pounding on the door.

“‘In a few weeks. I’ll write you a letter. I promise.’

“‘What happened, Layla?’

“‘I’ll write you a letter and arrange things. I’ll see you in a few weeks. You have to go now. Please.’

“She told me once that growing up in that dilapidated neighborhood of Alexandria she actually remembered a happy childhood. Even now she felt an attachment to the maze of dusty streets and alleys, the shouts of children at play, the cries of street vendors with their mountains of fruits and vegetables and array of battered wares. All of it a constant assault on the senses against which loneliness was made more difficult, and despair – like the pungent odor from the open sewers against the wafting aroma of cooking – at least in part a matter of perception. I always had difficulty imagining her a child there. I tried to picture her in a crowd of young girls in a schoolyard, or walking home in the afternoon, hair in a ponytail, schoolbag swinging idly by her side. But the image always failed; the Layla I had grown to know somehow too vivid to be easily concealed in that cacophony of sound and light.

“In those few weeks that I waited for her letter, everything seemed to simultaneously come together and fall apart. At first there was a feeling of the most precarious balance, as if any one event could tip the scales of the course of my life into a ruinous vortex. She would be with me, and we would leave for America and start a new life together. Or I would be alone, rejected by her and abandoning the only place in the world I really knew. I fluctuated back and forth mercilessly between these two polarities. But it was also around this time that I received the official notification that I had been accepted on a research grant to a medical school near San Francisco, and that became the ballast I desperately needed. I read everything I could about the city. I discovered its vineyards and beaches. I imagined the Golden Gate Bridge, the flowing silhouette of Mount Tamalpais, Alcatraz in the shadows, Ghirardelli Square incandescent in lights, Lombard Street writhing like a serpent. I looked at pictures from the great earthquake, and spent an anxious moment worrying when the next would strike. I had never left Egypt and all I really knew was Alexandria, but in my mind I tried to make this place on the other end of the world my new home. And after all it seemed like home – a white-washed city on the water, gateway to a new world, drenched in warm sunlight; although I concede I was not entirely correct on that final point. Eventually, I convinced myself that Layla and I were destined to arrive here. That we would emerge free of

the broken remains of our lives in an ancient city, onto something vast and new. I became imminently confident of this, and when finally I got her letter detailing the time and place we would meet, I needed the opportunity to articulate this vision to her and have her join me.

“The letter itself was brief and to the point. She wrote that Marwan had discovered her infidelity. He demanded to know the identity of her lover, but she refused to tell him even after he flew into a rage. She had left the house and eventually moved in with her mother. She wrote that after what he had done to her, he wouldn’t dare come near her again. It was this line, in addition to the brevity and tone of the letter, that initially generated a certain amount of anxiety on my part. But as I have said, by then I was flush with the enthusiasm for the life we would share, and whatever fleeting worries crossed my mind were readily dispelled.

“She asked me to meet her in a place called Ras el Tin, at a small beachside restaurant she and I had discovered. It was an isolated spot. The restaurant, frequented mainly by locals, was a shabby affair, but it had an open air patio that led right up to the water’s edge, where a few dining tables had been laid out.

“I hadn’t seen her in nearly three months. Ras el Tin was then nothing more than a sleepy fishing village, at the far western tip of Alexandria. The cab dropped me off a few blocks from the restaurant. That request on my part was as much a remnant from our time in subterfuge, as it was a desire to collect my thoughts and calm myself in the engulfing comfort of night. I still remember the brief walk down the dusty streets, the few streetlights casting shadows, the sky pitch black. Every now and then I’d heard the cry of a child, or the howling of hounds punctuating the otherwise silent night. It’s strange how these moments can remain in your mind, as if you already know that you will have to remember this; the future already seeding an otherwise normal moment with its impending weight.

“She was sitting alone on the patio. Although she was at a table at the dim edge of a pool of light, I immediately recognized her profile, the way she held herself. I said, “Layla!” but she didn’t get up to greet me. Her face was half turned in my direction. When I rushed to her side she put her arm out, not to embrace me, but to force a distance between us. I can’t begin to describe how I felt at that moment; everything crashing down, the worst fears realized. She was dressed in a dark raincoat and was wearing sunglasses, which struck me as absurd. Her whole body seemed to recoil from me. I said, ‘What’s wrong, Layla?’

“She asked me to sit down. She had arranged the remaining chair so that I would find my place at a distance from her.

“‘How have you been?’ she asked.

“I remember I started to laugh. ‘How do you think I’ve been? Why are you behaving like this?’

“It was then that her whole body seemed to collapse. I jumped up and tried to turn her to face me.

“What did he do to you?”

“She pulled back before finally looking up at me. ‘You want to see?’ she asked, her face suddenly caught in the moonlight, in the sheen of light that danced off the water. ‘You really want to see?’”

“Even before she took off her glasses I could see the scar. Red. Thin. Angry. Running down her cheek to the corner of that finely sculpted mouth.

“‘Oh, Layla,’ I cried. ‘My beautiful Layla.’ The words came out of me in horrible, short gasps.

“Then she removed the dark glasses, and I saw one eye lost, mangled flesh forced shut.

“I fell to my knees in front of her. I hugged her legs and sobbed like a child. And she stroked my head. She comforted me.”

Salim leaned back and stretched his legs out in front of him. His eyes were locked on Joseph’s as if trying to read whatever thoughts might be rushing by. “It all came to an end rather quickly,” Salim said. “I begged her to come with me to America. But she was convinced her life was over. She said she was damaged goods; that she’d just be dragging me down. The more I pleaded with her, the more certain she became that I was only reacting out of guilt or pity. It became pure hell. I wanted out of Alexandria. Out of Egypt. I was desperate, submerged in that half-reality of a bad dream, struggling to surface and breathe air.”

“But I can’t imagine she wanted to stay in Alexandria?” Joseph said.

“She had no plans. Everything had shattered for her. She always felt marginalized, but now her future in Alexandria was unimaginable. As for me, I kept thinking of San Francisco. I could smell the place. The newness of it. The cleansing breeze that would wash over me. And here we were in this nightmare; the two worlds were impossible to reconcile. After a while all I wanted was escape. Maybe she sensed that. I can’t imagine she did. But maybe.”

Salim grimaced. “You have to believe me,” he added quickly, his voice thick with emotion. “I wanted her to join me. I asked her a hundred times. There was nothing more I could have done. I am sure of this.”

“And so you came to San Francisco.”

He took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes. Alone. I fell into my new world. Fitfully at first, but then over time completely. Two events did throw me off balance though. My mother’s death nearly a year after my arrival. And then three years later, a letter from Layla. I’d had no contact with her. For a while I had written her but she’d never responded. She wrote to inform me that she was leaving Egypt and moving to Athens; a cousin of hers lived there and had offered her a place to stay. She left me an address in Athens where I could reach her. She hoped I was well.”

“Did you contact her?” asked Joseph.

“No. There were many times I wanted to. I’d dream of flying out to her. Suddenly appearing at her door. But I was afraid, and with each passing month the past seemed less real to me. I needed it that way. It helped me survive.”

Salim rubbed his eyes. The Square was empty. A few cars drifted past them on Stockton Street, dark shadows against the yellow halos emanating from the storefronts and streetlights. The uniformed concierge outside the Saint Francis Hotel ushered a tottering guest into a waiting cab.

“I started to feel differently with age,” said Salim. “My past seemed like so much shattered glass. So I thought by going back I’d come full circle, and make sense of it all. But I only go out at night when I’m there. It’s too painful in the sunlight, everything in decay. At two or three in the morning, the whole city is asleep, and all that devastation is concealed in darkness. For a brief while, Alexandria emerges again. The sound of the waves on a darkened beachfront is like a resurgent echo. It’s as if the old city is still breathing. You can feel it moving through you. And then I’m really glad I’m there.”

They said goodbye shortly after that. Salim was returning to Alexandria in a few days, and Joseph wouldn’t be seeing him again on this trip.

“Despite everything, you must visit me,” Salim said. “Perhaps I have assumed too much, but you won’t believe the things even you may remember.”

## Ω

Joseph drove across the Golden Gate Bridge, over the black, choppy waters of the San Francisco Bay, past the lonely bulk of Alcatraz. He thought of Salim and Layla and the Alexandria they had once inhabited. A few minutes later he pulled into the housing development where he lived; a cluster of Spanish tile and stucco, tidy lawns, and tree-lined streets that dead-ended against impenetrable sound walls. He doubted he would ever visit Salim in Alexandria. This was home or as close to it as he would ever get. It was a realization that he embraced with a wave of relief. But he couldn’t help a feeling of envy towards Salim. He stopped the car outside his house, and in the sudden silence, Joseph mourned the seamless unraveling of what he had once imagined was their exclusive journey.

ROBERT COOPERMAN'S latest collection is *Petitions for Immortality: Scenes from the Life of John Keats* (Higginum Hill Books). *A Tale of the Grateful Dead* was reissued in an expanded format by Main Street Rag Press. *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* (Western Reflections) won the Colorado Book Award for Poetry in 2000.

## Robert Cooperman / **Three Poems**

### **Canadians in France**

Whenever French tour guides inquire,  
 "Great Britain?" and hand us  
 English language guidebooks,  
 I reply, "Les Etats Unis," tourists  
 wide-eyed and happy as teddy bears.

This summer of America's  
 never ending occupation of Iraq,  
 a Gallic scowl greets my admission  
 and a frost colder than all the ice  
 our President is blissfully unaware  
 is temporarily safe at the South Pole,

until Beth gasps as if slapped,  
 "Just say we're Canadian,"  
 and I recall a summer of murdered  
 Freedom Riders and Civil Rights workers;  
 and New York's World's Fair,

a teenage girl stood in front of me  
 at one exhibition, announcing  
 she was from Alabama.  
 In my self-righteous youth,  
 I refused all further conversation,

torn between desire to make  
 her pretty acquaintance,  
 my New Yorker's smugness,  
 and guilt for her smile cracking  
 into more shards than dropped

gift shop crockery: the broken  
 innocence of all tourists  
 who expect nothing but open-armed  
 welcomes, wherever we travel.

## The House Carpenter

“Well, they had not been on the ship three weeks,  
I swear it was not four,  
Until there came a leak in the ship  
And she sank to rise no more.”

“The House Carpenter”

When she sailed off  
with her Demon Lover,  
I wished my wife in Hell.  
According to a passing  
merchantman, all hands  
were more lost than Jonah’s crew,  
her beauty picked over by crabs,  
her soul toiling on Satan’s frigates.

Still, I keep hoping she’ll return,  
her hair red-gold as a falcon  
that alights on a nobleman’s wrist.  
I pray she’ll grace my hearth  
one last time: her laugh,  
her quickening fingers,  
her sly looks leading me up  
to our loft featherbed.

I must stop this fantasticating,  
or they’ll find me mad  
as Yellow Tooth Sally,  
who roams the forest howling  
like full-moon wolves.  
Beneath her spider-tangled hair,  
she reminds me of my wife,  
her eyes that same wild gleam  
a carpenter’s hearth could never dim  
into Christian submission.

Each night, I leave a lit lamp  
in my window, hoping one woman  
or the other will enter, regal as a cat.  
Each dawn, the lamp is cold  
as the terrier-obedient grave  
I’ll one day lie in, alone.

## The House Carpenter – The Demon Lover

It wasn't the wench  
I sought to tempt into Hell,  
but her carpenter husband:  
self-righteous as a bishop.

After I honey lipped her away  
from her husband's hearth  
and his weight—  
heavy as a smith's anvil  
but not nearly as lusty—  
he declared for all to hear,  
that she could go to hell  
before he'd take her back.

“Aha!” thought I,  
“an unchristian curse,”  
and prepared to swoop  
like a stooping falcon  
and carry him off  
to my burning Kingdom.

But no sooner  
did he fling that curse,  
than he prayed for her safe return,  
the craven worm!  
Had she used me as vilely,  
I'd have mastiffed her  
like bloody rags.

Now, I allow him to hear her sobs  
when my pretty demons  
take their hard pleasures on her,  
my agonies somewhat relieved  
by her shrieks and his prayers for her.



DANIEL KANG was born in Seoul, South Korea. He majored in English at college and received a PhD in English and American Literature from the University of California, San Diego. He has taught writing and American Literature at various American and Korean universities. His list of publications includes articles on Sir Walter Scott, Stéphane Mallarmé, Geoffrey Chaucer and Wallace Stevens. His poetry has appeared in *Parnassus Literary Journal* and the *Linkway* magazine (UK).

## A Lover of the Common People

Daniel Kang

WELL, WHERE TO BEGIN – that’s always the problem. In telling a story, that is. We might just as well start by introducing your humble narrator. You are forewarned: this story will have nothing arty about it. On the contrary, it will be full of slang and secret language, not to mention the ever-too-popular sick jokes peculiar to the part of southern Korea that we call Seoul. I am a junior at a third-rate college in that city and am currently studying management science. Not a good prospect for success, you say? I entirely agree. My only boast is that, for almost three years, I managed to support myself in this harsh and cruel world of ours. I am from the country; my family tilled a few acres of brown earth which never produced enough to make us rich. But they kept us alive. To a certain point, I might add. A lifetime of rustic idiocy was not my desire, so I went to college.

Since my poor widowed mother couldn’t afford to support me, I had to rely on scholarships and the money I could scrounge from various odd jobs, plus occasional donations from my relatives. By that I mean the help I got from my uncle, my mother’s half-brother. My maternal grandmother remarried soon after her husband’s death. Leaving her children to the care of her husband’s family, she became the second wife of a wealthy Seoul merchant. My uncle was the only offspring of this union. He grew up in the capital and had almost no contact with his half-sister and her family. My mother seldom mentioned him. If she did, she usually added a couple of unpleasant words about his father, the fat old man.

Figuring I had nothing to lose, I looked up my uncle when I went to Seoul. Surprisingly, he proved to be a good sort. He was pretty sympathetic to my not-so-comfortable situation, and gave me money for text-

books. He also told me to drop by whenever I felt like it. I was thus supplied with a haven – a shelter where I was assured of some petty cash and a good, complete meal. The latter was always welcome, for hunger, to me, was a real presence – not actual starvation itself, but a sort of gnawing feeling of not having enough. The place I lived in Seoul was a small, dingy room in a dilapidated part of town, and I often skipped breakfast or lunch to save money.

My uncle had three daughters. All were pretty but the youngest was a real beauty. She was also the only unmarried one. Ah-ha, you might chuckle, you intelligent reader, for you have probably guessed that the story I am telling is about to take a romantic turn. Your speculation is partly correct but not completely. This story is not a tragic tale of love between cousins (tragedy because such love is strictly forbidden in our beloved land). Yet you would be right in assuming that the story is a romance, a romance which has my cousin as its central heroine. Come to think of it, aren't most of our classical tales constructed that way? As I am an average young Korean male, slightly oversexed perhaps, but otherwise perfectly normal, my tale would conform to the standards of storytelling laid out by our respected sages.

Enough of my digressions. To get back to the main theme, my cousin possessed a rare beauty. She was slender and tallish, not statuesque maybe, but extremely elegant. Her figure was definitely not Hollywood but still voluptuous; I do not doubt that the ficklest roué would have found it appealing. I could go on and on about her hips, legs, and ankles, using trite epithets like alabaster, white jade, polished ivory, and so forth, but, then I have never been called a poet. One thing I do have to call attention to is her pretty, small face which was extraordinarily pale. Her eyes were dark and luminous, quite large but slightly almond-shaped. The nose, a trifle small perhaps, was straight. Her bright red lips contrasted favorably with her black penciled eyebrows placed almost perfectly beneath a handsome forehead. Her white face was surrounded, enveloped by a tiara of magnificent coal-black hair. You might say that her beauty inclined more toward a Japanese ideal than the Korean. And such a presupposition would be entirely valid, for her maternal grandmother was Japanese. My aunt was half-Japanese, and often seemed more comfortable with that language than Korean. Sometimes at dinner, she would begin a conversation in Japanese with her husband. The daughters would join in, leaving me with nothing better to do than to gaze at them like an idiot. It was during times like these, sitting in the little dining room with a yellow lantern casting a strange shadow below, that I felt myself drifting into an exotic reverie, a fantasy about willowy maidens in flower-patterned silk robes who had to be rescued from the clutches of hairy and half-naked ferocious ogres.

My uncle was a war veteran and received a monthly disability check. He lost an eye in the war and wore a black eye-patch. He worked for an obscure company but his real job, and passion, was

gambling. Every weekend, he would gather his fellow gamblers to play mah-jongg. The clatter of the ivory pieces on the heavy, wooden table used to resonate throughout the house. On such occasions, my cousin would look kind of pensive, rather sad. My visits to my uncle's house usually ended with my entry to my cousin's room to talk. Our voices rose and fell above the unsteady rhythm of the clicking mah-jongg pieces. She was an avid reader and was interested in politics as well (who isn't nowadays?). She appeared to admire me for my self-reliance, as she called it.

"You know, I wish I could be independent like you. If only I had the courage . . . but I don't."

"Well, when you graduate from college, you can get a job and live on your own. Right?"

"It's funny you should mention college, because I don't know whether I want to stay any more."

"Why not?"

"I don't see any point in wasting my time. I want to live exactly as the *real* people, the common people, do, to experience what they really feel."

A typical dialogue like this usually led to heated arguments about the real nature of common people. My cousin was addicted to the opiate common to young South Korean intellectuals. I mean the glorification of the common people or the proletariat, which verges on religious worship. The common people, untainted by bourgeois modernization and betrayals by politicians, capitalists, and the military, are the only hope for Korea's future; they will make possible a resurgence of our culture. To me, whose categorical imperative was to stay alive in this metropolis and to break away from the ranks of peasants and laborers, this seemed to be like blind self-deception, the worst kind of naïve idealism. Yet I couldn't help admiring the seriousness of this young girl, her pretty forehead wrinkled with frowns as she discoursed at length about the sufferings that the masses received throughout history. In that little room surrounded by shelves of books, mostly past issues of magazines and quarterlies dealing with politics and culture, and filled with the light blue haze of cigarette smoke, I could feel a sort of freshness, a sense of exquisite and vulnerable delicacy.

It was during the winter of my second year of college when my cousin had a love affair which caused a great deal of consternation in her family. I saw her frequently because I was working as a busboy in a café near her college. The road which led to its main gate was lined with rows and rows of fancy shops – fancy stores which catered to every desire, ranging from clothes for young mademoiselles to bridal gowns, restaurants, tea rooms, designer boutiques which specialized in handbags or shoes made to order, beauty salons, a couple of playhouses, and a few bookstores. During the evening, when business was best, the streets were full of people; male and female college students, would-be intellectuals, teenagers looking for excitement, and the like. I

was employed by a café called, strangely enough, *Silvertown*. It was in the basement of an ugly concrete building layered with black imitation marble. I didn't like my work, for the college women who made up the large part of my clientele were hard to please. My cousin felt it was her duty to bring her friends to the place for my sake. She and her friends made a strange group – usually huddled in a corner, passionately discussing among themselves political and social issues.

Then one day my cousin brought along a male friend.

“Jinho, I would like you to meet Mr. Song Minku, a very good friend of mine.”

“So, you are Yunmi's cousin, eh? Nice to meet you.”

I could only mumble some incoherent words in return. I was totally shocked. In truth I had possessive feelings for Yunmi and the fact that she was going out with this fellow played full havoc with my heart. And such a fellow! It was incredible to see this guy sitting next to my beautiful cousin. He was barely five feet six, that is to say a good two inches shorter than Yunmi. And he was so squat. His sturdy legs were way too short for his massive torso. His long and powerful arms betrayed their owner to be a manual laborer. The broad shoulders were a little stooped and the leonine head, with the long hair clipped straight, was overly large for his body. His face must have been exposed often to the elements, for it was deep brown in color. The nose was nondescript and the stenciled lines in his face testified to a hard life. Yet his eyes struck me as most fascinating. They were somewhat narrow but well-shaped enough. They were sharp and glittered like bright metal. There was a singleness of purpose behind those eyes, a solid strength like a brick wall. In short, there was something frightening about them, something fanatical.

“Yunmi told me a lot about you. She said you come from Hongsong.”

“Uh?”

His question forced me to regain my senses. Hastily, I said it was true but that my home was forty miles from the town, in the country.

“Nice place, Hongsong. Good farming country. I don't know much about farming. I come from Haenam which, as you know, is a fishing community.”

And the poorest part of Korea to boot, I muttered inside my head. The whole place is disgustingly poor even for the Southwest, which is poor enough.

“I own a bookstore in the neighborhood. It's called *We*. Please drop by when you are not busy. I'd enjoy talking with you.”

After assuring him that I'd do just that, I left them and went into the kitchen. I was greatly confused: what was Yunmi doing with a bookstore owner?

As it turned out, *We* was pretty well known in the neighborhood. In talking with my fellow waiters, I discovered it was quite close to *Silvertown*, about two blocks. I also found out that the owner, Minku,

was something of a cult figure among the college women. He was reputed to have been one of the leading union organizers among the fishermen in Haenam. He had been sentenced to two years for what the authorities called “subversive activities” – fighting for fishermen’s rights against those of the big dealers and large-scale fishing companies.

“The college girls really like him because they consider him a fighter, and, then, too, he is involved in cultural activities. His bookstore serves as a front for underground circles.”

That was what one of the waiters told me and I got more and more curious about this proletarian hero, so I decided to pay him a visit.

The bookstore, which was at the back of an alley that branched off from the main street, was smaller than I had expected. The whole place was crammed with books – mostly ones which were out of print because of censorship. Literary, philosophical, economic and sociological texts were the majority; there were no popular magazines or bestsellers. One section of the shop was entirely devoted to reprints of foreign books. I glanced at the titles: Lukács, Althusser, Marcuse, Brecht, Freire, Fanon . . . I hardly knew any of the names. I turned my eyes to another part of the shop and found the shelves to be full of poetry. Kim Ji-ha and other poets whose works were hard to get hold of seemed to be popular.

Since Minku was not around, I decided to wait. There was a coal stove in the center of the shop surrounded by a few chairs. A young girl was sitting by the fire reading. She raised her eyes from the book she was reading, and asked in a pleasant voice:

“May I help you?”

“Yes, I’m waiting for Mr. Song.”

“He’ll be back shortly. Meanwhile, can I help you with anything?”

“No, I’ll wait. By the way, Miss, do you work here?”

“Actually, no. I am a friend of Mr. Song. I was visiting when he had to go out on an errand. I said I’d watch the shop while he was gone.”

So that guy had a lot of women friends, I thought. She didn’t look at all like a working girl; she was too nicely dressed, and I figured she was a college student. At that moment Minku came in.

“Well, well . . . It’s Jinho, isn’t it? Very nice to see you. Come, please have a seat by the fire. Sorry you had to wait. I was at the post office.”

Just then the girl rose from her chair and said she had to go. Minku thanked her and went to the door to see her out. Upon returning, he again insisted I should sit by the fire, so we both sat down.

“So, how have you been? How’s the work?”

I gave him a casual reply and then asked, “You have a lot of books here . . . difficult books, too. Are there many customers?”

“Oh, some . . . you know . . . Now, it’s winter vacation, so there aren’t that many. When school starts, business picks up.”

“It’s rather unusual for a man of your background to be selling these books, isn’t it? I mean, I’d expect one has to be rather knowledgeable about these books to sell them.”

There was a short pause. My comment, with its reference to Minku’s supposed lack of intellect, was rather insulting, depending upon your point of view. But he took everything well in stride.

“Well, I have never pretended to know the arguments of the many authors I carry. They are too recondite for me. But I have read most of them and know enough to discuss them with my customers and other students. I sometimes admit my lack of understanding to them and they help me out. At least, it’s very gratifying to discuss books with my customers.”

Then we moved onto other topics. I asked him about his family. He told me that his parents were dead and that he only had a younger brother.

“He’s now in his third year of medical school. He’s very intelligent, unlike me. He feels guilty because I am supporting him. I always tell him that I am only doing my duty and that he may pay me back when he is successful.”

“But being a doctor, isn’t that a little bourgeois? Isn’t it a little hypocritical trying to make your little brother into a doctor when you sell books extolling the virtues of socialism?” Minku reddened slightly, taken aback by my comment, but quickly regained his composure.

“I believe everybody should have the freedom of choice. If my brother wants to become a doctor, and has the intelligence to do so, then he should be able to try. I have no complaints against people working hard for what they want. Why is that against socialism?”

Though I wasn’t completely satisfied with his reply, I decided to change the subject. I asked him various questions about his past, his union activities in particular. He was somewhat evasive but told me he acted in good faith, and he didn’t regret anything. He described the horrible labor conditions and how the fishermen were generally overworked and underpaid. His voice rose in indignation as he denounced the exploitation of the fishermen by the big companies.

“They come in big ships and new equipment and just fish the coastal waters dry. You know, most of us little guys barely have equipment to venture into the open sea. It’s tough trying to survive, without having to worry about the big ships plundering your livelihood. Anyway, those people are supposed to be in the South Pacific. What the hell are they doing in Haenam?”

Evidently, that was not all. The wholesale dealers usually favored the big companies because they could get more fish at cheaper prices, so they were reluctant to buy the daily catch of the local fishermen. When they did, they insisted on deferred payment. “Which means that we have to wait about a month to get paid, if not more. How are we supposed to eat meanwhile? It’s not fair.” Minku spat.

And when somebody would complain, the dealers would just refuse to buy his catch until he “saw the light.” “That’s when we saw the need to organize,” said Minku.

He organized a union and it took collective action – the fishermen refused to sell their catch to the dealers who had the worst record of not paying on time. Since the local fishermen still accounted for more than fifty percent of the fish that were brought to Haenam, this meant that the dealers suffered huge losses. Soon, conditions for the fishermen improved drastically. But the government stepped in. The dealers accused Minku and others of breaking the labor laws, of forming a local union in defiance of the law which said all workers could have just one national and government-supervised labor union per industry. “The Fisherman’s Cooperative, the so-called national labor union, is a joke,” Minku added sarcastically. “It’s not a union, it’s a government institution. The labor officials there don’t care about the working people. They just want to avoid trouble. Those bloody labor aristocrats!” The end result of the whole affair was that Minku spent two years in jail for “subversive activities.” “I was pretty angry over what happened to me but I met many friends in prison who taught me that such things were pretty common. They opened my eyes to the injustices that people suffer, and who profits from such injustices.” Minku stated calmly.

When he got out of jail he came to Seoul and began to be active in dissident circles. But his fledgling revolutionary career came up against a snag: his father died and, since his mother had also died five years before, his brother was left an orphan.

“He didn’t want to become a fisherman. He was extremely bright and wanted to go to college.”

So Minku sold whatever remained of his family property and with that money opened his bookstore.

“My friends told me that it would be a success. So it has been. I don’t make a lot of money but I earn enough to take care of my brother and myself.”

I couldn’t help comparing my own situation with that of Minku and his brother, and, despite my earlier antipathy to the man, found myself warming to him little by little. I readily understood his seething anger toward his exploiters back home. Hadn’t I felt the same seething anger around harvest time, when our family had to sell our rice to unscrupulous dealers at an unfair price? Every year my mother would worry about how we were going to make ends meet, with the rising cost of fertilizer and animal feed. Still, I tried to explain to Minku that that was the way things were. Don’t complain. If you feel wronged, then succeed. Go all the way to the top. Then you can kick others instead of being kicked. Not surprisingly, he appeared to be not convinced with my philosophy.

“You cannot really believe that, can you? Could you really stomach trampling on your own people, people like your parents and brothers

and sisters in order to become successful? That kind of Darwinism is a fabrication, used to justify the status quo.”

I didn't really agree with him and I thought that his use of the word “Darwinism” was showy. But we kept on talking until it was dusk. Minku insisted on taking me to dinner. We went to a small mobile eatery nearby. It was a small tent stretched over short benches forming a rectangle, in the middle of which was the vendor's stand. The benches and the tent could be packed into his cart quickly in case he had to flee from the police who, in their periodic “beautification” campaigns for the city, extended their vigilance to arrest proprietors of mobile eateries, in addition to vagrants, unlicensed sellers of folk medicines, and various others.

Yet I always loved these mobile eateries. For one thing, the atmosphere was cheerful; people talking, singing. You could get substantial food for inexpensive prices, too. Since Minku was paying, I gorged myself on grilled eel and noodles, washed down with *soju*. The strong liquor hit my head and soon I was intoxicated with fumes of alcohol and pungent smells that emanated from the place. I didn't know who began singing but both Minku and I were singing a popular song, and I didn't know why I felt so sad. As he bellowed “Your silence shattered my heart,” I for some reason wanted to shout, shout curses at somebody, at anybody who didn't have to worry about the price of stinking fish or rice. When we left the eatery we were both quite inebriated. I shouted to Minku, “You know, you aren't a bad fellow but my cousin is too good for you. Leave her alone.” “You fool. Yunmi is just a friend. She is a nice girl and I like her, but I know we can never be more than friends,” replied Minku. “Yeah, you are too stinking poor to be courting her, unless you are a rat and make her pity you,” I retorted. Minku seemed visibly angry and I was afraid he would hit me but he only laughed. Then he said, “Never confuse love with pity. Remember that. Pity is never genuine, it's false, it's cheap. Understanding, yes. Pity, no.” Then he told me to just shut up or sing a song. I sang as loudly as I could as we staggered in the street: “My love was like a castle of sand . . .” Finally we parted at the subway station where I took a train home and throughout my journey I was greeted by icy stares from my fellow passengers who found my less-than-sober state obnoxious.

After that night I sometimes went to Minku's store when I had nothing better to do. I would browse through the various books or talk with Minku or some of his customers. Yunmi, my cousin, was delighted by this development. She thought my “revolutionary consciousness” was being raised at last. In truth, it didn't stir much. I only wanted to kill time and see Minku. He often invited me for a drink or coffee or a snack. Even though I attempted to pay several times, he wouldn't hear of it.

“I know you aren't well off. I am pretty sure you are economizing to save money. God knows how much college education costs, when you are trying to support yourself.”



I felt like a sponge, but I eased my conscience by doing some of his errands when I had spare time.

A couple of months passed and winter was gradually evolving into spring, though it was still pretty cold. I still saw Minku but more rarely because I got more pay from the café after becoming a waiter. I wanted to save more money before college opened. I was on my way to *Silvertown* for my evening shift that fateful day when *We* burned down. It was late evening; over the city darkness was slowly falling, eliminating the faint traces of brightness that had remained on the horizon. The night was creeping like a sidewinder, slowly establishing her dominion over the frozen gray sky. My journey was slowed down by ice on the pavement. White crystals had collected in the branches of emaciated ginkgo trees, stripped of their foliage and fluttering naked in the wind. The howl of the Siberian wind reverberated in the back alleys.

Suddenly, I saw a cloud of smoke emerging from the direction of *We*. I raced through the icy streets. As I got near the bookstore, the crowd got thicker. Pushing and shoving, I finally made it to the store which was already engulfed in flames. People were shouting for the firemen but none seemed to be at hand. Fortunately no one seemed to have been inside the building. I was wondering where Minku was but soon forgot about him as my attention was captivated by the raging fire. Have you ever thought about what a wonderful thing a big fire is? It attracts people from miles around as if they were a flock of moths. There is something glorious, something crazy about fires and men. Well, the flames danced wildly and people seemed excited. I was woken from my enchantment by a piercing cry of grief. It was Minku. He had returned from a meeting with a friend to find his shop in flames. He shouted like a madman. His eyes were wild and he attempted to rush into the building. I and a few others grappled with him and prevented him from his attempted self-immolation. He frantically struggled and shouted but there wasn't a whole lot he could do. When the firemen finally arrived, the damage was just about complete. The rest of the night, I helped Minku with sorting out what was left of his store. There wasn't that much. Yunmi showed up and swiftly burst into tears. Silently and methodically, I gathered up charred volumes of poetry and philosophy from the ashes and sorted them neatly into a pile. Minku, grieving, buried his head in Yunmi's lap.

We never learned what caused the fire. People suspected arson but the police never gave the incident more than a cursory investigation. And a few weeks later they took Minku away for questioning about his involvement in a "radical" dissident movement. This was the last time that I saw Minku. I heard through the grapevine that students in Yunmi's university petitioned for Minku's release but nothing came of it. I doubt whether they were really serious about what they were doing. I guess it was one of their fashionable hobbies, just like protesting for the rights of garment workers cooped up in sweatshops, meanwhile purchasing the designer jeans that the workers made for them. Yunmi

was ill for some time and appeared to wither away. Her family was deeply worried, especially since they now knew about her involvement with Minku. My uncle questioned me once about what I knew about their relationship, but I gave only noncommittal replies.

More than a month passed, and it was the beginning of spring. The scent of cherry blossoms was in the air and the April breeze was refreshing rather than chilly. It had been a long time since I had last seen Yunmi, so I decided to drop by her house. I am ashamed by what transpired, but maybe not as much as I should be. Please, gentle reader, be a fair judge of my shameful actions and sentence me without mercy. That's the least I can offer you for listening to my sententious tale. When I entered my uncle's house, I found my aunt talking to a well-dressed lady in the living room. I was immediately curious, for she didn't seem to be a friend of my aunt, judging from the serious and businesslike tone of her voice. After greeting my aunt, I asked for Yunmi.

"She's very busy right now, Jinho. Today she is going out for a blind date. She is going to meet a very nice young man. He just passed the civil service exam. Isn't that great? I only hope everything goes well."

In case you are dim-witted and didn't catch my aunt's drift let me explain things to you. My cousin and her mother were planning to meet with a young man and his mother, under the guidance of a go-between, or matchmaker, if you prefer. This meeting is held under the assumption that, if the young people like each other, or at least don't dislike each other, it will lead to further meetings, and in a few weeks to an engagement. Of course, the families of the young couple would furiously discuss the various wedding arrangements, the amount of dowry, who would buy the house, and so forth. All this is a common phenomenon among middle-class South Koreans. On weekdays the hotel coffee shops are full of nervous young men and women staring at their coffee cups. I was well acquainted with the courtship rituals of my homeland, but I was momentarily shocked that Yunmi was embarking on her journey toward marriage and, presumably, a new role as wife and mother. Twin pillars of our society, needless to say. I stammered, "Well, well . . . aunt . . . if it's not too, too inconvenient . . . I . . . would like to see her . . . if possible . . ."

"Oh, all right. But not for long."

Like a drunkard I stumbled into her room and found her in front of the mirror, carefully scrutinizing her make-up. She wore a yellow silk dress. She didn't greet me and went about her work. Finally she opened her lips.

"Jinho, what brings you here?"

Then she laughed, but her laughter was without mirth.

"Can't you see I am busy? I have to please my parents today. Oh, maybe myself. I don't know. I don't know anything any more."

My head was swirling with chaotic words and phrases. Memories, voices from the past, admonitions. What Minku had told me crept into my mind. Even when he was most cheerful, he would get pensive about his “relationship” with Yunmi.

“You know,” he once told me, “I like that girl. She’s most beautiful. I’d like to know her better. But I know it can never work. She thinks she likes me, maybe has some real affection for me. But it’s a fleeting fancy of hers, really. One day she will realize that she and I inhabit two different worlds and that will be the end of it.”

“Why do you keep on seeing her, then?” I inquired brusquely.

“I, too, want to believe in romance,” he replied.

A flood of rage swept over me. I kept hearing Minku’s words, “Pity is not love,” over and over again. I thought I would suffocate. The pretty room with lavender-colored wallpaper was rotating like crazy and I was feeling dizzy. With a supreme effort, I cried:

“You, you are full of shit. Do you know that?”

And I turned around and, without a moment of hesitation, ran out of the house. I ran and ran until I could no longer breathe. I didn’t care where I was going. I just wanted to run, to escape the immense pain that was bombarding my mind. The cool April breeze caressed me and I felt the quick of my being explode to smithereens.

Well, there you have it, you friendly reader. You just learned how your author lost one of the few precious places of refuge in this metropolis that remained to him. I didn’t mean to be overly sarcastic in my narration. And if I indulged in poor jokes and atrocious bits of humor, that was not my intention. You can take consolation that you have learned some new terms and strange customs of the inhabitants who occupy an obscure peninsula in the corner of the great Eurasian continent. My story has no moral, no political implications, no metaphysical significance. It’s neither subversive nor oppressive. I only have one question for you: Why does spring take so long to reach my beloved land?

CLARISE SAMUELS is the author of *Holocaust Visions: Surrealism and Existentialism in the Poetry of Paul Celan*. Samuels has published poetry, articles, and reviews, and is the author of *Loving Brynhild*, an as yet unpublished novel based on Norse mythology. She is currently working on a collection of poetry and a collection of short stories.

## Clarise Samuels / **Three Poems**

### **Among the Beasties**

here in this dreamy landscape  
 where the mist hides the dragons  
 i can sleep beside the monsters  
 because they do not notice me  
 i can sulk and brood to my heart's content  
 but what is it to them?  
 they are ferocious when provoked  
 but have no power when they are bored  
 and that explains why they are so inconsistent  
 even if i stand on my toes  
 with one thin strap fallen off my shoulder  
 so that my breasts are fully exposed  
 and then tap them on the head  
 they are oblivious  
 and will leave me alone  
 unless i pique their interest in a certain light  
 when my skin looks radiant in the sun  
 and then the beasties might fall in love  
 and sob all night with the pain  
 and beg me to do the same  
 but what is it to them?  
 they don't even know who i am  
 they think that i'm Eve in Paradise  
 and they're back in the Garden of Eden  
 it was not my fault – they wished for it  
 until they changed their mind  
 for they prefer their exquisite boredom.

## The Moment of Revolution

*A spectre is haunting Europe.*

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

a spectre is haunting me  
 the history of my love life  
 is a history of class struggles  
 instead of the purity of the moment  
 untainted by self-interest  
 every encounter must be a bargain  
 every man must trade off his favors  
 with an exchange of mutual needs  
 can't you forget what is in it for you?  
 can't you admire the moon  
 and somehow ignore the cost?  
 there is no past and no future  
 just the two of us in the dark  
 underneath a tent of stars  
 groping for Truth in this one sublime moment  
 that will lead us nowhere  
 if we're lucky  
 for any other place is bourgeois bedlam  
 and a bubbling cauldron of material needs  
 in the magic of this transient moment  
 that i will exchange only for the next  
 two pilgrims with palms together  
 like Romeo and Juliet entranced  
 this is the moment of revolution  
 when we have the courage to reveal  
 every lurid fantasy  
 every nightmarish fear  
 knowing that society wants a receipt  
 for every morsel of ecstasy  
 steal this for me  
 and hide me  
 from this unholy scrutiny.

## Armenian Nights

the Titans were the first  
to rule over the world  
but they somehow gave way  
to the Haykids of the Armenian nights  
noble Hayk would not relent  
he harassed Be'l the Titan with the skilled art of his bow  
from these then Aramenak, Amasia, Gegham, and Aram  
came the Armenian race  
and the chaos of Armenian nights  
the anger of the husband  
who is seduced by the foreign beauty  
when he thought he was renowned for loyalty and faith  
the passion of Armenian nights  
the sorrow of the massacres  
the sense of indifference  
the brutality of Armenian nights  
dismembered bodies  
and the blood of the child  
in the gutter in the wake of the atrocities  
the despair of Armenian nights  
so what were you to me?  
the doctor who ogled me with desperation  
you longed for my recovery  
you would not let the illness conquer me  
then you betrayed me and detested me,  
evicted me in horror  
i trusted you  
i loved you  
through the confusion of the rage  
through the darkness of the day  
through the beauty and the pain  
of Armenian nights.

LOUIS E. BOURGEOIS is an instructor of English at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi. His first full-length collection of poems, *OLGA*, is forthcoming this September by WordTech Communications. He is also the author of *Cora Falling Off the Face of the Earth* (Chapultepec Press).

## Late October

Louis E. Bourgeois

IT WAS LATE OCTOBER. The season of dying. At least for trees and animals. I was sick. I was walking home and sweat poured from my forehead. It was my fever, or maybe my coat. It was too heavy for this time of year and I didn't have the sense to take it off. No, I fear it was my fever and whether I removed the coat or not my forehead would still be wet. No matter.

I was trying to cross the road. My legs were stiff. I have bad circulation. A van slowed down and stopped. The driver rolled down the window and said he wanted me to take a look at some of his work. Get in, he said. No, I said. I will not take no for an answer, he said. No, I said. He said, there's a meal in it for you, and whisky. All right, I said. I got in. I had never been this close to him before. He was long, dark, and evil with gray hair full to the middle of his back. He wore silver-rimmed glasses that rested on the tip of his nose. He had on a heavy tweed coat like I did. He said his name was Jack.

It was a long ride. He lived out in the country. My work is in my country house, he said. Good, I said. We passed an exotic animal farm. He pointed out a giraffe and antelope. I was not impressed. My fever was growing worse. You look sick, he said. I am sick, I said. You should take something for that, he said. I don't know what to take, I said. He reached under his seat and handed me a pistol. It was huge and silver or maybe nickel. I can't tell the difference. Hold it, he said. I held it and stuck it out of the window to shoot. No, he said. Why not? I said. Because you have to be careful, he said. I gave the pistol back to him. He put it on the dashboard. A man's gun is his soul, he said. I agree, I said. Then there was a long silence. Silence between two people makes me nervous. I began to talk about Sartre. You are an intellectual, he

said. I don't care, I said. Why not? he said. Because I've forgotten how to care, I said. He grinned. I noticed something. I noticed he had wire protruding from each side of his upper gums. Your fangs, I said. Explosion, look at my face, he said. I looked at his face. A scar ran from his left eye out wide just below his left ear, down below his jaw line and back up by his nose. One half is silicone, he said. Or maybe he said mostly plastic. The important point here is that this guy Jack in reality had only half of a face. In the technical sense of blood and skin. Your arm, he said. I'd rather not go into it, I said. He noticed I had only one arm. You're too complicated, he said. I can't help it, I said. You're an intellectual because you have only one good arm, he said. Perhaps, I said. I like you, he said. Good, I said.

We arrived at his house a little before dark. His country house, as he referred to it. It was on about ten acres of land. There was a large pond. There were no trees. On the porch his Catahoula was chewing on some kind of meat. Maybe bone. I followed him in and sat at a small table. That meal, I said. Have a drink first, he said. He handed me a bottle of whisky. Then he handed me some manuscripts. Short stories and poems. Read, he said. He cooked while I read. I read and drank the whisky. His style reminded me of John Hawkes's earlier stuff. Particularly, *The Beetle Leg*, or, perhaps, *The Cannibal*. Ever read any John Hawkes? I said. No, he said. He'd never heard of him. Meat sizzled. Outside the wind blew, and the dog barked. No, the wind did not blow, nor did the dog bark. In any case, I was reading one of his stories called "World of Silent Ashes," and came to this line that read, ". . . and the dark fish enjoy these human remains." I remembered the pond. I looked up. He stood with his back against the stove and held a butcher knife. He was staring straight at me. He grinned, and I could see his metal fangs. I nearly shat on myself. However, I stared back at him with equal, or almost equal, strength. He waved the butcher knife and said, Control, Lucius, it's all about control. I said, Right, Jack, control. He seemed impressed. He hissed and put down the knife. I continued to read his work.

I hadn't paid much attention to the inside of the house. For, you see, my eyes were constantly downcast. I was reading one of his stories called "Everday a Burial." In a particular passage he described a room. I looked up from the story and noticed two swords glistening in a far corner of the den. If you take off the "s" from "sword" you get "word." Then I noticed three rifles standing against a window. There were also several pistols lying on a huge mahogany table in the middle of the kitchen. Some of these pistols had silencers attached to them. I knew they were silencers for I had seen silencers in the movies. But these silencers seemed homemade because they were roughhewed and didn't match well with the color and size of the pistols. Sweat poured from my face, because of the fever. I sweated through his story. He walked in from the kitchen and placed a steamy bowl in front of me. Eat, he said. He sat in a chair and watched me. I spooned the stew. It was all



meat, no vegetables. I didn't like the look of the meat. I need the bathroom, I said. He pointed and I went. In the bathroom was a small closet with no door. In this closet was a pile of filthy and mangled clothes. These clothes appeared to fit either a child or small woman. Around the toilet were strands of red and blond hair. My sweat was now mixed with tears because of an increasing pounding in my head that now accompanied my fever. I thought for certain this pulse would shatter my forehead. Are you all right in there? he said. Just fine, I said. Hurry up and come finish your stew, he said. In a minute, I said. Just checking, he said. Thanks, I said. Then he slowly walked away from the door.

When I returned from the bathroom he was gone. The front door was open. I walked out on the porch. It was now dark. On the porch was an old sofa. On the sofa was an open leather briefcase. I looked into the briefcase. In it were two pairs of handcuffs, a long and thin broken chain, and a dirty welding glove. Do you like my briefcase? he said from behind me. What do you mean? I said. Just joking around, he said. He took the briefcase and closed it. Go finish your stew, he said. I can't eat, I said. You must eat, you're sick, he said. I'm not hungry, I said. You want to go feed the fish? he said. The fever was wiping me out and my knees were slightly, but only slightly, knocking. I need to go home, I said. Sure, he said. He grinned, and I could see his fangs.

On the way home he asked me about his work. I don't know why he thought I knew anything. I told him I'd seen much worse. He seemed to like this answer. His headlights caught something dead in the road. You like raw meat? he said, somewhat jokingly. By now, my fever had grown such that I was indifferent to any perilous circumstance. I said, Human or the normal kind? He looked as if he did not know how to respond to this question. Then he said, quite seriously, I'm a killer, Lucius, pure and simple. I like you, and would murder for you. You're a cripple, so I can tell you anything and it doesn't matter. You remind me of a priest. You can do anything and go anywhere but you'll never be fully here, on Earth. There's not much of a difference between a murderer and a priest.

And with my body on fire I fell asleep that night thinking of Mother, God, Apple Pie, Patria . . .

LOUIS E. BOURGEOIS'S work has previously appeared in the *NOR*.

## Hampton Dies

Louis E. Bourgeois

MY FATHER TOLD ME to kill all of the rabbits. He told me to find a piece of pipe and hit the rabbits hard on the backs of their necks with it. I went out the back door to find a piece of pipe. I couldn't find a piece of pipe. I searched for a long time. I had to settle for a heavy stick of oak.

I began to kill. My mother watched me from an open window. There were dead rabbits all around my feet. About two dozen rabbits. They were white rabbits with pink eyes. The rabbits were exceptionally large. My mother was crying. You do it so well, she said. Father told me to do it, I said. But you're smiling about it, she said. It's fun, I said. Then one of my fits hit me and I fell onto the ground.

I was spread out and trembling all over the rabbits. My mother came out of the house and raised my head. She forced a pill down my throat. A minute later my trembling stopped. My mother brushed off her knees and went into the house. She was back at the window. She wasn't crying. She never cries when my seizure is about. She only cries before it begins.

I was putting the dead rabbits into a wheelbarrow. Mr. Semen called from the other side of the fence. It was a tall and wooden fence. I went through the gate. He had people over. Quite a few people. He wanted to know if I cared to bet some money on the cocks. I have to do something with these rabbits first, I said. I pointed to my yard. There were still some rabbits on the ground. It was easy to see what I was talking about. I walked back through the gate. I put the rest of the rabbits in the wheelbarrow and rolled it onto the porch. I went into the house. My father was on the couch reading a book. The rabbits are on the porch, I

said. It's my father's job to skin the rabbits. I told him what was going on at Mr. Semen's. May I have twenty dollars? I said. He gave me a ten. My father is a wealthy man, but he acts like a poor one. Five of that you bet for me, he said. Alright, I said. I was heading for the door when a fit overcame me. I hit the wooden floor hard. My father didn't get up from the couch. He just watched me. After it was over, he said, That one was a doozy! Sure was, I said. I wiped some blood off my mouth with my shirt, and got up to go see the cock fights over in Mr. Semen's yard.

The driveway was filled up with a lot of expensive cars and trucks. There were about a dozen people standing in a circle. I walked up to Mr. Semen. He said, Which one you want to bet on? The cornsilk-headed one, I said. I gave Mr. Semen the ten. He said, The one you picked is sure to lose, but it's three to one and if you win you'll win big. Good, I said.

Both of the cocks had razors on all of their toes. The one I had bet on was thrown into the ring first. The other was thrown in shortly after, and within thirty second the one I had bet on had his head nearly cut off. His neck was just hanging down as he slowly dripped and fell. All of the men were laughing. There's not many that get killed that soon, one said. He'll be good with rice and beans tonight, another said. I was standing there saying nothing. Someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was a guy named Carl. Carl had only half an arm. He had gray teeth and thin blond hair. What you been doing, Hampton? he said. Nothing, I said. You ain't still up at that college? he said. No, I said. Why not? he said. Because of my fits, I said. I guess they can't have you freaking out all over the place like that, he said. I guess not, I said. You want to go see some real action? he said. What do you mean? I said. Dog fights, he said. I don't have any money, I said. Just go for the blood, he said. Alright, I said.

He didn't tell me that this place was way out in Bogalusa. This was about thirty-five miles from where I lived in Lacombe. His Mercedes was spotless. We didn't say anything for the longest time. Then he reached in his jacket and handed me a piece of crumpled paper with dense script writing. I wrote this down the other day, he said. He had written: Conroy was a tough little nigger midget who lived way out in the country. Word on the street has it that Conroy was hiding out from the law because he killed his whole family one night after drinking severely from his father's gallon of homemade whisky. Conroy was a tough little bastard having grown tough through years of intense and irredeemable oppression. At an early age he had acquired the habit of shooting randomly anything he could get away with. If he was hunting out off Highway 36 and a man crossed his path, and if there were no other men around . . . Conroy was particularly interested in the killing of wild horses and stray cows such as we have in abundance here along Highway 36 and its adjunct Highway 434. Conroy was a known aphasia victim. After his suicide in his house way out here past what is

known as the “Tundra Trees,” something of these words were found on the kitchen wall written in blood presumably from Conroy’s dirty little nigger midget finger: kill red the last rites of the english jew who found prayers to be useless and typifying lost words that drained in dark puddles under the last say of the Tribunal of Crabs when the last of his confiscations were bronzed and shipped to Buchenwald got confused and really were sent to Auschwitz, god forgive my black midget ass I’m looking homeward see you after the blood sport.

- Conroy

After I read what was handed to me, I said, Why did you write this? Carl said nothing. I crumpled the paper and threw it out of the window. We were going out to Bogalusa to watch the dog fights. I had never been to a dog fight. I had heard a lot about them though, and was a little excited about going. How long does each fight last? I said. Anywhere between sixty seconds and sixty minutes, he said. What is it about dog fights that keeps you going back? I said. I’m unusually addicted to blood and money, he said. I’m quite aware of the popularity of this sport, I said. Yes, he said, very famous people are into it, J.F. Kennedy was, as well as Lyndon Baines Johnson, and Huey P. Long. Good, I said, it’s good that violence should be so upheld by the honorable men of the world. Carl rubbed his stump and sped up to a hundred miles per hour.

We arrived at this large barn out in the middle of nowhere. There were no less than fifty cars parked around the barn. We were escorted by an immense bald-headed man with blue lips. There were bleacher stands on both sides of the barn, and an iron corral where the dogs fought. The place was well lighted. The people were all dressed up in suits and such. Their deadpan faces gave an air of authority and control. Much more than I had seen up at the university before I was kicked out for being what I am. They released the dogs at the same time. Both of the dogs looked like mongrels to me. One was mostly bronze colored, and the other was kind of red with blotches of orange here and there. They fought for about three minutes before any blood began to show. There was no shouting going on like there was earlier at the cock fights. I’m not saying it was exactly silent, but I’m saying it was surprisingly silent, considering what was happening. I was bleeding from my nose. There were no bathrooms in the place. I had to go outside to take a piss. I jumped over a wide but shallow ditch. There’s cane high over my head on this side of the ditch. Nobody could see me, nobody can see me, the covering is dense. My fit came upon me, my fit is upon me. I fell hard on the soft mud. I am a fallen camera. Through the weeds I could hear Carl yelling, Hampton, Hampton, hurry up, the bronze one just got his eyes taken out! It is dark. I am a long ways from home. About thirty-five miles as the crow flies. Blood fills my brain. I remember the rabbits . . .

## Revolution of Gars

Louis E. Bourgeois

THERE WAS THIS TIME out in Chef Menteur, out by my grandmother's Fisherman's Rest, that something occurred, in the ways of mysticism, I suppose, or perhaps, merely insanity. I was standing on the shore of Bayou Savage. The boats were coming in at sunset. Skiffs, red and green, trawlers, large and small. It was a summer evening. That time in August when the gnats blacken the sky, swarming out of the rozos cane, where they live and hibernate. My grandfather was coming in with a large gar. A hundred pounds or so. They got that big back then, way before the Feds came and regulated everything, cutting out excessiveness, bringing things into proportion. My grandfather had his teeth out, I don't know why; he usually wore his teeth in during the day. This frightened me. This flapping hole scared me. I ran into the outside restroom. He ran after me. He knocked on the door. Come out of there, Lucius, he said. I'm not coming out till you put those teeth back in, I said. He laughed and laughed. He walked away from the steps, singing:

Yo-ho! little fishes Yo-ho! Yo-ho!

Yo-ho! little fishes Yo-ho! Yo-ho!

Yo-ho! little fishes don't cry, don't cry.

Yo-ho! little fishes don't cry, don't cry.

Yo-ho! little fishes you're just going to die.

He came back to the door. He had his teeth in. I could see that he did. I was looking through a curtained window. Seems like I've spent a lot of time looking through curtained windows. I have my teeth back in, Lucius, he said, come out and help me with the gar. No, I said. I didn't

open the door. He jiggled at the knob. The door opened. He grabbed me and took me to the boat shed. He didn't beat me.

It was nearly dark when we got around to the gar. My father had arrived. He'd shaved his beard, but kept the mustache. He took out a machete and chopped on the gar, skinning the gar, from the back fin on towards the head. What is that? I said. What's that coming out of its mouth? What? he said. Bring me that bucket, the white one. It's got wheels, I said. It's got wooden wheels and fire coming out of its eyes and mouth. Its gut is leaking green now, and the fire and the wheels. I fell on the soft Bermuda grass. My father and grandfather stood over me. Two men, identical and all.

I woke up the next morning in my grandmother's bed. She came in holding a porcelain pitcher and a tall blue glass. She said, Lucius, you are sick. You are not to leave the house today, darling. Through the window I could see Nigger Joe and Barclay rowing away from the launch in a green wooden skiff, heading out to Alcedia Lagoon in hope of lake runners and striped bass. I can't stay, I said, I'm going crabbing with Desmond. My grandmother set the pitcher and glass on the nightstand. Her mouth was dark, no teeth. She wet my forehead with a dish cloth. She said, You are sick. You are an only child.

I had fallen asleep and an hour later awakened by some slow knocks at the window. It was Desmond. I don't know how he knew I was in my grandmother's room. He stood at the window. He was wearing flannels and jeans. He had white rubber boots on. He didn't have but three teeth. Meet you at the launch, he said. I put on a t-shirt and shorts. No shoes. I slipped out the back door. Desmond was fooling around with the boat's motor. We're going out to Lake Borgne to bait some traps, he said. I didn't know you had traps in Lake Borgne, I said.

The sky was gray. Black clouds were moving in from the west out of Lake Pontchartrain. It would rain soon, and hard. We were pulling through the trestles at the Chef Menteur bridge. We spotted some dolphins. Dolphins are a rare sight out here, and Desmond couldn't resist. He raised his Winchester and shot about three of eight. Why'd you do that? I said. Desmond responded, They're a nuisance. They eat up all the fish and shrimp. We pulled alongside the dolphins. Dolphins have always scared me. Humanlike and soft. When they come up to you in your boat they're humanlike, when they're dead, especially if you've killed them, they appear manlike. Desmond was not an evil man, but he committed an evil act. He pointed his rifle towards the sky. He shot two seagulls, cousins to the albatross. They fell into the water next to the dead dolphins. An unlucky storm Desmond had started up there. Desmond was not an evil man, he just liked to kill what was sacred, because he never had anything sacred, he was a dirty and ignorant man, but not an evil man. Let's go get them traps, he said. I was too shy to tell him I wanted to go home.

I didn't know we were going so far past Alligator Point. On the horizon there were at least a half a dozen water spouts. Don't worry

about them, they're way off, Desmond said. He started pulling traps out of the water and putting them into the boat. I thought you were coming to bait them, I said. Naw, he said, I come to take them. I didn't know Desmond was going to steal traps, an honor code not easily broken among fishermen.

I could see them coming. They were in an aluminum bateau with an eighty Johnson, pushing about thirty-five miles per hour. You see them? I said. Desmond said nothing. He already had the whole boat filled with traps. I was forced to sit in the bow with my legs tucked underneath my ass. One man was about seven feet tall and bald. He had a huge silver revolver sticking out of his trousers. Don't worry about them, Desmond said. If they fire, we'll fire back. Beside, this 429 can outrun them. It began to rain. It rained so hard we began to lose sight of the three men that were coming at us. Bail the boat out, Desmond said. We're taking in too much water.

Through the ride in the storm I couldn't stop my head from hurting real bad. Huge fins were sticking out of the water everywhere. Dolphins? Sharks? Desmond said, Jackfish. We were moving in towards Brother's Bayou. The rain was not giving up. We spotted a boat shed alongside a rather large house. We pulled into the boat shed. There was only a small skiff in it. I could see an old man watching us from a window. Then he disappeared. I could hear the clicking of the crabs now in the traps. Desmond was loading up his Winchester. He said, Don't worry about them guys, they're not going to find us now, or ever. And don't you tell anyone about these traps. I told him I wouldn't. I wasn't worried about the men or the traps. I kept staring at the house. It was an old house but it looked to be in good shape. The man was coming out of the back door. The man kept running towards us. Desmond yelled out, We're just looking to get out of this rain. The man had a pistol strapped to his side. Desmond cocked his Winchester. The man came to the opening of the boat shed. What did you say? he said. Desmond said, Me and this kid got stuck out by Alligator Point in this storm; we're waiting for it to pass. The man didn't seem to know what to do or say. He didn't look as if he wanted to be mad. Then he said, What makes you think you can just come upon a man's property like this and take over? Desmond didn't like these words. Desmond said, This rifle here says I can do just about whatever I want. The man said nothing. Rain dripped from his pistol. Then he said, Ya'll look alright, come in and dry off. The man pointed towards the house. I was shivering. The cold was getting to me, no, I felt a fit coming on. I began shaking not shivering. I fell onto the traps. The last thing I felt were claws poking into my skin.

It was about an hour later, I woke to an old lady staring me in the face. I was lying on the bottom half of a bunk bed. There were animals' heads hung all over the walls, and pictures, of the type and feel of the late nineteenth century. Men holding rifles and shotguns, dressed in an attitude of professionalism. There were Blacks and Hispanics in the

pictures too, one I thought was Nigger Joe and one I thought was Desmond. My head was aching. Desmond was talking to the man. They were both drinking coffee and talking. The old woman wet my forehead. She said, You collapsed in the boat. They picked you off from the crabs. What? I said. I had no idea what was going on. I thought I was in some crab's dream. Desmond came towards me. What the hell's wrong with you, Lucius? I didn't know you to be the sissy type. It's my fever, I said, I mean fits. I didn't know you had fits, Desmond said. Desmond was looking mean and crazy. He was changing right before my eyes. I started thinking about the gar yesterday. Then I started thinking about snakes and alligators. Similarities, dissimilarities. It wasn't raining anymore, and the sun fell into my eyes from a high round window. We're going to lock you in a room till you feel better, the old man said. Desmond grinned. The old lady looked sorrowful. The gar came back to me brighter than the day before, without the body of a gar, but instead, with the body of a snake. It was half snake, half gar. Look at him, the old man said, he's done gone crazy. They wanted to shoot me, I heard one say it. Desmond said, We should shoot him because Lucius has a divine disease. Gar, gar, gar, was all I could say or think. My fever was hitting a high pitch. It was taking me beyond myself. Desmond said to the old man, You want to lock him in that room now? With the other patients? My legs and arms were growing numb. Where am I? I said. The old lady responded, Why, you're in the oldest duck hunting club in America. The Tallyho Hunting Club! I said, I didn't know this place existed. How far are we from Jeanfreaux's Fisherman's Rest? She said, You're very far from there. About ten miles away. She was right, that was far. Ten miles through the bayous and marsh is quite some distance. I want to go home, I said. You can't go home, she said. Why? I said. Maurice, she said. I heard some yelling coming from the next room. What's that? I said. Others who stay here, she said. Who are these others? I said. Why, the other trespassers, she said. Desmond is a trespasser, I said. But he's of a different sort, she said, he's one of us. What am I? I said. She said, You are a victim. You can't go around sleep-talking about gar heads and snake bodies and expect to get away with it.

Why not? I'm just a kid.

Doesn't matter.

Why not?

Because it can't matter.

The old lady slapped me across the face for no discernible reason. Desmond started yelling at the old man. Desmond took a swing at him and the old man fell back in his chair.

You're looking to be alone.

I was only trying to tell you what to do with the boy.

Sucking his cock and then chopping it off ain't what I'm about, old man.



Desmond grabbed me up off the bed with one arm and we fled out the door.

It was near dark. Desmond put me at the bow of the boat. He wrapped a rain coat around me. He said, I'll take you back home if you promise not to tell your folks nothing. I said nothing. Desmond untied the boat. He wasn't worried about the old man inside. The old man could have shot us from where he was. I looked out the boat shed and watched some black ducks flying in v-formation towards Washout Lagoon. Desmond started the motor. I could see the dark shadow of a gar move slowly through the boat shed. Desmond held the steering wheel with one hand and his rifle in the other. We were going back to Chef Menteur. I was glad to be alive. But I was sick . . .

Born in Brooklyn in 1953, son of an immigrant from County Cork, PAUL J. HEALY quit Queens College early to escape New York for the Canadian Rockies. But within the year, the RCMP caught wind of it. Other errant peregrinations around the American West led finally to a return to Portland, Maine. He will be the Featured Poet in the spring 2006 issue of the *NOR*.

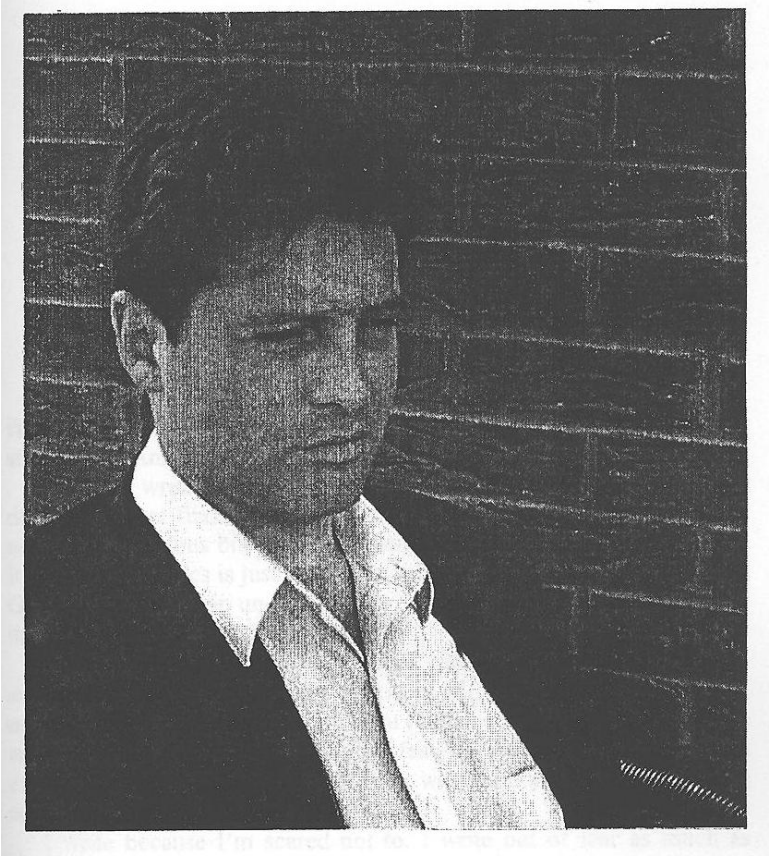
## Hitchhiking

Paul J. Healy

We would troupe over  
 a ragtag cluster of  
 homeless men  
 draft dodgers  
 hitchhikers  
 to a little luncheonette  
 three times a day  
 for oatmeal in the morning  
 soup and sandwiches  
 at lunch and supper  
 courtesy of the renowned  
 Canadian hospitality  
 the Vancouver refuge  
 of conscientious objectors  
 who couldn't go home to the States.  
 I could go anytime but  
 stayed another five days  
 with nothing to read but Kahlil Gibran  
 who is said to have had bad teeth.  
 Some guy had given me a joint  
 laced with belladonna  
 three hours in a ditch hiding  
 at a crossroads on the Peace River prairie  
 waiting for it to let up  
 so I wouldn't run into a cop  
 that stoned.

*Featured Poet*

# **Louis E. Bourgeois**



## **Animal Unchained**



LOUIS E. BOURGEOIS (see page 39) is the first Featured Poet to be represented by fiction in the same issue of *The New Orphic Review*. The prose poems are excerpted from a manuscript entitled *The Animal*.

## Save That of Blasphemy

Louis E. Bourgeois

Man on the earth is bored to death and this boredom is buried  
so deeply within him that he now no longer knows it.

Antonin Artaud

BEING ASKED TO WRITE about writing is like being put into a straitjacket. And I don't like suffering.

I guess I write as a replacement for religion, as there is something deep in me that finds all theological belief and attitude revolting. I am not only a-religious but very much anti-religious, no matter what form it takes, and politics is just as much a religion as Catholicism. The word God sends me into an un-hinged fury, whenever I hear it and no matter the context save that of blasphemy.

I write out of hatred but also out of euphoria. I think authentic poetic euphoria is the only reason to exist at all. What do I mean by this? I mean there comes that time when you realize once and for all that there really isn't any ground beneath your feet and no sky looking over you and you weep and you smile and you weep and you smile. I write to record these moments of bliss.

I write because I'm scared not to. I write out of fear as much as love.

I write because there is no choice but to write.

## Maggie

There is a lady at an open window staring into the yard; a mockingbird is foaming at the mouth. She wants to reach out and make love to the bird; she wants to become one with it. The mockingbird is dying of arsenic poison. Maggie at the window has set the trap. She is weeping.

She has not slept in years. She is afraid of dying alone.

## Maggie 2

The birds have gone mad; they are foaming at the mouth and shrieking as if their wings have been wounded.

Maggie has poisoned them, just to see what would happen.

See Maggie at the window? Her emaciated body and long thin red hair – she always smells of custard for some reason. Maggie is never bored.

She lives alone with her tomahawks and gum trees.

## Maggie 3

She kills several of the front yard birds, gathers them into a bag and walks to the edge of the yard and buries them deep. Six months later, she digs them up, boils their bones in bleach, and puts their skulls with the others.

You might say Maggie has a propensity toward nature.

## Maggie 4

Blue has destroyed her.

She does not want to recover from all her yesterdays, the spit of wasted time and an irresistible urge to slaughter everything, those temples on the horizon, those large birds on the shore, those tolling bells in the distance; all the fields of wheat and corn.

## Maggie 5

Red has driven her mad; the carpet is on fire, the books are on fire, the birds in the yard are dying one after the other.

It is not instinctual to see these things as *un-pure*, yet the Asylum wagon came and took her away just the same.

## Maggie 6

Her mind is full of birds. She has been dead for a long time now. Washer women brush her corpse. She is dead yet living in her own dreams and the White Herons and Rosette Spoonbills stare at her from a long way off.

## **A Voice from Sixty Years Ago**

Even while waiting in the anteroom of the crematorium, I wanted to believe in this world. All day long, they brought the bodies into the camp in boxes once filled with diamonds. It was then I cried hardest and longest. It was then I knew not only that life is not worth living, but it is wrong, it is wrong to be alive.

## **The Nose**

We were standing around listening to the noseless man. He really wasn't good at speaking, but sometimes what he said was of interest. He said he liked missing a nose. He explained that before his nose was chopped off in a propeller accident, he hated life so thoroughly that anything bad that happened to his body he saw as a kind of revenge against himself for letting himself get as old as forty years of age, which he emphasized as being totally unacceptable. Most of us understood what he was saying, and at least a few of us agreed with his sentiments, but it was agreed by all that we wouldn't want to lose a nose to gain such knowledge.



ERNEST HEKKANEN is also a painter and printmaker.

# Gilgamesh Revisited

Ernest Hekkanen

The Epic of Gilgamesh  
Translated by N. K. Sandars  
Penguin Classics  
120 pages \$14.99 paper  
ISBN 0-140-44100-X

REVIEWING *The Epic of Gilgamesh* might seem a belated if not an outright frivolous thing to do; after all, it was first executed in cuneiform writing on clay tablets some five to six millennia ago and, as well, its author remains anonymous; however, current events in the Babylon area of the Middle East have made me revisit it.

I first came across the Gilgamesh epic in my senior year of high school, way back in 1964. At that time, I absorbed its meaning none too well. Although I was prone to reflection, I was nonetheless a healthy young man, and a healthy young man's reflections are often disturbed by hormones and such things. Also, being an American lad, there loomed the threat of the Vietnam War, which President Lyndon Baines Johnson, the Gilgamesh figure of that time, was urging us to fight in, but which I ultimately avoided by crossing the border into Canada.

I dutifully filed *The Epic of Gilgamesh* away in a subconscious drawer of my mind, but due to recent events in Iraq, took it out again and, *voilà*, upon reacquainting myself with it, I discovered it had indeed had a profound effect on my understanding. When I reread it nearly forty years later I found it much richer than the first time round; indeed, I discovered it was a metaphor rife with meaningful infrastructure that is still unfolding, quite willfully and violently, today.

Indeed, I don't think we can fully appreciate America's invasion of Iraq, without first coming to grips with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

On the surface, the Gilgamesh epic is a well-told adventure story that closely follows 'the heroic cycles.' It is a coming-of-age tale. Gilgamesh, two-thirds god and one-third man, is an impetuous Alpha Male

Warrior whose adventures ultimately result in him discovering the boon and bounty of life, after many wrong turns, dead-ends and needless slayings.

As an Alpha Male, Gilgamesh might be best described as a right bloody royal flamer. He is a “king [who] should be a shepherd to his people,” but instead he creates chaos in his own kingdom, by bedding down other men’s wives and daughters and enlisting their sons in campaigns to further the sphere of his influence – which, in many ways, is economic in nature.

Indeed, Adam Smith, the Patron Saint of Capitalism, might very well have taken lessons from the anonymous social philosopher who chiseled *The Epic of Gilgamesh* into clay tablets. Mighty Gilgamesh, like his present-day successor, George Bush Jr., makes forays into the wider world in order to bring back material wealth to the walled city of Uruk, which “shines with the brilliance of copper.” The temple built to Ishtar, the lady of love and war, the like of which “no latter-day king [or] man can equal,” is a description worthy of America, perhaps.

In the Gilgamesh story, raw resources are transported from the countryside back to Uruk and are turned into commodities designed to add to the glory of the walled city. If we properly do our literary archeology and unfold in greater and more literal detail the meaningful infrastructure of Uruk, we are forced to conclude that there must have been a large assortment of craftsmen working to make the city an emblem of wealth and power. Later, Adam Smith would coin a term for this sort of activity. That term was *accumulation*, which he saw occurring primarily in metropolitan areas. Since the heyday of his popular social theories, his successors have replaced the word ‘accumulation’ with the words ‘capital investment,’ in hopes of obfuscating what is really taking place, I imagine.

Gilgamesh’s warring and fornicating takes a needless toll on his people. “He sounds the tocsin for his amusement,” they claim. The citizens of Uruk petition the gods to bring Gilgamesh into line, to place some restraints on him, for they themselves are impotent to do anything, for fear that they will be unjustly dealt with, if not killed. The gods hear their lament. To bring the King of Uruk to heel, and so make him a good shepherd to his people, the gods persuade the goddess of creation to create a Jungian shadow by the name of Enkidu. Enkidu is created as Gilgamesh’s equal; he is, in fact, Gilgamesh’s own reflection or “second self.”

A messenger goes to Uruk to extol the strength of Enkidu and to ask the King to supply a harlot, “a child of pleasure,” whose “woman power [will] overpower this man.” Here, we discover the archetypes for Samson and Delilah. Furthermore, if we are keen to discern such things, we find, at this point in the tale, the typecasting of woman as a thief who, given the right opportunity, will steal a man’s power. It is a bad rap that women have had to contend with for a very long time now.

Furthermore, it is a notion later foisted on us by other holy books which hail from that region of the world.

Gilgamesh, of course, subdues Enkidu, who is described as a “savage man, come from far-off in the hills.” However, it is important to note here how the gods accomplish this feat. After lying with the harlot supplied by the gods’ representatives on earth, Enkidu’s knees give way when he starts to run; his swiftness leaves him. He grows weak, “for wisdom [is now] in him.” The harlot’s control over Enkidu is made complete when she urges him to “eat bread, it is the staff of life,” and to drink wine, for it is “the custom of the land.” Obviously, Uruk was located in a region where grain and grapes grew in some abundance.

When Enkidu puts on Man’s clothing he appears as “a bridegroom,” and it is in this aspect that he now attempts to overthrow Gilgamesh, in order to “change the old order.” Gilgamesh subdues Enkidu in a metaphorical wrestling match. However, prior to the wrestling match, the King of Uruk has a strange dream that he asks his mother to interpret, and Ninsun tells him that he is destined to love Enkidu as a woman. Centuries later, a similar wrestling match would take place between Saddam Hussein and George Bush Jr., two men who are imperfect reflections of each other.

Once Enkidu, the shadow, has been subdued and, indeed, absorbed as part and parcel of Gilgamesh’s subconscious, Enkidu becomes “oppressed by idleness” and so his conscious spokesman – i.e. Gilgamesh – suggests that they go on a journey to Lebanon to slay Humbaba, the guardian of the forest, where cedars are destined to be felled and the wealth accruing from them further add to the glory of Uruk. Apparently, back then, there were no environmentalists bold enough to interfere with that pair of freewheeling capitalists and their attendant armies.

During their adventures (perhaps, it would be wiser to call them misadventures), Enkidu warns Gilgamesh that “the strongest of men will fall to fate if he has no judgment.” The warring shepherd, Gilgamesh, replies “hold close to me now and you will feel no fear of death.... Let your courage be roused by the battle to come; forget death and follow me, a man resolute in action.” And so, they go forth, like crusaders, to slay the guardian of the forest, followed by other ill-advised escapades typical of unthinking youth.

Ultimately, Enkidu, because of his enormous lack of judgment – which has to do with him blindly following the dictates of Gilgamesh – meets his fate. He dies of fever, but not before he has cursed woman for having endowed him with a modicum of wisdom. Upon hearing his curses, Shamash lashes out from heaven, “Woman, I promise you another destiny. The mouth which cursed you shall bless you! Kings, princes and nobles shall adore you. . . For you he will undo his belt and open his treasure and you shall have your desire: lapis lazuli, gold and carnelian from the heap in the treasury.”

In this manner, harlots are turned into goddesses and even saints, apparently. This is a dichotomy that holy books of every description

have passed down to us. They inform us that women are temptresses, that they are unclean spoils that can be made clean by gods and kings; and because fundamentalists of every stripe and persuasion have read these so-called holy books and taken the message to heart, they have reiterated it with great vigor down through the ages.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, roughly 15,000 words in length, we find a wealth of archetypal characters later recycled in Greek and Roman myths, and in every holy book that hails from the Middle East. We find enfolded in its pages ideas that inspired Freud and Jung. Furthermore, in the characters of Enkidu and Gilgamesh, we glimpse predecessors to Sancho Panza and Don Quixote. Also, as I've already harped upon at some length, *Gilgamesh* outlines what became the operative ethos of capitalism – a system based on plundering the countryside, in order to enrich cities. And, when it comes to literature, the tale of Gilgamesh is a near-perfect example of the novella.

Furthermore, after reading *Gilgamesh*, one comes to better understand why Saddam Hussein felt compelled to impoverish his countrymen in order to build monuments to himself, and why, in turn, George Bush Jr. felt compelled to attack Iraq. Babylon is considered by many to be the Cradle of Civilization, and for the West that might very well be true. Babylon has exported a form of economics which has come to dominate the world, and because George Bush Jr. and his cronies in the White House were determined to pursue the economic mandate first articulated in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, they, out of necessity, *had* to invade Iraq; nay, they were driven to do it, for reasons they themselves may only have dimly fathomed.

But as Enkidu, the Prototype Shadow, reminds us from his grave: *the strongest man falls to fate because he lacks judgment*, and I'm afraid this scenario is now playing itself out to the south of us, in the Good Ol' United States. In the end, I'm reminded of the often-employed visual metaphor of the snake devouring itself by first swallowing its tail. Or, as my father so often warned me, "If you know what's good for you, Ernest, you won't pursue a course of action that will come back to bite you in the ass."

It looks as though we haven't learned a lot from history. The right bloody royal flamer who was King of Uruk, and who had absolutely no regard for his subjects, is still willing with us today.

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).

## Michael Bullock / **Four Poems**

### **Lines on a Dying Friend**

She is fading  
 paling into a shade  
 shrinking into non-existence  
 her voice seems to come from far away  
 speaking to her is like speaking to a ghost  
 a haunting shadow  
 cast by the light of recollection  
 so much less real  
 than the orchid on her table

She will regain reality  
 once she has left the world  
 and become a cherished memory

### **Lily**

The lily speaks to me  
 in a pale pink voice  
 whispers longed for words  
 its petals open invitingly  
 the dark green of its leaves  
 echoes in the background  
 like the beat of a distant drum

## Cat

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 Pond

The wind weeps  
through the flutes of the reeds  
the sleeping water  
dreams melancholy dreams

The first leaf of autumn  
floats scarlet  
a burning boat  
bearing the corpse of summer

STELLA L. HARVEY is a social worker by training and has run a busy management consulting practice in Canada and abroad specializing in large-scale organizational change. She has worked in the USA, UK, Austria and Italy. She founded the Whistler Writers Group, affectionately known as the Vicious Circle, in May 2001. She has completed a novel and several short works of fiction have appeared in the *Question* and the *Pique*.

## La Straniera

Stella L. Harvey

I'VE GOT SOMETHING different for you, he says, early one Thursday morning in May. He's called you to his air-conditioned office where the tinted windows defy the force of the unrelenting Roman sun, drape the outside smog in light grey. You sit in the leather chair in front of his desk, notebook and pen positioned. He paces and eyes you out of hazel slits. You know he's looking for the light fleck in your green eyes. He and others have told you this happens every time you get excited, angry, express emotion. You look at your notebook; scribble the date in the left hand corner. He says, Last week you complained you were bored. Well, my dear Raffaella, I think I've found something more challenging for you.

He's drawn you down this dead end before. Each time you believed. Now you know nothing will change. You cock your head and smile like a doll whose string has been pulled. You briefly wonder what numbers will need smoothing now.

As special projects coordinator for one of the largest banks in the country, you work with round numbers you squeeze into squares on a spreadsheet. Appearances rather than accuracy matter in this business. You've heard this from your boss. He's also told you how smart you are. He takes the opportunity to tell you this anytime he wants something, those extras beyond calculating profit margins and spread. His smirk never falters. You counter, Not that smart, and with your quivering smile, you know he assumes you're being humble. You know what you mean. Not smart enough to get out from under him, out of the place leeching any enthusiasm you might still have. Numbers, unlike people, can be transformed and delivered. Another important lesson you've learned in this job.

Head office is sending us an outsider, he says, interrupting your thoughts.

Another one?

This is different. He adds, *Americana*.

What are they looking for?

Further efficiencies, new directions, he says and rolls his shoulders backwards, an attempt perhaps to work out a kink. You fantasize, as you've done before, about slipping something obscenely sharp into the exact same spot he's kneading. *Basta* already. We've boiled the bones, he says, cutting into your daydream. A small twitch on his upper lip threatens his smile.

What does this have to do with me? You notice you're tapping your pen. You stop and the sudden silence makes your hands itchy, your mouth dry.

You speak English. Help her understand our ways.

In other words, find out what she wants.

You're such a smart girl Raffa, he says, using the nickname reserved for family and friends.

## Ω

Although Jan is a mass of curly red hair and pale freckled skin, her eyes are a deep shade of coal. She has never liked this bequest of her mother's and would have covered her eyes with tinted contact lenses except she's afraid of sticking things in her eyes. This fear, she's convinced herself, comes from being hit by a rocky snowball when she was in grade two.

Her boyfriend loved her eyes, or at least that's what he used to say. They stand out, he said. I can tell how angry you are just by the shade they fall into when you're yelling at me. I never yell, she replied, but he left anyway. What persists is this job. Like a soother, it comforts.

Now her company has given her an opportunity to go abroad, get international experience. She doesn't speak the language, doesn't understand the culture, and although everyone thinks she likes change – a testament to the various company and position moves she's made over the past ten years – she harbors a secret desire for stability, a small group of friends, a man, and a place she can settle into. She bought new chairs, extra guest towels, and sheets in anticipation of the dinner parties and visiting friends she expected when she moved to Vancouver. Things now in storage until the day she comes back. She knows her desires are cliché, out of some woman's magazine where doing and having it all is salvation. So she doesn't share this part of herself.

The company offered a translator, a car and driver, a downtown apartment, a salary and cost of living adjustment, and help with getting all the necessary legal documents. Whatever she needed. She accepted the offer, ignored her sore stomach and the clumps of hair falling into



the bathroom sink. This is an adventure, she tells herself as she looks down from the airplane window.

Through the smog, she sees the beach at Fiumicino, the surrounding brown landscape, parched and needy. She read about the beach – *dirty, too close to Rome to enjoy a clean swim* – in her guidebook. In a few minutes, she will touch down in a city described as *chaotic, but no less romantic or fascinating to the traveler*. Will I always be the traveler passing through, she wonders. She should be excited, as excited and animated as she was when she told her colleagues about her assignment to one of Italy's largest banks. Instead, she feels empty. Again, she sees her colleagues' smiles propped to mask envy, hears their banter about the Italian culture. As soon as you try to tell them what to do, her colleagues teased, the Italians will send you packing. I never tell anyone what to do, she countered, I influence. They laughed. Is that what you call it? She smiles as she feels the bump of wheels touch down. She didn't think she'd miss those lugs so soon. She shrugs off this sentimentality, jet lag.

## Ω

Back in your family's apartment, a glass of red in hand, the television's muted blinks fill the space crammed with family pictures, books, a large *terracotta otre* handed down from your great-grandparents. You don't think about your lack of privacy, or how there's nowhere to sit when you're in this room with the rest of the family, or your desire to have your own apartment as you usually do this time of the night. Instead, you take the rare opportunity to stretch out on the two-seater *divano* and think about Jan.

You met *la straniera* earlier today. You had donned your linen suit, starched blouse and replaced *collant* with beige fishnet stockings even though women in Rome don't wear suits or pantyhose to the office after mid-April. After work, Jan invited you to dinner, said she'd love the company. When you told your boyfriend you wouldn't be having dinner with him and his family as planned, he told you to have a good time, he'd explain. Your girlfriends call you lucky because your boyfriend doesn't expect you to clean up after him, cook his favorite dishes or iron his shirts. You've reminded them on a number of occasions that he has his mother for these things. You haven't thought about your good fortune. All you know is you're bone-tired most days and the opportunity to have dinner with a stranger seemed to give you a burst of energy.

She asked you to meet her at her apartment. I don't know the city, she said, but there are lots of restaurants near here. When you arrived your eyes took in the stone arches, the wood beams, the antique doors and windows of the restored 17<sup>th</sup> century palazzo, large enough to accommodate two families. She lives in it by herself. As she watched you, her smile exposed high cheekbones; her eyes receded into an even

darker shade of black that struck you as too exotic and mysterious for someone from the Anglo-Saxon part of the world. She said, The owner is an actress. When you commented on the paintings and sculptures you know are the work of a famous Italian artist, she said, It's like living in a museum. You ran your hand over a small bust on the piano, the head of a baby swaddled in a blanket and cupped in a large hand. That's the actress at six months, she said, chiseled by her father as she lay sleeping. Later, you stared at the painting of black and red slashes and made out a distorted face, a storm of red surrounding it. You told Jan, This was the artist's most famous work, done before he committed suicide. She nodded and released an odd hum. You assumed this was her way of showing interest. But she made no further comment, asked instead if you wanted a drink before dinner. You thanked her, but declined. She poured yellow liquid into her glass. Canadian rye, she said. Getting to this part of the day is what helps me get through. Her head tilted to receive the next mouthful.

She asked you where you live. Near the airport, you said. With my family. Oh, like your own apartment within the home, she said. My own room, you replied. It's nice how families stay so close here, she said. If you ask me, we're far too independent where I come from. You wanted to suggest trading places. You know she'd change her mind if she lived like you do.

At the restaurant, you asked the polite questions you'd practiced before the evening began. She told you about her various moves, jobs, and men in one breath. I'm like Teflon, she said, men don't stick to me. Her hearty laugh surprised you, as did her openness. She met your eyes directly, leaned forward when she made a point as if she wanted to be assured you were listening. This straightforward talk made you uncomfortable. At the same time you admired it. No one you work with or know talks this way. Yes, colleagues and friends will raise their voices in feigned emotion, but this simple diversionary trick to mask genuine emotion is taught early in your country.

It is very difficult to get ahead here, you said. A university education doesn't guarantee you anything. You need connections.

You mean other women who are willing to help you. Mentors. Like that.

No. It's about who you know and who they know.

Sounds like the mob, she said, and rolled her head back in unabashed laughter. Sorry, too many Godfather reruns.

It's our reality.

Things must be changing.

You wanted to challenge her to count the number of women in senior positions at the bank, but kept quiet like you've learned to do when there is simply no point in explaining.

She gulped her wine and managed to pour more in between spurts of talk. She told you about the pretty fleck in your eyes and added, You've got the eyes I was supposed to have. My eyes are so dark and

ugly, she said. With the red hair and black eyes, I can't disappear. But hey, who cares about me? It's the same boring story. Tell me about you. She smiled again, leaned forward as if inviting you to share a secret.

## Ω

Jan returns to her apartment after dinner. She gets ready for bed and snuggles down, grabs the extra pillow and places it lengthwise at her side, cuddling it close. She loves feeling the warmth beside her. Her loneliness never quite disappears, but the longing in the pit of her stomach is less compelling tonight when her thoughts wander to her new friend. That's such a romantic name, she said to Raffaella when they first met at the office. My grandmother's, Raffaella responded, eyes averted.

She thinks about Raffaella's hazel eyes, the light fleck that trembled when she talked about the art in Jan's apartment. Raffaella knew a great deal about the artist. I can never retain that kind of information, she thought as she listened to Raffaella, too much junk about improving efficiency, service, and the bottom line in my brain to grow an appreciation for art and its history. Self-conscious about her lack of knowledge, she had asked Raffaella if she'd like something to drink. What an idiot, she thinks now.

During dinner Jan had felt as though she was doing all the talking. I've been very lucky, she'd told Raffaella and felt her face redden. Jan's colleagues and family assume she's comfortable talking about herself, tease her that she's always got something to say. She knows it's a role she puts on, like the suit and high heels she slips into every morning.

Raffaella asked a number of questions – how did you get into this business, where did you work before, why did you decide to come here. Jan understands the questions were Raffaella's way to make conversation, stave off nervousness. As the evening progressed, Raffaella's cherubic, polite smile widened. They teased one another about their accents, flirted with the waiter, tried each other's food. The arrabiata was too spicy for her, the saltimbocca too lemony for Raffaella. At the end of the evening, Raffaella gave her the customary double-cheek kiss, invited her to dinner on Sunday and suggested Jan call her Raffa.

A nickname?

Reserved for a friend, Raffaella said. And now that we're friends I can give you this back. Raffaella handed her the tip Jan had left on the table for the waiter. We don't tip like you do in America.

But . . .

The waiter understands. We all understand.

She started to say something else, then stopped herself. Instead she nodded as if she understood, slipped the bills in her purse.

Jan repeats the one word Raffaella said, *friend*, and falls asleep, content.

Nervous and irritated, you remove the coffee grounds from the porcelain sink, rinse the stain and, when it doesn't flow away, you scrub it into a white shine. You then wipe the counters. Your boyfriend, who seems to stand like a cardboard cutout in front of everything you need, wonders out loud when this burst of energy struck you. You feel driven to choke someone. He seems the perfect target. You ignore him; ask where his mother's salad is. Was I supposed to bring the salad, he asks, but when he sees your reaction, he puts his arms around you and says, It's in the bowl Raffa, in the fridge along with the chorizo and bresaola. You hug him and pat his back, look at your nails, think of your appointment next week. He senses your limp response, lets you go.

She'll love us, he says.

You wonder, what's to love, but say, Don't forget to pay me for half the food I bought for lunch.

Your fifty-fifty thing drives me crazy.

The receipt is on the counter.

You take one last look at the table you've set when you hear the buzzer. Your mother and father wait for your signal. You look at your boyfriend; he smiles and crosses his fingers. You nod, run your fingers through your hair and walk out into the corridor to answer the door.

Three hours later, you are finishing your last planned course. Jan practices her Italian with your boyfriend, your parents have gone into another room to watch the early news. You sip espresso, pick at the watermelon pieces turning into watery mush on the plate in front of you. The early awkward moments of introductions and quiet smiles have washed away. You are satisfied with the linguine and mussels you prepared, the discussion over lunch, despite your mother's gushing over your guest's dark eyes – My daughter should be so lucky, the unfortunate one has her father's eyes – and your father's monologues about young people, their inability to appreciate what they have. You remained quiet so as not to encourage him; your forced smile permanently stuck. Jan looked across at you and winked. She asked questions, listened intently while your father spoke, and then said, My father feels the same way. And who could blame him. He sacrificed a great deal to build a life for us. Your father nodded in agreement, and smiled. She charmed him into silence. You haven't been able to do this since you were a little girl, making up stories while sitting on his knee.

Your boyfriend is making a point you haven't caught. Where are you? he asks as he puts his arm around you and calls you, *mia sognatore*. He tells Jan it means my dreamer. He gave you the nickname a long time ago because listening is not your strength. He winks and his face brightens into the kind of puppy-dog innocence and attentiveness you once found attractive.

You say, I listen when there's something important being said. You roll your shoulders as if trying to shed something. He doesn't move his

arm. You lean back, squeezing his arm against the back of the chair. This time he's obliged to free you.

Jan smiles, looks at her watch and says, I've really enjoyed this.

Your boyfriend reaches over and touches her forearm. We hope to see you often, he says. You notice Jan's dark eyes lighten, her face reddens.

She was very nice, he says to you as he helps you clean up. A great person to work with, no?

It's difficult for strangers to fit in, you say.

He's about to say something else but as you scrub settled tomato sauce from the counter's grout with a small brush you bump his mother's bowl with your elbow. It crashes to the floor. You stare at the pieces of blue ceramic while he searches for a broom.

## Ω

You are sitting in Jan's office early Thursday morning. She's telling you how lucky you are to have a boyfriend like Stefano.

Yes, everyone tells me.

But?

Nothing.

He's so charming, she says. How long have you been together?

Twelve years.

That's longer than any married couple I know.

He wants me to move in with him and his mother when we get married. I'm not rushing.

It's hard to find a man like that.

Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Your discussion is interrupted by your boss. Ladies, he says, I need to speak with Jan. Will you excuse us, Raffaella?

You notice she smiles they exchange. You leave Jan's office irritated with him for interrupting your time with her. Later you realize you're irritated with her. You ignore the feeling; concentrate on the forecast numbers due today.

## Ω

Time passes, Jan thinks, as she tries to concentrate on the news program. The volume is high, so she can hear each word enunciated. I've been here a month, and I'm getting the gist. It's Friday night and she's waiting for Raffaella. When she arrives, they'll walk over to the trattoria. Raffaella is forty-five minutes late. Rome is a big city, Raffaella said when Jan confronted her a couple of weeks ago after waiting in the busy Piazza de Popolo where she jostled with motorcycles, pedestrians and tourists for space. While she waited, Jan watched the chaos, listened to the bits of conversations of people bumping up against her, wondered again about the phenomenon she'd observed

since moving to Italy – short older men with young leggy beauties on their arms.

The excitement of being in the busy piazza fizzled into irritation when fifteen minutes passed, then a half an hour. Claustrophobic, eyes burning from exhaust fumes, she tried calling but Raffaella's cell phone was off. She stood for an hour, refusing to leave the spot she'd agreed to meet Raffaella.

It's difficult to be on time, Raffaella said when she arrived.

Not if you leave enough time.

When in Rome. Raffaella shook her head. *Americana*.

After a bottle of wine and dinner, Jan relaxed. Raffaella had a point. I'm too uptight.

Old habits die hard, she says to herself now, bored with the news, pacing. Her stomach rumbles. She grabs some grapes, then hears the bell.

Can you let me in, Raffaella says.

Traffic?

I'm starving and hot.

Jan grabs her purse, locks the door and walks down the stairs to open the wooden doors to the parking area, trying to ignore her recurring thought. What about me?

They walk to the trattoria, a ten-minute walk, focused on avoiding cars, dog shit and groups of tourists led by umbrella-carrying guides blaring the history of the Piazza de Spagna in French, German, Japanese and English. Small motorcycles screech by them, their riders, with cell phones tucked underneath unbuckled helmets, talk and guide their noisy beasts through the crowd. When they arrive, the waiter tells them they were about to lose their reservation. Their cut-off is one hour. Raffaella says, The traffic was especially bad tonight. They exchange smiles. Jan notices the green sparkle in Raffaella's eyes. She knows the waiter has caught it too.

A charmer, Jan says, when they are seated.

Everyone understands traffic in this city, Raffaella says. It excuses many things.

So it wasn't the traffic.

I met someone at a party my sister gave last week. He called. Raffaella takes a sip of wine. She dribbles onto her blouse.

It's a hazard to drink and smile.

Raffaella's smile stays in place.

I'm going out with Marco later tonight.

I take it you're not happy with Stefano.

It's more complicated than that. Families are involved. He's at my house for dinner three times a week. My mother invites him. Or his mother invites me to their house. This is how things continue. Twelve years pass.

So if you break up, you break up the whole family.

I'm not talking about breaking up. I just want to have some fun. Make sure there isn't someone else for me.

Fun is good, Jan says. Understand what you're doing.

A man puts his hand on Raffaela's shoulder, smiles pearls at Jan and says, *Ciao belle*. Jan feels his eyes scan her face. She returns a smile and averts her eyes. Raffaela stands and towers over Marco's muscular but small frame. They kiss each other on the cheek while Jan watches them. Good looking, but shorter than Stefano, Jan thinks. Raffaela introduces Marco. His hand is damp, and limp, Jan thinks and pulls her hand away quickly.

After dinner, Jan gave Raffaela the keys to the parking garage and told her she could return them on Monday. She doesn't have any use for them anyway.

## Ω

She watches the lights of the Via del Corso and the stragglers leaving the *enoteca* on the corner. She wonders what it would be like in a relationship for twelve years. The longest she's been able to manage is a year. And she screwed that up with a Marco-type fling of her own.

She sees Marco and Raffaela walk up the street, continues to watch them as they stand under her window. He's greasy, Jan says to herself, and chides herself, but what do I know. Raffaela is talking animatedly, her hands moving. Jan can't hear what they are saying, but she hears Raffaela's laugh. It's different tonight, loose like her shoulder-length hair. Her face bright, open under the streetlight, for once not veiled in etiquette, doing what's proper. She likes to see her friend this way. Jan resolves not to spoil Raffaela's happiness. She'll keep her own experience to herself.

## Ω

You sit in your car, wondering if Jan is asleep. You want to discuss Marco, the way he held your hand, moved a strand of hair from your face, said he didn't want anything to stand in the way of your smile. Instead, you sit in the car mouthing the words he said, how he looked directly in your eyes as if he was serious about getting to know who you really are. The butterflies in your stomach make you smile. Again, you think about ringing Jan. You decide to keep this pleasure to yourself. You'll talk to Jan on Monday.

## Ω

Jan and Raffaela are huddled in Jan's office. The door is closed, and they talk quietly about Marco. This sharing reminds Jan of high school and the best friend who confided exploits with the psychology teacher.

That was the last time she remembers having a best friend, shared secrets.

He's a peacekeeper, works in Bosnia.

What's he doing in Rome?

A one-week break, Raffaela says. Then he goes back.

Then what?

Don't know. I'm seeing him tonight.

And Stefano?

I told him I was having dinner with you.

I don't want to do this. I like Stefano.

I don't have anyone else, Raffaela says, places her hand over Jan's.

Okay. Okay. Until you figure stuff out.

And Marco? What do you think of him?

You guys look good together.

We do, don't we.

## Ω

I can't reach him, Raffaela says over dinner two weeks later.

He's in Bosnia, Jan says. I'm sure telephone calls aren't easy to make.

He told me to call whenever I wanted.

Look at you, Jan says. I haven't seen you this nervous.

It's important.

Give him a chance, Jan says. She wants to hug Raffaela, or reach out to her, but stops herself.

When she first arrived in Rome, Jan was uneasy with the open displays of affection – male colleagues linking their arms in hers as they walked down the hallway discussing quarterly results, the secretaries in the office hugging her, the cleaning lady pinching her cheeks – and stiffened to the touch. She slowly relaxed into the Roman affection and stopped holding her body rigid as though an imaginary ruler delineated a two-foot demarcation zone around her. Instead, she allowed herself to feel the other person's body against her own, with everyone that is, except Raffaela. Jan had no explanations for this. It was what it was.

## Ω

A week passes and you've finally talked to Marco. Over the persistent static he told you that he enjoyed the time you spent together, but he doesn't feel a relationship is in store. You said, I don't understand. He said, I have to focus my attention on my work. I have no time for anything else.

When you told Jan she said, I understand where he's coming from. I've focused on work my whole life.

Now what?

Stefano is a good man.



Yes. Stefano.

Maybe you need a break from him too.

Not possible.

Tell your family you need some time away from Stefano. Tell them what you're thinking, what you want.

*Naïve Americana*, you said, and wondered why you confided in her in the first place. She hasn't been able to understand your reality. Not with Stefano. Not at work. Just last week, when you didn't get the month-end report done on time, she confronted you. You told her some of the senior managers didn't provide the data you needed to complete your analysis.

Have you tried talking to them? Jan asked.

In my position, I can't go into a senior manager's office. Make requests.

If you don't say something, how will they know what's expected?

I don't expect, you say.

She ignores you, talks about sending a memo to all senior managers setting out timelines and expectations. If they know what you want, they'll give you what you want.

## Ω

Another month passes. Jan meets with your boss a couple of times a week, taking your place. Initially, you didn't mind, now you wonder what they talk about. When you ask her, she says, He likes to talk through ideas, get a second opinion on plans he's making. It's all talk, you say. It's better not to feed him any ideas. Just listen. She teases you about being unfair, says you're the half-empty type. She later explains the expression you aren't familiar with and you feel insulted. You're sure your eyes give you away.

And besides, you know I have an opinion about everything, she says. I can't just shut up, be polite, and not contribute. You wonder if she's connected your politeness with not contributing, made other assumptions about you.

I'm suggesting we merge the three human resource agencies we acquired when we bought out the two community banks, she says. Save a ton of money.

There's no will. The heads of these agencies are defiant. They won't let a merger happen, you say in an attempt to warn her.

This is a great move for our shareholders.

That's not how it works here.

No harm in shaking things up.

This is not a game.

She's already picking up enough of the language through tapes and private lessons that she doesn't need you to act as interpreter. She could, however, use a lesson or two in the realities of your culture. You think of suggesting this to her, but decide against it. She'll learn. Be-

sides, you don't have the time to give her these lessons. You've gone back to playing with numbers.

Ω

In bed at the end of a long day, Jan wonders why Raffaella has become distant. Jan convinces herself she's pushed Raffaella too hard, hasn't taken the time to understand how difficult it must be for Raffaella to do her job in a bank where it's easier to talk about each other than to talk to each other. And they call this bullshit being polite. Easy for me to say what I think. They expect this from *la straniera*. They expect something different from their own. And sure, she needs less of Raffaella's help with translation. Raffaella couldn't possibly resent this, could she? She's a smart woman who should be looking for other challenges. The translation only adds to Raffaella's workload.

Then again, maybe it has nothing to do with work at all. She does spend time with Raffaella and Stefano. Maybe too much time. Last Sunday when they were in the car heading to the beach, Stefano quietly said, I asked her if she'd like to go to the flea market later today. Raffaella replied, I wouldn't be disappointed if she didn't come. Jan plays with the notion she might have misunderstood the Italian, but when she repeats the words, she knows she understood them correctly. Her stomach aches.

She gets out of bed and paces. She will need to talk to Raffaella. This friendship is too important to lose.

Ω

When you arrive at work, she calls you to her office. We need to talk, she says. She tells you how much she appreciates your friendship, the difference it made in her transition. You think, your boss has already spoken to her. He told you yesterday that he would. We're letting her firm go, he said. When you asked why, he replied, the HR heads are after me. Calling me at home about the *Americana's* crazy ideas. She takes things too far. You found it hard to contain your smile, knew in any event, your eyes would give you away. It's difficult for *stranieri*, you said, to understand. With his back turned to you, he said, She doesn't really belong here, and you felt vindicated. He finally gets it, you thought.

I think something's happened between us, Jan says now. I'd like us to resolve things. This friendship is important to me. You stare at her, say, I don't know what you're talking about. You seem distant, she says. I've been busy with marriage plans. You're getting married? November. Stefano is such a great guy. Yes, you reply. She asks, Are you happy? Jan, you think too much.

At that moment, your boss calls Jan. He wants to talk, she says. Go, you say, he needs you. Her dark eyes needle you. You realize she

doesn't know what's about to happen. For a single breath, you think about warning her, and in that same breath decide to say nothing. It's not your job, your place to get involved.

You sit in her office for a few more minutes and look around at this beautiful space she acquired because she was *la straniera*. You wonder if he'll give you this office now that she's leaving. You doubt it. People cannot be transformed as easily as your numbers. Besides, there are more important things to think about, the addition Stefano's family is building on their home for you, the child that will come shortly after you're married. You return to your cubicle and the only thing you're sure of, your numbers.

MARK SANDERS' second full-length collection of poetry, *Here in the Big Empty*, will appear in 2005. Poetry will also be appearing in *Poetry East*, *Wascana Review* and *River City*, and creative prose in *Glimmer Train* and *Georgetown Review*. He is a professor of English at Lewis-Clark State College in Idaho.

## Mark Sanders / **Four Poems**

### **Toastmaster**

Friends, I salute you with a brew or two—  
or six—you lovers and holders of zest  
for life. But—there's a weather change, something new—  
Forget about it. Let's lay John Barleycorn to rest.

Nearly, the lilacs bloom—wild lilies, too. The rest—  
mean ditch flowers, thistle and milkweed, that pursue  
their banks and flood the lawn. A freshening quest  
against sheep pen and feedlot. You know—don't you?—

that things, like stinks, change? But—I drink to you  
as one last time—and toast my ex-wife, bitch at best.  
Salute! all the beers I've ever drunk that led me through—  
what?—the dark. Or light? Damn it! Lay Barleycorn to rest.

## Butchering Chickens

Grandma bit her lip and scowled  
 as her hands worked over a carcass.  
 Feathers, scalding wet, rushed  
 through her fingers, fell,  
 and the bird was bald.

My chore: catch the broilers,  
 panicked and squawking.  
 I'd run one to a coop-corner  
 and trip it with my poultry-crook,  
 haul it screaming like a siren to the block.

The chickens knew what was coming,  
 instinct and scent of fowl blood  
 sunk into those pea-brains.  
 They bawled and brayed  
 until the corn knife joined

its rusty blade to narrow neck,  
 and the head would drop.  
 Blood spurt its warm stream onto black dirt  
 where staring, startled heads blinked.  
 Opened beaks tried to swallow.

I was seven the first time  
 I held the knife and put it through.  
 Grandma and I worked all day  
 while the men baled hay or picked corn.  
 We found a rhythm in the pop

that found its way past bone to stump.  
 A cadence we obeyed.  
 I'd catch and chop, catch and chop,  
 and Grandma's hands stripped the birds  
 and singed off the pinfeathers in alcohol blaze.

Our paring knives made their slits,  
 and out came the guts,  
 ropes of warmth and slippery stench.  
 The whining dogs, the mewing cats  
 stood outside our circle begging—  
 anything we didn't want,  
 foot or bowel, was theirs.  
 The older dogs slipped forward

to crush skulls in the vises of their jaws.  
Ants clotted the blood.

All of this took time.  
The blood draining  
from the spigots of necks,  
the flip and flop of dying bird,  
the shivering wings.

When Grandma's work held me at halt,  
I'd turn a head into a finger puppet.  
It was a country thing,  
unquestioned and, it seemed,  
natural.

Never had it been unpleasant—  
rather, a curiosity.  
Like one feels when doing something spiritual.  
Even here was immersion:  
life, death, and the attempt to live despite death.

Done, the chicken sizzled and spattered  
in skillet grease. Fresh bread  
hatched in the oven, and sweet corn's yellow  
deepened in its boiling water. Sometimes,  
playing cards,

we'd wait upon the men for supper. Sometimes,  
when Grandma'd rise  
to pass behind my chair to turn the meat,  
smell of feathers still upon her hands,  
she'd lay her plucky fingers

along the strings of my tired shoulders,  
rub the strained music there, rub there, rub  
there. In my head, the headless birds  
danced and leapt in macabre ballet  
until my own neck relaxed  
and a curtain fell of comfort,  
of home and all things steady and peaceful.

## In Texas, about October in Nebraska

Once, an ice storm at September's end  
brought elms down—the all-night bend  
and pop of limb, the wrecked wood on glazed lawn.

Ice pellets fought glass, the wind like the pain in a yawn,  
stretched so far so long  
you'd swear your body halved at the head.

This, how we knew summer was done.  
Light lines broke, our homes  
lit by old lanterns, committed, as to love, to dark.

Cold defined—summer had turned a blind corner;  
shock of shocks, winter murdered it.  
No time for fall.

My mother unpacked quilts. I wore extra socks,  
squeezed myself into a cozy ball in bed or on the couch.  
School cancelled. Cars skated,

and a dull thud meant someone hit a tree, a curb,  
someone else stupid enough to chance the trip.  
Snow came as it had to.

In the deep frost of home knowledge,  
the heat gone, we braced like the huddled green of hedge  
where the cold could not reach.

Here, south Texas, the cold never reaches either.  
October is another summer's day. Jubilation. Joy. Joy—  
in loss of freeze, of snow, of iced avenues?

Sameness appalls. Weather should not be  
breath-regular,  
but be a life itself, tumultuous, malevolent.

Knock trees down, eradicate, erase. Absolute  
blackout in the snow's tonnage. Wake feeling by killing it.  
Something in my soul needs zero.

## For Greg Kuzma

Tonight, in the dark lamplight of my study,  
 huddled among cat-quiet books asleep on their shelves,  
 sleek, curiously latent,  
 I hear the city's insistence,  
 its highway-hum, the siren-distraction.  
 Outside, fog webs the black tree limbs.  
 Suburbs named Brook Forest, the Oaks,  
 are a darker habitation  
 than the plain-dark, the plain-barrenness  
 upon which I grew.

Old friend, I envy you your little island,  
 your house on the edge of town, almost country,  
 its distance from the buzzy automobiles, the lumbering, clunky trucks,  
 the open field nearby. I imagine you at yard work,  
 the grass tuft-thick, foot-pillows;  
 the dogs at their doggy-duties: the bark, howl, sniff, and shit.  
 Here, the muck-choked grass grows only so high;  
 the turb-blossom is refinery stench.

Do you remember my visit? The hedge along your walk,  
 a snake tipped out its head and blinked back into the leaves.  
 My kids, babies then, ran the lawn,  
 waxing themselves in late-summer heat,  
 swimming rivers of leaves.  
 How small and safe they were,  
 how infant the hurts.

Or that time before?

You came to the house on the hill,  
 in country rain, the mud-greased roads.  
 The ground expanded all around us; the new crops,  
 just-green, the seasonal seam.  
 Did I make too much of it?  
 The ecstasy of friendship  
 was the trees rocking to a music we felt.  
 My daughter danced for us, my son grinned  
 until he slept in the couch of his mother's arms.  
 The cat and dog approved of the bearded stranger,  
 pawing and begging to be pawed back.

Somehow, these things slip from me.  
 Somehow, to restore them, to hold them,  
 I come here, in dimness,



to write them back.  
Having pursued something outside myself,  
I wonder at the small perfection of that former time,  
how it snaked into the fabric woods,  
disappearing.

Now, when I wish for the universe of yard,  
the sweet manure I am made from,  
I half create the smell  
from the ranker portions of myself  
to make it more real,  
the absence more raw.

One might say, Embedded in the ruined property of self is poetry.  
In that wonderful place where you are,  
you know this, too.

FABRIZIO NAPOLEONE was born in Switzerland and grew up in Hamilton, Ontario. He has had short fiction published in *Existere* (York University), *The Nashwaak Review* (St. Thomas University) and in *Insomniac's* 2004 noir collection, *Revenge*. Fab is currently holed up in a mountain cabin in Ellicottville, New York where he is working on a collection of short stories.

## Sunny Comes with a Smile

Fabrizio Napoleone

“TELL ME A STORY,” said Sunny, exhaling a small white puff of smoke.

Paul studied her. He noticed the way she sat on the bed, her arm arched over his waist, her knees folded to the side like a mermaid. She offered him the joint. This is one of those subtle but key moments, he thought, where you open a small door inside and let her in. Sunny was the first one he'd felt anything for since his wife, even though he wasn't in love with her when she died.

Sunny nudged him again and he took the joint from her. Her finger gently traced the scar on his abdomen. His hand moved across her curves, over the freckles on her thigh clustered together like some stellar constellation. Paul took a deep drag and looked around the room. The room was decorated in typical bed and breakfast fashion; quaint second-hand furniture, a four-post bed and a few antiques gathered from the farmhouses on the outskirts of Ellicottville. As he glanced out the widow, Paul saw the snow-covered Appalachians of western New York. Stuck into the window frame was a postcard from some exotic island, and on the nightstand were fresh yellow flowers. The flowers reminded him of a story he once wrote for the paper. The article was a nature piece about a beautiful but poisonous flower. If you didn't handle it properly, it could kill you. Sunny was kind of like that. A small painting in the corner of the room hung askew, as if forgotten, a ship in a harbor on dark blue velvet.

“OK. I've got a story,” he said, taking another drag from the doobie. “A ship is heading home from some far off place.”

“What kind of ship? Where was it coming from?” said Sunny.

“This was a couple hundred years ago so it was a sailing ship, most likely the Orient. Yes, the Orient,” he decided. “And, it’s attacked.”

“By whom?” asked Sunny.

“Pirates of some kind,” said Paul. “Will you be interrupting often?”

Sunny bit her lower lip.

“There’s a fierce, bloody battle,” Paul continued. “All the mates are killed but just as the pirates are about to whack the captain, a wicked storm brews up and the pirates abandon ship in an effort to save their own. The ship is tossed around in the storm, the sail is torn to shreds, and the hull is badly damaged. Water begins to pour in over the sides. The captain is as weary and battle-worn as the ship itself. For days the same storm that had saved him is now close to finishing him off. Finally, the sea calms, the storm fades and a thick fog sets in for several more days.”

Paul paused, shut his eyes and ran his hand along Sunny’s thigh, near the stellar cluster, caressing her as if trying to coax a genie from its bottle.

“One night when all seems lost, the fog begins to lift and in the dark sky the stars appear one by one. The captain spots Polaris. You know the North Star?” he asked.

“Little Dipper, right? Shows the way north,” answered Sunny.

“Very good.” This was one of those moments when Paul felt more like her teacher than her lover, or maybe they were the same thing.

“The captain points the ship east and after a few more days, he finally spots land. He doesn’t recognize the rocky coastline but soon finds a small, calm inlet. The ship drifts through the inlet until the captain comes to an old dock. He starts looking around for things he can use to fix his ship. He walks down the beach which is lined with huge palm trees, you know, majestic-like.”

Sunny glanced at the postcard stuck in the window frame.

“Then, out of nowhere comes a huge, mean, slobbering old dog.”

“My dog’s not mean,” said Sunny, knowing he was describing her dog.

“Yes, but he does slobber,” said Paul, pulling her closer. “So, the dog gets closer and closer.” He kissed her behind the left ear. “The captain can hear the dog growling and he can see its humongous teeth.”

“Is that a word, humongous?” said Sunny, biting her lower lip.

Paul ignored the question, kissed her on the neck. “So, this is the kinda big old mean dog that’s been trained to keep away pirates and other undesirables.” He reached her shoulder. “The captain has to act quickly. He needs something, anything that can distract this awful beast . . .” Paul thought for a moment. “He reaches into his coat and pulls out a hat of all things.”

“A hat?” said Sunny.

“Yeah, a hat,” said Paul. “He won it from a Chinaman in a poker game. It’s perfectly round and semi-elliptical in the center, like a Frisbee.”

Sunny smiled, she could relate.

“The captain flings the disc into the air to distract the big canine and much to his surprise, the dog turns to chase the hat.”

“Not much of a guard dog,” added Sunny, arching her back. He had reached her belly button.

“So, the dog takes off with the hat and the captain follows it all the way down a long, curvy beach.” Paul kissed his way down her right thigh. “The captain finds a small cabin. It’s well built and tucked in behind the palm trees. No one is around and it’s all boarded up, a fort almost. And then, ever so faintly, the captain hears a sound coming from inside. He puts his ear to the door. A sweet, soft voice is humming, singing a song – something about the Velvet Sea.

“The captain decides to knock on the door. The humming stops. He knocks again. No one comes. ‘Well,’ said the captain, ‘I guess the voice doesn’t want to meet me.’ And just as he’s about to turn and walk off, the door opens – there stands a beautiful girl, long, fair hair. Just about your age, early twenties, cute smile. And, of course, standing beside her was that dog with the hat in its mouth.”

Sunny laughed. “And then?”

“And then, he grabs her like this and he takes her into his arms and he ravages her.”

Paul and Sunny made love again.

## Ω

Sunday night, with his skis and her snowboard strapped to the roof, they wound their way through the mountains and headed back to the city. As the car’s interior warmed up, Sunny took off her shoes and socks – a habit Paul had noticed about her – always going around bare-footed.

Sunny turned down the radio. “Do you miss her?” she asked. They had hardly spoken of his past.

“Am I the subject of a term paper?”

“Strictly a clinical study,” said Sunny. “I’m not getting personally involved.”

“Sometimes,” he admitted, a confession he hadn’t even allowed himself until that moment. “What about you – any major relationships?”

“I once dated the bass player from Wide Spread Panic.”

“How did that go?”

She just smiled and mouthed the word ‘fine’. Sunny put her bare feet up against the windshield. The ring on her toe tapped to the rhythm of the music coming from the stereo. “My first boyfriend was from the church.”

“What happened?” asked Paul.

The steamy outline of her toes on the windshield made ten little angel heads, like a choir.

“Not sure,” she said. “I think maybe as I saw the path ahead of me, I panicked. Marriage, babies, housewife, a house on the escarpment. Sunday walks along the trail, to the lookout point. I don’t think I was ready for any of that. Oh, I love this song,” she said, turning up the volume. “Wanna go to a rave tomorrow night?”

Paul looked over at the impression of her feet on the windshield. The toe ring caused one of the angels to have a collar. “I can’t,” he said. “I’m interviewing an economist.”

Paul thought back on how he had met Sunny. He was on assignment writing a band review for *The Spectator*. The Fat Cats, a local jam band, was celebrating its tenth year of making music. The nightclub, La Luna, was teeming with college kids from Mohawk and McMaster and some of the local hippies were there as well, the ones that could smell good music. As the room waited for the band to come on, Paul turned on his bar stool and there she was, just sitting there, this glowing, radiant girl.

“What are you reading?” Paul asked.

She showed him the cover: *Something Meditation*. He was never good at recalling titles.

“Is it for school?”

She nodded. “Psych major.”

“Must be hard work?”

“Yeah,” she said. “But it’s all good.”

And there it was: that smile.

“Do you know how the Hari Krishnas meditate?” asked Paul. “They repeat to themselves over and over. ‘Hari Krishna, Hari, Hari Krishna’ until they get into this mental zone, kind of like the drummer in a band, you know, off in their own little rhythmic world – a cosmic mind journey.” Paul had no idea what he said after that. Her smile was frozen in his mind like a blinding camera flash and he just followed the light.

Their first outing together was a hike with her dog, along the boardwalk through the Dundas Marshlands. A few days later they met again at a repertory theatre in the village near the university. Sunny chose the movie, *Something Foreign*, thinking it exotic. During the film, Paul turned and watched Sunny for a moment; the way her hair was tucked in behind her ear, her face glowing in the reflected light from the screen. He wondered what it was she saw in him, an older man. Perhaps she found him attentive and a little more sophisticated than the mooks her own age. Maybe it was the fact that Paul hid his vulnerable spots well. Maybe it was the patience he had with her, just happy to be *with* her.

It was during these early days in their relationship that Paul felt alive again. So alive, in fact, he almost brought himself to write poetry, something he hadn’t done since he was Sunny’s age. As much as he tried to simply enjoy the moment, he couldn’t help but picture himself with her in ten years’ time. The age difference would become less of an issue as the years passed. Sunny was a bright and beautiful young

woman. She came from a strong family background, serious and industrious. Paul thought she would make a good mother, eventually. He knew why he was with her, but he still wondered what she was doing with him – an almost forty year-old journalist and a widower. Funny thing; whenever he looked at Sunny he never compared her or even thought of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had been killed in an accident three years earlier. Paul was driving, heading up the Jolly Cut, an access road carved into the side of a wall of limestone on Hamilton's escarpment. It was a freak accident; a boulder, the size of a truck tire, had come loose two-hundred feet above and crashed onto the Audi. Paul was in critical condition for a month. Elizabeth was killed instantly.

He blamed himself. Not because of his driving, but because he had *wished* it to happen. It wasn't a secret that their marriage was shaky. They hardly slept together during that last year, and despite the fact that Paul felt the marriage was doomed, they were trying to work it out.

The night of the accident they were on their way to see a marriage counselor. They began to argue, about what, he couldn't recall. It was all fuzzy to him now. He felt the pressure building up inside, like a barometer as a storm approaches. He pulled off to the side of the road to regain his composure. As he stepped out of the car, he screamed his frustrations out into the darkness and wished it all simply to go away. Back inside the Audi, just as he shut the car door, everything faded to black.

When he woke up, his wish had come true; all his problems with Elizabeth were gone. For several months after the accident, Paul was unable to write. Along the bottom of his left ribcage where the doctors had entered to repair him, he was left with a long scar. Occasionally, he felt a slight pain in his chest, a reminder of the accident. Paul was booked for follow-up surgery in a few weeks; the doctors needed to repair the repair.

Since the accident, Paul had been with a couple other women but nothing resembling a relationship. He didn't have the strength for it. Paul knew he was recovering, albeit slowly. He didn't want to involve anyone else in his life, didn't want them to get hurt by the emotional tornado that swirled around him. The wish for Elizabeth and all their troubles to go away, simply vanish, echoed in his mind. He felt as if he had found a secret power, which he had not yet learned to control. And now there was Sunny.

## Ω

As the holiday season approached their relationship blossomed. Sunny hinted at Paul meeting her parents. But he didn't want to meet them. He thought they would certainly disapprove, not just of the age difference, but of his whole scarred past. Instead, Paul decided to introduce her to some of his friends.

Brian and Kate Bennett were the most well-adjusted, middle-class friends he had. Brian was a software technician, Kate worked in a flower shop. On the way to the Bennett's apartment, Paul described his friends to Sunny.

"Typically Canadian," he said. "They answer survey questions on the phone, sample the baloney at the supermarket. They never leave the hotel compound when they're away on vacation."

This made Sunny smile. He was trying to be funny and clever, she thought, getting ready to be sociable.

At the Bennett's home they had a few drinks and nibbled on Kate's Christmas treats. Paul and Brian discussed the Microsoft Anti-trust case; old friends practicing old arguments.

Barefooted, Sunny went into the kitchen to check on Kate. "Need help with anything?" she asked.

"Almost done with this tray," said Kate. "I've been meaning to tell you, Sunny, I love your dress."

"Do you really like it? I made it."

"Oh, you made it. It's great. Kinda hippie-like, something you might see from the sixties." Kate paused, looked at Sunny. "You know, I haven't seen Paul this happy in a long time."

"Really?" Sunny blushed. "Is he pretty much back to normal? You know, before the accident."

"Well, Paul has always been a private person, keeps a lot to himself. But, he seems to be in a good place right now. You must be good for him." Kate handed the veggie tray to Sunny.

In the living room, Sunny spotted Brian's record collection as she placed the tray on the coffee table.

"What's that?" she asked.

Paul and Brian chuckled at the thought of Sunny knowing music only on compact disc and mp3. Paul got up, pulled out some of the records and said, "Sweetie, these are called 'vinyl records'."

"I know what they are. I mean, could we play some?"

Paul showed her some of the classics: *London Calling* by The Clash, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*.

Sunny sensed they were still kidding her. "I've even heard of 8-tracks and 45s," she said.

Brian cued up the turntable. *Frampton Comes Alive* began to fill the apartment. Paul reached over, took Sunny by the hand and they started to dance a sexy, intimate tango.

Brian nudged his wife. "Let's work off some of that Christmas cheer," he said. And they joined in on the impromptu dance floor.

As each couple got into their own private groove, against a backdrop of snow falling by the high rise window, Paul felt a slight flicker of pain in his chest, a tiny reminder of the past. They were less frequent, these last few months. Eventually they would stop, he told himself. No one else noticed his pain.

On the way home, Paul felt the evening had gone well. Sunny had stood her ground, passed the test of being an adult and being with him. He thought back to when he was her age; a girl like Sunny would have found him awkward and immature. Even the girls during his college days didn't seem as sure and confident and bright as Sunny. So what, if he fell in love with her? Paul looked at her; she was twenty-one, every bit a woman and she came with a smile.

In his apartment they curled up in bed. "You never did finish the story," Sunny whispered.

"Where did I leave off? Oh, yes, he ravages her."

"Come on," said Sunny. "I want to hear how the story goes."

"OK, so, where was I?"

"She just opened the cabin door."

"Oh, right. She opens the door and there is a long silence." Paul ran his hand along Sunny's thigh, rubbing her freckled constellation for inspiration. She was smooth and creamy like a warm gentle wave. The story came to him.

"The captain explains to her that he's far from home and his ship is in dire need of repair. The young lady looks to the dog as if for advice. The dog looks back at her with the Chinaman's hat clutched in its jaws. She agrees to let the captain stay and fix his ship. The captain asks her about the song she was singing. 'Oh, just a silly old song about the Velvet Sea,' she says. She closes the door and returns to her humming.

"The next day the young woman emerges from the cabin and walks along the beach towards the dock where the ship is tethered. She asks the captain how the ship came to be so battered. He tells her of the fierce battle with the pirates, and then the storm."

"What was she doing there?" asked Sunny, nudging him again.

"Well," yawned Paul. "She explains that her father, the king of this land, had put her in this remote place so that she would study and not become bothered with silly things that young women become bothered by. Her father had left behind, to protect her and keep her company, the most-feared of all beasts – the slobbering dog. So she helps the captain fix his ship, mending the sail, that sort of thing."

Paul tried to stop there.

"And then what?" Sunny nudged.

"Then . . . she makes him breakfast the next morning," Paul said as he tried to fall asleep.

"No, really, come on," she insisted. "What happens?"

"Well, it takes them a while but they finally repair the boat. And during that time, they become very good friends. They even dance on the dock until the moon disappears behind the palm trees – just like in some fairy tale. And as the princess hums that same tune about the Velvet Sea, a light breeze starts to blow, heading due west. It is the type of breeze that tells a captain when to sail."

There was a long silence.



“I don’t like your story anymore,” whispered Sunny as she turned away from him, but still close.

“It’s just a story, Sunny. It’s just a story,” said Paul.

And they slept.

A few days later, Paul had surgery – the procedure to repair the repair. A few weeks after the surgery Paul and Sunny broke up. They met at a quiet café in Hess Village.

“I hope you understand,” she said. “I need to concentrate on my degree. You’re a distraction.”

Paul didn’t try to change her mind.

“It’s all good,” was all he said. As much as he was ready for it, it still hurt. But, at least now he was feeling something, no longer numb.

“Maybe after the semester is over, when I’m done with exams, we could see each other again?” Sunny offered.

Paul sensed that a small part of Sunny wanted him to want her, ask her not to go, fight for her. But he didn’t try to change her mind. He was nonchalant on the outside and she felt it, maybe was even a little hurt by it.

“Sure,” he nodded.

They embraced, hugging as if for the last time, and then Sunny walked out of the café. Paul left some money on the table and as he got up to leave he felt something on his left side. Under his shirt was a small red spot. He was bleeding – a torn stitch from their long hug.

At home, after he fixed his bandage, Paul sat at his desk and pulled out his journal. He thought of Sunny and her bare feet and her toe ring. The slobbering dog, her snowboard, her smile. He started to write but only got two words written down, “Beautiful fun . . .”

Now that’s how a poem starts, thought Paul, and then he gently closed his journal.

JOHN GREY is an Australian-born poet, playwright and musician. US resident since late seventies. His latest book is *What Else Is There* from Main Street Rag. His work has recently appeared in *Terminus*, *Malahat Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Eclipse* and *South Carolina Review*.

## John Grey / **Three Poems**

### **Progress as Applied to My Street**

I watch the development happen.  
 I'm front row and center to trees uprooted,  
 New England bedrock dynamited,  
 slopes leveled, everything removed.  
 I have an orchestra seat to the arrival  
 of the builders, watch cellars dug, cemented,  
 frame become walls and ceiling,  
 and then window sockets fill with glass.  
 What plumbers and electricians do  
 comes to me in occasional shadow,  
 but fencers tuck their slats of wood together  
 in full view of the audience  
 and landscapers are nothing if there's  
 no round of applause.  
 The departures of the creatures that  
 used to live in that brief stretch of forest,  
 raccoons and groundhogs, nesting bluebirds,  
 are like the unspoken, unseen sub-plot of a play.  
 I have to feel their loss in the words, the actions,  
 of everyone they're not.  
 Still, surrounded by houses, as their living quarters were,  
 what could they expect.  
 Nature may abhor a vacuum but so does civilization  
 and it has ways of extending the definition of an empty space.  
 So I gain three neighbors and lose a view.  
 To these newcomers, it's all profit  
 give or take what they see in me.

## Angela

It takes nearness  
to death to put the beauty  
in the silver,  
long curled tresses  
bathing her shoulders.  
I can even find  
something to admire  
in the ivy tube  
stretching from her arm.  
Everything's long  
and leading somewhere.

She tells me what  
she'd do if she weren't here.  
Take one last vacation  
at the beach house.  
Sit in her own tub.  
Potter around in the garden.  
All these details,  
a string of them  
flowing from her lips  
to where she'll be  
if she's not dead.  
And there's death itself,  
connecting her to me,  
years from now.

She smiles instructions  
to my mouth  
to pass it on.  
And our hands grip,  
so arms won't know  
they end.

## Jean and I on the Lake of the Dead

We call this the lake of the dead  
 though no one drowns in it.  
 We row our canoe out to the middle,  
 rest our paddles,  
 bob there for a while,  
 feel the surface like liquid hands  
 grabbing to pull us down  
 but they're not strong hands.  
 Their grip is weak and comes apart as a wave.

We call this the lake of the dead  
 even though there's one chance in a million  
 we could spring a leak,  
 not bring the life-jackets,  
 forget how to swim to shore.  
 Nothing like that ever happens.  
 We sit, eyes tunneled to each other.  
 You're the only one who moves as I do.  
 My calm face, relaxed body, return the favor.

We call this the lake of the dead  
 even though we'll live long beyond this day,  
 somewhere else and with other people.  
 We'll have forgotten this place even exists,  
 that we once crossed its dark blue waters,  
 that we searched for, found  
 the peace, the love, in them.

We call this the lake of the dead  
 because the land of the dead  
 gets parched and hard where we're going.  
 It has to quench its torrid thirst  
 so it'll suck the cool, the deep,  
 the fluid it needs,  
 right from this moment.

MARC MILLER grew up in Montreal where he attended McGill, earning both a B.A. and M.A. there. Mr. Miller then went to Columbia University where he received his Ph.D. in Germanic Languages and Literatures. Currently, Mr. Miller is Assistant Professor of Yiddish Studies, a joint position he holds in Emory University's Department of German and Institute for Jewish Studies. His work has previously appeared in the *NOR*.

## The Moroccan Girl

Marc Miller

IN THE FOUR YEARS I was away at college, the landscape of my childhood completely changed. Mordecai Kaplan Academy had merged their two branches into one super branch, gutting the elementary school I had attended for eight years, replacing it with a hideous ultra-modern edifice. When I went to go pick up my half-brother after school one day, I got lost. I could also no longer revisit the central setting of my teenage years. Around the same time, possibly following Kaplan's lead, Achad Ha'am had merged its two branches into one, making my old high school absolutely unrecognizable. Of course, the most devastating change of all was the tragic timing of Hampstead's dissolution. When I got my chance to live there, after my mother finally convinced my stepfather to let me live in the basement until I was "back on my feet," the town ceased to exist. It lost its status as an independent town and became just another affluent neighborhood on the island of Montreal.

Another change I was not prepared for was the end of Blue Bonnets, our local racetrack. Once a year, my father used to take my brother and me there to watch and bet on the harnessed horses. Admission was one dollar each, a program was a dollar fifty and the minimum bet was two dollars per race. Our dad gave us each ten dollars and that usually carried us through exactly five races. I only remember winning once in all those years, on a horse named Shtikl Drek, Piece of Shit in Yiddish. Either its Jewish owner had a dumb sense of humor, or he had completely given up on his horse. In any case, this little ferd left the gate at eleven to one, with my two dollars riding on it. When he led the pack across the finish line, I almost fainted.

"Heh-heh, look at the kid. You'd think he won the shweepshtakes, mishter!"

This was my dad's friend, David Finestone, but everyone, including his own father and even his wife, called him Bullsly. Like my father, he was a taxi driver but, unlike my dad, he came to the track a lot more than just once a year and didn't limit himself to two dollar bets. My father liked to joke that the track should name the parking lot after the Bull for all the money he dropped there. "What'd you have, Bullsly?" I asked.

"I had two out of three in the trifecta. You know what that's worth now, kid? Bobkes," he replied. Goat turds.

Eventually, we stopped going. To be honest, even as a kid the track kind of depressed me. It seemed like everyone there was just one horse away from a big win, never achieving it.

One afternoon, during my in-between summer, Valerie called. We'd known each other since we were five and began Mordecai Kaplan together in kindergarten. After high school, we both spent a year in Israel Hebrew University. She was one of my closest friends and the one I missed most while I was away at college. I had even missed her more than Yael. Like me, like Yael and many of our former classmates, she was home for the summer, living with her parents, supposedly figuring out what to do with the rest of her life. And, like most of us, she watched a lot of daytime television.

"Ça va, chérie?" she asked. "How ya doing, sweetie?"

"Ça va, ça va," I said, channel surfing.

"What are you watching?" she said.

"Everything."

"Me too," she said. "Listen, you want to come for shabbat dinner tomorrow night?"

Valerie's family – like most Hampstaed families, especially Moroccan ones – was traditional. One of the few requirements was compulsory attendance at Friday night dinner.

"My cousin's in town for the weekend," she said, leadingly.

"Cousin?" I said. "No thanks. I don't date camel jockeys. Where's she from? Caza?" I asked, pronouncing Casablanca's nickname like a Moroccan.

"Non, con," she said. No asshole. "Pas de Caza. She's from New York."

"New York?" I said. "They got mooks in New York?"

"Alors," she said, annoyed. "What's with this mook shit? Who taught you that word? It doesn't mean anything! Listen, are you coming or not?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, hanging up.

'Mook' was a recent addition to our anti-Sephardic vocabulary. I can't tell you the etymology of the name, just that my friend Peter introduced it into our bi-ethnic context and it stuck. And it drove Val crazy. Growing up, we had used the traditional nomenclature to insult each other. I called her a mock and she called me polack or voos voos. The first anti-Ashkenazi moniker is easy enough to explain. Many

Ashkenazi Jews originated in Poland, so we're a bunch of polacks. The second name is a bit more inventive. According to Moroccan lore, Polish Jews and their descendants supposedly ran around the old and new countries constantly asking each other 'what? what?' In Polish Yiddish, this sounds something like 'voos? voos?' hence the name. Dumb Mocks.

Valerie and I never dated, not because of our racial differences but, actually, because, we were too similar. We were best friends and neither of us wanted to jeopardize our friendship by dating. Besides, as far back as I can remember, I was always in love with Yael.

The next evening I slapped together an outfit culled from my stepfather's voluminous wardrobe. He had grown up poor in Morocco and, after achieving significant wealth in Canada, indulged in certain, specific luxuries. He had about two hundred pairs of shoes and at least seventy or eighty suits. I found one, from his earlier years in this country, which fit me well enough, and walked over to Val's, only a couple of blocks from my mom's. Since I'd been coming to this house for almost twenty years, I didn't knock, but just walked in like I always did. Valerie's parents and her grandmother were sitting around the living room.

"Bon shabbat," Good shabbes, Val's mom said, getting up and kissing me on both cheeks.

"Ah, qui est là?" Valerie's grandmother said, her back to me.

"C'est moi, Mémé," I said, coming around the couch to face her. It's me, Grandma.

I walked over to see her, passing Val's dad on the way. He sat in his recliner, reading the newspaper, and gave me a welcoming grunt. I understood him. He worked really hard all day and, when he came home, he wanted to be left alone. A lot of my friends' dads were the same way.

"Viens ici." Come here, Mémé instructed me, even though I was already standing by the couch. I knew the drill. I kneeled in front of her. She cupped my head in her little hands and kissed my eyelids while she muttered "Ayuni," My Little Eyes, after each kiss.

"There he is," I heard Valerie say.

I pulled out of Mémé's grip and looked over and saw Val standing at the living room's threshold with the girl who was obviously her cousin. She was absolutely adorable. They stood there. Why weren't they coming in to sit down? Valerie made some kind of crazy hand and eye signals I didn't understand. What? I mouthed. Suddenly, I felt a hand whack me on the ass.

"Va," Mémé commanded. Go.

"Maman!" Val's mom admonished her own mother.

I approached the girls and Valerie introduced me to her cousin, Cynthia. She smiled and I saw the gap between her two front teeth, the Lauren Bacall-esque space which I found interminably sexy. She was dark with gorgeous olive skin. She had long, thick hair that spilled over

her shoulders and down her back in jet black waves. Her little goyish nose crinkled when she smiled and she wore small, rimless square glasses. I love glasses on girls.

Val's mom seated Cynthia – or Seesha, as the family called her – next to me and we chatted through the meal, mostly ignoring everyone else at the table. But they didn't seem to mind. This was a set-up after all. I was really fixated on the fact that she looked Moroccan, but she sounded like a typical New York Jew. Even though Valerie and most of the other Moroccan kids my age were born in this country, they are all of them the children of immigrants and still carry traces of mookie accent in their speech.

“You don't sound like a mook,” I told Cynthia.

“What's a mook?” she laughed.

“You know, a Moroccan,” I explained.

“Oh, well, I grew up on Long Island,” she explained.

She pronounced it “Lawn-guy-line.” She was so damn cute.

After dinner, the two girls walked me back home. Cynthia was only in town until Sunday. I had to see her again.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” she asked me before I could ask her.

The next day I borrowed my mom's car. I picked up the Moroccan girl and we sat in the idling Volvo for over an hour, talking, laughing, before we realized we hadn't moved.

“What do you want to do?” I asked her.

“Val told me there's a track around here,” she said, whipping out her wallet. She pulled out a handful of twenties. “Let's go play the ponies. I gotta get rid of all this Monopoly money before tomorrow.”

I'd passed the track many times that summer while driving down the Decarie service road, but it was only this afternoon, as I pulled into the newly renovated, gargantuan parking lot, that I noticed the changes. First of all, the place had a new name. It was now called L'hippodrome de Montréal, The Montreal Hippodrome. The dirt track had been expanded, now curving through the parking lot. And they no longer charged admission. I bought us a program and saw from the tote board that we had just missed the second race. We had fifteen minutes to bet on the third. I got Cynthia settled at the picnic bench a few feet from the finish line and fetched us a couple of beers. When I came back, she was carefully studying the program. “So, who do you like?” I asked, handing her a plastic cup.

“I think I may need to have a few before I make up my mind,” she laughed, accepting the beer.

I scanned the program, looking for clues. I found the first one in the following race. The jockey riding the number four horse, She's The One, was named S. Rubinstein. “Number four,” I announced.

“Sounds good to me,” she said and handed me a twenty. “Four to win.”



“So I’m your runner now?” I said as I stood up and arched my left eyebrow, a move I still practiced in the mirror.

“That’s right,” she laughed, slapping my ass like her grandmother had. “Va!”

I made our two bets at the window – her twenty and my two on Rubinstein to win – and, as I was walking back out, eager to return to my date, I bumped into the taxi boys. Bullsly, Harry “The Horse” Hornstein and Sam “Cubby Chicken” Chaikowitz were comparing their notes by the door. Their combined weight was not less than one thousand pounds. “Booziel!” I cried in a high falsetto, mimicking the way my father always greeted him.

“Oh, look who’s here, mishter! It’s the Belly’sh kid.”

My dad, never a thin man, had his own nickname: Shelly “The Belly” Singer.

“Whatcha doin’ here, kid?” asked the Chicken.

All the hacks called me ‘kid.’ I don’t think they ever knew my name.

“What’s it look like?” I asked, holding up the betting slips.

“Oh, you’re cute,” the Chicken said, turning to Harry. “Isn’t he a real cutie pie?”

“Oh, yeah,” the Horse replied. He saw me looking in Cynthia’s direction. “Who’s the beaver?” he asked me.

The other two boys peered over. “Thatsh shome nishe peesh of ash, mishter,” the Bull said approvingly.

“Thanks, Bullsly,” I said. “You want I should introduce you?”

“Ha-ha, good one, mishter. Sho, who you got in the neksht rayshe?”

“She’s The One,” I said.

“You’re betting on Solly?” the Horse said incredulously. So that’s what the ‘S’ stood for, I thought.

“He’s a bum,” the Chicken threw in.

“You know him?” I asked.

“Yeah, I know the little prick,” the Chicken replied. “I knew him back before he was throwing races, when he was still sucking his mother’s dick.”

“So I guess you’re not betting on him?” I deduced.

“I didn’t say that,” the Chicken said.

“Thatsh the problem mishter,” the Bull explained. “Shometimesh he actually winsh.”

“C’mon,” the Horse interrupted. “Let’s go look.”

A couple of minutes before each race, the horses paraded past the finish line to be inspected by the crowd. We walked down to where I had left Cynthia and I introduced her to the boys. But they were no longer interested in her. They were focused on the ferdlekh. They stood, their fat bellies resting on the railing, scrutinizing each horse. Cynthia and I had no idea what they were looking for, what we should look for, but we stood alongside them anyway. When number four trot-

ted by, the boys yelled at the Jewish jockey who rode in the two wheel harness behind his horse.

“Hey, Solly, does your mother know you ride on shabbes?”

“Shloymele, you shtikl drek, this time when you’re coming to the finish line, try not to pull on the horse’s tail.”

Since I already had some money on him, I offered a positive message.

“Sol, zol zayn mitn rekhtn fus,” I called in Yiddish. Get off on the good foot.

The diminutive Jew turned and gave me a thumbs up. Mine was the only comment he acknowledged.

“I don’t like the way She looks,” observed the Chicken as he lit a cheap, thin cigar, chomping down on its plastic mouthpiece. “She’s limping.”

“She ain’t limping,” Harry said, dismissing the Chicken’s opinion with a wave of his hand. “Whadda you think, kid?”

“I always bet on a heebe driver,” I said.

Cynthia giggled.

“I guess that’s as good a system as any,” the Horse said soberly.

“Come on,” said Bullsly. “We only got two minutes to poshte.”

Without saying goodbye or good luck, the three boys waddled up the small incline from the track to the clubhouse. I handed Cynthia her slip as we walked back to our picnic table. I sat down on the bench and, instead of sitting next to me, she climbed up on the table and sat down behind me, her legs enveloping my shoulders. Her sundress had hiked up a bit and I felt my ear touch her bare knee. She played with my hair.

“Those guys are hilarious,” she said. “How do you know them?”

“Friends of my dad’s,” I said, trying to keep cool, watching the horses assemble for the start of the race.

Unlike thoroughbred racing – where the jockeys actually ride the saddled horses – harness races begin with a flying start. Instead of emerging from a standing still position, bursting out of a stationary gate and onto the track in a mad gallop, harness horses follow a moving gate which folds out from a pickup truck. It is the jockey’s responsibility to get his horse on pace with the truck which, at a designated point in the track, lifts its two airplane-like wings and speeds ahead and off the track. At this point, the bilingual announcer calls over the loudspeaker: “Et c’est le départ, And they’re off!” The horses passed us once. They would complete another lap before crossing the finish line. Solly and She’s The One, who had gone off at five to two, came past us the first time in third place. Cynthia and I urged them on: “Come on She’s The One!” she yelled. “Shloymele,” I called, “I need to get paid!”

They disappeared around the bend and when they re-emerged, turning the final corner, I spotted number four leading the pack by a good six or seven lengths. Cynthia and I both jumped up and stood on the table, screaming like lunatics. “Go, go, go, go, go, go!”

As the pack straightened out around the curve, Solly started to slowly lose his commanding lead. I squinted up the track and thought I spotted our jockey yanking back his reins. "Shouldn't he be whipping him?" I asked Cynthia.

She squinted at the approaching horses and shrugged her shoulders. She's The One crossed the finish line in fourth place. I ripped my ticket in half – like I had seen so many losers do over the years – and tossed it on the ground. Smiling, Cynthia did the same. I looked around at all the disappointed faces, at all the poor people who were betting more than us, yet who had less to bet. We stayed around for another couple of races. I kept drinking beers and, even though Cynthia had stopped at two, she still laughed at almost all my jokes. By the end of the final race I was drunk and Cynthia had to drive us back home.

It was hard for me to keep my eyes open. Cynthia sat next to me on the living room couch and kept goosing me each time I nodded off, showing me her sneaky smile. Valerie's mom suggested I go upstairs and nap for a while in Jojo's room. He was away for the year at Hebrew University, following in his big sister's academic footsteps. Valerie and Cynthia walked me up to his room and left me there to relax. Cynthia assured her cousin that she would come wake me when it was time for dinner. I saw Valerie wink at me before she closed the door.

Lying in Jojo's bed I attempted to sleep but I was suddenly not tired. I tried to conjure Cynthia's face, her long, blue-black hair, her cute little glasses, the sliver of space between her two front teeth. I had never had a Moroccan girlfriend before. I never thought Moroccans truly trusted us. I always felt that they erected a glass partition between themselves and Ashkenazi Jews. There was a basic mistrust between the two ethnic groups, one I believed I was personally willing to ignore, but it seemed that Moroccans held on to. But who could blame them? They came to this country with nothing, looking to their settled, Ashkenazi co-religionists for help and, for the most part, we spat on them. I suppose the division trickled down to the second generation. But relations had definitely improved over the past fifty years. There were many intermarriages – my mother and stepfather, for instance – as well as many human products – my half-brother among them. Evan is seven and, because of his mixed heritage, I call him Shoko Vanil, the name in Israel for a mixed cone of chocolate and vanilla ice cream.

My stepfather has a daughter from his previous marriage which was a mess. I get along really well with my stepdad, but his daughter makes herself hard to like. A few years ago, our family doctor found a small hole in my brother's heart. This required a simple surgical procedure. Nothing to worry about, said the doctor. My friends who were in medical school told me the same. But it was still open heart surgery. It wasn't like getting your tonsils out. We were all nervous. My mother was a wreck. Thankfully, one of the good things about this province is that we have socialized medicine. Almost all medical treatment is covered one-hundred percent by the government. So when my brother en-

tered the hospital, money was one of the few things that we did not have to worry about. When my mother told my stepsister about her half-brother's impending operation, the little bitch rolled her eyes and sighed: "How much is this gonna cost?"

My stepfather is quite rich and his only daughter is worried that his new family will squander away her inheritance before she gets her chance.

And even at my birthday party a few weeks ago, with my mom's side of the family, about twenty people came over to her and my stepfather's house for dinner, and even though I'm not close with my stepfather's daughter, my mother thought it would be nice to invite her along with her boyfriend. Oh, this boyfriend is another story. He's a German Christian whose parents "were in Switzerland" during the war. His name is Rolf and he has blond hair, blue eyes, and is six feet tall even. The perfect human specimen. He's going for a Ph.D. in Genetics.

The whole mishpokhe was there, sitting around a huge feast prepared by my tireless mom. I sat at the head and Shoko Vanil sat right next to me so that he could help blow out the candles on the cake. Next to him was the Nazi, and then my stepsister. After the party, while I helped my mother clean up, she told me that Evan had heard my stepsister lean over to her boyfriend and, motioning to me, whisper:

"You see that boy over there? He's living off my money."

I was lying in Jojo's bed thinking, grinding my teeth, when the door slowly creaked open. It was Cynthia. "D'ya miss me, little voos voos?"

Yes. I really did.

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" (*Journey Prize Anthology*, 2001), and again in a much longer story, "Blue Skies Over Savognin" (*NOR*, Spring, 2002).

## To Travel the Distance

(The Serialized Saga of Ulyssa Segantini)

Margrith Schraner

### Chapter 5

THEY FOLLOWED a narrow footpath down the hill, Ulyssa repeatedly turning around to look back at the castle looming up into the vast sky, while Tomas soldiered on, urging her to keep up with him. He had taken to calling her Swiss nanny goat, but she felt neither surefooted nor nimble enough to fit the name and had to remind herself to watch where she was placing her feet. The path looked treacherously steep. The terrain was uneven. She might slip; what with all the sand and shifty pebbles. All it would take would be one moment's inattention and she would go flying off her feet and land on her back. She would look up at Tomas, who would be standing over her, his body blocking out a considerable chunk of sky. On his face would be a look of consternation or else apology, and in his hand the straw hat, which he would hand back to her, but not without brushing the dirt off first.

She instinctively reached for his elbow to steady herself. She had grown accustomed to the weariness in her bones, but now it was joined by a vague dizziness. Her forehead was sweaty and grimy and she looked forward to a time in the not-too-distant future when she would be comfortably ensconced at a table in a quaint, little cafe in the village of Riom.

Her attention was drawn to a profuse display of chicory flowers that bordered the path. She stopped in her tracks. The flowers were like a garland of lights, she exclaimed. They were strung together to shine the way, forming a blue ribbon that would escort them to the village. She had entered a fairytale, a world of enchantment. Already, she could feel

tiny wings beating at her heart; it was as tangible as a swarm of fireflies.

In spite of the intense summer heat, the chicory blossoms appeared to her dewy and fresh – forever young, she wanted to say. They had been blossoming here, in this very place, ever since she was a young girl. How could she have missed seeing them when she was last here? Moreover, she didn't understand how she could have failed to include them in her story, *Blue Skies over Savognin*.

The more she thought about it, the more she fretted. “And to think that they have been in this very place, blooming each and every summer,” she told Tomas. “Not remembering the chicory flowers strikes me as a real lapse of memory.”

Tomas continued his steadfast walk down the slope. He clasped her hand in the crook of his elbow and steered her around the rockier sections of the path like a mountain guide. “Well, you have managed to compensate rather nicely for your lapses,” he said, affecting a lightheartedness that seemed inappropriate somehow, given the circumstances. “Haven't you heard that an incorrect memory is the mother of invention?”

“*Necessity* is the mother of invention,” she said sullenly, feeling the need to reprimand him for the liberties he took with foreign adages. She didn't understand how he could feel so free to adapt – she wanted to say *appropriate* – an expression from another culture and use it selfishly to fit his own needs, while she felt obliged to stick to the facts. She pulled her hand away from his grasp. “What your twisted, old-world wisdom has done is make me lose track of my argument,” she said.

“You didn't remember the chicory flowers,” Tomas reiterated, full of patience now. “But look, you did something else, instead. You reached for something to take their place.”

She hadn't reached for anything, that much was certain. The blue of the chicory flowers, she wanted to tell him, had lifted her soul straight up to the sky only moments ago. But now, it was having the opposite effect: sweetness was turning into bitterness, longing into regret. “I must have loved those flowers when I was a child,” she told him, by way of explanation. “By not including them in my story, I feel I have lost them – forever.”

Tomas was silent for a long time. “Love and loss,” he finally said. “It's the old story, isn't it?”

In her imagination, there appeared a murky pool. In it she saw love and loss, floating intertwined.

“There is a word for what you are feeling,” he said. “It's called nostalgia.”

She avoided looking him in the eye.

“The problem with *nos tall gea*” – he pronounced the word as if it were Latin – “is that it makes the past appear far more important than it deserves to be.”

She wasn't ready to hear anything else. On his outstretched hand she saw a small heap of chicory flowers. They were being thrown up in the air. She watched them land at her feet.

Was he denigrating the past – *her* past? He might as well have trampled on her flowers. "I don't need a lecture," she told him, defiant, hugging her elbows to her chest. She felt a door about to close and strained to keep it open. Would he be interested in hearing her definition of the word nostalgia?

He raised an eyebrow, keeping the door ajar, showing interest.

"Nostalgia is but an amorphous mass of insubstantial feelings – " she began.

He stopped her. "Amorphous?" He mouthed the word as if he were a fish blowing bubbles.

"Insubstantial feelings," she repeated. In her mind an image rose up out of the murky pool; in it was a bunch of feelings resembling a bouquet of flowers, hastily tied together, rapidly sinking out of sight. She took a deep breath. "Deeply moored in regret," she said.

He forged on ahead of her, taking up the entire path as if the way needed clearing. Ever so often, he turned his head to speak to her. She had the impression that his words were coming out of the side of his head.

She walked closely behind him, trying to keep up with him. "*Moored* in regret," she heard him say, echoing the phrase she had used. "It sounds fine by me – just as long as you don't say *mired* in regret."

He skipped over the rocks on the path with unthinking ease and all the while he kept up the conversation. She skirted the rocks as best she could, listening to him speak about the sweetness of the chicory flowers, about their ethereal essence, which seemed in dire contrast to the bitterness of the root.

"The root was prized among the people of the old country," he said, remembering a time when mornings were frosty – long after Midsummer night – and he had gone with his Finnish grandmother – his *Mummi* – to wrest chicory roots from the stony soil. Later on, he had sat in her kitchen, next to the tiled stove, where she roasted the roots he had helped her scrub. He remembered the knife and the chopping block. "In Finland, chicory roots were used as a coffee substitute, long after the Continuation War."

"The frugal Finns," Ulyssa said to compliment him. "They're so clever."

"Every bit as clever as the stingy Swiss," Tomas replied, pulling her close, forcing her step to fall in time with his. "Aren't we a pair?"

The goat path had widened. She walked next to him, giving herself up to the rhythm of his walk. She heard a voice speaking inside her head. The voice was her mother's. "Chicory roots make a cup of coffee go twice as far," the voice intoned. Ulyssa was a small child. She had to stand up on a chair to reach the large bowl on the table. She was stir-

ring an ever-shifting mountain of dark coffee grounds with a large, wooden spoon. Her mother poured chicory grounds from a blue-and-yellow-striped package, making the mountain grow. “Keep stirring,” the voice said, while Ulyssa inhaled the mysterious aroma.

The phantom smell of the coffee mountain now reached her nostrils. “Speaking of bitter roots,” she said, “I would love a cup of coffee right now.”

“I could use a cup, myself,” Tomas said. “Let it be my treat.”

They had reached the bottom of the hill, at the outskirts of the village, where the road was paved with stones but much too narrow to accommodate any vehicle larger than a wheel barrow. The bantering of children’s voices could be heard echoing off a cobbled side street, followed by the excited staccato of a dog’s barking. But they didn’t see anyone; the place seemed deserted.

They turned the corner and saw a lanky, pastel figure advancing rather quickly up the street. They recognized him immediately: it was the priest.

“Oh, no. Not him, again,” Ulyssa said, slowing her pace.

“He looks rather odd from this distance,” Tomas remarked, “as though he were dragging a small, evil shadow behind him up the street.”

The priest seemed in no apparent hurry; he sidled over first to one side of the street and then to the other, and each time he stopped at a courtyard to talk to someone.

Tomas handed her the camera. “Here. Why don’t you take a picture of him – it might provoke some *nos tall geea* in the future.”

She looked through the viewfinder. The priest came into view only after she put the focus on Infinity. But even then, his figure lacked definition. “What I see is a washed-out priest,” she said.

“Washed out?”

“The image lacks sufficient depth and color,” she explained. In the end, the priest’s figure would look pasty. The unforgiving light of the early afternoon was to blame. Unfortunately, the blue-gray color of his robe would simply blend in with the surrounding, gray pavement behind him. To tell the truth, she would find the lack of contrast appalling.

Tomas did not want to listen to her objections. “Remember, it’s the priest’s shadow we’re after,” he said. “Its exaggerated shape.” He looked upon the shadow as an extension of the priest’s feet. The unevenness of the pavement gave it a jagged, crippled appearance.

“His shadow may look crooked, but it certainly isn’t evil,” she said. She handed him the camera. Her decision was final. “I refuse to take his picture. I’m not interested – neither in the priest nor in his shadow.”

The priest had moved on to yet another dooryard, further up the street.

Ulyssa eyed him from a distance. She wanted to avoid running into him at all costs, she told Tomas.



“He’s just being friendly,” Tomas said, as if she had been afraid of being bitten. “Isn’t that what priests are supposed to do – talk to people, look after their souls?”

“I wouldn’t be caught dead, entrusting my soul to someone like him.” Giving a snort, she inadvertently breathed in a scent that was an affront to her well-developed sense of smell. “It hardly takes an educated nose to tell us we’re not sniffing violets, here,” she said, pinching her nostrils shut.

“Ah, yes, the smell of agriculture,” Tomas replied. His voice was full of appreciation. “One would have to invent it, if it didn’t already exist!” He raised an imaginary glass to make a toast. “To every barn its manure pile,” he said, looking off to the right where a substantial manure pile sat in the middle of a courtyard. It was cubical in shape, a veritable edifice. There was layer upon layer of dung, piled high. The dung looked as if it had been braided. “It reminds me of brown tresses,” Tomas said. “The people here don’t seem to mind the stench, just as long as the pile is pleasing to the eye.”

“Manure piles are sacred to the farmers of Switzerland. The bigger the pile, the greater the wealth.”

“It’s a splendid vestigial remain of rural life,” Tomas said. He went and stood close to the pile, tentatively leaning a shoulder against it, offering to pose for her. What if he stood on top of the pile? He handed her the camera.

“You’d look as imposing as a general on a plinth,” she said. “Minus the horse, of course.” She liked the look of his profile. “You remind me of a certain Swiss playwright,” she told him. “The only thing missing is the pipe.”

“What pipe?”

“The pipe that all Swiss writers have their pictures taken with. You can see them, an elbow propped at the waist, holding their prized pipe, in all those black and white photographs, on the jacket covers of books.”

Tomas was amused. “And they all smoke a pipe, without exception?”

“Well, Friedrich Dürrenmatt did, if I’m not mistaken.”

“The comparison flatters me,” Tomas said. He had read *The Visit*.

She snapped his picture before he had time to compose himself and smiled at him, satisfied. “I’ve caught you *in medias res* – in midstream, so to speak. I like to arrest the flow of life.”

As he moved away from the manure pile, she told him about a radio play Dürrenmatt had written, back in the fifties. It took place in a cow shed. At the center – he had guessed it – was a manure pile. The play was a spoof, an imitation of a Greek drama, complete with chorus. Dürrenmatt had brought the manure pile right into the living room of his esteemed Swiss compatriots. The manure was a symbol representing what had piled up in government.

“He speaks the right language,” Tomas said, patting the manure pile. “It’s the language of cow dung. But being a writer, I’m far more interested in how he handled this smelly problem. For instance: Did the manure pile get cleared away in the end?”

“Well, the citizens talk a lot about it. They argue, and they reason. What if the pile were removed? What would be left to revere?”

“Holy cow, what a conundrum,” Tomas said, impressed. “It’s probably too subtle for anyone but the Swiss to fully appreciate.” He swatted at a fly that had landed on his thigh. “But tell me, how does the play end?”

“You’ll have to read it,” she said. “Let’s get away from here, before I faint dead away.” Her stomach was feeling faint. She glanced furtively up the lane, quickening her pace, relieved that the priest was nowhere to be seen.

“There are so many cowsheds and manure piles here, we’ll never be able to get away from the flies,” Tomas said. The entire village of Riom was stuck in feudal times, all one had to do was take a look at the braided manure. Besides, she still hadn’t answered his question: Had Dürrenmatt succeeded as a playwright in tying things up into a nice, little bow? Was there any room for a revelation?

She informed him that yes, the manure pile changed during the course of the play, that it underwent a transformation. “The manure turns into compost – metaphorical compost, if you will – so flowers can be grown for future generations.”

Tomas seemed satisfied with the answer. He called Dürrenmatt a forward-thinking man. He himself was forward-looking, too, he said. He was looking forward to lunch, which was probably waiting just around the corner. He could hear his stomach growling. As if on cue, the clang of a solitary church bell signaled that lunch was about to be served.

The hesitant tolling grew louder as the solitary bell was joined by another, and then another, resulting in utter cacophony. “They must think I’m deaf,” Tomas said. “Ever since coming to Switzerland, I’ve been assaulted by the ringing of bells. I don’t see any reason for making such a ruckus – every hour on the half hour. It’s a deplorable habit, propagated by the Catholics and Protestants of your country.” He stood still, flustered. “Today isn’t Sunday, is it?”

She assured him it was a weekday. The ringing of the bells was an ancient custom left over from medieval times, she told him. “The bells are ringing to signal to the women of the community that it’s time to stop working outside in the fields and to go home and prepare the mid-day meal for their husbands and children. Everyone works non-stop till noon, when the schools and shops close and everyone goes home for lunch.”

Tomas grew thoughtful. “I like that tradition. Home-cooked meals – who could resist?” He pulled her toward him. “We’ll have to institute that custom as soon as we get back to Canada, eh?”

“I refuse,” Ulyssa said, offended. She shrugged him off. “I won’t be tied down, slaving over a hot stove, if that’s what you’re trying to tell me.”

They had arrived at the village square. The central plaza turned out to be relatively small. It was dominated by a large stone fountain and ringed by a number of grayish-white stone buildings. White stucco covered the walls of the upper floors. A red shingle hung over the doorway of the Savognin, a prominent boarding house. The shingle had the shape of a heraldic shield from the Middle Ages and depicted three white bells, two at the bottom and one at the top, separated by blue and white waves that suggested a river.

“My guess is that the three bells refer to the three churches – two Catholic, one Protestant – that occupied the center of Savognin,” Tomas said. He pointed out the iron rings he saw embedded in the mortar of a stable next to the boarding house. They were the remains of an era when horses used to be tethered there, allowing their owners to enjoy a meal at the inn, he said.

Tomas and Ulyssa headed across the square, passing two elderly women in black who were seated in a narrow skirt of shade on a bench outside the municipal office. A boy emerged from the local Milagros with a bag of groceries and headed up the street, giving them a quick, once-over glance.

“The official welcoming committee,” Tomas observed. “It’s such a timeless scene, isn’t it?”

“I’m glad to see some things haven’t changed,” Ulyssa said. A small brasserie-style establishment with outdoor seating on the uphill side of the square had caught her eye. Two faded cloth umbrellas, red and blue, with fringes, were casting small pools of shade onto metal tables and chairs. “*Hürlimann*,” Tomas said, deciphering the letters surrounded by a circle of white stars, on a green logo that hung from a rustic chain in the window. She laughed. He could have been a poet, she said; he had intoned the word as if it were the title of a poem.

“It will be a poetic moment, indeed, when my parched lips are allowed to touch the Hürlimann brew,” he said. He claimed the one table beneath the awning that was pushed up close enough to the white plaster wall to grant them some shade.

A large ginger cat lay basking under an opulent gardenia bush which partly hid the stairs from view. The bush was no longer in bloom. The blossoms, now a faded brown, resembled tissue paper rosettes. They reminded Ulyssa of ornaments, stuck to the tree long after the festive season was over.

Beneath the awning, the air was only slightly cooler, yet Ulyssa’s skin felt clammy. The dog days of summer were getting to Tomas, too. He had taken off his sunglasses and was mopping his face with a cloth handkerchief. He unbuttoned his blue shirt, and would have proceeded to take his shirt off, had Ulyssa not intervened. She fanned herself vig-

rously with her straw hat. “This isn’t a beach” she told him. “Nobody wants to see your belly button.”

A woman approached them, ready to take their order. Her look was harried, as though she had been called away from waxing the cafe’s floorboards. She nodded obligingly at Tomas when he pointed at the green stained-glass circle in the window. She came back promptly, serving them the beer, which was poured into two tall glasses and produced tall heads of foam that rose like a couple of cumulus clouds above the sparkling, golden liquid. “*Salute*,” the woman said, her dark hair bobbing while she stood nearby, waiting for them to click their glasses. Tomas leaned back in his chair and raised his glass. “*Prost*,” he said, grinning at Ulyssa as though he were challenging her to a private drinking contest. He gulped down half the beer before setting down the glass and wiping the foam off his upper lip. He gestured for the woman to bring them more beer.

“I’m feeling better, already,” he told Ulyssa, casually looking at the menu, which consisted of a single page inserted in a plastic sleeve. Ulyssa noticed that the plastic had become grimy with use. Tomas seemed engrossed in the choices, mulling over the various items. She was far more interested in the medieval lettering that spelled out the name of the establishment, *San Lorenzo Bar and Grill*.

“I wonder if they serve those homemade, plump little noodles here,” Tomas said. “Remember the specialty we enjoyed eating at the *Zunft-haus* in Zürich – the noodles that go so well with beer – what were they called, again? *Zwinglis*?”

She laughed. “No. They’re called *Spätzle*,” she informed him. “*Zwingli* is the name of a Swiss Protestant reformer from the sixteenth century. His supporters hailed mainly from Zürich; his ideas were met with fierce resistance everywhere else, though. His reforms spurned a civil war and he was killed as a result of it.”

Tomas sipped at his beer. “I don’t worry about little distinctions of that sort,” he said. “*Spätzlis* or *Zwinglis* – they’re all noodles to me.”

For more information about the author, consult WWW.ABCBOOKWORLD.COM and enter Ernest Hekkanen's name. "The Puukko" comes from a collection of linked short stories entitled *The War That Never Ends*. The stories in *War That Never Ends* deal with a fictional anti-war reunion group operating out of Nelson, B.C. "The Puukko" is the final story in that volume.

## The Puukko

Ernest Hekkanen

AT FOUR MINUTES AFTER FIVE, it was still relatively early in the morning. Normally, the quiet before dawn was Murray Maki's favorite time of day, his most productive time of day. But this morning, despite having drunk two cups of coffee, he had yet to produce a single word. Every now and then, even though he tried not to let it happen, his gaze was drawn to the *puukko* in the sealed, glass case that hung on the wall to the right of his desk. The knife with its slightly rusty blade looked like it was being held in horizontal suspension above the well-used, battered sheath. The tip of the knife and the tip of the sheath pointed in opposite directions. Lately, whenever Murray looked at them in the glass case, he was reminded of two fish about to swim away from each other.

Suddenly, he recalled the necklace of ears, the sweltering, moist heat of the Vietnam jungles, the ubiquitous mud of the monsoon season. He shook his head, as if to rid himself of unbidden memories. Earlier that morning, at 3:34, according to the luminous, blue numbers of his digital alarm clock, he had awakened in a cold sweat, the phantom sound of mortar shells falling all around him, a curse forming on his lips.

"Fucking gooks, fucking war . . ."

Ω

Yesterday, when the boy arrived at the house, Murray felt himself become remote; no, actually, if he was going to be honest with himself, and Murray liked being quite honest with himself, he had felt himself becoming remote the moment he had heard the boy's deep voice on the

telephone three days before. That was when the boy let him know that he was about to impinge on Murray's solitude in the A-frame house that sat among the larch, spruce and Douglas fir trees on the hillside above the northernmost end of Slocan Lake. The A-frame was located nearly two kilometers south of Hills, British Columbia, on the western shore. It was reached by a dirt road that snaked up and over and around the hill behind the house, a road that became quite treacherous during the winter when snow often made it impassable, even in his Toyota LandCruiser. During the height of summer, the lake often appeared to Murray to be a flat, glistening mirror through the dark trunks of the trees that stood between the deck of the house and the dock that extended out into the blue depths of the water.

The boy, Alan Maki, was no longer a boy, actually, for he was thirty years old; however, out of a force of habit acquired over many years, Murray continued to think of him in that manner. Yesterday, when Alan had said, "Nice to see you again, Dad," Murray had cringed at the word 'dad.' It had stirred memories similar to loose, dry ashes lifted into the air by a gust of wind.

Upon hauling himself out of the maroon Volvo, the boy had proceeded to stretch the kinks out of his tall body. The way the boy looked at him, sideways, as though inspecting him under a microscope, had heightened Murray's suspicions. When the boy crossed the bone-dry dooryard over to where Murray was standing beside the steps to the back porch, to hug and then to slap him robustly on the back, Murray tried to return the gesture with the same sort of enthusiasm, hoping the boy wouldn't feel him cringe upon contact with his body.

During their telephone conversation of three days ago, Alan had chosen to let him know that the backyard of Virginia's house near the shore of Little Shuswap Lake had been dug up to renew the septic field.

"But we had to stop," Alan had informed him, followed by a significant pause.

Murray had braced himself. "Don't tell me," he said, letting go a rough-sounding laugh. "You failed to get the proper permit."

"No, it didn't have anything to do with that."

"What was the problem, then?"

"I'm surprised you haven't heard about it. It was on the CBC news."

"I very rarely listen to the radio, when I'm working on a book. Too disruptive, too much of a diversion."

"The backhoe operator unearthed a body," the boy informed him.

"A body?"

"Yes, a body. A skeleton, actually. Not far from where you used to have your studio. Beneath that big weeping willow tree near the far right corner . . ."

Murray remembered digging the hole and lowering the root ball of the weeping willow into it. He had untied the burlap from around the

trunk of the willow and had held it down with his left hand while scooping rich, loamy soil onto it with his right.

Afterward, he had driven a stake into the earth about eight inches away from the trunk. With each thump of the eight-pound sledge, he had winced involuntarily, at the thought of the point being driven . . .

“Don’t tell me the house is sitting on the site of a former Indian village,” Murray had told him, his upper lip beginning to bead sweat.

“No, the skeleton’s a lot more recent than that, apparently.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Murray had said, with a casual snuff. “I bet that’s going to interfere with the new septic field.”

“A forensic team arrived. It scoured every inch of the property. It’s been a real mess, actually. Needless to say, Mom’s been pretty upset by it and the neighbors – well, you know how neighbors are when they see police cars pull into someone’s driveway and yellow tape being unfurled all over the place.”

“I can imagine,” Murray had told him, directing a quick glance at the *puukko* in the glass case. The ears had separated so easily from the temples of the dead and the not-quite-so dead, sometimes with a few sprigs of hair clinging to the skin. As the ears had dried in the moist, jungle heat, they had assumed a cauliflower-kiss shape on the loop of the leather thong.

That morning, upon waking, Murray was certain he had tasted the rotting scent of the jungle mixed with the acrid scent of Agent Orange at the back of his throat.

## Ω

Yesterday afternoon, after Alan had hauled his suitcase into the living room, Murray had suggested they have a beer out on the deck of the house. The deck was an extremely large, generous one that managed to remain quite cool during the hot summer months, owing to the larch, spruce and Douglas fir trees that towered around the house. Whenever the wind unfurled along the western shore of the lake, the boughs of the trees produced a sound not unlike numerous raven wings spreading the air all at once. A stairway descended from the deck to the slope, and from there, a path wound down through the trees to the dock jutting into the lake.

“So, have you been doing a lot of fishing this summer?” the boy had asked him, nodding down the hill at the canoe tied to the dock.

“Not as much as I’d like to be doing. You see, I’ve got a deadline for the book I’m working on, and that’s coming due in a couple of months. I’m nearly done with it, though. Then I’ll be able to do some serious fishing.”

“What’s the title of this one?”

“*Such a Good Man.*”

The boy leaned his back against the rail around the deck and clasped the wide capping plank with his left hand. "So, what's it about?"

"The title's ironic, of course. It refers to a man who's unmasked for what he really is – that is, someone who's less than good. Your typical crisis novel, in other words. Simenon made the form famous."

"A lot of your novels deal with that sort of situation."

Murray had shrugged. "A dearth of imagination on the author's part, I guess. But, at least, they sell."

"Unlike the paintings and prints you used to do back in the seventies, for instance?"

Again, the boy's utterance had been followed by a pause. Alan had scrutinized him for several seconds before taking a sip from his beer bottle.

"Yes, unlike the paintings and prints I used to do," Murray had told him.

"So, what made you give up on doing any more art?" the boy had persisted.

Murray had smiled at him, impassively. "What are you attempting to do, Alan – psychoanalyze me?"

"No, I was simply curious, is all."

Murray had lifted his own bottle of beer to his mouth. "You know what they say about curiosity . . ."

"No, what do they say about it?"

"They say it killed the cat and now it's killing me." To cut the conversation short, Murray had glanced at his wristwatch and said, "You know, I'm starting to get kind of hungry, Alan. How would you like to have some hardtack and cheese?"

## Ω

Again, Murray tried to concentrate on the five pages he had written two days earlier. He was at the point in the novel where the protagonist was now forced to contemplate the enormity of his actions and, due to the enormity of them, was turning his thoughts to suicide, which Murray sensed would take place in a fairly comfortable manner, with the protagonist listening to Rachmaninov's *Sonata for Cello & Piano in G Minor* on the Jeep Cherokee's tape player, while a hibachi filled with briquettes gave off carbon monoxide fumes on the floor in front of the passenger seat.

Over the span of twenty-eight years and fifteen books, many of Murray's protagonists had experienced similar failures of courage resulting in bizarre deaths . . .

Again, he glanced at the *puukko* in the glass case. In part, the rust on the blade had been produced by blood. He recalled the hand grenade he had thrown into the village hut and the woman in black pajamas who



had crawled out of the collapsed structure, into the spray of machinegun fire.

“God, what a disgusting hobby,” Corporal Lance Harlow had snarled at him.

“They’re dead. They’ll never miss them,” Murray had replied, unsheathing the *puukko* and grabbing the woman by her black hair.

Murray had sold his ear collection to a man in Alabama, a fellow who specialized in odd war memorabilia . . . and for a tidy sum, too.

Ω

In the living room, where they had unfolded the hideaway bed, Murray heard the boy awaken with a groan that suggested he had stretched rather vigorously.

*“Fucking gooks, fucking war . . . Goes on forever, goddammit.”*

After having dinner the previous evening, the boy’s interrogation had continued although it had been a polite interrogation couched in feigned curiosity.

“So, why so many questions?” Murray had finally asked him.

“The better to understand you and your work. After all, it isn’t every day that the son of a famous author gets to do a Ph.D. thesis on his father’s oeuvre.”

“I’m hardly what you’d call famous, Alan.”

“That War Resisters Reunion thing that you’re mixed up with has made you rather famous.”

“No, it hasn’t.”

“I beg to differ with you, Dad. That article in *The New York Times*, the one written by that Bernstein fellow, has turned you into a famous author. Really, it has.”

Murray had felt himself flush. “B.S. Those are two . . . completely different . . . issues, Alan.”

“Are you so sure of that?”

“Yes, I am. Without a doubt.”

Ω

Hubris, he thought. I shouldn’t have allowed Ira to involve me in the War Resisters Reunion campaign. What was I thinking, anyway?

By now, morning had dawned so fully, light had begun to seep past the slats of the louvered blind that covered the only window in his office. It was a fairly spacious office, located beneath the loft where, every morning, upon opening his eyes, he would gaze at the cathedral ceiling of the A-frame. Hanging on the walls were several of his late, identical twin brother’s paintings, along with the glass case that contained the *puukko* and its battered leather sheath, both of which had seen so much action in the jungles of Vietnam. When he squinted in the direction of the glass case, he could discern the brown bloodstains on the leather sheath.

“I would like to name him Alan,” he had told Virginia, “in memory of my brother, wherever he might be . . .”

Virginia had been sitting in a chair beside the hospital bed, attempting to breastfeed the infant. In the fluorescent light, the boy’s tiny face was the color of magenta.

“Do you think that’s wise?” she had asked him.

“That’s whom I’d like to name him after, but, of course, the final decision rests with you.”

The suggestion had resulted in her giving him a slight nod, followed by a thin smile that told him she would consider his request.

“About that weeping willow tree,” the boy had said the previous evening. “You planted it back in the 1970s, didn’t you?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“I guess you didn’t plant it very deeply, though?”

“I didn’t have to. It was a sapling.”

“Did you know that the septic line ran through that part of the garden?”

“I think that might have crossed my mind. Yes, in fact, it did. I think I was of the opinion that the willow tree would act like a sump pump, that it would soak up the waste water. I think I might have smelled some septic odors wafting in through the window of the studio and was hoping the tree would take care of that.”

“It wasn’t long after that that you switched from painting to writing, according to what Mom has told me.”

“What exactly are you trying to say, Alan?”

“I’m not trying to say anything, in particular. I’m just trying to figure out why you switched from painting to writing around that time, because your paintings – well, they’re so full of light, life and flowers – in fact, it looks to me as if you were trying to invite the garden into your studio, whereas your novels and stories are so dark, so full of inexpiable guilt and memories that torment the characters.”

“So?” Murray had said, with an impassive expression on his face.

“So, it smacks of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. A flip-flop in personality, if you will, and, well, I was wondering what might have caused that.”

“Perhaps, it was the letter that my brother sent me, around that time.”

“You mean, Alan? My namesake?”

“Yes, Alan, your namesake.”

“What was in that letter, if you don’t mind my asking?”

At that point, Murray had pushed himself up from the reading chair beside the floor lamp that caused such long shadows to be cast on the cathedral ceiling of the A-frame and had gone over to the bar where he had poured himself two fingers of scotch. “Would you care to have another drink?”

Half the boy’s face resided in shadow. “No thanks. I’ve had enough. More than enough, actually.”

“Good boy. I’m glad to see you’re not like me.” Murray sipped some of the scotch in his glass and then leaned his back against the bar, his arms crossed on his chest, his right hand swishing the scotch in his glass. The boy had continued to stare at him. “As you know, my brother volunteered to go into the Green Berets,” Murray had gone on to say. “He relished the opportunity, as a matter of fact. That meant he disagreed, and disagreed rather violently, with my activities in the S.D.S. – you know, the Students for a Democratic Society – and later, when I came up here to Canada, he took even greater exception to that.”

“How do you mean, he took even greater exception to that?”

“In 1975, after the conflict in Vietnam was more or less over, Alan sent me the *puukko* in the glass case that’s in my office. That *puukko*’s got a lot of history to it. My grandfather used it in hand to hand combat, fighting the Reds in the Finnish Civil War, and later, during the Second World War, your Great Uncle Reino took it into battle with him, when he was dumped like a sacrifice on the shores of Normandy.”

“I thought my Great Uncle Reino was in the U.S. Army?”

“That’s right, he was. By that time, the family had moved to the States. First to Kemmerer, Wyoming and then to Seattle, Washington.”

“So, how did your brother end up getting the *puukko*?”

“Your Great Uncle Reino gave it to him just before he was shipped off to the Vietnam War. It was in Vietnam that my brother . . .” Despite the scotch he had drunk, or maybe because of it, his voice had cracked. “You know, Alan, I really don’t relish talking about this stuff.”

“It touches too close to the bone, does it?”

“Yes, I guess you could say that.” Murray gave the glass of scotch another lazy swirl and downed the contents.

“So, what exactly did your brother say in the letter to you?”

“Many things, but mainly it had to do with how many Vietnamese he had killed and how many ears he had cut off with the precious family heirloom in my office. Things of that sort.”

“I see why you don’t like recalling it,” the boy had said.

“It was the letter that made me take up my second great passion – writing. You see, motivations are pretty difficult to account for in paintings and prints, and now I sensed there was something a lot deeper that I had to explore. It’s like that with identical twins, you see. They are puzzles to each other. They are always trying to figure out where their individual pieces overlap.”

“Did you ever see your brother, after he got out of the Green Berets?”

“No. Never. You see, I had no desire to go down to the States, for fear of being arrested.”

“Yes, that’s what the reporter from *The New York Times* quoted you as saying.”

Murray shrugged. He swished the non-existent scotch in his glass. “Well, there you have it, Alan. That’s it. That’s all she wrote.”

However, the boy wouldn't let matters rest. "Did your brother ever come up here to see you?"

"No."

"When Mom went down to Seattle to have the baby shower for me at her parents' house, she paid your mother and father a visit at their house. According to her, your brother had just gotten out of the service. He was living in the rental house next door to that of your parents. Apparently, he came over to the big house to say hello to her. From what she told me, she shuddered when she looked into your brother's eyes. You see, she felt she was looking at you."

"I'm not surprised, I guess."

"Not long after that, your brother disappeared."

Murray shrugged. "That sounds about right."

"There was talk to the effect that he was going to be tried for acts unbecoming of a U.S. soldier. Did you know about that?"

"I think I might have heard something to that effect, yes." Murray had crooked his arm to glance at the watch on the underside of his wrist. "Listen, Alan, it's nearly eleven o'clock. I have to get some sleep, otherwise I won't be able to get any work done tomorrow morning."

"Of course. We can talk about this some more, tomorrow."

"Sure. I don't think I can tell you much more than I already have, though."

## Ω

In the living room, the springs of the hideaway rebounded as the boy rolled out of bed. Murray heard his footsteps go down the hallway to the bathroom, followed by the sound of his water splashing in the toilet bowl. At that point Murray rose from his desk and went over to raise the louvered blind, which he normally didn't do until ten o'clock in the morning, after he had finished writing. He stood gazing out the window, his eyes watching for unambiguous movements among the dark, shadow-bitten tree trunks.

On guard duty during the night, his eyes would often ache from staring into the dark, trying to detect the slightest movement . . .

*"Goddamn gooks, goddamn war . . ."*

By now, the boy had padded back down the hallway. Murray sensed, from the chill that ran down his spine, that Alan was now standing behind him in the doorway.

"I thought I saw a bear," Murray told him, feeling he had to explain why he was gazing out the window. "Not long ago, one came up onto the deck. He clawed at the sliding glass door, trying to get the damn thing to budge."

"Was he successful?"

"No, I chased him away."

When Murray turned around to look at the boy, he was struck by how much Alan had come to resemble his late father. Tall and rather lanky, Alan stood in a T-shirt and boxer shorts in the doorway to Murray's office, his coffee-blond hair tousled by sleep.

"So, how did the writing go this morning?" the boy asked him.

"Badly. Too little sleep. It put me in a funk."

"Sorry I kept you up so late."

"What the hell. I'll rustle us up some bacon and eggs and then we can do some fishing."

The boy didn't seem to hear him. He was staring at the *puukko* in the glass case to the right of Murray's desk. "Our infamous family heirloom," Alan said. "So, why did you put it in the glass case?"

The boy turned to look at him by the window.

"To remind me that I should endow such devices with lots of meaningful infrastructure in my novels and stories."

"Does it do that for you?"

"I think so, yes."

Again, the boy stared at the *puukko* in the glass case. "According to what I was told by one of the forensic fellows, they'll be doing a DNA test on the remains found under the weeping willow tree."

"That's the usual procedure, I guess."

"They asked me if I would be willing to provide them with a tissue sample."

"Did you?"

"Yes, I did." The boy examined him with a steady gaze. "Sure, some bacon and eggs would be just fine. Do I have enough time to take a shower?"

"More than enough time . . . ."

## Ω

While the bacon was frying in the cast iron frying pan on the electric range, Murray proceeded to remove the front pane of glass from the case. He ran the blade of his Swiss Army knife around the beveled edge where a bead of transparent silicone caulking attached it to the sides. As he was trying to pry the pane free with the bottle-opening blade, the pressure caused the glass to crack diagonally from the top right corner to the bottom left corner and, quite suddenly, the lower half of the pane fell away into his left hand.

He slid the cracked pane onto the top of his desk and reached inside the case to yank the *puukko* and its sheath free from the transparent silicone caulking that held them in horizontal suspension against the rear of the case.

"Fucking silicone, fucking war . . . ."

Upon removing the infamous family heirloom from the case, he shoved the *puukko* into the battered leather sheath, removed the sheath of the Swiss Army knife from his belt and fed the belt through the

leather loop of the *puukko*'s sheath. Then he returned to the kitchen to finish frying the bacon in the cast iron frying pan.

Soon, he heard the shower stop drumming on the bottom of the bathtub. Using a stainless steel pancake flipper, he removed the bacon strips from the cast iron frying pan and laid them on a paper towel in order to soak up the excess grease. By that time, the boy had wandered into the kitchen, fully clothed except for a pair of socks that he held in his left hand.

"How many eggs would you like?" Murray asked him.

"Two would be fine."

"Easy over?"

"Please." The boy glanced at the *puukko* hanging in the sheath on Murray's belt. "I see you've taken it out of the glass case . . ."

"I decided to take it out fishing with me."

"What provoked that?"

Murray shrugged. "Perhaps, it was our talk of last night. I figured I should at least find out what it's like to use the damn thing."

Murray cracked the eggs into the cast iron frying pan and slapped the lid down roughly so the spluttering of the eggs wouldn't get grease all over the stovetop.

"So why, in 1976, did you and Mom decide to split up?" the boy asked him from the chair where he was pulling on his socks.

"Irreconcilable differences."

"She told me the other day that you suddenly seemed to change, that you became very remote."

Murray took two plates out of the cupboard. "That's her opinion and, of course, she's welcome to it."

"She told me something else, too."

"What's that?"

"She said you developed some sudden phobias, that you no longer felt comfortable sitting in public places, unless your back was to a wall or something like that. Also, she told me that you would no longer go to the movies with her. The dark made you uneasy."

"As I've already told you, she's welcome to her opinion."

The boy rose from the chair. "I'm not a psychiatrist, mind you, but it sounds to me as though you began to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder."

"Very amusing, Alan. Very amusing."

Murray removed the lid from the cast iron frying pan and flipped the eggs so they were now sunny side down. Moments later, he scooped them onto the plates where he had already laid the bacon strips. "Toast?"

"Not for me, thanks."

"How about some coffee?"

"Please."

Murray poured them each a cup of coffee. Nodding at the table near the tall front windows of the A-frame, he said: "Take the plates to the table. I'll get the cream for the coffee."

Ω

"It's such a beautiful view," the boy observed. "How do you manage to tear yourself away from it in order to do your writing?"

"That's why I get up so early. I don't like the view to interfere with my work."

The boy slowly, almost idly, ate his breakfast, as if he weren't very hungry, as if he were trying to postpone the last bite. His gaze studied the lake through the trees on the slope below the house, and then he said: "In *The New York Times* article, you were quoted as saying you came up here in 1969."

Murray sipped at his cup of coffee. "I'll have to trust your word on that. You see, I didn't read the article."

"Is that what you told the newspaper reporter?"

"It might have been, yes."

"The reason I'd like you to clarify that point is because of something that Mom has told me."

Again, the boy followed his statement with a long pause.

"Yes, go on," Murray told him.

"She swears you came up here in 1968, because, by then, you were wanted by the FBI. She was able to give me the exact date of your departure, because, you see, you were waiting for her in the hallway outside the psych class she was taking at the University of Washington. According to her, you said you had to leave, and leave rather quickly, otherwise you were certain to be arrested."

"'68 or '69. What difference does it make, now?"

"All the difference . . ."

"Not when you're my age, Alan. All the differences begin to blend together."

The boy finished eating the eggs and bacon on his plate and then drank some coffee from his cup. "So tell me," he said, holding Murray's gaze, "am I sitting here talking to my father or my uncle?"

Murray collected the plates and took them to the sink in the kitchen.

"I'm going to get ready to go fishing," he said. "Come on down to the dock, if you'd like to come along."

Ω

Murray was standing on the dock beside the canoe, waiting anxiously and yet with calm remoteness for the boy to come out of the house, thinking that it would now be too late to finish the novel he was working on, the one called *Such a Good Man*. He remembered feeling anxious and yet calmly remote while on patrol in Vietnam. His lower back,

jarred senseless by the many times he had hurled himself face down on the ground, would begin to ache with anxious anticipation that came with not knowing when or where the next firefight would take place and then, all of sudden, before actually hearing anything, he would notice the scything of the tall grass or the thick jungle vegetation, off to his left or off to his right or even up in front of him, as if Old Man Time were cutting things down with an invisible reaper, and then, with a spasm, he would hit the ground. That was when the smell of the ears on the leather thong around his neck would rise up out of his shirt and reach his nostrils; and yet, in a peculiar way, he would feel supremely detached from everything, as if he were somewhere else altogether, watching events unfold from a long way off; and then, and only then, would he become conscious of the rattling and the explosions, as though under water in a concrete pool. That would save him, hearing that. That would bring him back to where he was and what he must do to stay alive. But sometimes, as a counterpoint to everything, he would feel like saying to hell with it all; he would feel like standing straight up into the wild spray of bullets singing all around him.

Really, I should thank the boy, he thought, glancing up the hill at the A-frame in the trees. It was good of him to have warned me, to have let me know what was going to happen. But to have harbored so many conjectures, and for such a long time, too, well, that must have been difficult for him. Very difficult. But, hey, what the hell, the boy can use all of that in his Ph.D. thesis and, who knows, maybe his thesis will become a bestseller.

Finally, as he was looking up the hill into the trees, with his right hand poised above his eyes, he saw the boy come out onto the deck of the house.

“So, are you going to come fishing with me, or aren’t you?” he yelled.

“I think I’m going to pass,” the boy yelled back down the slope.

“Suit yourself. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

But he knew, as he climbed into the canoe and shoved away from the dock, that he would not be coming back, that he was leaving the dock for the last time. He paddled strongly, in an unhurried manner, and sometimes, bringing the paddle up out of the water, he would contemplate the glistening drops that fell back into the lake, before, once more, burying the paddle in the water and giving another firm pull. Soon, he had paddled around the shoulder of the hill that dropped at such a severe angle into the lake and then he knew very definitely that he was out of sight of the A-frame and the boy’s gaze drilling into his back and he was able to paddle less self-consciously in the warm summer sunshine on the western shore of the lake. Across from him, along the eastern shore, the lake continued to reside in shadow because of the mountains that rose to peaks on that side. He observed the shadow and the mountains with a sense of calm detachment, for he had always



loved the view, especially at this hour in the morning, ever since he had first purchased the A-frame back in the late 1970s.

He was sorry about his brother, of course. Very sorry. He had only meant to show him the *puukko* and to describe to him everything he had done with it in the Vietnam War, to face Murray with his own cowardice. He had only meant to demonstrate to him how he had yanked back the heads of the gooks and had slashed their throats so that his brother, too, would come to know the horror of it all. He had wanted to convey to his brother, in the studio filled to capacity with paintings and prints, exactly what lay below the surface of everything – all of the mud, the blood, the sweat and the fear. He had wanted to explain to him that, until one really and truly confronted oneself with such horror, which was the real compost of life, the compost which produced all the beautiful flowers, one could only paint what lay on the surface, one could only be an interior decorator, so to speak, rather than a painter of any real substance.

Only he had gone a little too far . . .

For several moments, Alan (aka Murray) Maki wished he were gliding in the canoe in the shadow on the eastern shore of the lake, rather than in the slanting sunshine on the western shore, but that was simply how things were going to be, he thought, rising to his full height in the canoe, drawing the *puukko* from its sheath and, without thinking about it at all, dragging the blade across his neck.

Blood leapt into the air before his eyes . . . .

After the subway bombings in London, England I wrote the following letter to Prime Minister Paul Martin. Feel free to use a variation of it, when approaching political leaders of your choice.

## **A Political Postscript**

**Ernest Hekkanen**

Dear Prime Minister Paul Martin,

Although the bombings that took place prior to the G8 summit were vile and reprehensible, it seems to an increasingly large number of us that the leaders of the G8 summit have misconstrued the message being sent them. The bombings were not, as Tony Blair and George Bush Jr. would have us believe, an attack on our values, way of life or the freedoms we enjoy here in the West. Because the wealthy, powerful leaders of the G8 are so well insulated from reality, the culprits have, once again, taken out their anger on innocent people. Those who die are indeed being used as pawns in an economic game of chess that you and your opponents are participating in.

Rightly or wrongly, the G8 has an image problem. For several decades now, the common perception has been that G8 (formerly G7) leaders – all very wealthy, powerful individuals – get together to decide how to divide up the resources of the world so that the wealthy and the powerful can continue their mission, which is to become wealthier and even more powerful. And, of course, lines of transportation (such as Canada Steamship Lines) figure prominently into this scenario.

To achieve the purpose of coalescing the wealth of the world, the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO have been created in order to drive less powerful, poorer nations into debt – at exorbitant interest rates which, in the West, would be called usury. This game is participated in not only by the wealthy, powerful representatives of the G8, but also by their wealthy, powerful cronies in less fortunate countries (i.e. the House of Saud, the bin Ladens, Pinochet of Chile, etc, etc), much to the annoyance of those who aren't reaping the benefits.

In an attempt to secure resources, the United States and Great Britain decided to plunge into war in Iraq. Not only was oil (and the wealth accruing from it) desired by the wealthy and the powerful who represent those countries, those selfsame individuals desired to create military bases in Iraq, ones which would allow them to make excursions into surrounding countries in the Middle East.

The common perception is that the leaders of the G8 get together to decide on the next series of moves they are about to make in the big, economic chess game. You, Paul Martin, seem to be one of the more accessible, moderate representatives of wealth and power, and someone who might actually have a conscience, and so I am addressing myself to you. Greater and greater numbers of people are beginning to understand that we in the West do not actually live in democracies. We live in Corporate Feudal States run by Corporate Feudal Lords who are very good at promoting the idea that they represent democracies, when, in fact, they actually represent the interests of the wealthy and the powerful.

However, more and more of us are beginning to recognize that the Corporate Feudal Lords, who are very good at benefiting themselves at the expense of their subjects, have been indulging in a public relations hoax of magnificent proportions. When Blair and Bush announced to the West that the latest bombings in London were an attack on our way of life, our freedoms and our values, the subjects of the wealthy and the powerful simply laughed, because Bush and Blair and the rest of the G8 leaders do not represent our values, freedoms or way of life. They represent power, wealth and privilege that's determined to acquire more power, wealth and privilege, and only by holding the feet of the wealthy and the powerful to the fire of public opinion are we able to get them to recognize that poverty is a breeding ground for terror, and only then do they give such matters a small nod of recognition.

But because the wealthy, the powerful and the privileged are so well-insulated from the effects of their policies (by police and military personnel), those who would take exception to their policies end up killing the subjects of the wealthy and the powerful. However, your subjects are becoming increasingly cynical, and that is what should now be addressed by you and your G8 friends. We, the people, don't want to live in a Corporate Feudal Empire. We want to live in an actual democracy. We don't want to be the subjects of Corporate Feudal Lords. Furthermore, we are tired of suffering the repercussions that have to do with suicide bombings, increased police surveillance by authorities, etc, etc, because the Corporate Feudal Lords of this world are too cowardly to put themselves on the frontline.

I am beseeching you, Prime Minister, to make a real difference in the world, rather than continuing the same old sham.