

The New Orphic Review

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Cover art: *The View From Here*, a collage by Ernest Hekkanen

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Led Astray by Idealism

Ernest Hekkanen

IN THE SPRING, 2006 issue of *The New Orphic Review*, I mentioned that the Our Way Home Reunion would be taking place at the Brilliant Cultural Centre in Castlegar, B.C., and in this editorial I would like to follow up with an evaluation. In past editorials such as “Feats of the Imagination,” “The Power of a Good Hoax,” “Ruling Fictions,” and “Heretic & Infidel,” I discussed the impact that ‘story’ has on human behavior – how story can play upon our gullibility on the one hand and how it can lead us to accomplish great things on the other. I suggested in those editorials that we can be enslaved or liberated by story, and I think the Our Way Home Reunion – an experiment in alternative social engineering if ever there was one – is a practical example of what I’ve been trying to address over the years.

Ever since the initial Our Way Home press conference took place on September 7, 2004, I have been amazed by how contentious ‘the practice of peace’ can be. Most of us are willing to pay lip-service to the idea that peace is a fine, noble endeavor; indeed, a Nobel Prize for Peace is handed out by the Nobel Foundation nearly every year, and the recipient of that prize is lauded in newspapers and on television around the world. In colleges and universities, courses are offered in Peace Studies, which seems to suggest that society *does* pay the idea of peace at least a modicum of sober reflection. However, if we take ‘the subject of peace’ out of the classroom and attempt to put it into ‘practice,’ peace becomes extremely controversial.

There is no better example of what I’m talking about than the response to the Welcoming Peace Sculpture. Conceived of as a monument that would honor Vietnam draft evaders from the States, it immediately became a focus for antagonism by those on the political right.

The negative outburst by those who think of themselves as patriots was so ferocious, Isaac Romano shelved the monument for over a year; perhaps, in hindsight, it would be more accurate to say that it was kept under wraps. In early 2006, Larry Ewashen, the curator of the Doukhobor Village Museum in Castlegar, asked Isaac if the sculpture was available for placement, and Isaac reported that it was, with the result that a news conference was held in early May at the Doukhobor Village Museum. There, a joint communiqué was issued to the effect that the Welcoming Peace Sculpture had at last found a home.

Unbeknownst to the board of the museum, which voted in favor of placing the sculpture in its Peace Park, the City of Castlegar had a final say in the matter, and the city chose to nix the idea. The Our Way Home Reunion committee wasn't informed that a decision made by the museum board had to be endorsed by city council and neither was Larry Ewashen, apparently, because city council had never before interfered with the decisions of the board. Rather than being flummoxed by the city's decision, the Our Way Home committee decided to turn the defeat into a triumph, by traveling to Vancouver and holding a press conference there, outside City Hall, where we announced that the Welcoming Peace Sculpture would be erected outside the New Orphic Gallery – coded language for my front yard.

The press conference on May 23, 2006 resulted in news coverage across the country – on television, in newspapers such as *The National Post*, *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Globe and Mail* and in news magazines such as *Macleans*. John Dooley, the mayor of Nelson, responded by saying in print in the *Nelson Daily News* that I should be served with a business license, with the result that the Nelson City Building Inspector came calling at my door. My response was to publish a letter of reply in the *Daily News*, in which I concluded by saying: “Please send the following message to John [Dooley], will you, Bob [Hall]? I'm not going to charge anyone to look at the statue that will be placed in my front yard, and therefore I'm not required to have a business license. However, I do appreciate the low-level threat.”

When the Paragons of Patriotism find it impossible under the law to deny freedom of speech, they often resort to the fallback measure of trying to tax it out of existence. It's an old story, and I wasn't going to buy into it.

Early on during the controversy, when Isaac was thinking of permanently shelving the Welcoming Peace Sculpture, I advised him that it was not only the fuel which powered his campaign, it was the engine that drove it. In reality, the sculpture is quite inoffensive; it depicts a young couple crossing the border into Canada and being welcomed by an older gentleman. Without being told what one is looking at, it would be difficult to fathom the sculpture's infrastructure of meaning. Indeed, the sculpture itself verges on being innocuous, which leads me to conclude that what people see in it is a matter of projection – or, if you will, a matter of story.

In my editorial, “Feats of the Imagination” (vol.7, no. 1), I stated that human beings “seem to be imbued with a fatal flaw, one which expresses itself as a willingness to believe the most absurd claims . . . Feats of the imagination have driven the history of humankind from the time we stood upright and started walking across the face of the earth (in pursuit of what, we have yet to discover), and I suspect feats of the imagination will continue to drive us for a very long time to come.”

The Welcoming Peace Sculpture is one such feat of the imagination. Dreamed up by Isaac Romano and executed by Naomi Lewis, it moved from the realm of ideas into the world of substantive artifact. However, it barely got out of the conceptual stage, as a clay maquette, before people with entirely different motives and imaginations tried to kill it – both here in Nelson and across North America. There ensued a battle for dominance by two vastly different imaginations, one of which, until now, has reigned supreme – it being aligned, of course, with power, patriotism and war, the latter of which is financed to the hilt by big business, oil, and the banks.

The Our Way Home Reunion has been in trouble from the very beginning. Attacked by the Political Right and undermined by the Professional Left, which, for financial reasons of its own, tries to eliminate competitors before they get out of the starting gate, Isaac’s campaign lurched along, ran into countless roadblocks and nearly expired due to lack of financial resources. To employ a handy metaphor, Our Way Home was a dark horse that eventually crossed the finish line, despite the odds against it doing so. That metaphor encapsulates a story that is dear to this author’s heart. For decades now, my existence as a writer has been an extremely precarious one; the more I was told to give up the notion of ever becoming a writer – by family, friends and publishers alike – the more determined I became to succeed. You see, for me, writing has always been a matter of rebellion, of defiance, a matter of saying ‘no’ to the prevailing rules, regulations and mores. In other words, my personal story and the story of the Our Way Home Reunion were a perfect match, with the result that I allowed my idealism to lead me vastly astray. I plunked \$30,000 down on Our Way Home to cross the finish line, knowing full well that I’d probably end up in debt. Why did I feel compelled to take such a foolish risk? Because I’m in the habit of defying the predominant social order, which insists on the game being played according to a set of rules that amount to little more than a kind of fiction. It is an unexamined fiction we are taught to live in obedience of all our lives, and it is having a terrible effect on us and the world.

Thirty thousand dollars is a pittance compared to the trillions of dollars being wagered by banks, corporations and nations that desire Man of War to perpetually come in first across the finish line.

As I have said repeatedly to newsmen in the print world and to interviewers on television and radio, “As long as you make sure the middle class remains relatively comfortable, you can commit just about

any crime you want on its behalf and get away with it.” That *was* the story behind the Vietnam War, and that *is* the story behind the Iraq War. People are dying so that we in the West can continue to drive SUVs. People are dying so that America can prop up the Yankee dollar, which is now pegged to the oil standard rather than the gold standard. People are dying so that we can continue to consume commodities made of plastic, a derivative of oil. Every day, whether we like to think so or not, we bet millions of dollars on Man of War to be first across the finish line. This wager is being placed in every community across North America. It is the reason why the Our Way Home Reunion in general, and the Welcoming Peace Sculpture in particular, ran into so much opposition by those who insist on maintaining the status quo.

In an article entitled “As Iraq Burns, Haunted by Vietnam,” published online at *The Tyee* website, Bill Metcalfe reports that “Ernest Hekkanen, a Nelson writer who came to Canada to escape the Vietnam draft, has offered to display [the Welcoming Peace Sculpture] in front of his home, which doubles as a small art gallery. . . . Hekkanen says he has been surprised by the reaction of some people on the left. ‘They ask me if I’m worried that my house will be fire-bombed. They are expressing a fear that the American right wing has somehow managed to inculcate in them. The left in Canada had better get some backbone. Every time the right wing in the States growls and barks, [the left wing] hightails it out of town.’”

I would also contend that the Left here in Canada and in the United States is so badly compromised by the economics that further the cause of war, it is disinclined to bet on peace, which it views as a bad investment. That’s the real story behind the Our Way Home Reunion. A bunch of little guys who didn’t fully understand the economics arrayed against ever pulling off an event devoted to peace and reconciliation managed to nevertheless ride their dark horse across the finish line. How much impact our efforts have had on the status quo is difficult to say. I know I came away extremely moved by many of the workshop participants I had exchanges with – men who belong to the Vietnam Veterans for Peace, for instance. I know that many people lined up to have their pictures taken beside the bronze Welcoming Peace Sculpture on display at the Brilliant Cultural Centre, and I know that the fear and paranoia the right wing tried to instill in the local population was successfully defied, as it must be defied elsewhere in the world, in the United States in particular – that is, if we intend to survive beyond the year 2010.

However, you’re probably wondering whether I managed to recover my \$30,000 investment?

Not all of it. Which only goes to prove that peace doesn’t pay, I guess. However, that might change. We’ll see.

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). His most recent collection of poems is *Moons and Mirrors*.

The Burning Chapel

Michael Bullock

FOR SEVERAL YEARS I have regularly walked down a street bordered on one side by a high wall. One day I observed, to my surprise, that a window had been let into this wall. Through the window, to my utter amazement, I saw what appeared to be a large park, though it extended out of sight on all sides. Directly ahead a grassy slope ran down to a reed-fringed lake. Beyond the lake and on both sides there was woodland as far as I could see.

Naturally I was no little puzzled by the discovery of the existence of a hitherto unsuspected park in the middle of a major urban center. And yet it looked very familiar to me, as though I had seen it many times before.

After this first vision of the park, I never failed to look through the window in the wall every time I passed it, and from time to time I made a special trip for the sole purpose of looking through the window. I observed that no one else paid the slightest attention to it, as though it had always been there and hence aroused no particular interest, or as though nobody but myself had noticed its existence.

This state of affairs lasted for several weeks, or perhaps even months. Then one day I saw next to the window a green-painted door in the wall that had not been there before. Again, no one but myself appeared to notice it.

I tried the handle. The door was not locked. I opened it and stepped into the park.

As I walked down the grassy slope towards the lake, I glanced over my shoulder to make sure I had closed the door. There was no door. Nor was there a window. All I saw was the weather-worn brickwork of the ancient wall.

I was dumbfounded. But more than this, I was filled with consternation at the thought that there was now no way back to the street. I tried to console myself with the idea that of course there must be other ways out of this estate. But, against all reason, I could not believe my own arguments.

Since there was no turning back, however, I had no alternative but to walk into the park.

To take my mind off the worrying problem of my eventual escape from the park, I concentrated on the details of my environment. The first thing I noticed was the grass on which I was walking. Although it was quite green it rustled under my feet like straw. Then I saw that, as it proceeded towards the lake, the grass was gradually changing into human hair, grey hair, as though I were walking on the head of a grandmother.

But when I reached the bank of the lake the grass became green and soft again, in keeping with the green reeds that fringed the lake, swaying gently in response to some imperceptible movement of the water.

By now I had become so intrigued by my mysterious surroundings that all thought of an eventual escape had vanished from my mind.

Now that I had reached the lake I had to decide whether to follow its bank to the left or to the right. In both directions lay thick woods. The only difference was that to the left what appeared to be the spire of a small church or chapel rose above the treetops. Curious to find out more about this spire I turned to the left and walked along the lakeside till I came to the wood.

I had not penetrated very far into the wood when I came to a stream that evidently flowed into the lake. Over this stream stretched a very rickety Japanese bridge showing every sign of having been allowed to decay without repair for many years. I crossed it gingerly as it swayed beneath my feet and came safely to the other side.

The unexpected presence of a bridge inside the wood made me look more closely at the setting. I saw that the woodland trees were interspersed with shrubs – hydrangeas, rhododendrons – and even tree ferns. It appeared to me quite certain that at one time this area had been no ordinary woodland but a garden, perhaps, as a number of rocks scattered here and there suggested, a Japanese garden into which a bridge fitted perfectly. These hints of a distant, vanished past lent the scene an air of forlorn desolation of which I had not at first been aware.

With a slight shiver I hurried on in the direction of the spire. When I reached it, the building did indeed prove to be a chapel. Like the bridge it was in a state of total disrepair and dilapidation. All but one of the windows were devoid of glass, but the stained glass in this one window, at the far end facing the door, was surprisingly intact. The surrounding trees did not let in enough light to allow the design of the stained glass to show up clearly, but it seemed to depict a group of enigmatic figures engaged in some obscure and indecipherable activity. There was even, no doubt as a result of the motion of leaves outside, a

suggestion that these figures were actually in movement, as they performed some secret rite. I gazed at them intently in an attempt to fathom the mystery and to ascertain whether they were indeed moving, but in the dim and shifting light I was unable to do either. At times it seemed almost as though the whole scene were taking place under water and the confusion was due to flowing currents and eddies. This effect doubtless arose from the fact that the colors of the window were glaucous greens and blues, divided by black lines of the lead, though at times a faint rosy glow would appear now here now there, as though a swimmer were moving from place to place carrying a rosy-colored light.

Baffled by this vision, I turned my attention to the rest of the church. Parts of the roof had fallen in and through the gaps leaves had drifted down and now carpeted the floor, rising in small rustling clouds as I strode through them. Surprisingly, the altar beneath the one glazed window was clear of dust, rubble and leaves, as though still used by someone. And the two silver candlesticks, though somewhat tarnished so that they did not gleam, were not as covered in verdigris as would have been in keeping with the neglect and dilapidation of the building as a whole.

These signs of use, far from being reassuring, created an eerie, sinister effect, as though whatever purpose the chapel might now serve was connected with evil rather than good. It occurred to me that the window by which I had been so intrigued had not been preserved from the original existence of the chapel, but had been added later and was of an entirely different nature from the window it had replaced. Perhaps the disrepair of the rest of the building was not due to mere neglect but symbolized an active contempt and hostility towards its original function.

As I walked away from the chapel deeper into the wood my eyes were lulled by the tranquil scene of tree trunks, leaves and branches, moss and a few pink flowers whose name was unknown to me. But my ears were assailed by a variety of inexplicable sounds: a rustling as though of a myriad falling leaves, although I could see not a single leaf falling, the pale, distant music of an organ, melancholy, nostalgic, the grief-stricken song of a solitary bird bewailing the loss of a mate, a voice whispering close to me although there was no one to be seen. The whispering, especially, perturbed me deeply, and all the more so because I could not decipher the message, or identify the nature of the speaker. The whisper was so neutral that I could not even guess whether it was a warning or a threat, advice or instructions, or even whether it was male or female, though I had an instinctive feeling it was female – unless this was pure wishful thinking. Because I could not distinguish a single word, I wondered if I was being addressed in a foreign language. However, I felt sure that if this were the case I should at least be able to hazard a rough guess as to what language it was or what group of lan-

guages it belonged to; but there was nothing about the whisper to give me the slightest hint.

Meanwhile the leaves continued to fall, the organ to play and the grieving bird to lament. Clearly, this was a sorcerer's wood and I began to wonder whether I should ever escape from it. What surprised me most, perhaps, was the fact that however far I walked the sounds continued to surround me, as though they were not located in any one spot but were moving along in step with me. Moreover they did not seem to be in any way competing with one another. The notes of the organ might have been expected to drown out the laments of the bird, the rustling of the leaves to have silenced the whisper. But no, each sound maintained a complete and clearly identifiable clarity, an unearthly clarity that lent them all a supernatural significance, a significance I felt without being able to fathom it.

Since the sounds accompanied me wherever I walked there were two possibilities: either they were following me and would go with me wherever I went, or they were guiding me and I was bound to go wherever they took me. I had no distinct feeling of the latter situation, and yet I could not dismiss this possibility from my mind. In any case I was convinced now that there was a purpose to my being here and a goal to my wandering. And as I walked on, it became ever more clear to me that this goal would be a large and apparently empty building, a manor house or, as I became increasingly certain, an even larger building constructed on a semi-circular plan, approached by a wide flight of steps and flanked on either side by a wing in the form of an arcade or colonnade.

Sure enough, the wood gave way to a stretch of open grassland and beyond this rose precisely the building I had visualized. I ascended the steps and entered a rotunda, a circular hall with a high domed ceiling, columns round the walls and a marble floor. I believed it to be some sort of assembly hall.

The sounds from the woodland had now left me, though I could not pinpoint the precise moment at which I ceased to hear them. Probably they had faded gradually as I walked across the open grassland to the flight of steps.

A corridor led out of the assembly hall, and I followed this to a high double door painted white and gold that opened into a spacious book-lined library, whose windows looked out onto what I seemed to recognize as the lake down to whose opposite bank I had walked after first passing through the door in the wall.

Deeply ensconced in one of the leather-upholstered armchairs that furnished the library was a man apparently immersed in a book he held on his lap. He glanced up as I entered; then, as though he had been expecting me, he rose, shook my hand and introduced himself to me as Randolph Cranstone. The name seemed to stir some memory buried deep in my mind, but it was no more than a vague feeling of recognition that brought no specific recollection to the surface.

Cranstone led me to the window and began to talk about the lake that we could see some hundred or so meters away. Because I was pre-occupied with the attempt to recall where I had heard his name before, I found it difficult to concentrate on what he was saying, but he appeared to be recounting some adventure with a monster that had risen from the lake. However, it was not clear to me what part he had played in the events he was recounting nor what the final outcome had been. Whether, for example, I was to understand that the monster in question was still present in the lake. I looked closely at the still water, but I found it hard to imagine that beneath its unruffled surface there lurked a monster which, if I understood him correctly, had once devoured Cranstone's maid.

I was now certain that this mansion, and particularly this library, had been the goal of my journey and the meeting with Cranstone had been an essential part of the reason for it. But I had as yet no idea what the purpose might be. What was I to learn or acquire from Cranstone, or what was he to show me on this estate that was unknown to me and yet seemed so familiar? Since there was nothing of which I was aware, or could logically deduce from my surroundings, I resolved to patiently await events.

As Randolph Cranstone continued to talk about the lake in terms that I only partially understood, I took the opportunity to glance surreptitiously around the room. At intervals, in spaces between the books, there hung portraits of famous authors. It was not without a certain pride and satisfaction that I noticed my own portrait among them.

After making this observation I turned my attention back to Cranstone and the lake. After a while, however, I felt the desire to look at my portrait again. To my horror I saw that it was gone and Cranstone's portrait hung there instead. Once over the shock I looked carefully round the walls to make certain I had not confused the position in which my portrait had hung. But no, there was no sign of my portrait anywhere else.

I was doubly angered by the replacement of my portrait with Cranstone's. I felt that Cranstone had no claim to be among famous authors, and certainly not at my expense.

Again I turned back to Cranstone, but now anger and bewilderment made it even more difficult than before to grasp the meaning of his words. Losing interest, I glanced back at his portrait; to my amazement it was now my own I saw in the position it had originally occupied and where Cranstone's had then hung. I repeated this procedure several times, turning from Cranstone to the portrait and back again. The portrait I saw on the wall alternated between Cranstone and myself: one time it was myself, the next time Cranstone and so on ad infinitum. If Cranstone had resembled me more closely it might have been a trick of the light. But in spite of some very superficial resemblance, Cranstone and I looked radically different. And in any case, the light did not change, so this explanation would hardly hold water. I should have

liked to go over and examine the portrait or portraits more closely, but I experienced a profound reluctance to draw Cranstone's attention to what was happening. I felt that once I had admitted being aware of it this would have given Cranstone a certain power over me.

I therefore did my best to concentrate on what Cranstone was saying.

He had now waxed lyrical over the changes that took place in the lake with the changing seasons. He spoke of the fresh green of the reeds that appeared in spring, the chirping of the newborn birds in the surrounding trees and the budding of the water lilies. He described the multitude of shimmering dragonflies flitting hither and thither over the water in summer and the pink, white and red lilies that opened up to the full in the sunshine; the rustle of the dry reeds of the fall, and the same lilies coated with a silvery white frost sparkling in the cold sunlight in winter.

Now I could fully understand him, and as I listened I began to feel that I was intimately acquainted with the lake that stretched out before me sparkling darkly like polished jade, reflecting everything around it with preternatural clarity but yielding no glimpse of what lay beneath its surface. As Cranstone continued to lyricize about the lake, I found myself becoming increasingly certain that at some point he would abandon the lake and turn to the chapel amongst the trees. I awaited this moment with mingled eagerness and trepidation. I was impatient to hear the truth about the chapel, but fearful of what this truth might be.

When he did make the transition, he established a curious link between the two, claiming that the lake was fed by an underground stream originating in a holy well close by the chapel.

As Cranstone talked about the chapel I did my best to grasp what he was saying, but I was so preoccupied by the ever-changing portrait behind us, at which I constantly stole surreptitious glances, that I found it hard to concentrate on his informative description. Nevertheless a picture formed in my mind that may or may not have arisen out of his words. In my mind's eye I saw the chapel enveloped in flames, but it was not burning. The flames were inflicting no damage on the structure. They seemed like an emanation, almost a decoration, as though the image was a work of art rather than an actual burning building. I felt sure that within the chapel candles were burning, encircling an open coffin or catafalque, and that within the coffin lay the body of a beautiful young woman whose golden hair encircled her face like an aureole. Moreover I was certain that the face, could I but see it, would be known to me and yet, without seeing it, I was confronted with a range of possibilities and had no idea which of the various possibilities it would prove to be – unless they were all, in the last analysis, the self-same person, someone I had no recollection of ever having seen.

These images and speculations carried my attention so far from Cranstone's words that I was taken entirely by surprise when, as though

in conclusion to his remarks, he proposed that we should pay a visit to the chapel.

As we left the library I cast a final glance over my shoulder at the portrait and saw neither Cranstone nor myself, but an inextricable amalgam of the two, as though we had somehow been combined into a single person, although he was clearly walking beside me as a separate being as he led me across the grassy slope towards the wood in whose depths stood the fiery chapel.

When we reached the chapel it was indeed afire, but as in my vision the flames neither damaged the chapel nor set fire to the surrounding trees. They must, therefore, have been spiritual flames emanating, I felt sure, from the body of the young girl lying within. And in this, too, my vision proved to be correct. There she lay, peaceful and fresh as though asleep, and I could have sworn that her lovely breast was rising and falling very gently as though with the very least of breaths – certainly an illusion induced by the freshness of her whole appearance. And the candles too encircled her as my vision had portrayed them, tall candles wavering in response to an imperceptible current of air.

None of these phenomena appeared to make an impression on my companion, who passed the recumbent figure with only a casual glance, approached the altar and laid upon it, before the slightly tarnished cross between the two silver candlesticks, a juniper twig which, unnoticed by me, he must have broken off as we made our way here through the wood.

After a few moments Cranstone picked up the juniper twig and placed it on the lips of the dead girl in the coffin. Almost at once color began to return to her pale cheeks, her chest rose and fell as she breathed, and she opened her violet eyes. She sat up, letting her long hair fall over her shoulders; then she stepped out of the coffin and stood there before us clad in a long white robe, looking like a priestess of some ancient Anglo-Saxon cult.

Cranstone, who seemed to be well acquainted with this magical being, introduced her to me as Aura, a name which I assumed to spring from the golden light that seemed to emanate from her and concentrated particularly in her golden hair and which fitted her perfectly in every way. The tips of our fingers touched briefly and I felt an electric thrill pass up my arm.

Meanwhile the flames encircling the chapel had been extinguished and the candles round the coffin had also ceased to burn, allowing thin wisps of smoke to rise for a few seconds into the air before vanishing without a trace. I sensed that Aura's resurrection had given rise to a golden refulgence that illuminated everything around her, causing it to glow as if lit from within, even though the light emanated from Aura and fell upon her surroundings from without. Cranstone shared in this illumination and I supposed that I too, could I but see myself from outside or reflected in a mirror, would also display an unaccustomed radiance.

The three of us walked back together through the wood and up the grassy slope to the library. As we walked I heard the song of a bird, which seemed to be accompanying us. This time, far from being a lament as on my arrival, it was a song of joy or a paean of praise and, if the latter, it must certainly be a song in praise of Aura.

When we entered the library my first thought was to glance at the portrait on the wall. This time it was Aura it portrayed; but in the background were two silhouettes that appeared to be those of Cranstone and myself.

Even inside the library I could faintly hear the singing of the bird outside.

There were several low tables in the room and one of them was littered with papers. Leafing through these I came upon a sheet bearing writing that I immediately recognized as my own, though clearly dating from an earlier phase in my life. I read it and discovered to my amazement that it was a poem, the first poem I had ever written, dedicated to a childhood love. I felt reluctant to mention it to my companions, because of the difficulty of finding an explanation for the presence of this poem in such an unlikely spot.

Then, to my further surprise, Aura took the poem from my hand with an expression of thanks, as though it had been written for her – as perhaps it had been.

It had now become clear to me that both Cranstone and I had a strong link to Aura: Cranstone because he had brought her back to life, I because I had apparently celebrated her in a poem at a much earlier stage of my existence, a poem that had sprung from an earlier time, indicating that our acquaintanceship, our friendship even, was of an immensely long duration. Cranstone, too, had clearly known her in the past – how else could he have been aware of her presence, and even her condition, since he had come prepared with a juniper twig, in the chapel among the trees? Did I have to think of the two of us as rivals for her attention? This hardly seemed the case, for without Cranstone's intervention I should not have discovered Aura in the chapel. Or was it Cranstone's calculation that I was bound to return to the chapel in any case and it would be better for him if I did so under his guidance?

Future events, I was sure, would provide an answer to this question.

Now that I had been twice through the wood, had paid two visits to the chapel and had familiarized myself with parts of the mansion and especially the library, there only remained the lake, when Cranstone, as though reading my thoughts, made precisely this proposal.

When we reached the lake I found, to my surprise, that it was frozen over. The reeds, brown and thin, were coated with a thin film of frost and produced a glassy sound like windbells as they rubbed together, moved either by some shifting of the water under the ice or by an imperceptible breeze. The sound gave me a strange sensation in the pit of my stomach, a feeling of foreboding and apprehension, as if the bell-like ringing was a death knell or heralded some other form of immanent

disaster. I shivered and so, I noticed, did my two companions. Perhaps they too were experiencing the same feeling of apprehension – or were they only reacting to the chill that rose from the frozen surface of the lake?

Aura moved closer to me. Was she simply in search of warmth or was some force of which neither of us was aware drawing us together? Whatever the reason, as she moved closer, so that I could feel the warmth of her body, the wintry aspects of the lake began to diminish and disappear. The frost melted from the reeds and the ice from the surface of the water. The reeds appeared in the green of spring and the water glistened in the sunlight, I felt an urge to plunge in and swim, but before I could put this impulse into effect the reeds expanded their area of occupation until they filled the whole pond with the exception of the narrow, winding channel stretching from one bank to the other. I had no wish to swim this channel and I turned instead to Aura, whose face I saw was lit with a radiance that seemed like a reflection of the sun on the water of the lake.

At the sight of her radiant face I was once more drawn to the lake, realizing that it was indeed this lake whose water was throwing back upon her the light of the sun. This time, however, I imagined myself crossing the lake with her hand in hand and emerging with her on the opposite bank. But when I looked across at the other side I saw a field of thistles that could hold no attraction for anyone or anything but a donkey. I immediately abandoned the idea of crossing the lake which now, even in the company of Aura, had lost all appeal.

While the lake and Aura were engaging my attention I had forgotten the existence of Cranstone, who now brought himself back to my consciousness by saying with bell-like clarity, as though addressing a public meeting: “The lake has nothing further to offer. Let us return to the library.”

He spoke with such authority that it never occurred to either Aura or myself to question the truth of his assertion or the rightness of his proposal. We all three therefore turned and trooped up the grassy slope, entered the library and sat down in the leather armchairs.

I quickly glanced at the spot where the multiple changing portrait had been. There were now three portraits showing each of us singly and independently.

As I thought back on recent events it became inescapably clear to me that Cranstone had manipulated them from start to finish. He had led me to the chapel in the woods, where I met Aura. He had guided us to the lake, whose metamorphoses had bewildered and confused me. In both cases he had himself stood back and observed what took place. He reminded me of nothing so much as an author who places his characters in a certain situation and then sits back to watch how they behave under the circumstances he has created for them. It only remained for me to await Cranstone’s next move. I could not be absolutely certain whether he was improvising from moment to moment, or whether he had a pre-

determined scenario in mind; though I was fairly certain it was the latter, since he must certainly have planned my initial entry into the park through the door in the wall.

I felt myself confronted by a variety of questions. What was Cranstone's purpose in all this? Did he have a purpose, or did he merely enjoy playing God? What was the outcome likely to be and would it be detrimental or beneficial to me? And, above all perhaps, what was Aura's role to be in this drama of two characters, an author and a landscape?

The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that Cranstone himself would be at a loss to answer these perplexing questions, that he was in fact motivated more by the desire to see what would happen next than by the urge to carry out a preconceived plan. Moreover, it occurred to me that perhaps he was also inspired by a desire to turn the tables, having himself so often been at the mercy of an author's whim.

While Cranstone chatted casually about the lake and the landscape, I stole another surreptitious glance at the three portraits on the wall. Even as I looked, they combined into one before my eyes, then vanished, leaving me staring at a blank wall.

As though this were a sign he had been waiting for, Cranstone ceased his casual talk and announced in a rather peremptory tone that it was time to return to the chapel in the woods.

As we passed between the trees I heard the melancholy notes of a single bamboo flute playing what sounded to me like a song of farewell.

When we reached the chapel Aura was the first to enter. She walked straight down the central aisle to the altar, onto which she climbed. Then she stood there, encircled by a golden radiance, the personification of the Mother Goddess, Madonna, Isis, Shakti. She embodied them all.

I fell to my knees in adoration. As I did so, a flood of cold flame passed through the chapel, entering from behind me and sweeping forward towards the altar.

I knew that we should all three be devoured and vanish from this earthly world. But I also knew that we should thereby be transported to a world beyond space and time, where we should be united forever in an everlasting communion of spirits, where I should possess Aura, but always in the presence of Cranstone, a benevolent or threatening presence whose real intentions I should never be able to fathom.

As I felt myself disappearing I stretched out my arms to Aura, imploring her to follow me. Her answering smile assured me that she would. Cranstone, I knew, had preceded us to the world for which we were bound.

Had he foreseen this apotheosis from the outset, when he first introduced the door into the wall by the street?

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Linda Lee Crosfield / **Four Poems**

How Poems Come to Be

August 30, 2005

Come on now
 It doesn’t have to be long
 Just a few succinct words
 Herded into the right order
 To become a line,
 To be heard,
 Is all it takes for words to line up
 And become a poem.
 Rushing headlong into thought,
 Hanging around demurely at the door of an idea.
 Waiting to be asked in.
 Shy words, shrinking back,
 Waiting to be asked to dance,
 Bold ones, elbowing the others aside,
 Not waiting their turn.

Invoking the Muse

Someday it will be easy to toss aside
The pen, for it will have spent its ink,
The pencil, for it will have used up all its lead.
But not yet.
Is she here, your 3 a.m. seductress,
Just waiting to take you for a spin in a boat
On a vast sea of words you know nothing of?
Can she find you here in this doldrums din
Of too much – not enough?
And if she does find you, if she does come, will she stay?
And if she stays, where will you put her up?
You know the bitch – she likes her own
Room with her own entrance,
She won't take meals with the rest of the family,
Prefers to lope past the table, naked and enticing,
Showing off what she can do when she feels like it.
She snaps on lights when it's not even dark,
Answers phones that don't ring,
Stops to peer over your shoulder when you're reading,
Tells you how the story's going to end.
But you let it go – almost – nearly every time.
By now you know if you speak up, or push her aside,
She'll squash you, leave you retching at the side of the road,
Green bile where once sweet rivers flowed,
For she's a trickster, a siren,
A pillaged pot of gold you're bound to seek.
You know she's in the room,
You can smell her fetid jasmine breath,
But when you look for her she's gone like silent thunder,
Leaving you stunned and wordless after all.

Blake Parker at 3 a.m.*

August 5, 2005

There was something about a boat
 – a ferry, perhaps, something to hold cars –
 and there we were, underneath the stars,
 the Milky Way a sparkle-fan snapped out
 about our heads by the hand of God.

There was something about the night
 – a clear one, quiet, cold –
 and you and me, huddled together for warmth
 while somewhere, off to sea, I heard you were dying,
 that whiskyraspy voice soon to be silenced,
 and even though we've never even spoken
 to each other, well, you're a poet
 and so am I, and I must consider
 all the poet-friends you'll get to see
 once you've raged past the dying light,
 embraced the last lover of us all,
 stepped up to the Bar of Ages
 and ordered yourself a fine, cold beer.

The boat is there to cross the river Styx,
 The Milky Way, that legion of word-spinners.
 There you'll be, shining bright and new,
 Inspiring some new, mute poet-voice to speak.

I get it now.

* Editor's note: It should be understood that Blake Parker is very much alive and intensely working on further creative projects.

At Least You Know

August 7, 2005

At least you know
 Not to take it personally
 When the old one snaps,
 Bites down hard,
 Says you put her in a taxi
 To get home from the hospital
 And she had to wake up the clown
 To get into the building.

Consider the way the mind works
 (Or, in this case, does not)
 You see a shadow moving in the yard
 You are convinced it's someone's kite
 Waiting to be released into the impatient sky
 If only you could find the string.

For isn't that what death is?
 Us released from all that holds us down
 Taking that leap, that giant step
 Into the sweet unknown?

Try standing at the edge of anything
 That wants to keep you out.
 Adjust your whims to meet the light of day.
 Taste tangles on your tongue,
 Makes mockery of morning

Tugs you awake

one

more

time

MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*. Her short story, "Dream Dig," was published in *The Journey Prize Anthology*, in 2001, and her novella, *To Travel the Distance*, can usually be read in serialized form in these pages (look for its continuation next spring). *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen* is an informal study based on a series of interviews, to be released by New Orphic Publishers in November, 2006. The first 25 pages have been reproduced here.

The Reluctant Author

Margrith Schraner

Author's Note

SOMETIME DURING the fall of 2005, Ernest and I were sitting in the kitchen of our house, at a rickety, small table that came with us when we moved to Nelson in the summer of 2000. The table had once served as a theatre prop. More specifically, Ernest had built it for his play, *Beyond the Call*, which was produced by Jay Hamburger's company, *Theatre in the Raw*, in Vancouver and a year later at the Fringe Festival in Seattle.

While we were sitting at the table, Ernest mentioned an interview he had heard the night before on the CBC program, *As It Happens*. It had featured a well-known art forger whose forgeries were being exhibited in Belgium, along with some of his original works. The forger had explained that some of his forgeries were still undiscovered and hanging in museums around the world. Ernest was fascinated by the man's confession. He was reminded of the painting, *The Man with the Gilt Helmet*, originally thought to have been executed by Rembrandt, until forensic tests proved it to be a fake some three centuries later.

In the manner of unpremeditated exchanges that tend to take place at breakfast tables, Ernest mused about the similarity between the forger interviewed on the radio program and a character that appears in his rather long story, "The Search for Alexander Mikkonen," published in his collection, *Medieval Hour in the Author's Mind*, and later in *Bridge Over the Tampere Rapids and Other Finnish Stories*.

"I've always been fascinated by hoaxes," he said. "The arts seem to lend themselves particularly well to the creation of forgeries."

He made reference to a number of parallels in the world of literature: A. E. Hotchner's largely invented biography *Papa Hemingway*,

Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Balloon-Hoax."

Our excited exchange about forgeries soon led us to discuss other matters, foremost among them the consistent, nagging desire I have had over the years to do a study of Ernest's oeuvre.

"I guess I'll have to be the one to write it," he teased me, knowing how long it takes me to produce a chapter of my novella, *To Travel the Distance*.

I wondered then what sort of fiction an author might resort to if he were to critically appraise his own work. How candid would he be in revealing himself? How objective? How much about himself would he want to protect or leave unsaid? What if we worked on such a book together?

"I could ask all the right questions," I kidded him. "You could even put words in my mouth."

I'll let the reader unravel the extent to which this approach has shaped *The Reluctant Author*. I will only admit that I am grateful for Ernest's help in guiding my inquiry. And, of course, I want to thank him for the boundless generosity he has shown in sharing the peculiar workings of his literary mind.

Margrith Schraner
Nelson, April 2006

Prologue

I have never met an author more reluctant to sell one of his books. On one occasion, fairly late in the afternoon, in the early fall I believe it was, Ernest Hekkanen received a telephone call from a woman who happened to be interning as a reporter at the local weekly newspaper here in Nelson, British Columbia. The young woman told him she had read his novel, *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*, and now wished to read another one of his books. "You're sure you want to do something like that?" he tried to dissuade her. "Certainly, you could spend your time in a more fruitful manner."

"I wouldn't be calling if I didn't want to read one of your books," she said. "However, I can't find any of them in the local bookstore."

"There are several good reasons why you can't find them there."

"What reasons are those?"

"Well, first of all, they would sell only very rarely – perhaps one every couple of years, if that – which means that they'd be little more than depressed stock and would end up incurring the annoyance of the proprietor; second, I don't wish to put myself in the position of preying

on the locals here in Nelson; and third, I don't feel like going to so much effort."

"Would it be possible to buy a book directly from you, then?"

"Sure, if you're willing to hike up the hill to where I live on Mill Street, I guess I could sell you one."

Even after Florence had arrived at the house – slightly out of breath, flushed in a manner that went well with her long auburn hair, and dewy at the temples from the steep walk uphill – Ernest grilled her as to why she wanted to read one of his books. "I enjoyed *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*. I thought you did an excellent job of getting into Pamela Dresdahl's psyche, and I thought I'd like to read another one of your books."

"Wherever did you come across a copy of *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*?"

"In the Edmonton Public Library. My mother and I read it, and we both enjoyed it."

"Good God! Did you hear that, Margrith? She and her mother read one of my books and they both enjoyed it, apparently. Very strange, very strange indeed." He looked Florence in the eye. "I hope my other books won't disappoint you too much. You know, I never write two books that are even remotely alike. It bores me to death to do anything like that."

"I'll take that risk."

"What a fearless young woman you are. I'll bring some down from my office and you can take your pick."

While Ernest was upstairs getting some books out of his office, the young woman sipped at her cup of tea and then gave me an inquiring look. "Have you two been together very long?"

"Nearly sixteen years."

"Does he always make it so difficult to buy one of his books?"

"Nearly always. He's a bit peculiar in that regard."

"Now I understand why he isn't better known as a writer."

"Yes, he refuses to do things in the proper fashion. He refuses to believe his books are important enough to deserve recognition."

"That's a funny attitude to adopt."

"I think he fears being the least bit successful, actually."

She looked past my shoulder. "Are those paintings by him?"

I turned to glance at the canvases on the wall. "Yes. He describes himself as a mucker, as a binge artist."

"Are they all by him?"

"Yes."

"He's a good artist. Does he ever exhibit his work?"

"He used to exhibit, but not any more. He doesn't enjoy the snobbery that is part and parcel of the art scene."

Florence got up from her chair and went to take a closer look at the painting called *Bull and Muse*. She turned to glance at me. "The woman in this painting is you, isn't it?"

“Yes, it is.”

“This painting gives me a haunted and yet humorous feeling.”

“Ernest has a pretty quirky view of the world.”

“I like it. I think he’s a good painter.”

“You’d be hard-pressed to persuade him of that. He finds fault with just about everything he does.”

“Why?”

“It’s just the way he is. A defensive mechanism, I imagine.”

I’m always suspicious of women who develop a sudden interest in Ernest’s work, especially if they are the least bit young. Once, in a creative writing class that Ernest taught on Wednesday evenings in Port Moody, one of his female students offered to acquaint him with the Photo Shop program at her home in Port Coquitlam. For several weeks after the course had ended, he continued to receive perfumed letters from her in the mail.

I suspected that Florence was in her late twenties. She was an innocent-looking young woman who could easily form a liaison with an older, more experienced writer – out of admiration and infatuation, the way I had done upon meeting him and reading his collection of short stories, *The Violent Lavender Beast*. Apparently, Ernest’s ex-wife had reacted with heated annoyance upon reading “The Wooden Arms of the Angel,” about a sculptor-cum-elderly-biker whose biker-chick model poses for him in the privacy of the garage where he’s executing what will become his final sculpture, that of a pregnant young woman riding a motorcycle. According to Ernest, his wife had said: “What will people think when they read that story?”

At last, Ernest came downstairs with an armload of books. I noticed that *Black Snow: an imaginative memoir*, a book we had co-authored, was not among them. Florence studied the books that Ernest spread in an arc on the tabletop. As his in-house editor, I’ve read every one of them.

“I’m afraid you won’t find any of these at all like the book you’ve read.”

“That’s all right. I like variety.”

By the autumn of 2001, Ernest had completed his 28th book, *The Misadventures of Bumbleberry Finn*, a pastiche of things Finnish. While his objective in *Bridge Over the Tampere Rapids* was to explore the lives of first, second and third generation Finnish-Americans and – Canadians, his objective in *Bumbleberry Finn* was to make fun of the stereotypes and the eccentricity attributed to Finns. Finns are often thought of as rather stiff and serious, but they also possess a slapstick sense of humor.

Finally, after several minutes of deliberation, Florence decided to purchase Ernest’s first published novel, *From a Town Now Dreaming*. “It’s a spoof,” he told her, “a send-up of things New Age and mythological.”

She perused the first page of *Dreaming*. “The first two paragraphs remind me of Camus’ *The Plague*,” she said, looking up at him with large, wide-open eyes.

“How perceptive of you,” he said. “That allusion flies below the radar of most people.”

“I majored in literature,” she said.

“Oh, yeah. Where did you do that?”

“At the University of Toronto.”

“A great school, the University of Toronto.”

“While I was there I took a class in Finnish literature. It was being taught by Börje Vähämäki.”

“I know Börje,” Ernest said. “Not well, but I *do* know him.”

“In Börje’s class I came across *Connecting Souls: Finnish Voices in North America*. It included an excerpt of poems by you.”

“I’m not terribly proud of those poems. They strike me as rather clunky, now.”

I began to fear that the ‘purchase’ of Ernest’s book might stretch into the evening if I didn’t move things along and so I piped up:

“Weren’t we going to do some grocery shopping at the mall?”

“Oh, that’s right,” he said. “I nearly forgot about that.”

“So, how much would you like for this book?”

“The price is on the back cover.”

After the transaction had been made and Florence was on her merry way down the hill, I said:

“Hers was a pretty transparent display of adoration. It must have done your ego a world of good.”

“Now, now, Margaret, don’t let your jealous mind run away with you.”

“I saw how she flicked her hair around and how she batted her eyelashes at you. And don’t call me Margaret,” which he does whenever he means to admonish me. “My name is Margrith,” I said, exaggerating the vaguely French manner in which I like to hear my name pronounced.

Chapter 1 A Multiplicity of Views

I should attempt to put the writing of this informal study into some kind of context. For the past year, Ernest has been working intermittently on *Kafka: The Master of Yesno*, which I have been editing while also acting as the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review* and writing my novella, *To Travel the Distance*. Often his criticism of Kafka reminds

me of criticism he has leveled not only at his own fiction, but at mine, too. For instance, he accuses Kafka of viewing the world from the perspective of an unborn child gazing through his mother's bellybutton. Novice creative writing students, he says, are guilty of a similar tendency. This results in the self-centered approach that is so typical of initial drafts. "As fiction writers, we must learn to get out of our own heads," he advises them. "Poets can get away with acting like spoiled children who insist on everyone else viewing the world through their eyes, but writers of fiction can't afford to be so self-centered. They must learn to look at life through other people's eyes – to appreciate it from a multiplicity of perspectives."

In *The Master of Yesno*, Ernest takes exception to the intellectual dishonesty displayed by scholars and academics, an attitude I advised him to tone down.

"Why should I tone it down?"

"Because the market for *The Master of Yesno* will be largely academic, and you don't want to alienate potential buyers."

"Does that mean I should curb my tongue?"

"It might be wise to curb it just a little bit."

"Then I'll choose to be unwise in my wisdom. Too much toadying goes on at universities, especially in literature departments. Students are expected to adopt the views of their professors, and in order to get their PhDs, professors have to at least pretend to endorse the views of earlier scholars and academics. I remember taking an undergraduate literature class that consisted in part of a study of Franz Kafka. I couldn't believe the praise the professor kept heaping on Kafka's oeuvre – his novels in particular – which he thought of as terribly deep, terribly significant. I couldn't believe I was reading the same stories and novels he had apparently read, but then, after listening to him for a couple of days, I realized his presentation was based on what other scholars had written about Kafka, and that their views comprised a major part of his understanding of the Great Writer from Prague. In fact, without all sorts of supporting evidence produced by other academics, my professor would have foundered in the sea that was Kafka's oeuvre. The last thing he was inclined to do was to wade through Kafka's work himself and come up with his *own* thoughts about it. It was much easier for him to rely on received ideas, a method he had obviously used to obtain his doctorate. In other words, my professor was simply another cog in the Kafka thesis writing industry. . . . Do you see what I'm getting at? The man couldn't think for himself, and the reason he couldn't think for himself was because he was so full of academic piffle."

When I first met Ernest I was working on a Master of Arts degree at Simon Fraser University, in Children's Literature. I made his acquaintance at a housewarming party hosted by Pat and John Kelly of Victoria, B.C. When Pat introduced me to him she mentioned that Ernest was a writer living on Mayne Island and that his novel, *Chasing After Carnivals*, would soon be appearing with Stoddart Publishing. What she

didn't fill me in on was the fact that Ernest was living the life of a hobo in what was then called the University Endowment Lands of Vancouver and that he worked as a day-laborer for a friend. In other words, he was only weekendng on Mayne Island. While his mind and spirit were straining to reach literary heights, he was living the miserable life of an outcast. Back then, he struck me as a terribly arrogant and insecure individual. As soon as he found out that I was working on a Master's degree in Children's Literature, he began to heap all sorts of ridicule on academics who 'pretend' to know something about literature.

"People who have an academic interest in literature are basically quite cowardly," he said. "They have chosen to take the easy way out; they are so uncertain of their writing prowess, they opt for the fallback position of writing about writers and their work. It's less risky; they prefer to lead an easy, middle-class, bourgeois life rather than the rigorous, oftentimes impoverished life of a writer. But boy, oh boy, can they wax romantic about the poverty enjoyed by *real* writers. They can go on at great length about that, and in such a sophisticated manner, too."

Ernest's opinionated attitude struck me as extremely overbearing and suggested to me that something must be gnawing at him. In "Goodfellow Finds It Deep," which appeared in his short story collection, *Journeys That Bring Us Here*, the protagonist, Frank, works as an electroplater in a fishing tackle factory. Eventually, his wife leaves him because he's such a loser, but not before she has subjected him to plenty of humiliation. She refers to him as "a toxic dump" and says to his face that his looks are comparable to those of a potato that should be kept in the cupboard below the kitchen sink. However, it isn't until she refers to him as "an embittered worm" that he begins to "feel uncomfortable" in his own skin. When I first read "Goodfellow Finds It Deep," I marveled at his extensive knowledge about electroplating and fishing tackle factories, and he replied: "That's because I've worked as an electroplater in a fishing tackle factory."

"And did your wife ever call you an embittered worm?"

He looked up and away, as though at a cloud above his head. "If she did, I can't remember when it was, but it might have occurred during the years when we were living in Coquitlam, on Smith Avenue, in a very large, lower-class apartment complex. But I can't say for sure, now."

"What was it like, being an electroplater?"

"I hated every minute of it. The working conditions were deplorable and the pay was indecently low. And – and when the owner's son was on summer break from university, I was bumped down to the buffing room, where, for eight hours a day, I got to polish fishing lures."

"Oh, so that's why you have it in for academics! I see now."

"Don't jump to conclusions. I was an immigrant to this country, and like nearly every other immigrant, I had to take lots of immigrant jobs. That's why Canadians encourage immigrants to move here. They need

immigrants to do the work they wouldn't think of doing themselves, and that's something I came to despise about this country – the systemic prejudice that existed back then, and which exists even now, I strongly suspect.

“You see, I'm a very rough-hewn individual. Since coming to Canada in 1969, I've held down over thirty-five different jobs. I've had to develop a knack for surviving, for getting by, because, you see, nothing was handed to me on a silver platter. Canadians expect things to be handed to them. They have a sense of entitlement that is part and parcel of their British heritage. Indeed, when I first came to Canada, it seemed to me that one could do quite well for oneself simply by having a British accent. It didn't matter how stupid or generally ignorant one was, the accent was the thing. I remember, when I went for my requisite interview at the immigration department, which at that time was located at the foot of Granville Street, on a little island in Burrard Inlet, the immigration official had a rather noticeable British accent. He went over my application form, rewarding me points for this and that and the other thing; however, when he got to the number of years of education I had had, he said, raising an eyebrow: ‘I hope you realize that four years of university in the States is equivalent to only three years of university up here, in Canada. You *do* realize that, don't you, Mr. Hekkanen?’

“He gave me a piercing look, a challenging look. ‘Why is that?’ I said.

“‘Because here in Canada we study our subjects much more thoroughly than they do in the States. We aren't on the quarter system, the way you were at the University of Washington, for instance.’

“I didn't know whether the official was being serious or was trying to provoke the American in me, but I could certainly tell he was attempting to put me in my place – that is, a rung well below the one he himself occupied on society's ladder. I have since come to realize that there is something about me, something about my character, that people in positions of authority find vexing. I think perhaps I strike them as a bit too uppity. I recall going for a job interview at Douglas College in New Westminster. It was a Creative Writing position that I was more than qualified for. By that time, I had been in the country for at least twenty years. I had an MFA in Creative Writing from U.B.C., I had lots of publishing credits in literary magazines, and my collection, *Medieval Hour in the Author's Mind*, had just appeared with Thistledown Press. I thought the interview was going rather well, until one of my inquisitors asked me what I would do if a student of mine wasn't fulfilling his class requirements and by all appearances wasn't displaying a lot of interest in the course. ‘Having been in the position of an employer,’ I told her, ‘and having had to fire people. . .’

“As soon as I uttered the four-letter word ‘fire’ I knew I had lost the opportunity of landing that job. Before I could complete what I was about to say, my inquisitor lashed out at me. ‘This is an institution of

higher learning, Mr. Hekkanen. We don't *fire* people here, and in particular, we don't fire students.'

"I realized right then and there that I would be consigned to the lower strata of working-class life in Canada, where one gets knocked around a great deal, and that I would never secure one of those soft-gloved jobs where people complain about each other in dulcimer tones, in an oh-so-polite fashion. I wasn't civil enough. I didn't come at things from an oblique angle. Plus, I was too frank with my opinions."

"Did that result in you holding a grudge?" I asked him.

"Initially, I held a grudge, yes; but then, I came to realize that this was the path I had inadvertently chosen for myself. And now – now, after some thirty-six years in Canada, I'm glad I was forced to take the rough, winding road that was full of potholes."

"Your collection, *Journeys That Bring Us Here*, is chock full of stories about characters who have taken the rough, winding road to get to where they are in life, people who have suffered some pretty hard knocks along the way."

"I call *Journeys* my working-class collection. It includes some of the most honest writing I've ever done, and by that I mean it doesn't incorporate a lot of the tricks typical of fiction writing. It's full of stories about people who occupy places on the lower rungs of the social ladder. You see, at the time of writing those stories, I was laboring under the illusion that a writer should go out into the world to experience things, to have adventures in society, and that my adventures should do more than simply confirm what is known about middle-class life. Unfortunately, there weren't any publishers in Canada who shared my views. I remember one editor saying something to this effect: 'Unfortunately, your collection didn't appeal to our readers. It's full of losers, deadbeats, outcasts and drifters. Furthermore, there are very few women in your stories, and all of them are subjected to the whims of men. In fact, I strongly suspect you of having a misogynist streak, Mr. Hekkanen.' The editor was obviously an educated woman who was leading a pretty solid middle-class life, someone who had gone through university and now had a soft-gloved job. Another editor informed me: 'Real people don't act or speak the way your characters do. They're all so illiterate, so determined to be stupid.' I suspect that such editors haven't been forced to experience anything beyond their own comfort zone. It's typical of people in the writing industry here in Canada. Those who are part of the industry refuse to recognize that Canada has a dark underbelly made up of underachievers, of people who go unrecognized and are left behind in the dust. The stories in *Journeys* run contrary to the myth most of us hold so dear to our hearts in this country. I have often pondered writing a novel called *Kanada* – that's Kanada with a 'K' – one that would mimic Kafka's *Amerika* spelled with a 'k,' a novel that would deal with the dark underbelly of this country, told from an immigrant's point of view. But then, I think, what the hell, I've

succeeded at what I set out to do – despite the fact that I’ve tripped myself up along the way.”

Ernest sent a copy of *Journeys That Bring Us Here* to a former writing instructor at The University of Washington. Jack Cady is the award-winning author of *The Sons of Noah & Other Stories*, *The Off-Season*, *The Well*, and *Inagehi*, among many others. Jack’s reply was as follows: “When *Journeys That Bring Us Here* arrived I set all other reading aside. . . The title story is one of the best I’ve read in years. . . ‘Have a Little Decency’ carries the reserve that marks fine story writers like Hemingway and Ray Carver. . . Mostly what I like is the ‘on the road’ sort of feel that has more to do with Steinbeck and such people than it does with Kerouac and his crowd. I like the lonesomeness, the ability to keep going when every message says ‘give up,’ the tenacity of the human spirit. There are damned few writers with the experience to write such stuff these days.”

After showing me Jack’s letter, Ernest informed me that he was going to put it on the back cover of the next edition of *Journeys*.

“I wonder if Jack was just being kind, or if he really meant what he wrote in his letter,” he added.

“I’m sure he meant what he said,” I told him.

I saw moisture welling up in Ernest’s eyes.

“I think he realizes how hard it has been for me to get anywhere in the literary business.”

“Why do you say that?”

“That bit about the ability to keep going when every message says ‘give up.’ ‘Give up’ is the message I have consistently received from just about every publisher in Canada.”

The title story of *Journeys That Bring Us Here* deals with a Finnish immigrant to Canada who lives in a shack in a garbage dump, which he owns and operates on his property. Reino epitomizes the loner, the outcast. His lifestyle is extremely frugal. But he loves listening to the music of Rachmaninoff. He shelters a runaway boy for the night. The boy is curious why Reino always refers to himself in the third person, and Reino replies: “When you’re old you get certain habits. By yourself, you get more habits. It is the way I speak, is all. People might think it’s funny, but me, I think other people are funny. For instance, I think what people throw away is very funny. Sometimes it is perfectly good stuff” – and, as we soon discover, the protagonist is ‘perfectly good stuff’ that has been pitched on the garbage heap of life.

In the process of getting to know one another, Reino discloses to the boy that he too was a runaway – from Finland. By the end of the story, Reino gives the boy a refurbished bicycle for his journey, as well as some money, food and a few mementos. But the boy’s father tracks the youngster down and returns the bicycle to Reino. He is incensed. “I want you to know that I don’t appreciate what you did for [my runaway son]. In fact, I’m going to report you to the proper authorities.”

After father and son have taken their leave, Reino retrieves the items which have been thrown on the ground. He proceeds to go through the khaki pockets of the infantry belt he had given the boy and discovers that the boy has kept one of the mementos, namely a piece of walrus tusk which Reino claimed was a fragment of the Sampo, the Finnish magic mill of the Kalevala.

“Good,” he says to himself. “You keep it, boy. Dream about where you have to go. Dream until it comes true.” This utterance might very well be understood as an encapsulation of the author’s own *raison d’être*.

In “Journeys That Bring Us Here,” I strongly suspected that Ernest was imagining himself as having been thrown on the garbage heap of life and literature in Canada. When I tested my hypothesis on him, he said rather evasively: “You have to remember that when I wrote that story I had just lost another job – you know, the job I had with that circle of stock promoters. I had just given up my basement suite on Venables Street and had moved into the basement at 1095 Victoria Drive. I felt as if I had lost my footing on the lowest rung of society’s ladder and had landed squarely on my backside. But, in fact, the story of Reino had lain dormant in my mind for quite some time, ever since living on Vancouver Island, at a little bump in the road called Whiskey Creek. Once upon a time, there used to be a garbage dump in the Parksville area very similar to the one in ‘Journeys That Bring Us Here.’ The proprietor was not unlike the way I depicted the character of Reino. One day, when I went to dump some refuse there, I fell into conversation with him. He stuck in my memory – as an allegorical figure, I guess you could say – and finally, time and circumstance gave life to him on the page.”

“You speak in depth to that process in your aesthetic manifesto, *Turning Life into Fiction*. By the way, I think *Turning Life into Fiction* is a trailblazer of a book, one of your best, in fact. But I’m curious: Was Reino, in ‘Journeys that Bring Us Here,’ a Finn?”

“No.”

“So, in effect, you imagined yourself in his position, the position of an immigrant who has been tossed on the refuse heap of Canadian society?”

“I suppose to some degree I might have done that, yes; but then, you very kindly plucked me off the trash heap, applied some spit and polish to my hide and sent me off again to tilt at some more windmills.”

“I know that in several editorials and books you have made mention of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza; in fact, you have compared yourself to both of them.”

“Yes, they comprise a metaphor for the way I have lived my life. Don Quixote is led vastly astray by his imagination, while Sancho Panza, his faithful sidekick, is forced to clean up the mess that the Don has made of his life.”

“Do you think you’ve been tilting at windmills while living here in Canada?”

“Most definitely. I have often felt that with regard to my career in literature. You see, I chose to pursue a career I wasn’t particularly suited for, the same way Don Quixote wasn’t suited for the life of a Knight Errant. By that I mean I’m not a natural-born writer. I suffer from a mild case of dyslexia that made it difficult for me to acquire a proper grasp of the English language. Becoming a writer was the most difficult career I could have chosen for myself. That’s where my own private Sancho Panza comes in; he cleans up the mess I leave behind on the page.”

“Which seems to imply that you have a dual personality.”

“I don’t think one can go into the arts without having a dual personality. That’s a given, I would contend.”

ARTHUR JOYCE has been published in *Canadian Author*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Whetstone*, *The New Orphic Review*, and *Horsefly*. His latest collection of poems is *The Charlatans of Paradise* (New Orphic Publishers, 2005).

Arthur Joyce / **Three Poems**

shadow

– for Shadowcat

When a man loses his shadow
skin peels from his feet as he walks.
Footprints burn in the cloudless desert

of his heart. The soul ripped from his side
howls absence all night long.
Even his dreams are empty,

busy with gossiping, irrelevant fools.
He fills his house with a thousand candles
to light the soul's way home, thinking

if only he can provide enough light,
the shadow will be drawn down,
enticed from its otherworld

to dance and skip at his heels again.
He would burn down entire planets
drown star fields in white heat—anything

to fill this screeching hole in his side.
But it's no use. Sunlight gives
and sunlight takes away.

He is a fool to think those he loves
will live forever. One by one
they will be taken from him,

his skin stripped a layer at a time
until every minute in their eyes
reverberates like a cathedral.

Hunger

April is the cruellest month.

– T.S. Eliot

All winter long we mourn the sun,
that god we love most in absence.
Blood dreams uneasily
in his moist underworld, and sap
knows its place in the darkness.

Chill air mellows on a chickadee's song.
Green light returns leaf by leaf
from the shadow side of the moon.
Bare teeth shine in granite mouths
that tear at blue sky. Something moves
in the veins, something animal.

Bones must be eviscerated,
lives sucked clean. Something moves
down the mountainside, looking
to be made one with you.

From this sleep, a terrible
awakening. A beauty so profound,
blood drips from its jaws.

earth tether

–Carpenter Creek, New Denver, B.C.
February 2006

we walk a ridge of the sky.
cedars reach into biting air
from the earth beneath our boots.
the creek whispers *slow down*
from the sheer plunge below.

winding back of an old snake
who knows these mountains
better than time. ice pearls blossom
under pale green water.
me cliff-dancing like a fool

looking over the edge of his fear.
you with one hand firmly
in my pocket, earth tether
calling my star sparks
back to the fire.

we follow the will of the trail
over log spurs, ducking dead branches.
ribbons mark out someone's
snowy dream home.
at the foot of a hill

you humbly announce a miracle:
beaded water curtain
spilling down the slope
a stream caught in diamond
and clicking happily

its subterranean song.
and i sit down and weep
for the beauty, for you
and me and what we are
and all things open

and dying

STEVE ELDER works at the University of Colorado Law Library. He was the Featured Poet in the Spring 2005 issue of *The New Orphic Review*.

Poet in the City

The Pitch

Steve Elder

“IT’S A TV SHOW about a poet. How a poet sees the world different. He’s a city poet. NYC of course. There’s no such thing as an LA poet. It’s researchable. Unfortunately their delusions aren’t real enough out there. They’re pretend. NYC is real. Midmorning rain washed with diesel. The deli soup aroma, soon to arrive, steaming . . .”

“ . . . ?”

“Yes I guess I am a mess. Now that you mention it. The fact is I slipped and fell into a dumpster on my way over. I didn’t see it there. Looks like I got some radicchio or egg yolk on my sleeve. Something. You’re probably getting hungry just looking at me. Natheless, our Poet will walk the streets noticing what no one else notices. Or putting the all-noticeable differently so it’s rejuvenated again. Waves of doves coming down. To attack. The uriney smell of alleys. A secret entrance to hell. A sprig of parsley outside the subway. An epic jour—”

“ . . . ?”

“The entrance to hell is just by way of example. There actually is no hell. I’ve seen it. It’s just a vast yolky pancake of a plain that’s a struggle to walk through because the air’s so syrupy. And you can’t distinguish the living from the dead and the future’s like the past but just as exciting et cetera and so on. Anyway the Poet has a girlfriend and although she loves him and the brilliance of his disposition, she gets exasperated. This is the problem with all girls. He’s there to free them from the soul-flattening concerns that everyone pretends are primary – economics and politics right? But he’s so improvident pretty soon they’re thinking about one thing only. Money money money. Which is naturally ironic because initially that’s what he’s there to free them from. But in an uneconomic way. Meaning the economy ceases to be a con-

cern. Like animal sacrifice. Or human. And his freedom and messiness and inability to recognize the importance of hygiene distresses them . . .”

“ . . . ?”

“He’s a bit disheveled. But nattily so. He’s a poet. Death is his neighbor. He pays more than lip service to what’s really important. Whatever that may be. Not wage-earning or judging one thing against another. Is *Frasier* as good or bad as *Twin Peaks*? Of course not. Near death they’re both beautiful. Everything is. Even green olives. It’s the near-deathness of his livingness that grants a certain honeyed glisteningness to the presenceness of everything. Sort of. In the middle of the night he writes fragments of poems in a corner of the wall by the futon. And he won’t let his girlfriend erase them *even though it’s supposedly her wall*. There’s that tension you people like so much right? Maybe she’s renting. Wants her deposit back . . .”

“ . . . ?”

“The scribblings in fact would be phrases from his dreams. So something cryptic probably. Like *My wings are where I’m going*. Or *Just over the horizon of your iris*. Fragments. Then later we’ll watch him as he puts a poem together in his head on the street. So the Poet and his girlfriend fight about the writing in the corner and of course it’s a big fight because it’s really about a much bigger deal than that. Poems, who needs them? They’re a slap in the face right? Especially for the well-organized person. So she kicks him out and he’s always getting kicked out. He’s always coming out of the darkness into other people’s firelit lives because let’s face it he’s an asshole who someone else has recently kicked out of their fire. Just like Plato. But he has to go back to her place because he forgot what he wrote on the wall the night before. The gibberish from the gods as it were. But she’s already erased it so it’s just indelible pink flecks and her new boyfriend is there. He’s a placemat sort of fellow. A real estate agent wearing a polo shirt with a pattern on it. Sort of American anti-chic. Meaning he’s married and supposedly tamed. Bacon is sizzling or maybe link sausages. And it turns out this real estate guy is familiar with the work of Wallace Stevens. He even knows that the Bard of Hartford did *not* write ‘The Red Wheelbarrow.’ Which is the most amazing thing that will ever have happened on TV in history.”

“ . . . ?”

“Of course I’m kidding. Do I seem serious? Ha ha. No I love your shirt! I hadn’t noticed it there before. So alternatively our Poet and the real estate guy get into a fistfight. The Poet hasn’t had his morning coffee so he gets beat up *and* kicked out. And blamed for everything. He has bedsores and he’s proud of them. Then, after all that action and tension, he goes to the Park and finds a panini on a sunny bench. With cheese and butter. I realize that’s a multiple impossibility in real life. But on a TV show where people are always finding the right thing at the right time . . .”

“...?”

“Okay that’s an idea. We could make the Poet a psychic detective. I’m glad you brought that up. The Poet Crimefighter. Interesting and beautiful. Called in by the cops to solve the unsolvable. And his psychicness could take the form of writing automatic verse wherein the solution to the crime is hypnotically revealed.”

“...?”

“Or we could skip, yes, the poetry altogether. Because as a weird man once said, “Every word is a stain on the beauty of silence and nothingness.” Why he felt the need to say it I don’t know. Just more yellow snow. I’m getting really hungry here. I have no problem with that. I think I’m going to faint. If I do just slip some roast beef down my gullet and I’ll be fine. I’ll be heroic. I’ve been patient forever.”

GERRI BRIGHTWELL was brought up in Devon, UK. She has M.A. degrees in creative writing from the University of East Anglia and the University of Alaska, and a doctorate from the University of Minnesota. She now teaches creative writing at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Her work has appeared in the *Hawaii Review*, the *Santa Clara Review*, *Double Entendre*, and the *Guardian* newspaper. Her novel, *Cold Country*, was published in 2003.

A Small Loss

Gerri Brightwell

A QUIET AFTERNOON in the store, like many of late, so Olafson pulled out the account ledger and his pens. He even sat down – on the high stool Moira usually used – and leaned his head onto one hand as he added and subtracted. Purchases, payments, the bold truth of his customers' lives laid out in his steady hand: Mrs. James who hadn't bought ribbon in months but whose debt was still swelling in an unseemly way; the Malloys who'd always settled up at the end of the month but whose payments had shrunk, just as the Malloys themselves had, so that those big-bodied people were disappearing into their own clothes; Mrs. Gianelli who'd bought dried fruit and nuts and fancy sugars for those strange flat cakes of hers but who now had a strained look about her and asked him only for flour and margarine.

From overhead came a soft creaking and every once in a while he'd glance up at the spot on the wooden ceiling where he judged Moira was lying in their bed, the curtains pulled closed. By now the air would be stale and hot, her nightdress damp against her body. But even as she slept her hands would stay cupped around her belly. Next to the bed, in the rocking chair he'd brought all the way out here in pieces, his mother-in-law would be sitting, as plump and imperturbable as a hen. She'd be gripping the armrests, her stolid boots appearing under the hem of her black dress every few seconds as she pushed herself back and forth, back and forth, her small eyes keeping watch from a face gone soft with fat. Looking like an old woman already, although her hair was still black, as if it too would never make it out of mourning.

Occasionally he stared into the street. A wagon loaded high with hay. A motorcar that snarled past, all dazzling glass and bright metal – the youngest Dawson boy most likely. Then Ferguson coming out in

his bloodied apron to wind down the awning over his window, nodding a hello to the two men looking at his display of cut meat and sausages, glancing about him as he worked the mechanism that brought the awning lower and lower until his windows disappeared, and everything of the men except their legs.

The next time Olafson looked up the men were crossing the street – or maybe they were different men with the same worn jackets and slack hats, the same sullen look of despair about them. They were smoking cigarettes held tight between their fingers, heads bent against the heat of the day, and were walking fast as though they had somewhere to go. But they stopped at his window, mere shadows against the brightness of the day. Olafson thought they were going to come in – cheap cigarettes, most likely, paid for in coins counted into his hand – but they turned their backs and stared across the street. The next time he looked up they were gone.

He was close to finishing the accounts when the bell rang, and he jumped up, pen still in his fingers, thoughts baffled. Too long scratching through the signs of his fate, because that was what it was – his fate spelled out before him in his own hand, and Moira upstairs, unaware of it. Only two years ago this town had seemed like a sure thing, and they'd packed up everything to come here and start the store, and hoped to God that they'd left behind a life where an apartment could catch fire without warning, and a brother could be stabbed on the street, and their hopes for a child worn down by the waiting and waiting, until Moira joked that maybe they were doing something wrong and who on earth could they ask?

He squinted into the glare of the doorway and started a smile, but it shrank back under his mustache when he saw who was there: the Everetts. Three of them – or four, if you counted the baby, which he supposed you should. It clung to its mother's hip as she walked up to the counter, then stared at him with eyes paler than the August sky outside. The other children – a lanky boy and girl – took off in different directions, the boy towards the boxes of apples, the girl towards the notions. Their hands, quick as mice, were everywhere. The boy's picking through the apples, the girl's unwinding a length of lace trim from a bobbin and holding it against herself as though she meant to buy it, standing on the ends of her heavy shoes to see herself in the mirror, twisting this way and that. Then she let it drop and tugged his best red velveteen ribbon from its spool.

“Hey now,” he called out, “you can't be touching all those things.”

The mother sat the baby on the counter. “Callie,” she said, without even bothering to turn her head, “you mind Mr. Olafson.”

Of course the girl didn't mind Mr. Olafson – she wasn't the sort of girl to mind anybody, as far as he could tell. Instead she pushed back her thin ginger hair that never looked washed then, before he could object, before he could even realize what she was doing, she'd wrenched free two feet of ribbon and tied it around her hair. She pulled

so hard the spool spun crazily on the edge of the counter then dropped to the floor where it rolled in the dust, spilling ribbon behind it like a thin trail of blood.

Olafson came striding down behind the counter. “That all needs to be put back,” he said. “This is not one of them help-yourself stores, so nobody can be helping themselves.”

“Just trying it,” she said. “Can’t buy if you can’t try,” and she tipped the mirror forward a little to take a look at herself. Even with her mouth closed her front teeth showed between her lips. She blinked at herself and fussed with her hair as though, with a touch here and there, it would do more than lie flat across her skull.

He leaned onto the counter to catch her eye. “I said—”

“I heard you, Mr. Olafson,” she said but didn’t take her eyes from the mirror. Instead she pressed her lips into a pout and pulled the ribbon loose. Dangling it from the very ends of her fingers she coiled the end untidily onto the countertop. “There, now,” she said and turned away, as though she hadn’t noticed that the spool was somewhere by her feet or that, even as she turned, the ribbon on the counter was uncoiling like a snake and slipping away. Without another glance she walked off with a swing of her hips to make her washed-out dress flare around her legs, over to where her brother was sitting on the floor with an apple he’d already taken a bite out of.

Olafson had come around the counter to pick up the ribbon. The spool lay against a crate of tools – hammers, wrenches, screwdrivers, because people always needed tools, didn’t they? – looking like a dead thing. Gently he picked it up and ran the ribbon through his fingers as he wound it back onto the spool, cleaning it as best he could. But of course it did no good. The detritus of the floor – wisps of fabric and yarn, the dust of flour, tiny, sticky grains of sugar – all clung to the red velveteen. Unsellable – for the moment, unsellable. Not that he’d had a single woman come in and buy ribbon or lace for weeks now that their menfolk were wandering the streets like ghosts. But still it galled him. The Everetts with their quick hands and careless ways, spoiling things for no reason. It was his money draining away, his life damn it, when he’d worked so hard for this place.

He kept winding the ribbon, feeling the warmth of it against his fingers, feeling too the grittiness of the dirt. Maybe Moira would know how to clean it. She was full of tricks like that – using catsup to brighten silver, getting the smell of onions off hands, cleaning a burnt pot without scrubbing, taking blood stains off linen. But not, apparently, of any sure way to save the baby growing inside her. For five days now she’d lain in their bed, and every day Dr. Braddon called when the sun went down. When he came out onto the landing he’d hold the banister and look about him as if unsure where to rest his eyes. Then he’d say, “It’s in God’s hands. All you can do is keep her still, and not worry her. Quiet, Mr. Olafson, lots of quiet and lots of rest.” But before making his way down the stairs he always shook Olafson’s hand, and that

warm, sure grip gave Olafson hope – maybe quiet and rest would be enough, after all. So later, once his mother-in-law had gone downstairs to start dinner, he'd creep into the bedroom and kneel at Moira's side. She'd look at him but not say a word because, after five years of being married and giving up hope of a child, this is what it had come to: lying in bed with a pillow under her behind, as though with gravity against it the baby could not slip out of her and into a world it wasn't quite ready to survive.

He put the spool of ribbon out of sight behind the counter and wiped his hands on his apron. There was the lace too – heaped untidily where the girl had let it drop – and he snatched it up. All of this he would put to rights later, when the presence of the Everetts had dissipated. Besides, they were still here – he turned quickly and saw the boy poking through the apples though he still had one half-eaten in his hand, the girl holding a jar of jelly up to the light coming through the window as though it contained something she'd lost. And over by the cash register, the baby – kicking its bare heels against the counter, a piece of jerky in one wet fist, the other hand feeling around in the jerky jar while its mother idly smoothed its fluff of orange hair.

His palms tightened, bending his fingers in towards them. Then he was off, the floor loud and hollow under his boots as he strode in their direction calling out, “Mrs. Everett, Mrs. Everett – you really can't let your—”

She looked up in a lazy way that she had, said, “Oh Lord,” and plucked the jerky from the baby's fingers. It stared at its empty hand and opened its mouth for a howl that came only as its mother lifted it into her arms. But it threw its head back and kicked its legs hard, once, twice, and caught the lip of the jar. Over the polished countertop it glided like a rock on ice, then tipped, hit the stool, and fell, down to the very spot where Olafson stood to ring up customers' bills. There it broke into a halo of shattered glass.

On the other side of the counter the mother stood jabbing a finger into the baby's chest and saying, “Franklin, you stop that awful noise, you hear? You stop that now.” Which of course did no good. So she gave the baby the jerky it had been chewing and it settled into her arms, its face flushed, a slight catch in its breathing now, and watched Olafson.

The jar, broken. All that jerky lying at his feet amongst the splinters of glass, ruined.

Mrs. Everett said, “Accidents can't be helped.”

He looked up at her. Unlike her children's hair, hers wasn't orange but the color of old, polished wood. Even with it pulled back into a lazy knot it framed her beauty: her long-lashed eyes, her delicate nose, her skin the perfect beige of a freshly laid egg. But on her all this was spoiled by a surliness that gave a twist to her mouth and an unpleasant slant to her eyes, as though she saw in everything reason to resent her lot in life.

She rested her hip against the counter, then bowed her head to the baby's to give it a kiss on its lips. Olafson looked away. Beyond, in the center of his store, the boy was spinning a wooden top that he must have taken from behind the counter – when had he done that? In the silence it hummed quietly, seeming to hover just above the floorboards. He still had an apple in his hand – the same one? Perhaps. Or perhaps another for, after the last time the Everetts were here, saying what a shame it was about Vitelli's closing down and all those men out of work, how the country was on the road to ruin, when his fingers had closed not on the smooth skin of an apple but a damp, rough hollow. He'd turned it over. Teeth marks plain as could be, the flesh gone brown and a little soft. He'd picked out others, found three of them ruined like that. Who takes only one bite out of an apple? Who can afford to waste like that when times are against us? That's what Mrs. Cain had wanted to know, and he'd shaken his head, said, "It was the Everett boy, I'll be bound." She'd sucked at her cheeks and told him, "They're trash, excuse me for saying so, every single last one of those Everetts."

Now he kicked the broken glass away and looked for the girl. Where on earth had she gotten to? He spotted her back by the notions, picking through the bowl of buttons he had out because what woman can resist new buttons to pretty up her dress?

There was something in the way she held herself that spoke of buttons slipped into pockets or held cleverly out of sight between fingers. "Hey," he called out, "hey now. I don't want you touching anything else. Come over here. Both of you." Instead they merely looked at him with the same sullen eyes as their mother's.

"They aren't harming anything," said Mrs. Everett, and she slid a slip of paper onto the counter.

The back of a letter, one that had been folded in four and smoothed out again. Down its length, a list of words written out in a backward sloping hand: flour, sugar, cornstarch, baking soda, potatoes, beans. He felt a heat rise in his chest, pressing uncomfortably against his ribs. "There's the matter of what you owe already," he said quietly. "And I'll have to charge you for the jerky – and the jar. And," and he nodded to the boy, "the boy's apple."

She glared at Olafson over the baby's head. "You go right ahead," she told him.

He took a step along the counter and pulled the ledger towards him. Under his boots glass ground against the floor. There'd be scratches – more if he didn't sweep it up soon. He filled his lungs then waited a moment, just looking at her and that baby of hers that had rested its head on her shoulder and was chewing on a piece of his jerky. "Mrs. Everett, it'd be best if you settled your account."

With the tips of her fingers she smoothed the baby's hair. "There's no need for that."

“I haven’t wanted to make things hard for you when times are hard already,” he said. “You can’t say I haven’t been patient.” From her shoulder the baby watched him and he looked down at the open page of the ledger, as though he needed to consult it. “You haven’t put down a single dollar against your account in two months. I have to make a living too.”

Her eyes had grown smaller. With anger? With hurt? He wasn’t sure. He waited. He waited for her to tell him that her husband was out of work, that in a few weeks – a month or two at most – he’d have found another job, that she couldn’t feed her children when her pantry was empty. But she didn’t say any of that. Instead she shifted the baby on her hip then was off across the store, calling out to her children, “Mr. Olafson no longer wants our business,” and they came to her, the boy leaving the top on its side, the girl with her hands swinging loose and her fingers suspiciously cupped towards her palms, taking with her buttons, he was sure.

The door slapped to behind them and the glass shook in its frame. Outside a few faces looked their way – Mrs. Malloy, a man leaning against the wall across the street. Everyone watching the Everetts file past his window, the mother with the baby clasped to her, the boy and girl striding to keep up, each of them with an angry tilt to their head.

A little while later when a horse turd was flung against his window he knew it was them. He leaned against the glass and looked up the street for a shock of red hair. But instead he saw the bulky shape of the delivery truck from Johanssen’s Dry Goods. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his apron and walked back into the shadows.

Ω

The rains had set in when the girl came back, slinking into his store like a cat. He caught the crackle of the downpour on the sidewalk and glanced up from weighing out dried beans. There she was, the Everett girl, wiping the rain from her face with a drenched sleeve. Olafson wasn’t surprised to see her – a family like hers wasn’t likely to get credit from either of the other stores at this end of town. And it was just like the mother to send the girl on her own – as though what had happened only a few days before could be overlooked, as though a man couldn’t deny a child.

Her coat hung heavily against her legs and her hair stuck darkly to her narrow scalp. She came right up to the counter, right past Mrs. Phelps and Mrs. Malloy, as though she didn’t understand that there was an order to the way the women waited and that she should stand back and take her turn. No. She came up to the counter and rested her hands on its edge. The beans he was weighing rattled into the pan but she didn’t wait for him to finish. “Mamma sent me for cough elixir,” she said. Her voice was as hard and cold as an empty pot and she stood stiffly, her pale fingers glistening against the counter.

"You'd best take your turn," he told her. "There's others waiting."

She looked over her shoulder just far enough to let the two women know she'd seen them. "It's for the baby," she said. "He's sick."

"That'll be the damp," said Mrs. Malloy. "Brings it on. Every year it's the same."

"He's bad with it," said the girl. She didn't look at them. Instead she fixed her eyes on Olafson.

"You go on ahead of me," said Mrs. Phelps. "I don't mind."

"Yes," said Mrs. Malloy, "yes. Mr. Olafson. You take care of her. You can finish with me in a minute."

He watched the women. Mrs. Malloy with her hands clasped together over her loose coat, Mrs. Phelps with her nose sharp as a finch's beak and her head tilted forward, as though she couldn't see far in front of her. He didn't like this – these women giving way to a girl who pushed ahead of them as though it were her right. Moira would have had something to say, a few words gently spoken that would have been enough to make the girl understand that she should give way. But she was upstairs, the doctor with her now. Contractions all through the night and it looked as though the baby was coming, whether it was ready for the world or not. Her mother busy, folding towels, heating water, finding a basin and soap for the doctor for when things came to that. But no baby clothes. Olafson had noticed that when he went up for his lunch. After all the evenings Moira had spent sewing those small things, they were still in a box under the bed.

In the middle of the night he'd gone for Dr. Braddon. The doctor had come to the door still buttoning his shirt and picked up his bag without a word. Together they'd walked the empty streets, dodging the puddles as best they could. Olafson had been all set to come in the bedroom – to hold Moira's hand, or fetch her a glass of water whenever she needed it – but at the door the doctor had told him to get some rest while he could. There was nowhere to lie down except on the sofa in the living room where his mother-in-law had been sleeping these last two weeks. The top sheet was still thrown back and the pillow dented from her head. When he'd come in to wake her she'd risen out of that makeshift bed in that black dress of hers – waiting for this to happen, he realized. Taking her place on that sofa would have been too much, so he stretched himself as best he could in the armchair, feet up on a stool. From just beyond the door came the sound of his mother-in-law's long dress sighing along the corridor, then only the creaking of boards in the bedroom and, a little later, his wife's groans. He found himself listening hard for the sound of a baby so that, even if his child lived only a few moments, he would have heard it.

But when he woke up – how long had he slept? Not long, for he remembered the room getting light – and had hurried down the corridor, the doctor had opened the door barely the width of his face and told him they were still waiting.

Now he realized he'd been quiet for too long, standing there in front of Mrs. Phelps and Mrs. Malloy, the Everett girl looking up at him from the other side of the counter. He made himself say, as he'd have said to any other customer, "Dixon's Elixir?"

"I guess," she said. "That the good stuff?"

"That's the good stuff," said Mrs. Phelps. "Though it costs a little more. You pay for what you get."

So he brought the bottle over and set it down on the paper and wrapped it up and tied it with string with the girl watching him the whole time as though she wanted to find him cheating her in some way. Then when he set it in front of her, all wrapped up, she stuck it in her pocket and turned to go. "You aren't forgetting to pay, are you now?" he said.

She swiveled on her heel and hooked her wet hair behind her ear. "No sir – you can put it on Mamma's account and she'll take care of it later."

He said as softly as he could, "That wouldn't suit – not today."

The girl pulled herself up a little straighter. "Mamma'll take care of it later. Franklin's real sick."

He felt the eyes of the two older women on his face as he looked over at the girl. He said, "Listen, I'm not a hard man—"

"You're a good man," said Mrs. Malloy. "We all know that, Mr. Olafson." She turned her smile on the girl. "You make sure your mamma pays as soon as she can. Mr. Olafson has his worries too, and she shouldn't add to them."

For a moment he thought the girl was going to spit out angry words at Mrs. Malloy, and that Mrs. Malloy would then understand – that the Everetts didn't much care for being told what to do, that for them kindness was nothing more than something to take advantage of. But perhaps the girl knew that the advantage now lay in keeping these women on her side because she said, "Yes, ma'am."

She was so wet through she shivered and clenched her arms against her body. Her coat was dark with rain. It must have been her mother's for it was turned up at the sleeves and came down past her knees. She was just a child, he reminded himself, one without much hope with a mother like hers. And the father, where was he? A few times he'd come in for cigarettes and candy – a grown man eating candy, right there in the store.

Olafson ran a hand over his hair. "Tell your mother I'll see her in a day or two then," and he gave a nod. "And I hope little Franklin gets better."

But those words glanced off her back for she was already on her way to the door. Into the store came the rattle of rain and a shudder of cold air as she let herself out, then she passed the window with her head bowed under the force of the downpour.

"It's going to get worse before it gets better," said Mrs. Malloy.

Mrs. Phelps glanced towards the door. "That's for sure."

Mrs. Malloy lifted one hand to her hat and touched its drooping brim. It was sodden, ruined no doubt. "Those kids have it hard."

"Isn't hardly a family in town that doesn't nowadays," said Mrs. Phelps.

"That wasn't what I meant. What with their father—"

"The worst of it is having everyone know their business," said Mrs. Phelps. She peered about her, at Mrs. Malloy, at Olafson where he stood behind the counter. "No one likes to think the whole town knows their troubles."

"We're all in it together," said Mrs. Malloy. "We've all got troubles now. Isn't that right, Mr. Olafson? You must be so worried." Her face arched into a look of pity, and he had to look away.

"Dr. Braddon's doing what he can," he said.

"He's a fine man. He's the best doctor in town."

But here he was in the store, handing customers cough elixir and dried beans when his child might have been born and died without him knowing. Damn this place, he thought, damn it all to hell, and these women and their beans and their gossip.

He brought his gaze back to the women and breathed slowly to ease the trembling in his throat. "Anything more I could do for you today, Mrs. Malloy?"

She ran her thumb down her list to smooth it and sighed. "With those beans that's it for me today."

He helped her put what little she'd bought into her bag. Then, as he was about to stand back, she laid her hand on his and bent towards him. "I'm short today. I'll see what I can get by the end of the week." She gave him a sad smile. "You're a good man, Mr. Olafson."

They were still standing there, the weight of her hand on his, her wet hat wilted over her head, when from above their heads came a wild cry. Moira. He jerked his head up and gazed at the ceiling.

"Go to her," called out Mrs. Phelps. "Go now." And he rushed through the storeroom and up the stairs, borne along by the fear that he was already too late.

Ω

Thursday evening, and the sky was hung with ragged clouds turned gold. Two days since the baby had been born and above the street the world stretched huge and hollow. The clouds far away, the sun beyond all reach, and him – Olafson – standing behind a pane of glass, looking out at it all.

Two days since his daughter had been born. Alive, alive though only just. They had no crib for her and no clothes that would fit, so they'd wrapped her in towels and bundled her into the drawer he used for his socks. When he'd looked down at her – he didn't dare touch her – he thought of baby mice, blind and pink and with skin loose over their bones. There'd still been blood on her face for Dr. Braddon hadn't

done more than wipe her off. More than anything, he'd said, she needed to stay warm. So his mother-in-law had carried the baby to the kitchen and, to Olafson's horror, had pulled down the oven door and set the drawer on it. For a moment he imagined her slipping the baby in to bake and he reached out, just in case. She saw his hand and took it between both of hers. "Now don't be worrying that way," she said. "They had to do the same for me when I was born." Then she bent down and laid her cheek against the baby's forehead.

"Should I go to Moira?" he said.

She crouched on the floor, her black skirts spread around her. "Give your daughter a kiss first."

So he had. He'd knelt down and pressed his lips to the skin that smelt almost fishy, to the head smaller than the palm of his hand. And he understood that his mother-in-law had been waiting to do the same, had instead pressed her cheek against the baby's head so that the second kiss would be his. "Is she going to live?" he whispered.

She gave him a frightened smile. "I did, didn't I? And look at me now."

Two days and the baby was still alive. He thought about her as he added up his customer's accounts, imagined her tiny chest lifting and falling, felt the rhythm of it in the strokes of his pen, in the shudder of the minute hand across the face of the clock above the door. When he let go – when a customer handed him a list, when he thought he saw the truck from Johanssen's Dry Goods coming up the street – it was as gentle as falling asleep. For a few minutes he'd be caught up with other matters until something reminded him that only a few yards above him on the oven door, his daughter was lying in her wooden box. A panic would grip him. Had Moira managed to feed her? Was she still breathing? To stand there waiting for Mrs. Malloy to remember what else she needed, to have to listen to Mrs. Bennett tell him that the line for the soup kitchen down on Third Street reached all the way around the block – he could hardly bear it.

Now he looked up at the clouds unfurled over the town, at the impossible lightness of them, then closed his eyes to hold in the beauty of such a sight. "Dear God in heaven," he muttered, "don't take her. Not now. Moira couldn't stand it."

Somewhere must be a place where pain fell away to leave life simple and beautiful, that's what he told himself. "I'll do anything," he said. "Dear God, if there is a God—"

But his thoughts were broken apart by the clatter of the doorbell. He turned, knocking a can of peaches to the floor. Mrs. Phelps. As he bent to pick it up he noticed: outside, the Everett girl coming out of a doorway, as if she'd been waiting.

It happened twice more in the next few days. Customers would come in – Mrs. Malloy and Mrs. Howard, Mrs. Kleinfeld – and the Everett girl would appear. Somehow she would be served first, despite him turning his attention to the women. She'd have that sad-dog look about her, would ask him for more elixir for the baby, and some beans and some cheese and some flour too, if he didn't mind. And what could he say? Mrs. Malloy shepherding the girl forward as though otherwise he'd forget about her, Mrs. Kleinfeld telling the girl to pass on her best wishes for the baby to her mother.

The third time, she needed sugar and raisins and apples and more flour, but Olafson didn't move. Behind her three women stood with their baskets hooked over their arms, all in line like birds on a branch. Mrs. Carpenter, Mrs. Malloy, and a woman with a name that sounded Russian that he could never pronounce without seeing it written down. They smiled at something one of them said, but he didn't catch it, and he looked back at the girl. She was leaning against the counter the way her mother did, one arm laid on its polished surface, her gaze somewhere in the distance. Against the wood her short nails tap-tapped.

"And I'll take a can of preserved meat," she said, then started to hum under her breath.

"Not today," he said. "I need your mama to come down and talk to me."

"Oh Mr. Olafson, Mamma's busy." She gave a little laugh and tilted her head. Between her lips her teeth showed, but she smiled archly and raised an eyebrow. "She can't be coming down here all the time to see you."

He felt his back go stiff. "I'm asking you to put something down on your account."

Her smile became a little less certain but he kept his eyes on her, even though she looked away to the shelves behind him. She lifted her chin, said, "But Mr. Olafson, you have plenty—"

"I have plenty of customers who can't pay me. But I can't run a store without money coming in – you tell your mamma that. None of this," and he swept his arms wide, "comes free. And if I can't pay for it, the store will close. Surely you understand that."

She held one hand up to her throat. "We need to eat—"

"As do I," he said brusquely, "or hadn't you thought of that?"

From behind her came a small sound – the Russian woman, her mouth open as though she'd just said something. Next to her Mrs. Malloy, her face pink. She looked away now that Olafson turned towards them.

The girl drew herself up. A strand of hair fell across her eyes but she didn't touch it. "Then we'll take our business elsewhere." As though she spoke for the other women too, as though what she had brought to his store was business anyway. With that she swung around and strode across the floor on her skinny legs.

They all followed her with their eyes then, once the door had closed and she'd taken off across the street – straight across it without looking, no matter that there were cars and Tucker's wagon moving fast towards her – then the women looked back at Olafson. Their faces had pulled in around their mouths, tasting something sour it seemed. But their eyes – that was what he remembered afterwards when he locked up and made his way up the dark stairs. Even though they asked him for flour and lard and salt, even though they asked after his wife and his baby, a silence welled up between their words, and their eyes rested on him with a stillness that unnerved him.

Ω

The shades were still up, so he crossed to the window. Through the glass the sun came strong and full of hope, yet here he was, in the black suit that had lain in a trunk since his brother's funeral. His brother's suit – he'd felt the irony of it walking behind the coffin – but it had fit him so perfectly. Only three years but now the jacket clung uncomfortably to his shoulders and the pants needed a belt to gather them in. His whole life he'd worn his brother's cast-offs, but now he was finally outgrowing him, turning into a man his brother hadn't lived long enough to be.

October, but here was the sun fierce as ever. Across the way Ferguson's shades were already down. The door opened and Ferguson stepped out, the black of his suit like a hole in the brilliance of the day. When he glanced across the street Olafson raised a hand, but Ferguson didn't seem to see him and took off down the street. He watched him go then lowered the shades.

After the glare his eyes took a few moments to see through the dimness of the store. Then it all came back: the sad sight of cans huddled on half-empty shelves, the signs that had bloomed – *No Handling Merchandise, Special Price!*, and the one in front of the cash register that he only saw when he stood here, where his customers stood: *Sorry No Credit*.

The first time Moira had come down and seen them all – painted in black on white cardboard – she laughed then covered her mouth with her hand. “What's all this?” she'd said. Then she'd walked around the store as though it were new to her, had taken the sign from in front of the cash register and held it between her hands. “I don't think we'll be needing this,” she told him, and he hadn't said a thing as she carried it around the counter. Just the sight of her back in the store swept away his despair. Maybe they would make it after all because, God knows, they deserved it. He was about to go after her, to take her in his arms right then in the middle of the day, when a pool of shadow slid across the store: the truck from Johanssen's Dry Goods. The man had said, “Good day to you, Mrs. Olafson,” as he always did, as though he hadn't noticed her absence the last few weeks, and she'd propped open the

door for him as he brought in sacks of flour and sugar, dried beans and rice. But when he handed her the bill and waited she hadn't understood. Olafson had had to take it out of her hands. He'd felt her watching as he took money out of the cash register and counted it out for the man who'd tipped his hat to them and closed the door. Her mouth had opened slightly, but instead of asking Olafson to explain she'd turned away. For a moment he'd imagined she was going back upstairs. Instead she reached below the counter for something – he didn't see what it was until she was walking past the small pile of goods the man from Johanssen's had stacked in the middle of the floor. The sign. She propped it back up against the cash register then came over with her arms wide to hold him. "You should have told me," she said. She held him tight and pressed her face against his shoulder. "You could have, you know."

He glanced up at the clock over the door. A quarter after – they'd have to leave soon to make it to the church without hurrying. Overhead the ceiling creaked as she moved around. He'd left his hat on the counter, and he picked it up and held it against his chest as he walked across the floor, this way and that, this way and that, until the thud of his boots against the floorboards became too much. He found himself back at the door, and he peered out. A wind had picked up and swept a curl of leaves along the gutter before scattering them across the road. Three men came loping up the sidewalk opposite, cigarettes gripped in their fists, loose hands hidden in their pants pockets, shoulders high. It must, he thought, be colder out than he'd imagined. He watched as they glanced over to his store and noticed the drawn blinds. Maybe they saw him too for they seemed to peer for a moment, unsure, then looked up the street.

It took him a few moments to see what had caught their attention: the Everett girl, her hair cut off short to the neck now, stalking along in too-big shoes that scraped against the sidewalk. She had on a thin summer dress the color of sour apples that fluttered and rose in the wind and showed her thin legs. A school day yet there she was, out in the town on her own, dressed like that.

One of the men called out to her. She stopped and shielded her eyes with her hand to look over at them, as though a girl paying attention to men on the street was the most natural thing in the world.

Behind him, footsteps – Moira. A trick of the store's dim light but against her black dress her face floated, bodiless. "This is the best I could do," she called over. Then she stepped forward and gave him a small smile. Only now did he see the baby. Moira had found a black shawl and tucked it around her. "It didn't seem right to have her in white," she said, "but when did you ever see a black baby blanket?"

He reached out and Moira laid the weight of their daughter in his arms. For a moment they stood with the baby between them, and when her small pink mouth stretched into a yawn Moira laughed. "Just look

at that," she said. "With you she wants to sleep. I should have given her to you at three this morning."

Olafson smiled down into his daughter's face. "My magic only works in daylight," he said.

Moira rested her hand on his arm, then stepped towards the door where she slapped the dust off her black coat. Then he heard her say, "Look at that – Jimmy Everett. I heard they'd let him out."

"I didn't know he'd been away."

"I thought the whole town knew." Then she sighed. "And there's Callie."

"I saw her. She should be in school."

"She's cleaning for the Dawsons." She leaned a little closer to the glass. "How's she ever going to get on in life? I wish we could do something for her."

Olafson looked beyond his wife to where Callie Everett was standing with her hands tucked into her armpits while her father – of course it was him, that flame-orange hair, same as hers – bent forward to talk right into her face, at least until she let her head sink. Then Everett snatched her arm and set off along the street with her stumbling beside him. The other two men watched them go, taking hungry puffs from their cigarettes.

"It's a shame," Olafson said. "But what can we do? What can anyone do?"

Against his chest he felt the warmth of his daughter. In the black shawl she looked fragile and doomed yet she gazed up at him without alarm. When Moira had told him they were going to have a baby the world had opened wide with possibilities. But what sort of world was this in which a girl missed school to clean houses, and he had to turn away the women who came to his store without money? What sort of man had it turned him into? He'd seen Mrs. Malloy getting thinner and thinner and her skin growing loose until she looked like her own mother. Then she was gone. A heart attack they said. Not eating enough, giving all she had to those boys of hers, until her body couldn't take it.

Moira touched his arm. "Come on, we're going to be late."

"I'm sorry," he said.

She held the door for him and he stepped outside into an eddy of leaves and grit stirred up by the wind. Moira had the key, and she locked up now while he held their daughter close to his chest.

When she turned to him she looked worn out, darkness caught under her eyes, her skin pale against the black of her clothes and hat. She lifted her hand to her eyes and gazed back at him standing there in his brother's suit.

"Who'd have imagined she could go, just like that?" she said. "It's such a shame."

"Yes," he said, "a terrible shame."

Then they set off up the street through the gusting wind, following the bright spot of green that was Callie Everett's dress as the wind tugged and tugged at it, as though it could pull her free.

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Joanna M. Weston / **Two Poems**

I Will Be

cover my coffin
 with forsythia and sunflowers
 embroider me with grass and leaves
 that I may know
 the company of earth

thread my bones
 with strings of stars

put shells in my eyes
 that I may see air and sea

weave songs about these bones
 that I may rise to music
 and dance with larks
 for I will be light
 as drifting clouds
 transparent as rain
 and as near to you
 as whispers of wind

String

mother kept the ball of string
in the kitchen drawer
among chopping knives
and meat skewers

we untied every knot
on every parcel
winding the string
carefully
onto the ball

rough white string from Canada
with brown paper
carried a blue dress for me

thin string from New Zealand
round a parcel of peanut butter
and jam
butcher's string
from soft parcels

we undid the knots
laboriously
small fingers
more adept than mother's
as we picked and pulled
to find the end
hoping that one day
there would be no need
to save small things
because of war

CODY L. STANFORD lives in Overland, Kansas. He attended the University of Missouri at Kansas City and is fascinated by history, politics, religion, mythology, and the other forces that shape who we are. His stories have appeared in *Eyes*, *The New Orphic Review*, *The Rejected Quarterly*, and *The Circle*.

Reedman

Cody L. Stanford

I TELL A STORY from a city that has disappeared, of a New York once haunted by old ghosts that lurked inside shadows cast by the sort of streetlamps people today think of as quaint. On foggy autumn nights the streets would glisten black under the lights like smooth skin on the legs of a young girl. She had skin like that, the girl who tore me apart, much as my rival almost literally tore apart another man. Those lights are gone and the ghosts are gone but for Desta, whose spirit remains in my soul even today.

It happened during one autumn of black and gold in the late 1950s, when New York was a city of people. It still is in places, but too many areas are now amusement parks while others have become dead steel. It was back in the time of the living city that Desta Kahn came into my life, Desta with her smart, sexy clothes and that way of rolling her hips when she walked that twisted into a man's mind like tongues of cool velvet fire. I had picked up her brother to play drums in my group. I played trumpet; still do on occasion, when the nights get long and lonely. I'm nowhere near as good as I was and I was never as good as I *thought* I was back then. I figured, with the brashness of twenty-eight hot shit years, that it was just me and Miles and the rest of the world, and I would wind up on top. I held on to that illusion until *Bitches Brew* came out ten years after my tale, and I knew for a fact that Miles was from another planet, another star, sent down here like a demon to tell us there was only one god of music and he was it.

I played trumpet; Heywood Kahn, drums; Earl Burns wailed on tenor sax, and Spencer O'Dell kept us moving on bass. And the stranger in the hood danced his whirlwind on alto sax.

The stranger arrived shortly after I hired Heywood. At the time Desta hung around us while we jammed. She used her pretty eyes to flirt with us fellas in the band while we warmed up for each night's show. We played in some sad old club way up north in Harlem, a club that knew a rumor of places like the Cotton Club and 52nd Street but never revealed that the way there was not through her doors. "Birdland's next, fellas," I'd say each day. The line always got a good laugh as if we were all in on the big joke and I wasn't a bit serious.

He showed up like a religious saint, a master assassin, a cat burglar on the run. His garb concealed heavy boots rarely glimpsed under the hem of a long grey raincoat. The coat covered some strange hooded garment as well, like a monk's cowl. He always wore the hood up, even when playing, the golden twist of his axe snaking out of the shadows of his face. I had a quartet, not a quintet, I told the stranger when he approached me. Temple's Tempest, we were called. I didn't need an alto, didn't want one because alto reminded me of what happened to the beautiful Bird. But the stranger played for me the sweetest tunes, like honey on the lips of a girl beneath a shade tree on a hot summer day. He didn't want much money and so I took him on. What I couldn't tell from his unseen eyes that somehow gave off their own weird light was that what he really wanted was Desta.

"My name's Templeton Tupper," I told him. "People call me Tempest."

"Tempest." The stranger's voice possessed a sort of soft, pretty music of its own, hardly like a man at all. "Very good. Call me . . . La Chèvre."

I chuckled with my eyebrows pinched in perplexed humor. "La *what*?"

"La Chèvre," Earl put in, "the goat." Earl had been to Paris and knew the lingo. "He wants you to call him the Goat."

"La Chèvre," the stranger insisted. "It's a family name."

So it was, and we called him that, though behind his back some of the fellas called him the Frog. I'm glad he never heard that. I would have hated to see his reaction. I was the only one of the band to ever learn where he was from, and even when Heywood begged me to tell him where Desta might have gone with the Goat, I never told. Hey never would have believed me anyway.

Ω

We all circled around Desta like a dance spinning into a hurricane. She was twenty-two, with legs made to walk all over a man and leave the deep indentations of her high-heeled shoes across his heart like Cupid's calling card. Or rather Eros, Cupid's real name, as my search for knowledge of the stranger would lead me to discover, once it was all over. Eros, whose darts must have pierced Desta's heart right through when she finally fell hard in love.

I think I hired Heywood just for Desta, to keep her around me so I could dive into her bottomless brown eyes and drown there. She was new to the city and had nowhere else to go, not that big brother Heywood ever let her out of his sight. At least not until she played that innocent backwoods Alabama girl routine on me and the Frog (or whatever animal he wanted to be called) and then, with the worst consequences, on Hunter. But that came later.

First there was me, and I would spend all night after our sets talking to her and trying to figure a way to get in between those magnificent legs of hers. I never did, though Lord knows I tried. When I wasn't with her I planned and plotted, and even when I played I sent my trumpet's tones out to her, hoping to snare her with their awesome beauty. But it only took one night to lose her, after the stranger had been with us about two weeks. La Chèvre captured her heart that night within the sinuous knots of his own playing, strokes of color that wound from the bandstand down to where Desta sat waiting for a lover or destiny or maybe both. Which is what she got in the end. Other guys tried to sit with her and she made them go away. At one time she did this with her eyes on me, but that night her eyes switched to La Chèvre and never returned.

A few nights after that, she went home with La Chèvre.

We didn't find out 'til Heywood stormed into the club the next afternoon. His wiry little body strutted like an enraged rooster across the bandstand and between the empty tables, while he puffed on a cigarette with such fury that his face was shrouded in a grey cowl not unlike La Chèvre's brown cloak. Desta was living with her brother and unless she was with me (didn't Hey know *that* was a bad idea?) she had to be home by a certain time. But she was no baby anymore, I told Hey, and what did he expect after she saw how the big girls in New York City lived?

She did show up eventually. After our first set that night I took her aside, got her a drink, gave her a cigarette, and with jealousy firing every suspicious corner of my mind, I grilled her. Where does he live? Somewhere. What is he like? Nice. Has he got brains? You bet. Is he funny? Passionate? With that fancy name, did he have money? What did he do on his own time, since he was never around us except when he played? On and on like that. I think Desta would have been annoyed if she weren't so obviously pleased at her power over me. Her answers were vague and her smile betrayed the satisfaction of a woman who had changed. I could tell what had happened to her the previous night. The little girl inside Desta had grown quite a bit in those few hours.

I honestly think I would have asked her about it directly if I hadn't seen him at the back of the club. La Chèvre must have once been a farmer because we all noticed he smelled like a barnyard when you got up close to him. Like a goat. He sat on a stool he'd taken from the bar, hunched over in his coat. His long fingers with the claw-like black nails tenderly stroked a glass of red wine. Under his hood I could see nothing

of his face except his eyes, which flickered with a reddish reflection from, I assumed, the candle on the table beside him. But when I took Desta's arm in a protective bid for her affection, the goat man's red eyes stopped flickering and shone steady at me like the eyes of a cat encountered on the hunt at night. It scared me, and I let go of her arm. The red flickered again; the goat man's emotion calmed. I fled to the cramped little room we called backstage to finish my drink.

Ω

Way up in Harlem as it was, and so far off the path from where they usually went for some jazz, few white people ever came into the club. Those who did we knew were true believers, dedicated to the faith and the music. This is where Hunter Carmody enters my story. He was a fashion buyer for one of the big stores along Fifth Avenue. It was the ideal job for a jazz fan like him. He was able to follow the music in New York and in Paris, and charge it all to one of those truly succulent and beautiful phrases, an expense account. But Hunter wasn't a fag like you might think a guy with a fancy for women's clothes might be. Oh no, he had a love for the women wearing those clothes all right. He was a playboy of the first caliber. Though as it turned out, he might have been better off chasing boys after all.

Hunter was around forty-five with an impressive head of graying hair that swooped up and back from his forehead, giving him the expectant air of a man in charge, impatient to get to the prize. His clothes were imported and finely tailored, and they covered a solid build that belonged to someone who had fought his way up in life, which he had. We all knew Hunter's tales of his Hell's Kitchen upbringing, the testimony written in the scars on his big, rugged hands from knuckles split against the jaws of the enemies of his youth. Hunter always came to the club with friends both white and black, couples out on dates. Often he had a girl of his own with him. And it should have tipped me off, not that I had any reason to consider it at first, that the couples were always all Negro or all white. Unless Hunter came in without a date. Then invariably he'd pick up a black girl in the club. That became the core of his sad little excuse when things went wrong for him, when what really did him in was exquisite jealousy of the kind only Desta could inspire.

Hunter wanted her badly, and anything he wanted he was used to getting. The little goat man, however, would have none of it.

I always noticed Hunter when he was in the club, and nodded my head to him because I knew he liked our playing. After a time I noticed something else, after Heywood and Desta and La Chèvre joined our crew: Hunter stopped coming in with a girl of his own. He still came with friends, all of them elegant in their fine apparel. Even the white friends looked sharp, inspired by the grace of the Negro folks alongside them. But Hunter began to sit alone in his chair at their table, not too close but not too far away from the bandstand. He stared at Desta at her

table off to the side, safely near us amorous mother hens. Oh, how he wanted her, another black girl to add to his collection. It never bothered me before, his one night stands with the young girls who hung around the club, but this . . . this was *my* Desta. Once mine, anyway. When our sets were through you could just see Hunter's handsome white face turn the color of pea soup when La Chèvre sat with her.

One Friday night while we were playing, Hunter came over to invite Desta to his table. She accepted the invitation with those flirting, chocolate-gold eyes of hers. I don't blame her. After all, it must have been pretty dull listening to the same cats play the same tunes night after night. She probably just wanted someone to talk to, and how could she resist the Italian suit, diamond rings, and fancy cologne? What did La Chèvre have? A coat and a cowl and a smell like bad cheese. I admit I smiled behind my mouthpiece – the Frog's comeuppance. And Hunter, he was just slumming, not that he would have thought of his pursuit of Desta that way, in so many words.

You have to remember that La Chèvre wore his concealing get-up all the time, night or day, rain or shine. None of us, save Desta presumably, had ever seen his face. In the darkened club you *really* couldn't tell anything about him, other than he looked like Death's altar boy in that hood. So the trouble began when, after our first set that night, La Chèvre strolled with that funny gait of his out to Hunter's table. His footsteps – I swear – sounded like the clop of a horse's hooves. He seized a chair from another table without asking permission and sat next to Desta, close to her, with Hunter on the other side. The white man flinched a bit. Maybe he saw, as I had, the goat man's bizarre, glowing eyes. Hunter's gaze dropped from the fearful dark hood and fell on La Chèvre's hands propped on the table, his ubiquitous glass of red wine clutched like a delicate ruby in his black claws.

"You're white," Hunter noted.

The hood inclined acknowledgement, though when I finally got to see his face up close his skin wasn't so much white as a dusky Italian, or even a high-yellow Negro tone. "So are you, sir."

Hunter let go of Desta's hand under pressure from those hidden eyes. "She tells me you're a fantastic lover."

The wine glass partially disappeared in the hood, then returned with less wine than before. "That I am, and I think you wish to prove her wrong." Pan – for I may as well use his real name, which I learned not long after – set his wine glass down and put his hands together. His long fingers closed slowly, like the sinister vines of some dangerous plant.

"Is it serious?" Hunter asked.

The goat man chuckled. "As in?"

"Do you love her? Do you want to marry her?"

"I will if she and the rest of the world will let me."

See, this is where it gets weird. Hunter had this idea that it was okay for a white man to bang a Negro girl for fun, but not to love her, not to

marry her. After all this time, thinking he was one of those “enlightened” whites, he turned out to be no better than the worst of them. Hunter tried to use the fear and shame of one white man against another to pry Desta loose from the goat man.

I watched this exchange unnoticed at a table nearby, ignoring some friends I’d come over to say hello to. I felt anger, jealousy, hatred. Then I think I began to root for the goat man, just for a bit, just for the moment.

Hunter and La Chèvre got into it something fierce. The angered voices of two men whose desires were never denied attracted every pair of eyes in the club. The fight ended when Pan seized Desta’s arm and led her back to her solitary table. She didn’t mind. By then the sparkle in her eyes over the handsome Hunter Carmody and his nice suit and broad shoulders had dimmed, having seen the good ol’ boy that lay underneath after all. La Chèvre came back for our next set and as we played, the golden bell of his saxophone sought out Desta and wrapped its long body around her, a snake bent not on killing but protection.

Hunter watched and seethed. I saw him motion to La Chèvre, saw the whisper of his lips as he said to a companion, “I can take him on. He’s scrawny. Look at him! He’s hardly a man.”

Oh, how terribly right you were on that last note, “Mister” Carmody.

Ω

Yes, I said his real name was Pan. It wasn’t a nickname or another family name. It was who he was, or rather is, because I know not what happened to him later but I know he still lives. You don’t believe me, of course; and why should you? Just follow me, please, through my eyes to the end of my story. Do it for Desta’s sake, who lost herself so deliciously in him.

Ω

Mid-week after that Friday, late afternoon just before the club opened. With a pack of cigarettes I was doing my best to contribute to the smoky grey texture of the light in the club while I worked on the single whiskey I allowed myself before we played. Desta sat across from me at our lonely table in the empty club. She was eating a sandwich. “What,” I asked her, “can you tell me about him?”

“You mean La Chèvre?” She slowly chewed a bite of her sandwich and swallowed. “He’s like nothing . . . like no man . . . I’ve ever known.”

“C’mon, girl. He was your first, wasn’t he?”

“Very perceptive, Tempest.”

“So, just about any man would impress you then.”

“And so I hear told about you.” She gave me a slow, pitying smile. “You know what I mean, Temple. It’s not that.”

I lit a fresh cigarette. “What’s he look like?”

Desta’s grin hid secrets; oh, such dark and lovely secrets. “He’s different. Not . . . you might think he’s not much to look at but . . .”

“He’s white.”

“Enough so’s it’d bother you.”

“Very funny. Is he built? Like a wrestler, say?”

“He’s strong but doesn’t look it.”

“Hung?”

Desta set down her sandwich and laughed into her napkin. “Oh, baby! Like a horse!”

I laughed along through the sting of my envy. “Please, girl! There ain’t no white man alive who’s hung better’n a toy poodle!”

All the laughter left Desta’s face and my own chuckle died alone. She gazed at me with a sort of serene awe in her eyes. “He’s not entirely a man.”

“Excuse me?” I gulped a too-large mouthful of whiskey and almost choked. “Don’t tell me something’s missing. Did he lose it in the war?”

“No, Tempest; nothing’s missing. It’s just . . .” She resumed eating her sandwich and I waited for the rest of her answer. It never really came. “Well,” she finally added. “Maybe someday he’ll show you.”

Ω

I was furious. I went backstage, careful to hide my jealousy from Desta, and played out my anger on my trumpet. Desta. With a hung white man. Goddamn it! Damn this fucking world to hell and gone! A man tries, okay? He sees this beautiful creature and falls so hard in love with her, follows her with his eyes, tries to make time with her while dreaming endlessly of her incomparable body. And then so easily, so *fucking* easily, some white fucker in my own band steals her from me and . . .

Tempest. Be honest. As my mother used to scold me.

Yeah. Okay. I just wanted her ass too, like Hunter, at least at first. It hadn’t been long enough, when La Chèvre showed up, for it to have become love. Yet. But when I knew for certain about him and Desta, that he’d had her in the way I longed for so much, yeah; *then* I kidded myself that it was love because that thought was easier to bear. *I* was the one who had been violated, raped, stolen from. Didn’t matter. If La Chèvre hadn’t shown up I would have exploded in rage over Hunter instead. Thank God Hunter came in when he did, though, because when it came time for a jealous man to have it out with . . . well, someone as vicious and powerful as Pan . . . I’m glad it wasn’t me in the way.

Ω

The stranger's music swirled like dance and we would get on him about that. Bebop wasn't about dance; it was about getting away from the swing tunes and the pretty melodies that set white folks' toes to tapping. La Chèvre would try to get around it and sometimes he was good, and sometimes . . . well, hell, he was brilliant. But that dance feel would creep back in and after a while we just gave up and let him play as he liked, and he wove such bewitching tapestries of music around all of us to the point that we couldn't help but love him. Anyway, I had a feeling he wouldn't be with us much longer, and I was right.

Another grey afternoon. La Chèvre practiced alone on the bandstand while keeping an eye on Desta and me. She and I sat in close conversation much as before, my dinner once again only whiskey and cigarettes.

"Is he jealous?"

Desta let slip a "puh" sound before she caught herself and said, "La Chèvre? A bit. But not like Hunter."

Hunter came alone to the club these days, obsessed and sleepless and passionate over Desta. He'd stare at her, his eyes swollen with desire and, when La Chèvre was playing, anger. He tried to talk to her and she brushed him off. I had made note of that and asked her, "Why?"

"Because I love La Chèvre."

My gaze tumbled down to my whiskey glass, where I knew I'd be finding friendship for a long time to come.

"Don't be hurt," Desta reassured me. "You're not . . . you're wonderful, Temple, okay? You showed me the city when I first arrived, and those times with you were very precious, baby. I do love you, just not the way you want me to. Please understand. It's not you. It's *him*. You don't know what you're up against."

"Like to find out."

Desta's expression became as serious as I would ever see it. "No, you don't. Leave it alone, baby. Trust me."

My voice almost cracked. Oh, man! Crying before the girl would never make it. "Does Hunter know?"

"He will if he doesn't leave me alone. He follows me sometimes, when Pan isn't with me."

"Who?"

"La Chèvre," she amended hastily, and plowed ahead before I could ask her what the hell she meant. "Hunter's angry now, since I won't talk to him. Calls me names. Says he'll take on La Chèvre if he's man enough. I've never seen him say it right to his face, though."

"Man talk," I chuckled. Another quarrel between white men. Best to stay out of it. "You just make sure you don't stray too far from Heywood or me, okay?"

"Yeah. But if I need him . . . if I need help . . . I know he'll be there."

I didn't have to ask who.

Picture this now: the club had closed for the night and no one was left save Hunter, watching Desta at her table watch La Chèvre and me on the bandstand as we sat on stools and jammed blues together. I had sent everyone else home and Cecil, the club's owner, trusted me to lock up when we left. I had my whiskey and cigarettes; La Chèvre, his red wine. We played slow and hurt, and I think La Chèvre understood me, he really did. He sounded as if he'd lost hundreds of beautiful women who ran from him for . . . whatever reason. Turns out that was the case. You should have heard him play. Then you would truly know what intense loneliness is like. Intense love, too.

We knew what was coming that night. I think we planned it that way, without words, La Chèvre and I. Let's get it over with, we thought. Yet his plan was far more sinister than mine. I wanted confrontation. He wanted blood.

Pan – there's no point in calling him anything else now since Hunter and I were about to learn what Desta already knew – let the tune he was playing drift off into some sweet, heartrending distance, then laid down his axe. He stroked the reed tenderly with his left thumb as he did. Something about the smooth, straight grain of the yellow wood pleased him, a memory of the pipes he played when he was home. The pleasure in his eyes shone gold from under his dark hood, and when he turned his head I could still see them as they bored red anger at Hunter Carmody, right into his heart. "You should leave her alone," the goat man said.

Hunter sprang to his feet and approached the bandstand. Desta flinched as he went by her. "Can't make it with your own kind," he accused Pan, "can you?"

I almost swallowed my cigarette trying not to laugh.

Pan was calm and turned his body, on his stool, toward Hunter. His boots peeked out from under the hem of his coat. Odd toes they had, almost cloven in appearance. "I can make it with you," he replied, his voice beatific and calm.

"You?" Hunter laughed, a superior sort of malice in his tone. "I don't particularly care for nancy-boys, sweetie." He turned to Desta. "You really love this deviant? Whaddya do, let him fuck you up the—"

A loud noise interrupted Hunter. Pan had stood and in anger flung his stool against the wall, behind the bandstand, with what looked to me to be a mere flick of his wrist. Plaster cracked, pictures fell and shattered, and Pan's voice made Hunter snap his attention back to him. The inevitable hard freeze of winter shaded his words. "You have no choice, sir." The goat man slipped delicate-seeming fingers into his hood, and lowered it. Then he removed his coat.

The first things I saw were his horns, amber and black tiger-striped, curling back from his forehead. His head was elongated, coming to a sort of point at the end of his long jaw. He was a bizarre combination of human, goat and – when his smile revealed those terrible teeth – a touch of wolf as well.

He took off his hooded cloak. He was scrawny in appearance, though under his clothes he always moved like a man in careful possession of enormous strength. I glanced quickly at the shattered stool beneath the cracked wall. That first estimate was correct.

I thought initially that it was a damned good costume, but then Pan turned toward Hunter after laying down his cloak and started to walk. His shaggy legs were bent like a goat's but were large and powerful, and he walked with an unusual stride on his cloven hooves. Never had he worn the boots I thought I had seen. His cock began to swell and Hunter fixed wide, horrified eyes on it. Pan bobbed his head up and down, confirming Hunter's fears with the most malicious grin possible. Pan's eyes – the light came from deep within them – shone through huge, intent pupils. Those unsettling eyes now glazed a terrible, bloody red.

The pack of cigarettes slipped from my hand. I stood from my stool and backed away from the two combatants. Desta remained calm. Her own eyes lit up and I could see her admiration and love for the goat man. Sweet, innocent Desta, who knew exactly what was coming. Such vengeance in her young heart. "That's right, Mr. Carmody, I warned you," she called out. "Now you'll learn not to call me a—" And she repeated the insult, words deeply hurtful to a young Negro girl. The ancient goat god, perhaps as old as the dimly remembered past when we were all of one skin, advanced on his quarry. Hunter turned and knocked over several chairs, trying to flee. He found the doors locked. He ran back through the club and Pan followed, leaping from table to table with the precision and grace of a mountain goat balanced on rocks high above the earth.

He caught Hunter and forced him down, and then the blubbing and the screaming began. I learned later that men in ancient Greece sometimes did this to other men who wronged them. Say a fella came home and caught you with his wife. Time to bend over, boy! It wasn't sex for fun the way the nancy-boys like it. This was pure punishment and humiliation.

Pan meant to kill Hunter, too, and he halfway did just by raping him. But when Pan withdrew from Hunter he began to wrench Hunter's right arm from behind. Pan had it dislocated from the shoulder before I ran over and stopped him.

"No, Tempest, don't interfere!" Desta screamed. "He'll kill you, too!"

Hunter was hunched over with his face to the floor, bawling bitter tears of defeat. I leaned across his back and put my hands on Pan's

shoulders. His face had shown a most perverse glee while he tortured Hunter. Now his eyes leapt up to lock on mine and I . . . I . . .

Those eyes, the light of them; the things they told you about the creature who possessed them. Oh my God. I've never seen anything more horrifying in my life. Red fire like blood swirled as if seen through the gates of Hell, but mixed in were shots of black so dark it was like peering into a sucking void, into insanity and death. For a moment I thought Desta was right, and I had just made the biggest mistake of my soon-to-be-ended life.

I found my voice anyway and dared speak to him. "*Don't do this!* Let him go. The memory of tonight will punish him far more than killing him will. Don't make Desta live with this."

Pan's breath stank of goat and the blood from where he had sunk his teeth into Hunter's shoulders. His voice sounded of hoarfrost and cruelty and love. "She wants it, too. Revenge comes so easily to you hairless apes."

I felt the rage of insulted pride until Desta cut in: "He means *all* humans, Tempest. All people. Not just—"

"Okay, okay." It was all or nothing now. I squeezed Pan's shoulders and forced myself to look into those horrifying eyes. "Then here's the other side of humans for you. Let him go."

The black shots disappeared from Pan's eyes and the red slowly dissolved into a sort of violet calm. "You're a different sort of storm, Tempest. You know control." He grinned, and I watched the tip of his long tongue suck blood from his sharp canines with relish. "And that silly thing you monkeys call compassion."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I replied. "Don't push your luck, goat-boy. Just back away, huh?"

With laughter soft as a child's oncoming sleep that promised the most wonderful dreams, he did.

Ω

I don't know why I saved Hunter. Perhaps I saw myself too well in the same spot he occupied. As Pan went to Desta's side, Hunter stood and pulled his trousers back up with his one good arm. I turned away for a moment because of the blood. A cock as large as Pan's can do something awful to a person, if the owner so wishes.

Two days later I read in the paper that Hunter killed himself. I hoped it was quicker and less painful than what would have happened had I not stepped in when I did. Me and my "compassion." I'm glad no one else heard that. I'd never had lived it down.

I never went anywhere. After what I had seen and what I had lost, I did begin a too-close friendship with the whiskey bottle, and Miles went on to rule the world. So I like to think anyway – that I failed solely due to drink. On nights when the memories hurt too much, I can even makes myself believe it for a moment.

Desta and Pan disappeared together that night. None of us ever heard from her again. Heywood was angry but by the time he died in 1978, I knew his heart was broken. He believed he had failed his baby sister. I did everything I could to convince him otherwise.

Could Desta still be alive, still be with Pan? I don't know. The goat god has so much *life* in him. When I touched him, when I saw into his eyes, I knew what a force he is. I love to be alive, but wouldn't the joyous intensity of being so close to Pan soon begin to hurt from the pain of your own soul being torn to shreds?

I can't imagine saying "no" to the opportunity to find out.

GREGORY GILBERT GUMBS comes from the small French/Dutch Caribbean Island of St. Martin/St. Maarten. He worked briefly as a lawyer and a criminologist in the Netherlands. In the USA, he worked as a screenwriter (MFA) and is now pursuing a PhD in Political Science. His poems have appeared in magazines and in anthologies all over the world.

Gregory Gilbert Gumbs / **Three Poems**

The Places Where I am Most at Home

In the busy Central Stations of big metropolitan areas the world over
where the trains from everywhere come and go

Come and go

In the large international airports just outside the large cities
where happy passengers from all over arrive and sad ones leave

Arrive and leave

In bustling harbors spread out along the magnificent coastlines
where huge ships from elsewhere dock and depart

Dock and depart

In huge hotels scattered across the continents

where eager travelers and happy visitors stay for a few days and nights

Before sadly moving on

These are the in-between places where I am now most at home

I who am not from any of these places and

once was from somewhere else.

When Love Dies

We stand in the small kitchen side by side
 preparing our own cups of coffee and tea
 Each a refugee in his or her own world
 so close yet already so far away from where we once stood
 When love dies

The bathroom door is now always securely locked
 not boldly and provocatively left open as before
 When we used to continually walk in and out on each other
 in various stages of disrobing or getting ready
 Often for no other reason but to stop and admire
 When love dies

The one you once loved and truly cared for
 Her beautiful face
 Her sensuous mouth
 The small, soft breasts
 Her firm, round ass
 The sly, poetic and sexy words she would utter each and everytime
 in passing
 All now completely meaningless and totally alien
 When love dies

The life you once eagerly shared
 Now only blocking your way
 The children you were happily raising together
 Now only a major bone of contention
 The dreams which once sparked the both of you
 Now nothing but a gathering nightmare
 When love dies.

Somewhere here

Somewhere here

Some time ago, along these magnificent white sand beaches
Teaming with lobsters, crabs, conchs, wilks, shrimp and fish
Minus the many expensive and large yachts from everywhere
The Carib Indians came ashore in awe of the little Island,

which they called Soualiga

because of the excellent quality of the salt in its saltponds

Somewhere here

Some time after that

Minus the large tourist hotels aggressively laying claim to

the very same beaches

The French, the Dutch, the English and the Spanish often fighting

came ashore

and competing and temporarily replacing one another

Arrogantly renaming the Caribbean Island, St. Martin

All the while wiping the fiercely resisting Carib Indians off the face of
this small place

Only leaving some clues behind of what once was for future

archeologists to unearth

to contemplate later on

And, oooh, historical irony upon irony, using the same golden salt,

which was in high

demand, to further colonize the other Islands

Somewhere here

Minus the cars and the traffic jams, which has now become

a new way of life

Some time ago, along these magnificent white sand beaches

Minus also the now depleted waters of fish, crabs, lobsters and conchs

The Europeans pulling behind them brutally chained, enslaved and

bleeding Africans,

who looking around

Somewhere here

Must have sensed the bittersweet irony of the entire unfolding

situation before them

As their steadily dripping blood stained and marked a bloody red line

in the white

sand beaches.

STEVEN FRYE has published numerous essays, articles, and reviews in journals such as *The South Carolina Review*, *The Centennial Review*, *The Southern Quarterly*, and *The Kentucky Review*. His historical novel *Dogwood* will appear in the fall of 2007. He is Professor of English at California State University, Bakersfield.

Evensong

Steven Frye

PAUL TOOK HOLD of the wheel and dropped his hand to the shift lever and Stan turned and looked at him then lifted his eyes across the interstate up the slow sweep of the Tejon Pass. Later Stan would think on his friend and prayed to God he was oblivious when it happened, sipping on a gin and tonic and chatting away at some stranger when the big plane landed on their puddle-jumper and burned them into the tarmac. It would be all over the news, and Stan would find himself nameless, anonymous, but still at the center of a story carved into a fleeting pastiche by editors and sound technicians and the polished poetry of Peter Jennings.

The chassis dropped into a mud-soaked rut as the jeep threaded between two pickups onto Frazier Mountain Park Road toward Lockwood Valley. Paul wanted to see the twenty acres Stan's parents owned, a place where they had camped in college. They lay along the crest of a hill past the Ventura County line. From the tightness of his hands on the wheel and the lift of his shoulders it was as if Paul had left something there. Stan wasn't sure why they were going but knew not to argue. The two-lane road was straight and thinly traveled and the alluvial plain lifted to the right into foothills spattered in sage and mesquite and piñon pine. The snow was blinding on the peaks but gray and spotted across the plain and littered on the ground like the white insides of fast food packaging. Stan looked at Paul out of the corner of his eye and saw his pensive stare and knew his friend had saved him. They had been best friends for seventeen years, though a lot of people called Paul best friend, and Stan couldn't really figure how to define himself or think out where he would be without Paul's taking him on. Paul was the outsider really, with a family busted up by a twisted amalgamation

of choice and circumstance – parents divorced, older brothers brutal and drug-hounded, and a soul at once unsuited for common living but too much attuned to common pain. On the wrestling team in high school Stan couldn't muster the confidence to win, but Paul always did. Still, he made himself a bridge between Stan and those who would have tossed him aside. They were all still friends, all because of Paul, yet somewhere Stan became the paragon of right choosing.

Now it seemed like some liquid fantasy. Stan was married, moving back east to graduate school in two weeks with this their last day together before leaving, Paul engaged to a woman Stan couldn't figure a way to talk to. Stan wanted to freeze-frame events, take hold and keep them, and Paul looked restless. He always looked restless, bringing in what he saw and trying to weave out some meaning that would tally with his own gleaming conception. The jeep crested the slope and Paul chose the by-pass and headed straight to the valley and the speed and the black ice made Stan tense, but he knew there was no deterring Paul from a calling he wouldn't confess.

"Do your folks have any plans to sell?" Paul said.

"Not any that they've said to me," said Stan. "God knows why. They've always loved that valley."

"It's peaceful."

"No water, though. Nothing really to do."

"We managed a few jovial evenings a few years back."

"We did."

Paul shifted in his seat lifting the fur lapels on his ski jacket over his ears as the chill drifted from the baseboards into the cab. He flipped on the defrost and the windows cleared and Stan thought on his own comfort and repose knowing the new jeep would get them where they planned to go this time.

"What are you smiling at?" Paul said.

"Remember back that first winter in junior college when we went with Mark in my old Mustang to spend the night up on Mount Piños?"

"I remember I busted my face on the parking lot when I lost hold of my sled."

"I forgot about that."

"Good, because you were smiling. My lovely proboscis has never been the same. What then *is* the source of your shit-eating grin?"

"Driving back down. Do you remember why we decided not to stay the night?"

"No."

"My well-performed pose of responsibility. I was afraid of the cold, or maybe just the isolation."

"Your cowardice has been our salvation a few times anyway. Now that I think about it, the gas station attendant in Frazier Park told us it would drop to eight degrees by midnight. And us with those duckie-and-bunnie sleeping bags."

"Discretion is the better part of valor."

“Sounds like your old man.”

“Yeah. But he pulled it from Shakespeare. Actually the line reads, ‘The better part of valor is discretion.’ Trouble is the line is spoken by Falstaff – the biggest coward Western literature has ever produced.”

“Aye, there’s the rub.”

Stan reached forward with the sleeve of his jacket and cleared the latent frost from the windshield. He stared above the wiper blade through the mist as white lines like rivets passed by.

“I remember mainly driving back down with no chains,” Stan said. “The tail end sliding into the drifts, the defrost on the blitz, and you laughing your ass off in the back seat with Mark lighting matches on the window.”

“Adventure, anyway.”

“Yeah.”

“Of course adventure is miserably overrated – mainly a harrowing and life-threatening experience in retrospect, colored over by memory and bullshit.”

“That doesn’t sound like you. Did you learn that in Africa?”

“Maybe. Tick-bite fever makes you hallucinate.”

“I remember your letters.”

“Longest six months of my life.”

Stan thought it a telling omission. Paul talked about the fever and the crocodiles in the river and the loneliness and political unrest and the barbed wire around the bank where he programmed the mainframes but never of missing Vickie. They both met her the same night, a set-up, a friend of a girlfriend of a friend, the absurdities of flirtation when seen from the outside, the tickling, the foot-wrestling under the card table. Stan thought she looked good enough at first glance but never wanted her, and it seemed that Paul wouldn’t either in the long run. But days later Paul took to her like a left-over casserole, on the bathroom floor of Duane Capelli’s apartment. She never knew she was the real thing after waking, the compromise, the maybe this is all. Paul never made her think she was. He traveled on business, though – to London, to Portugal, to Brussels, to Africa, months at a time, wanting to come back and wanting to leave: fox-hunting in Wales, a safari up the River Benue, Michelangelo’s *Madonna and Child* in Bruges, sailing around the Rock of Gibraltar, letters home to Stan and Mark full of events and details and diffuse desire. Stan understood but couldn’t meet him in mind anymore since he married Allison.

They rolled into a canyon with snow melted in the meadows and the fence lines capped in ice and a few scattered Angus trimming the sage along the base of the posts. In the center of a field along a fracture spreading finger-like from the San Andreas a white-tailed doe grazed with two yearlings. They raised their tame heads curiously with ears lifted to hear but with no intention to flee. They dropped them again as the jeep passed into the crest near Ponderosa Ranch.

“What was that ranch for?” Paul said.

“It’s a dude ranch built in the sixties when *Bonanza* was big. They used to have ads on big billboards at the entrance. Jeez, I’ve been passing that place since I was ten.”

“I remember it from when we’ve come out here before, but I guess I never thought about it.”

“What’s got you curious about my folks’ land all of a sudden?”

“I always liked going out there.”

“I just like driving.”

“Yeah.”

Stan knew it was more than nostalgia that took them there. They were going for a reason, Paul full of words most of the time but stone quiet on his motives when he wanted to do something, counting on Stan to come along, to keep the real questions reined in. Stan was used to following Paul places. He was used to never really knowing, even when the jaunt was over, why they went. But he always took himself through the ritual of asking and Paul knew the routine and when it would end.

“But what’s got you curious?”

“I’d like to get the lay of the area. See what’s available.”

“You’re in escrow, though. You’re not changing your mind?”

“No. I’m just thinking ahead a bit. Dreaming I guess. The quiet appeals to me.”

“Would it appeal to Vickie?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someday.”

“Is she happy with the house?”

“It’s new. She likes new. Picking out the carpet and all that. She can’t stand white walls, though. I guess I’ll be painting my ass off.”

“You won’t be fixing the water-heater any time soon.”

“Don’t think that didn’t occur to me.”

“But are you satisfied with it? Do you want it?”

“It’ll do. I can’t figure want anymore. Nothing comes up to what I want.”

Stan looked ahead and wedged his thumb under the shoulder harness and pulled it forward and let it rest again taking a long draw on his water bottle.

“You know I’ll be back in May for your wedding,” Stan said.

“You better be. I hauled my ass all the way from Portugal to get to yours.”

“Thanks for the best man thing.”

“Who the hell else would it be?”

Paul shifted down as they came to the crest past the turkey farm near the valley. He didn’t notice or talk about it as he usually did, or laugh at the Owl’s Barn Tavern with its wind-warped redwood siding and cracked plastic Coca-Cola logo and the Willies flatbed jeep on the side. He leaned forward and looked ahead as the jeep struggled with the incline and elevation.

“It came as a bit of a surprise,” Stan said. “You didn’t seem like you were there yet with her. Not mentally, anyway.”

“Maybe you have to make things work instead of waiting for them to coalesce naturally. I’ve been gut-hooked on magic too many times.”

Stan turned as they reached the summit, entranced as he stared across the sweep of the Lockwood Valley with his eyes unblinking and the cool bliss of his mind emptied of thinking, a wave of disembodied sense breezing his temples and tingling, like the first sip of scotch before the ice thinned its bite. The view was imprinted on his brain and the new scene tallied, the angular reach of the runway at the airfield with its one aging Cessna 150 and the blue A-frame of the pilot’s lodge and spots of young sage thinning the breadth of the strip. The main road crested in a slow sweep westward into Ventura County, the pine forests narrowing into creeks white and dry, iced in winter with red-fingered canyon walls rising from the bedrock and edged at the top in gray sand tinted blue under the dull sheet of clouds. Stan could see the eaves of a cabin rise obliquely between the pines on the foothills with the color faded only barely from when he had seen them before – a sight set and permanent but incongruous when paired with the tin roof-lines of storage sheds near the white plastic of new fence lines and custom homes newly built and isolated. He remembered why he always avoided coming here when he could argue his way free of it, the scene searing in its claim, its sinister assertion of sifting time. The shale waste of the borax mine hadn’t changed, pouring from the side of a mountain in shades of white and gray as if some colossal mole had gutted it from the inside. It was larger than it appeared. When standing at its base he remembered you couldn’t see to the top, but from a distance you could make out a thin sheet of rusted metal rising perpendicular to the ground. They had always wondered if it was just scrap or the cover for an abandoned shaft. As a kid he had wondered, in college they had talked about it, but they had never made it more than halfway to the top, the shale sliding beneath them made it a tough go and the shaft never quite seemed worth the knowing.

They dropped into the valley and past the busted mail boxes and turned right on Adams Trail as the tires hummed on the dirt road rippled by run-off. Paul pulled to the side and without speaking they got out and uncapped the wheels and turned the level knob on each putting the jeep in four-wheel drive. Paul dropped it quickly into gear impatient to get to where they were going and Stan could feel the weight of the gearing as Paul stayed in second to hold traction but wound the engine high. They made a left on Curtis Trail and dipped into the dry creek bed and turned again onto the easement near the land, lifting the front end out of ruts newly cut and sharp with edges iced and hard. Paul stopped and set the brake. Stan got out and walked to the back and pulled the hatch free and reached into the back for the cooler. He lifted it out and set it on the ground and opened it, picking out a sandwich wrapped in tinfoil and tossing it to Paul as he came up.

“Beer or coffee?” Stan said.

“Beer for now. The coffee will keep in the thermos.”

Stan handed Paul a can and took one himself and opened up a turkey sandwich and took a bite. The lettuce was watered down and he wondered why he always added it. He opened up the sandwich and took out the soaking leaf and threw it off the side of the road. He pulled out an apple and a bag of tortilla chips and opened a jar of salsa and closing the lid of the cooler set it on top. Paul ate listlessly but took a long draw on his beer and finishing it took out another. He nibbled at the chips and seemed to want to say something but turned to the jeep to pull out his daypack and unzipping it tossed in two bottles of water.

“So all things are ready for your late stage academic renaissance? It’s odd you’re starting in winter,” Paul said.

“They let a few grad students in mid-year, if they already have teaching experience. You’d be surprised how many people don’t hit grad school until thirty.”

“What’s set you on Ohio State?”

Stan knew it for small talk and that Paul wanted him to take the conversation over but that if he did it would go nowhere, not yet.

“They’re giving me money. I think Columbus is probably a good place for Allison to get a teaching job.”

“How many places did you hear from finally?”

“Four. Ohio State, Marquette, Indiana, and South Carolina. I was about fifty-fifty on acceptances.”

“Did you apply anywhere local?”

“U.C.L.A. But I didn’t stand much chance there.”

“Why?”

“Everybody applies there. Some of my profs told me it’s better to go east if you want to get back west for a job. Universities don’t like provinciality.”

“You are provincial. You know that.”

It was true and it smacked at his veneer of courage, but somehow coming from Paul there was no bite, only the calm that comes of being known.

“Yeah. I’ll be back one way or another.”

“At least you’ve got good reasons. I thought you might be going away just to go away. That’s always been my mistake.”

“If it’s a mistake you’ve made it more than once.”

“I know.”

They tossed the foil into the cooler and Paul handed over his empty can and Stan closed the lid and lifted the cooler into the jeep. He zipped his jacket to his chin and pulled the woolen ski-cap over his ears but took the cold against his face and loved it, preferred it to heat, saw in it a comfort he couldn’t explain. Paul walked ahead into the frozen sage and Stan could hear its dull scrawl against the denim and his mood sunk remembering that he preferred the driving, that Paul always walked too fast. Now though he walked even faster and it was strange. They weren’t laden with fishing poles and headed somewhere special. They were going nowhere really but into a forest that crested to a sum-

mit at the base of the foothill where a spike marked out the border of his folks' land. Paul was silent now and intent as he passed out of the sage meadow into a grove of mixed trees. Piñon, gray, and coulter. Lodgepole, Jeffrey, and sugar pine. Stan tripped and lost his footing and looked down at the gray root of a sage that curled in like a mummified hand and seemed burnt but for the shoots that rose from its spreading base. Stan could see the rise of Paul's shoulders and his bending head and the steady press of his legs as he lifted away the branches and traversed the granite slabs covered with lichen and dulled to black by frost. Paul stopped at the crest of a rock and lifted his pack free and Stan was used to following his friend's buried motives but this seemed something more. Paul opened the pack and pulled out a bottle of water and handed it to Stan as he walked up. Stan took a long draw and gave it back and sat, both of them looking through a thin frame of trees at the flat plain and the fence lines. Stan felt the density of Paul's confused intent but habit won out and left him in no mood to ask.

"Did we pitch a tent in here somewhere? I think it was over there," Paul said, pointing to the flat concave of a pine bed at the edge where the granite gave way to dirt.

"Maybe. I remember mostly sleeping in the car."

"We couldn't get any reception on the radio."

"Best laid plans."

Paul pulled off his cap and ran his hand through his hair and reached down and yanked without purpose on the laces of his boot.

"We never made it to the top of that old mine," Paul said.

"No. We never did find out if there was a shaft there."

"Why didn't we?"

"You and Mark always gave up on my account. At least that's what I figured."

"I don't remember."

"I don't either."

"Let's do it now?" Paul said.

"Is that why we're here?"

"I suppose."

Stan knew Paul was calling in a debt, even if he didn't know it.

"I'm in as good a shape as I've ever been," Stan said.

They each loaded a daypack and worked their way through the trees into meadows of pressed granite and petrified moss past the hardwood A-frame Stan remembered from when he was a kid, with its pale blue panels and sun-dimmed red sheeting near the apex. The folded chairs on the balcony were new and it struck him strange that the cabin had been occupied if only in intervals. They moved steady past the fire road with mud ruts hardened by the ice then up the slope into the sage now dense and brittle until they arrived at the base of the shale pile at the bottom of the mine. It rose at a steep angle five hundred yards to the summit. Paul's focus was undiminished but steady now and Stan looked on at the broken stone and hated the sight of it. Its void and

waste. Beside it was the lift of the hills and the curve of Curtis Trail all part of the framework of memory, structure and stasis, but this only busted and fluid and out of time. He took off his pack and heaved it onto the weighty branch of a sugar pine.

“Let me take your water,” Paul said.

“Are you going to carry your pack?”

“We should have water at this altitude.”

“Headaches. I’ll pack it.”

“There’s no reason for both of us to. If I get tired I’ll hand it off to you.”

Stan took the water bottle from his pack and the kit with bandages and antiseptic then handed them to Paul and lifted his pack to the tree again.

“Not high enough for bears. But we won’t be there long,” said Paul.

“It’ll keep out the lesser varmints.”

They began up the hill parallel to each other and Stan could see the angle of Paul’s vision as he measured him. Paul’s stride was short but fast and he moved ahead and Stan’s long and steady but with more endurance now than when they tried it before. Paul stopped breathless and waited and caught himself as Stan reached him. He offered to wait but Stan urged them on. Paul stayed with him for a while but moved ahead again. Stan felt the shale beneath him loose and unpredictable, much of it broken to sand by the rains and wind, pieces of it blade-like and gleaming and some of it flat and useful for climbing. The pitch of the slope increased and they had to use their hands and Stan knew his palms were bleeding from the cut of the stones but didn’t feel any pain, only the surface cold repelled and tempered by steady movement and breathing and the pulsing of his blood. Paul paused at the halfway point as his vision cleared the tops of the trees and the highway came into view and the canyon rim cut by the creek bed could just be seen against the range to the south. Stan arrived and saw him looking as if into some spectacle that denied him entry. He parsed out what his friend was seeing. Paul was groundless. He stared past the trees. They were too close. He was reading the curves of highways and canyons and ridges like some clay mystery in cuneiform and it was as if he knew the symbols but not the patterns they formed, the alphabet but not the language.

“I don’t quite remember this view. It’s odd to see the highway from this angle,” Stan said slowly, taking in the cold air in heavy breaths.

“I remember it, I think.”

“There’s something unsettling about it.”

“More so in winter.”

Stan reached around and unzipped Paul’s pack and took out his water bottle. He uncapped it and took a long swig.

“Don’t take too much,” Paul said. “We can spend more time at the summit.”

“Does Vickie like to get out to places like this?”

“She’s flexible. She didn’t get outside much growing up. She likes the outdoors in the daytime but she’s not much for camping. I’m less and less for that these days.”

“Yeah. There’s a reason we crawled out of the primordial ooze.”

“Nature’s got to be seen in the light. When you can make out patterns and colors.”

“Patterns that seem more than patterns. The art of the eye, I guess.”

“You say it sadly.”

Stan tightened his collar and kicked his heel on the root of a scrub and loosened a stone under the surface of the sand.

“On our honeymoon in Colorado, I spent too much time with the video camera. Allison put up with me. It loses something in the translation.”

“I’m not sure it isn’t already lost in the seeing.”

Paul stood and lifted the pack from his shoulder and closed the zipper tight then shook it to settle the contents. He lifted it again to his back and loosened the levers to ease the straps.

“Do you want me to take it for a while?” Stan said.

“No. You can pack it down.”

They climbed again, steady, together this time at the same pace as the slope increased and the shale gave way to red grains of granite dust and black ash and surface sweeps of white from the chalk and borax. The summit crested without drama as Paul claimed footing on a peak of sand and Stan took hold with both hands but lost himself as Paul took his grip and lifted him onto the base.

They sat a while on the soft rim of sand taking in the air, looking out at the valley, not turning yet to see the remnants of the mine. Paul’s eyes thinned and his lips tightened and he squeezed hard at the strap of the pack. Stan could see the compact pressure at the base of his throat. He stood up with a quick lift that surprised even Stan, and tossing the pack to the side he turned to the carved plateau of the shale mound and moved toward the rusted sheet of iron. It rose out of the ground and angled toward them as if in a solemn bow. Stan had the odd feeling they had come to a shrine to worship some strange demigod who fooled them now by turning on them, laughing them into nothing, paying them back in a comic gesture of contempt. As they came to it they saw it was a set of panels joined with rivets, some of them busted out by the frost and others welded by time and indistinguishable from the rust that creased between the lines of welded joints. Paul arrived at its base and looked beneath it. The sand was concave beneath the panel but solid and hard and where the metal broke free of the earth there were two scraps of aluminum. Paul reached under and picked them up. They were beer cans bent and crushed. Paul tried to read the labels and could only barely make out the brand.

“Schlitz,” Paul said.

“They don’t ship that past the Rockies anymore.”

“They’ve been here a while.”

Paul pounded his foot down on the sand under the sheet, hard and repeated with a look of undimmed purpose in his face, anger that Stan remembered but couldn't place. He kept at it, slamming his heel on the sand and waiting for it to give way to a shaft. Stan watched and remembered when he was a kid before he met Paul he had been obsessed with caves, watched shows on TV about caverns and subterranean waterways, the patterns and colors and speaking depths, that his friends had dug a tunnel and built a fort in the sand under the power lines near where they lived, and his parents told him never to go into it. He obeyed and was always sorry. Paul kept pounding with the other foot now, his strong hand red as it took hold of the rusted panel to buttress his weight. But there was no shaft, or if there had been it was packed tight by the sand and hardened by the rains and snowdrifts. Paul stopped and stood for a moment, one that lengthened in the cold and turned crystal in the altitude. He walked to the crest and stood a while, then sat again. Stan sat next to him.

"I never did know when they mined this place. I don't think my dad knew either," Stan said.

"Probably in the forties. I think the borax companies moved east into the desert."

Paul ran his hand through his hair and tightened his collar around his neck to keep out the breeze. Stan pulled his cap down tighter over his ears.

"We're smaller than our own thinking," Paul said. "One choice can make you."

Stan turned suddenly and looked at him. The rush of air in the trees quieted a bit and Stan listened and in a quick moment knew he had taken the wind for silence and the real silence was deafening. He let Paul's words settle and took in the expression on his face.

"When?" Stan said.

"August."

"Is that why . . . ?"

"No. We'd set the date and called the planners the week before."

Stan could see he wasn't lying about the timing and looked forward, paused to select his words, spoke only when it pained him not to.

"Mark's pretty fired up about Connie being pregnant. It's nice that your kids will be the same age," Stan said.

"Yeah."

"Vickie?"

"Sick. But nothing out of the ordinary, I'm told."

The wind stopped. The tops of the limber pine at the base of the shale rested in a granite chill. Stan looked ahead as the landscape held its color but lost its depth and contour. Paul's profile sifted into it like some bas-relief in marble that would beat out time by standing into it: telling silence, believing, defiance. Stan knew he would remember it. Then Paul's face softened and he began to speak again.

"Remember when you visited me in London?" he said.

“That great little flat in Pimlico.”

“We took in a late service at Salisbury Cathedral, after that long train ride – Evensong.”

“The boys’ choir,” said Stan.

“I remember not being able to make out what they were saying.”

“Impressive what they could do. One of them seemed restless,” Stan said. “He kept lifting his arm onto the railing and the director corrected him with a glance.”

“Didn’t affect his singing.”

“No. They were all spot on.”

Paul unzipped his jacket and leaned back resting his palms on the sand with his eyes straight ahead and his vision unvarnished and clean and uncorrupted.

“What do you call it when sections of the choir alternate their voices on the same line?” he said. “Repeat it in a different pitch, over and over again?”

“There’s a term for it. I want to say ‘antiphony’ but that isn’t it.”

“The redundancy seemed strange when I looked at the words on the worship folder.”

“Meaning in form – in notes instead of words.”

“If you explained it to me without my hearing it I’d say it wouldn’t work.”

“You’re not supposed to get your mind around it, I guess.”

“Comforting thought.”

Paul broke his stare and stood and lifted the pack onto his back and pulled up his socks and wiped the sand from the laces as he readied himself for the descent. Stan stood up and pulled at the belt loops on his jeans.

“I’ll pack it down,” Stan said.

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Paul leaped over the rim onto the thin sand at the top of the mound and pressing his heels together jumped back and forth mocking the movement of a slalom skier posting his poles, and Stan followed him at least until they reached the heavy shale, repeating his whoops with their boots ankle deep in the granular dust and the crisp air breaking through their jeans but chilling only the surface as they coursed the outer body of the mountain like new blood under new skin, Paul laughing as they kept moving till he reached the base, and Stan in steady movement working his way through the rocks. Stan stopped for a moment to shift his clothing and looked down at Paul and saw him as he dropped the pack and pulled out the water, turning to the plain again, taking a long drink and spitting a portion at his feet. It was an odd image out of so many to stick in his brain after Paul died, like the ghost pain from an amputated limb or some random trace from a film scene that marked his memory but seemed in no way an emblem of its meaning. More

often he thought about the outer contours of the figures drawn from Paul's imagining, his sharp greens and blues, his use of light, the blinding textures lifting from the cold canvas of his thinking. No calling back to events could win free a purpose for his dying, but that was where the words and the notes blended and the questions had to end, and for Stan to leave off questioning was like stilling the grains of dust that float on the surface of the eye. There would be moments, though – stillness, reverie – in the thought of the choir and the slow rhapsody of Evensong, in the voices and the notes and the words discordant but joining finally in the columns and rising archways, among the frescoes of martyrs and saints. It was a beauty better rendered because he couldn't grasp the order of its making. He began again down the slope with the blades of shale now hard near the floor and the valley in view like a baroque textile with the folds of images still clear. Stan arrived at the base of the hill. He took the pack from the ground and lifted it onto his back. Paul handed him the water, and they made their way slowly through the pines.

ALLEGRA BLAKE has recently published poems in *FreeFall*, *Blue Unicorn* and *Ibbetson Street*. She teaches creative writing at Central Michigan University.

Allegra Blake / **Four Poems**

Wheels on Fire

We could be in Kansas, baby,
 at night fall, the foothills, jayhawkin' it all the way to Emporia.
 Fireflies, jack of hearts, gypsy drunk
 but now with a Visa and better ride.

Adorable me, because I traveled light,
 always the chance you'd wake
 to an empty seat, and three states behind.

Because I was a true believer, a straight rocket
 of downy-legged love.

You found me in Lawrence, in Topeka, and then,
 man, you were persistent;
 mapped me to a hair's breadth, to a lark's song.

Photo: Cabin, January 7, 1996

Flames shoot past the sashes
 of the bedroom windows;
 the yews, much taller, frame them
 in greeny black. This is the house

where we once lived, bungalow that *Burns to Ground*
 in Sub-Zero Temps. There is a salvaged
 stroller at the edge of the print,
 nestled in the poplars, childless

in two feet of snow. How many times
 did we torch this place?
 Passion without issue. Issue
 without passion. Cursing

a starless night.
 The whole of us
 is cremated and
 reconstituted into a single sentence:

The small, gray one-story home was gutted.
 Like the bluegill I caught out back,
 their shucked scales littering the stone stoop,
 fresh wet petals.

Wolfgang Jefferson Layheart

Here is your Cat-in-The-Hat chew toy
donuts and more donuts,
Here are the torn Adidas
you ripped off a prowler – you took same liberty
with an exceptionally cruel 14 year-old boy
who buried a pellet beneath your skin, so
Here is my warrant for “Harboring a Dangerous Dog.”
Here are your perennial sleek-black sheddings,
three bags full.
Here is the tar-pit of sentimentality
and your nonchalant side-step from its embrace.
Here is my inability to emulate your good example.
Here are the dozens of neon-hued tennis balls
you buried, pushing up pink and green painted daisies.
Here is the softball-sized knot of cells
pushing your stomach into your throat.
Here is my gratitude – a needle full
of rabbit-pantings from beneath our lilac bush.

I'd like to think that I think in prognostications

but the holes in my universe are crammed
with inner-tubes and empty Coppertone bottles,
bad homegrown, and rueful panting, Oh man.
What was I thinking! Not thinking myself
a holy rolling ghost-child bopping to AM radio,
three on the tree, such a great second gear,
burning my way through my fly-over state.

Professional development? You're witnessing
it baby, bubbled blue tank top, clopping Dr. Scholls,
hair tied with a garbage bag twist. Firing up
the Impala with a screwdriver, bypassing
the dead solenoid – ain't that a grand
metaphor for what followed me home.
Be real: home followed me home
no matter how hard or long I drove.

LORRAINE M. LOPEZ, author of *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories*, has published stories in *Prairie Schooner*, *Once Upon a Cuento*, *Latino Boom*, and *The Mammoth Anthology*. Her second book, *Call Me Henri*, is forthcoming from Curbstone Press in 2006. She is an Assistant Professor at Vanderbilt University.

The Flood

Lorraine M. López

“AUNTIE,” ROXANNE says to Lydia in her piercing four-year-old way, the volume of it drawing stares from elderly white men seated near the storefront window. “Auntie, let’s sit here.” She juts a thumb at the table closest to the seniors. “Okay, Auntie?”

The bakery is capacious and empty except for the old men, the little girl, and Lydia, so there’s no reason to take a table near theirs, but Roxanne *likes* people. Already, she’s grinning at a gaunt oldster who glares back through thick, distorting lenses that make his eyes seem watery, strange as the orbs of a nocturnal creature surprised by light.

“Hi, my name is Roxanne,” she says. “What’s yours?”

Lydia hopes he won’t encourage Roxanne, who will likely belly up for a handshake. Luckily, the old man returns to his Danish and Styrofoam cup of coffee.

“Roxanne,” Lydia whispers. “Why don’t we sit toward the back? There’s plenty of room.” The bakery’s scuffed wooden floors extend back into a deli area that’s not yet open for business, but the many empty tables and chairs are invitingly private and offer the opportunity to admire decorative ceramic pigs, trophies, ribbons, and framed black and white photographs of the founding bakers and their employees.

“You don’t like this table?” The girl’s brown eyes, wide and shiny, threaten to brim. “I picked it out just for *you*, Auntie.” So this is another offering. The morning has been full of these – gestures and found objects that Roxanne has presented as tokens of affection – and Lydia cannot refuse too many, especially since she is not really Roxanne’s aunt. She’s a cousin to the girl’s mother, Shirley, and has reluctantly agreed to keep Roxanne for the summer, while Shirley sorts through some legal trouble. Lydia and Shirley had been close as sisters, grow-

ing up in California. When Lydia moved to the South for graduate school several years ago, Shirley trailed after her, though they soon grew apart. The rest of their family still lives on the west coast, so Lydia's the only extended relative the little girl knows.

Lydia sinks into the chair closest to the men to create a barrier and prevent Roxanne from disturbing them too much. Roxanne climbs into the chair before the bottled apple juice and the cream puff Lydia has set out for her. "Why are those guys so white?" she asks in a stage whisper that is maybe half a decibel lower than her raucous speaking voice. Lydia's certain that even the men with hearing devices embedded in their hairy, oversized ears must have heard this.

"Shush." Against her will, Lydia glances over her shoulder. The men, seven or eight in all, *are* strikingly white from their balding pinkish pates to their glossy patent leather loafers, and in the sunshine pouring through the plate glass, they are nearly luminous, ghostly. With beaky noses and hunched shoulders, they huddle over their sweet rolls and coffee like celestial buzzards picking over paradisiacal carrion. These men provide such sharp contrast to Roxanne's dusky skin and kinky jet hair that Lydia's pupils dilate perceptibly when she turns back to their own table. "Maybe they're in a club or something." She sips her coffee, imagining they could be a church choral group getting together after services, though it's only Friday.

"Like in a team?"

"Yeah, like that." Though, it's hard to imagine what game they might play – even shuffleboard might prove too rigorous, so maybe mah-jongg or checkers? She unwraps Roxanne's straw, sliding the paper down, coiling it with care. Lydia eavesdrops on the men as she dribbles juice from the straw onto the wrapper, so Roxanne can watch it expand and stretch, writhing wormlike.

"Ooh, let *me* try." She drenches the wrapper, and puddles the tabletop.

The old men discuss Michael Jackson, the pop star, his recent acquittal, their voices edged with anger. Next, they are onto Ted Kennedy and Chappaquiddick. Now, they are fuming about divorce and the special dispensation from the Pope. Lydia can't follow the connections. Perhaps they suffer from some kind of mass senility, a rhythmic call-and-response type of shared dementia. Maybe their white polo shirts and bleached khakis are uniforms of a sort, institution wear—

"Where are we going after?" Roxanne stretches out her pointy pink tongue, reaching for a dot of whipped cream on her nose.

"Well, if anything's open, like a museum or a gift shop or something, we'll go there." Lydia glances at her watch. Though they meandered as slowly as possible along the flood wall from the hotel to the center of town, it's not much after nine. She'd noticed on the way that the Market museum doesn't open until noon, nor does the Railroad museum a little farther downriver, or upriver – how can one tell? And the Paducah Fair won't admit people until five in the afternoon.

“This sure is a lazy place,” Roxanne says, as though reading Lydia’s thoughts. She pops the last bit of cake into her mouth and sucks the dregs from the juice bottle.

“Yup.” Lydia wipes Roxanne’s sticky cheeks and fingers with a damp napkin. “They’re in no big hurry to open up.” Not for the first time, Lydia questions the wisdom of this trip. The plan had spawned from a confluence of lucky coincidences: Roxanne’s day camp was closed half the week because of a Jewish holiday, an advertisement for the fair appeared in the Sunday paper, and Mateo, the man Lydia is dating, had a few days of vacation to use up before the end of the fiscal year. (Lydia, a comparative linguistics professor, has just finished a research project, so she has the entire summer free.) But then, they’d argued – Lydia and Mateo – over something as trivial as song lyrics, and he was consequently uninvited, though the hotel room had been reserved, the car fueled, bags packed, and Roxanne primed, raring to go to the fair in Kentucky. “Stupid ad didn’t mention the fair doesn’t open until five,” Lydia says under her breath. Now they’ll have to spend another night in the damp, smoky hotel beside the river.

“Stupid ad,” Roxanne echoes. She’s at her best in the morning, Lydia’s noticed. The little girl’s agreeable personality early in the day betrays no hint of her intractable, mercurial, and at times, demonic afternoon self.

“Hey,” says Lydia, as she gathers the napkins, plate, and empty juice bottle, “want to have a look at those pictures over there?”

They examine the trophies first – Roxanne calls them “trophy-ohs” – tall and ornate, but tarnished and fuzzed with dust – before moving onto the grinning ceramic pigs. Then, they stand before the wall of photos: row upon row of grim men and women fixed in poses suggesting stoicism and industry, their faces chiseled, Lydia supposes, by hard-scrabble Appalachian living, against the backdrop of this same cavernous bakery.

“Him, him, her, and him,” Roxanne says, putting a smudgy fingertip to the glass.

“Don’t touch.”

“Her, him, him, and him,” she continues, obediently pointing from a distance now, “him and him and him, too.”

“What?” Lydia asks. “What about them?”

“Them too.” She waves a hand at another photo, a group shot. “All of them, every one of them, *dead*, right, Auntie? *All dead*.”

“I suppose so.” Lydia reads the dates under the frames. If the people in the pictures Roxanne’d pointed out had lived, they’d be well over a hundred years old.

Roxanne moves along the wall, straining to stand on her tiptoes, jabbing a finger at people in the photos she passes. “Dead and dead and dead and *dead!*”

The old men near the window raise their heads and lift their collective gaze, as though the child has called them to attention.

The River Heritage Museum is the first tourist place to open. Just after ten, Lydia pulls open the heavy door for Roxanne, grateful for the air-conditioned gust that whooshes over them. She digs a wilted bill from her pocket to pay the sharp-featured woman at the register. “Two please – one child.”

The woman, wearing a badge that identifies her as a docent, peers at them over the top of her glasses, likely curious about the relationship between the fair-skinned Lydia and the biracial child. “Your momma and you are going to have a great old time at this museum,” she says, her voice a twanging nasal drawl.

“*She’s* not my momma,” Roxanne says, dimples deepening. “My momma got put in jail. *She’s* my auntie.”

“Oh, my.” The docent looks startled. “Well, you two enjoy the museum.” She goes on to explain to Lydia that Roxanne can press buttons at various installations to summon steamboat music and taped narration and trigger mechanized movement from the displays.

Warily, Lydia and Roxanne approach the first exhibit: a model steamboat encased in glass. Roxanne depresses a button near the glass and the paddle blades churn, a flashing red lamp revolves above the bow. Lydia pushes another button, and the music starts up. Roxanne slips into a nimble jig, and Lydia takes her hand, joins her. Just as she’s twirling the little girl, a redheaded man, carrying a plunger and wearing a disgusted look on his face, steps into the room. He wears an orange jumpsuit bearing stenciled block letters across the back: *Property of Kentucky State Penitentiary*. Without a word, he passes the dancing pair on his way toward the back.

Lydia leads Roxanne into a side-room exhibit. Together they stand in the dark staring at what appears to be an extraordinarily thick table top that is tilted toward them. Roxanne punches a button on the railing separating them from the table top. Thunder rumbles and flashes of light illuminate the display – a relief map of the river area. A tape-recorded narrator warns about the river’s strength and fury: *the power to sustain life and ... to destroy it!* Water sprays onto the map from unseen ceiling jets, slicking the model riverbanks before they fill and then spill over, dripping noisily into a drain below. Another thunder-clap reverberates, and Lydia realizes that she and Roxanne are holding hands, the child’s grip so fierce that Lydia’s fingertips grow chilled and numb.

By the time they head back to the hotel, Lydia’s head swims from the intense heat, and her stomach rocks queasily. The optical effect of multiple mural sections along the river wall contributes to this touch of seasickness, the scene scrolling out, expanding with each step she

takes, and then winding away like a slowly drawn curtain. Roxanne shields her head with her brown arms as she pauses before images of horse-drawn carriages, women in long skirts, bare-chested natives gutting a doe. The past must seem a distant planet to her, Lydia thinks, these strangely-garbed figures, with their outdated contraptions and tools, as alien and incomprehensible as extraterrestrials. “Who’s that?” Roxanne tilts her chin at a flabby-faced man in a black suit painted on the penultimate panel.

“That’s Alben Barkley,” Lydia says, reading the legend below the mural. “Served under Harry S. Truman as vice president and was known as the ‘Veep.’” The muralist has rendered this favorite son as a humorless sort, his eyes narrowed and lips compressed in distaste.

“Veep?” Roxanne said. “What’s a ‘veep’?”

“It’s short for vice president. Says here, ‘he coined the term “New Deal” and assisted FDR in reform of social—”

“I’m too thirsty and hot.”

“We’re almost there.” Lydia’s mouth is also dry. She peeks around the wall that ends just before the hotel’s vast parking lot and looks out to the green-gray river for relief. The coal barge that blocked their view that morning has inched away from the hotel, so that now it’s about to draw up alongside the river wall. It would drive her insane to travel on such a lumbering vessel, but the crew members in their orange life vests had waved in a jaunty, carefree way passing them earlier that morning, as if they were cruising by on a yacht. “We’ll have lunch in the hotel, and we can drink whatever we want.” Except a *real* drink, she thinks, which the family restaurant won’t serve, craving an icy mug of beer – nothing better to settle her stomach.

“But I’m thirsty *now*.” Roxanne’s voice ratchets up a decibel or two.

“Let’s get moving then.” Lydia reaches for her hand, but Roxanne jerks free.

“I *said* I’m too hot. I can’t walk no more!”

Lydia checks her watch – too early for a tantrum. “We’re here, the hotel is there.” She points at the building shimmering in the distance, and she wonders at the delusional optimism that prompted contractors to pave the equivalent of a football field for hotel parking. “What do you want me to do?”

“Just go get me a drink, some lemonade or ice cream.” Roxanne’s dark face is shiny with perspiration, but her full lips are moist and her eyes clear – no signs of dehydration or sunstroke.

“I can’t do that. I can’t leave you here while I get you a drink.” Lydia hates to scare the little girl, but the steamy heat is a bit much for her too. “What if someone came along and tried to take you?”

Roxanne shakes her head. “Nah-ah, nobody won’t take me.”

No doubt, she’s right. Clearly, it’s too hot for kidnapping. “Come on, I’m not leaving you, so let’s go. You can drink all you want at the

hotel. Plus, it's cool there. And the longer we stay out here, the hotter it'll get."

"I can't walk no more." Roxanne folds her arms over her chest. At an impasse, they stand, sniffing the warm fishy breath of the river and glaring now at the last panel, the muralist's representation of the 1937 flood – the pastel blue water submerging light posts, storefronts, treetops. Lydia wipes her brow, counts under her breath. Somehow the barge has chugged past them, heading up, or down, river at a good clip now.

"Carry me," Roxanne says. In the several weeks Lydia's kept her, the girl has filled out. She often eats more than Lydia, and the rigors of the day camp that offers swimming twice daily and sports activities in between have added muscle mass to her large-boned frame. Last doctor visit, a few weeks ago, she weighed fifty-six pounds, a lot for a preschooler, but she's tall, a head taller than the next tallest child in her age-group at the camp. "I can't go no more. I can't take another step."

Just the idea of lugging Roxanne – half Lydia's own body weight – to the hotel in this smothering heat causes the blood to hammer in Lydia's ears. "If you're too weak to walk, oh, well, I guess we can't go swimming later," she says in a mock-patient voice. "Too bad about that."

Roxanne screws up her face and emits a high keening howl that rends the torpid riverbank like a siren's wail. This she follows with such amplified squalling that Lydia panics, fearing some well-meaning person will overhear it and report her as a child abuser. She lifts the girl onto her hip. If she favors the side bearing Roxanne's weight, maybe she can limp most of the distance to the hotel.

As the hotel's red awning draws into sight, Roxanne's weeping subsides into phlegm-clotted hiccoughs. Finally, she grows silent and then struggles to get free. "*Stop*, let me down." Roxanne scrambles out of Lydia's arms and races to pick up a stone, a smooth brown oval streaked with a pale watermark. "Here." She thrusts it at Lydia. "This is for you," she says sweetly. "I picked it out just for you."

Lydia raises an eyebrow, but she holds the stone to the sun, admiring its shape and deep cocoa color. "This stone is perfect." She drops it into the pocket that holds five others, a greenish penny, and a ragweed bloom. Lydia draws the line at feathers, the nasty, germly things. "I have enough stones for now," she says when she notices Roxanne spying a glinting chunk of granite near a beer bottle. "*Plenty* of stones, in fact."

"I think you need one more," Roxanne says.

"Well, maybe *that* one." Lydia indicates a small bit of quartz near the door to the lobby. "That white one and that's it."

At the buffet counter in the dim hotel restaurant, Lydia probes a piece of fried chicken with the serving tongs, making a rapping sound. “Why, that’s petrified.”

“What’s petrified?” Roxanne asks.

“Really old wood, so old it turns to stone,” Lydia says absently. “It also means being scared, super-duper scared.” She passes on the chicken for the macaroni and cheese – burnt around the edges of the pan, but presumably chewable – and butter-drenched green beans. “We’ve got to find somewhere else to eat.”

Roxanne slides her tray along the counter. Hoisted on tiptoes, she points out macaroni and cheese, green beans, and something called “sweet potato soufflé” for Lydia to scoop onto her plate.

“Just take what you can eat, dearie,” warns the woman carving the roast beef, when Roxanne pushes forward her tray for a slice.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Lydia tells her. “She can handle it.”

“I got good appetite.” Roxanne points at her stomach. “Lots of rooms.”

Roxanne, of course, opts to sit as close as possible to the only other diners in the place, a professional group, suit-wearing men and women in the middle of a luncheon meeting. While Roxanne tucks into her food, Lydia listens in, soon surmising they are lawyers discussing casework. One of them, an attractive fair-haired man catches Lydia’s eye and smiles. After this, she steals glances at him when he’s not looking. Despite his ruddy face and pushed-in nose, he strikes her as gilt-edged, even glittery, from his silvery blond hair and his shiny yellow tie to his watchband and his sand-colored loafers. If she had been in the restaurant by herself, she would wait out their meeting and contrive a reason to speak to him. Maybe they would make plans to meet for a drink later.

“Pass me the honey,” Roxanne says, but reaches across the table, helping herself.

“Please don’t pour that on your meat.”

“Why not? It’s good.”

“Don’t.”

“We handle a *lot* of methamphetamine cases,” the blond man is saying to his companions, and Lydia pricks up her ears. She freezes, her forkful of limp green beans suspended between her plate and her mouth. He shakes his gilded head. “You see a meth user and you know you’re looking at a seven-year death sentence.”

“Auntie, what’s wrong?” Roxanne asks. “What happened?”

“Nothing, eat your food.” Lydia drops the fork, pushes her plate away, wishing she could order a vodka and tonic at this family-style restaurant.

As luck has it, Lydia encounters the good-looking lawyer, the golden boy, as she's come to think of him, again in the elevator. After she settles Roxanne down for a nap, she's taken her swimsuit and Roxanne's to the guest laundry to tumble in the dryer. Despite hanging all night to dry, both suits are still clammy, and they smell, like everything else in their room, of mildew and cigarettes, though Lydia doesn't even smoke.

"Hi, there," he says. "Going up?"

"Fourth floor."

"Okey-dokey." He grins, pushes the button. Lydia likes his voice, a low rumble that is both warm and sexy.

"I couldn't help overhearing you," Lydia says. "I'm sorry I was eavesdropping at lunch, and you said something about a seven-year death sentence."

"Yeah, meth addiction, that's what it amounts to." He looks her up and down, no doubt sizing her up against his clients, checking for symptoms of drug abuse. "Why?"

"Someone I know – a relative." Her face hot, Lydia regrets going on this way, except, of course, that she doesn't want him to think *she's* the addict, and because she needs to know if what he's said is true. "Can't some of them *kick* this thing, go into detox and quit the habit? I mean, a few do, don't they?"

"I never knew one who did. Not one."

The elevator chimes at the fourth floor and the shiny doors slide apart, but Lydia stands rooted. "I thought at first, she was on a diet. She lost a lot of weight. She looked great, you know, had all this energy."

"At first, you really can't tell a thing," he says and holds the doors open, "until the sores appear and the troubles start."

Lydia remembers now the nests of dark red pimples. "She was arrested a few months ago, she and her boyfriend. They had a lab in their garage."

"Do they need representation?" The lawyer fishes a card from his breast pocket.

Lydia shakes her head, steps out of the elevator. "We're in Tennessee. She has court-appointed counsel."

He catches her hand, presses the card into it. "Keep it. I know some lawyers in Nashville, good ones." He shrugs, winks at her. "Who knows? It might come in handy."

Ω

I can't do this, she tells herself, there's no way. A frigid swell of water slaps Lydia's thighs in the wake of Roxanne's dive. The girl's small dark head surfaces, her wild, wiry hair finally as smooth as a seal's coat. "Come on, Auntie, jump in and you won't feel the cold."

"I swam yesterday, remember?" she says. Today, the icy water feels oily, viscous with the residue of sunscreen, she imagines, and perspira-

tion, and who knows what else. And that halved sphere floating toward her, surely not a grapefruit rind!

"It's just a little old Nerf ball somebody cut in two," Roxanne tells her, again reading her thoughts. "It won't hurt you."

"I'm not really a pool person." Lydia mounts the ladder. Her swimming repertoire is limited to one stroke: a choppy dog paddle. Plus, she dislikes the water, fears having it over her head, preventing her from breathing. No, she's not a pool person, not an outdoorsy type, either, and except for managing her students and attracting the men she likes to pick up, she's not much of a people person or even a pet person, for that matter. And she's definitely not what anyone would call a kid person.

Roxanne drenches Lydia with a full-body splash that spins her off balance in surprise. She slips from the aluminum ladder and falls deep into the water before clawing and kicking her way to the surface, spluttering. "Why, you *little*—"

But Roxanne has slithered away, darting underwater like an eel. Her head pops up when she reaches the side of the pool. She wags from side to side, taunting. "You *ca-an't* catch me. You *ca-an't* catch me."

"Got that right," Lydia says, holding again to the ladder. No way can she keep up with Roxanne, who swims so well she races with the seven-year-olds at camp. Lydia knocks the water out of her ears, climbs the next rung.

"Where are you going?" Roxanne calls, her voice bouncing off the tiled walls. "Don't go, please don't go. I don't like to swim alone." In truth, the girl doesn't like to do anything alone; she's a pool person *and* a people person. "Come on, play with me. I promise I won't splash you. I *promise* I'll be good. Please don't leave!" Her voice rises with panic, and Lydia relents, releasing the ladder, tumbling backwards into the water. She forces herself to relax into it, and after sinking momentarily, she is buoyed up. "What are we going to play? What can we play that I can keep up, the way I swim?"

Roxanne wrinkles her sleek forehead. "I know," she says. "Let's play flood."

"Flood?"

"Like this." The little girl stops treading water and descends upright into the greenish pool. After she bobs to the surface, she says, "Try it."

"I don't know if I'm comfortable. . ."

Roxanne inhales deeply and disappears beneath the surface once more. When she emerges, she grins. "There's cars under there, Auntie, and buildings, and trees. You got to look!"

Lydia takes a deep breath and falls stone-like to the bottom of the pool. Water stops her ears, fills her nostrils, and she wills herself not to panic. The chlorine stings her eyes. Tangled on the grate over the drain is a child-sized pair of purple goggles. Gently, the water lofts her back to the surface. "You'll never guess who I saw down there."

"Who?" Roxanne asks.

“Alben, Alben Barkley. He’s sitting near the drain, picking on a banjo.”

“*Nah-ah*, let me see,” and she goes under again.

And this is how they spend the afternoon in Paducah: in the pool, in the flood.

Ω

Lydia compares this trip to Paducah to a form of shock therapy – the unbearable mid-day heat sharply contrasted with the icy green pool, and now, here at the fair, she feels as though she and Roxanne are like body lice, competing with hundreds of others for breathable air, deep in a foul, sweat-drenched armpit, a *smoker’s* armpit; everyone over twelve in Paducah seems to have a cigarette dangling from his or her lips.

She buys just the half sheet of tickets, so Roxanne can board a few rides, the safe rides, only those run by people who look sober and sane. (At a parking lot carnival a few weeks ago, she let Roxanne ride a child’s Ferris wheel operated by a shoeless teenager who, after starting up the machinery, slipped into a trance, while the contraption spun faster and faster without stopping until Lydia and another child’s mother yelled in his face and made him set the brake.) But before advancing on the rides, Roxanne wants to “play the games.” Lydia’s been dreading this: the child has a wickedly powerful arm and a sharp eye. In this soupy heat, she’s not keen on hauling around the stuffed animals Roxanne is sure to win. The child’s room, Lydia’s former guestroom, contains enough of this garish junk. Lydia glances skyward. The air is so dense and ion-charged, she expects a hard, thumping downpour to send them racing for the car. But the sky is motionless and the brooding clouds full and white.

Nearby, the fellow manning the milk jug pyramids asks if Roxanne might want to take a practice throw or two. Lydia shakes her head – not necessary. The little girl topples all three pyramids, one after the other, and selects a six-foot stuffed snake as her prize. At the dart booth, Roxanne punctures five balloons in a row, winning a goldfish doll as big as a calf. Next, she brings the sledge-hammer down so hard on the child-sized scale that the weighted ball sticks to the bell, won’t come down. “I never seen anything like this,” says the heavy woman who hands over a huge, inflated plastic parrot.

“Don’t you have anything smaller?” Lydia asks. By now, she can’t see much over the prizes in her arms. The car is too deep in the field parking lot for her to dash over and deposit these in the trunk.

“I *like* the parrot,” Roxanne says in her whiny voice.

“All right.” Lydia hasn’t a free hand to mop the perspiration trickling between her breasts like a trail of insects. “But no more games, got that? Ride the damn rides.”

After the rides, they come to a showdown in front of the ticket booth. Roxanne wants both another batch of tickets for more rides *and*

to be carried to the car because, again, she's worn out, too hot and too tired to take another step. Lydia threatens – in the cool voice she reserves for students who have crossed the line – to leave all the prizes behind, “right here in the dust,” if she must, again, lug Roxanne any distance. Roxanne tearfully claims to have won the prizes, “every one of them, just for *you*.” Compromise is reached, though, when they agree to not leave directly, but to walk, each on her own two feet, over to the grandstands to watch the dirt bike racing on their way out of the fair.

Though it thrills Roxanne, this kind of racing overwhelms Lydia. The explosive starter pistol and the flatulent muffler sounds hurt her ears. She sits on the hard edge of the bleacher, her hand over her mouth, as the three-wheelers shoot around the track. “I can't take this,” she says. She feels like everyone's mother – like all those boys on those deadly machines are hers, the way Roxanne is hers. “I can't do this.”

“Do what?” Roxanne asks. “You don't have to *do* anything, just watch.”

The bikes tip precariously rounding the track, and these boys are far too young. She's never had feelings like this for strangers. It's as if living with Roxanne has torn off a layer of her skin, exposing a raw sub-dermal stratum of self, tender and vulnerable as an open wound. A boy sailing around the curve loses his balance in a dusty swirl. She looks away, holds her breath.

Metal scraping metal seconds before a plosive boom thunders from the track. Spectators gasp, and Lydia shields her eyes.

“He fell off,” Roxanne says softly. “I saw him. Then the bike hit that wall.”

Lydia longs to dart across the track with the pit crews, to trail after the ambulance now bumping over the dirt ruts toward the wreck. She feels what his mother must feel – shock, confusion, the dread welling like flood waters. That she's *not* the boy's mother brings no relief. How can she ever have thought this a good compromise, a fine plan for getting Roxanne to the car? She scans the bleachers; of course, Roxanne is the only young child here. Stupid, so stupid, she tells herself, *why* don't I know any better?

Squad cars are now plowing across the track, and the next batch of racers has dismounted, taken off their helmets. They stand about talking to one another and scratching their heads. Lydia gathers up the prizes and manages a free hand to grab Roxanne's. Together they trudge toward the car, Lydia talking the whole way about accidents, mistakes, and being careful, as well as learning to be better, trying to be better. Roxanne says nothing, until she's in her car seat in back and after stopping at a package store, Lydia pulls onto an unfamiliar street, saying, “Why did I do that? I swear I don't know what I'm doing.”

And Roxanne tells her, “This is the right way. You do know what you're doing.”

That night, after Roxanne has been tucked into the double bed that she's claimed as hers for the trip and has finally fallen asleep, Lydia has her drink: a large gin mixed with clouded tap water in one of the hotel's plastic cups. She nibbles Cheetos from the family-sized bag she bought Roxanne at the package store for her "treat," while sipping her drink in the darkened room. Her fingertips grow neon orange with the salty pollen, and she thinks she ought to have bought a more nutritious snack for the child, something that didn't even occur to her until now. She tosses the handful she's just plucked back into the bag and curls it shut.

Once Roxanne is sleeping deeply, Lydia will hazard flicking on a light, and perhaps the television with the sound turned low. She leans over the child, listening to her regular breathing. In the early weeks, when Roxanne first came to stay with Lydia, she'd thrashed about at night, groaning and grinding her teeth so noisily that she woke Lydia in the next room. Those nights, she would enter the guestroom and sit at the side of the daybed, stroking the child's wooly hair until she settled into deep sleep. Now, though she snores, Roxanne sleeps soundly.

Lydia pulls the sheet over the girl's bare shoulder, thinking how odd it is that Roxanne never asks for her mother and never wonders aloud when she's going home. Surely, most children aren't this strange. But how complicated it is to handle a child, any child – the tug and pull of relentless negotiation. How wearing and limiting it is, how hobbling, and when not so tormenting, how stultifying and mundane. Somehow Lydia's sensed this all along, and she's never wanted a child. One of her girlfriends has just traveled to China – clear to China! – to adopt a baby, and another has spent a fortune on fertility treatments. To her, this is as incomprehensible as pulling strings to get into prison, angling for an eighteen-years-to-life sentence.

Lydia pours herself another drink and rummages in her purse for her cell phone. She'll call Mateo, talk to him about this. Of course, she'll have to apologize first. After she checked her e-mail on her laptop during Roxanne's nap, she'd looked up the song lyrics, and he had been right. Besides, she had been the one to make a big deal out of it.

He picks up after two rings. "Lo."

Lydia can hear syncopated cheering and horns blaring in the background. She pictures Mateo stretched out on his sofa watching a basketball game, a beer on the coffee table before him, as he reaches for the phone.

"Hey, it's me." Her voice is soft, supplicating. "Look, I'm sorry. You were right. It was a stupid fight, my fault really."

He's silent, maybe pausing for a free throw, but then he sighs, says, "It's okay. You're going through a lot. I know that."

When the syncopated roar of the crowd and applause don't resume, Lydia's grateful that he's muted the set. She takes her drink and the

phone into the bathroom, closes the door. “I don’t think I can do this, Matt.” Her throat aches saying this. “I think I should find her permanent foster care when we get back.” She blurts it out. “I can’t count on Shirley. She might never be able to take Roxanne back. Maybe my aunt can take her.” Lydia considers Shirley’s mother, Ida, who lives in Barstow, California. “I can call her, fly Roxanne out there in a few weeks.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

“Yes,” she says, and then shakes her head. “No. I don’t know. *Anybody’s* got to be better for her than I am.” She downs her drink.

“Why do you send her to that pricey camp? Why send her there when Parks and Rec has some pretty cheap programs?”

“It’s the swimming. She loves swimming. They swim twice a day.” Lydia rolls her eyes. Mateo knows well that Lydia chose the day camp at the Jewish Community Center for the two pools – indoor and outdoor – so Roxanne can swim in any weather. This is so obvious that she shouldn’t have to say it.

“You do it for her,” Mateo tells her. “You are calling me from where?”

Lydia scans the humid cubicle – the clouded mirror, the mold-peppered shower tiles, the drippy swimsuits hanging from the curtain rod as forlornly as if they’d been executed. “Paducah.”

“Ah, beautiful Paducah – you have business there?”

“You know why we’re here.” Lydia hates when he adopts this riddling savant persona with her. He’s so boringly patient and right that she’s tempted to break up with him all over again. “We came for the fair.”

“For *her*.”

“Yeah, but—”

“You do these things for her,” he says. “Do you think anyone else who can take her will do what you do for her?”

Lydia remembers visiting her aunt last summer. Ida was wearing a white cotton housecoat printed with cherries, her vein-scribbled legs propped on an ottoman as she stared at *The Young and the Restless*. She could barely lift her eyes from the screen to answer Lydia’s polite inquires about her diabetes and arthritic knee. Lydia flashes on an image of Shirley, the last time she saw her, behind a chicken-wired glass window, speaking into a black telephone.

“Do you?” Mateo asks again.

“That doesn’t mean that I *have* to keep her.”

“No,” he says. “I suppose it doesn’t.” Noises from the basketball game blare in the background, and he says she should call him when they get back in town.

The next morning, Lydia has a powerful sense of déjà vu, as once more they hike across the parking lot toward the river walk. Roxanne, again in good form, skips ahead, finding stones and dandelion heads and a rusted toy car to present Lydia as tokens of affection and accepted by her like ballast, freighting her with guilt, unworthiness, even grief. Lydia's queasiness also has returned, this time due to the gin and the Cheetos and the sleepless night. At the sight of her bloated face and puffy eyes in the bathroom mirror that morning, she'd murmured, "Alben Barkley, I presume."

But the robust Roxanne could be photographed for the cover of *Health and Fitness* magazine. Her dark legs are strong, well-muscled as she skips ahead and trots back to Lydia bearing found treasures. The girl is the forerunner of a new physical type for Lydia's family, which is comprised of gaunt, desiccated-looking men and pale, pillowy women – the lot of them short as jockeys. (Lydia, herself, is a compromise between these types, trim and curvy now, but distinctly headed toward plush flabbiness as she ages.) At a family reunion picnic, Roxanne would be a thoroughbred colt grazing among stick-like reeds and fat, waxy mushrooms. Why, she could eat them all up.

Roxanne jogs over, offering a dandelion puff. "Why are you such a slow pope?"

"For a pope, I'd say I'm moving pretty fast," she says, and Roxanne dashes off.

She's a bright girl, too, Lydia thinks, not really knowing what other four-year-olds are like. But Roxanne has an uncanny ability to read people, or at least Lydia, and to anticipate her thoughts before she speaks them. Roxanne also has a sharp sense of direction, and she's observant and shrewd. Yes, Lydia tells herself, the kid knows which side her bread is buttered on. Roxanne would do fine for herself wherever she went. Isn't she thriving now under Lydia's uncertain, inexperienced care?

"Close your eyes." Roxanne reappears, hands behind her back and dancing on one foot, then the other. "I got something really good here."

Lydia screws her eyes shut, smiling. "What is it?"

"Hold out your hands."

Lydia obeys, and a stiff, fuzzy object settles in the bowl of her palms. *Not feathers!* She opens her eyes. "Ugh! What is this?" A rigor-hardened mess of pale down, leathery claws, and beak tumbles from her hands.

"Don't drop him."

"It's *dead*, a dead chick! Why would you *touch* such a thing?" Lydia wishes she'd had the presence of mind to heave it into the river. It glares up at them from the asphalt now, one beady, reptilian eye wide with disdain.

"Can't we take it to the doctor?"

“Are you out of your mind?” Lydia shakes her tingling hands, searching about for something other than the murky river in which to plunge them. “It’s *dead*.”

The girl swoops for the bird, but Lydia catches her arm, reels Roxanne – struggling, kicking, pinching, yowling now like a feral cat, and trying to bite – into her arms. “Stop it,” she says. “Just stop!” She remembers a public restroom at the edge of the next parking lot, just past the Farmer’s Market. She tightens her grip on the flailing girl and lumbers for it.

When she catches her breath in the ladies’ room, Lydia says, “There are some things we just can’t help.”

Roxanne, sitting on a counter near the sink and drumming her heels against its cabinet, glowers at her. “You don’t love me.”

Lydia pumps the soap dispenser in a frenzied way, but only hollow puffs issue from it, so she digs her fingernail for dried soap from the spigot. “I don’t always like what you do.” This sounds so weak, such an obvious evasion that she follows it up hastily with something she remembers reading in one of those childcare books she’s checked out from the library. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t love you.”

“Do you love me?” Roxanne asks, cutting to the chase.

Lydia works a feeble lather into her palms; the hot water is no more than tepid. “What do you think? You tell me.”

Ω

Calmer now, they stroll along the commemorative bricks on the way to the National Quilting Museum after again visiting the bakery. Roxanne insists Lydia read the inscriptions on the terracotta rectangles, many of these scored with couples’ names and sentimental declarations: *My Forever Love*, *The Power of Love*, *To God’s Glory*, *Little Buddies*, *How Good to Share the Path with You*, *I Love You*, *Dearest One...* Lydia mouths these in a scornful way. This kind of emotion is too facile and cheap – there’s no struggle reflected here. It’s a lie, she believes, to say only half of what’s true.

“Why do they mark the bricks like this?” Roxanne asks.

Lydia shakes her head. “No idea.”

“Is it like making a wish?”

“You know, maybe that’s it.”

As Roxanne dawdles over the bricks, examining them and sounding out the letters she recognizes, Lydia pulls her cell phone from her purse, flips it on to check for messages. One missed call – *Shirley*. She draws in a sharp breath. *Shirley’s home?* She doesn’t mention this to Roxanne, who’s trying to read the inscriptions by herself. The phone chimes in Lydia’s hand, jolting her like a live wire. She’s tempted to shut it off, disconnect the call, but Roxanne has lifted her eyes from the bricks, watching her now.

“Yes?” she says into the mouthpiece.

“Hey, Lydia, it’s Shirley. Can you believe it? They let us out on a whaddayacallit, a technicality. The cops had the *wrong* address on the warrant, so it was an illegal search kind of thing.” Shirley’s rapid-fire babbling leaves no opening for Lydia to make any reply. “Yeah, it was like unbelievable, like some kind of *movie* or crazy dream or something. Anyway, you got my baby, right? Tell her kiss-kiss-kiss. I’m coming to get her as soon as I can. But now, like, my mama had a stroke, so I got to fly to Barstow, take care of her. Problem is – no money. I hate to ask, but you know how it is, family, and all that. I got to go see her. It was a bad accident. She hit a stop sign. I mean *ran* a stop sign, hit a truck—”

Lydia turns her back on Roxanne, so she won’t hear. “You said she had a stroke.”

“Oh, yeah, a stroke too – she’s in bad shape, on a respirator. I need like three hundred – *what?*” Muffled voices rumble in the background. “I need to borrow *five* hundred dollars. Hate to ask.”

While Shirley natters on about being out of work, no money, even for groceries, and bills piling up, Lydia peers into a darkened thrift store across the street, the mannequins arranged like dancers frozen mid-step in a waltz. So, she thinks, this is the way Shirley wants it to go – Lydia keeps Roxanne as long as she sends money. And what happens when Lydia runs out of money? What’s to keep Shirley from snatching Roxanne then and placing her with the next highest bidder? As long as her cousin correctly perceives the little girl is her best resource, Lydia knows she will exploit her.

“Listen,” Lydia says, interrupting Shirley, who is now complaining about an eye infection she contracted in jail and discussing the possibility of suing the county to pay Lydia back. “I don’t have money. The best I can do is to take care of Roxanne for you until you’re on your feet. It’s not easy for me, but I’ll help out as long as I can.” She doesn’t want to push it, but can’t resist adding, “If you want to come get her, fine, just—”

“I miss her so! But right now, I can’t. I just absolutely can’t. Tell her kiss-kiss-kiss. I got to go now. I’ll call you later,” Shirley says, breathlessly, no doubt anxious to make her next begging call.

Lydia clicks the phone shut. Roxanne is bent over a brick, sounding out the syllables. “To g-g-get her...for...for – what’s that say, Auntie?”

Lydia peers down. “Ever,” she reads.

“To get her for *ever*?” Roxanne narrows her eyes.

“It’s *‘together* forever.’ That’s what it says. Come on now. Don’t you want to see those quilts?” Lydia’s relieved when the bricks give over to the street. She takes Roxanne’s hot dry hand, and they cross.

The Quilting Museum, when they reach it, is – of course – closed. Their reflection in the smoky glass made it seem, for a moment, as though another woman and child approached them from the inside, meeting them at the main entrance. “I thought that was a little girl and her mom,” Roxanne says, pointing at the glass. “But it’s just us.”

Lydia's struck by how similar their expressions are in the dark glass. Roxanne knits her brows the way Lydia does when she squints, and both of them tighten their jaws in exasperation, as Lydia reads the admission times. The place doesn't open until noon, so they resign themselves to revisiting the River Heritage Museum, the other side of the town square. They march there in silence and seriousness, as if fulfilling orders.

The same woman takes Lydia's money. "You didn't get enough of us yesterday?"

"Nope," Roxanne tells her with a smile.

As she returns the change to her billfold, Lydia rifles for the lawyer's card. She files it near her driver's license. Lydia hopes he wasn't just bragging and he can help her find someone in Nashville because what she needs now is a lawyer, a good one.

She snaps her purse shut. The floorboards groaning beneath their feet, they head directly for the side exhibit with the tabletop relief map. Roxanne takes Lydia's hand, as though this is now part of their ritual, before punching the rail button. Again, the narrator's deep voice describes the river's unpredictable power, its dangerous strength, while Lydia and Roxanne stand together in the cool shadows, holding hands and trembling, as they wait for the flood.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review*. “Ned’s Place” is the second chapter of a novel entitled *The War That Never Ends*, which traces the activities of a fictional anti-war group operating out of Nelson, B.C.

Ned’s Place

Chapter 2

Ernest Hekkanen

NED FOLSOM’S RANCH was located in the Slocan Valley between Highway 6 and the river, on eight-hundred hectares of land several miles north of Appledale. By all appearances, it was a typical niche operation specializing in organic Angus beef cattle, a herd that fluctuated between forty and sixty cows and steers at calving time in the spring. To get to the ranch one had to follow the Spur Line Road that ultimately split into two driveways. A little ways beyond the split in the gravel road was a widened turnaround where people often parked their cars in order to take advantage of a narrow strip of public land that tumbled down to the Slocan River. There, during the summer, people would gather for picnics or fishermen would toss angling lines into the slow-moving, emerald-green current below the former Burlington Northern Santa Fe railway bed. Thirty feet beyond the widened turnaround was a locked steel gate suspended above a cattle guard. Above the gate a fabricated steel sign arched high into the air between flanking rows of fir trees. The sign notified one and all that they had arrived at the Flying Circle A Ranch. Attached to the steel gate, at car hood level, was an orange sign with black lettering that read: Private Property, Keep Out. Trespassers Will be Prosecuted.

Back in the early 1970s when Ned purchased the property, it hadn’t been necessary to have a locked steel gate, but now it was an absolute must. He didn’t want all sorts of day-time picnickers, errant fishermen, hormonally-driven lovers and late-night carousers parking cars in his driveway at all hours of the day and night. It was annoying enough having to constantly repair the barbed-wire fence that people kept climbing over or crawling through. Now and then, he would find the barbed-wire

strands yanked free from the posts which held them rigidly in place, and on a half-dozen occasions he had even found the strands cut. That annoyed him – annoyed him immensely! – and so he was always on the lookout for offenders.

Ω

Corky Veysey had been monitoring Ned Folsom's comings and goings for a number of days now. Once, when Ned had pulled his one-ton flat-bed truck over to the side of Highway 6 to pick up his mail at a bank of rural boxes, Corky had pulled up behind him in his F-350 Lariat Super Duty pickup truck and had pretended to ask for directions to Slocan City. The Border collie that was sitting in the passenger seat of the flat-bed truck suddenly put its forepaws on the ledge of the open window and started half-barking, half-growling at Veysey. That had resulted in Ned looking Veysey up and down with a jaundiced eye before glancing at the license plate on the front bumper of his truck.

"Can't miss it," he had said. "Just stay on this highway. There'll be a big sign pointing down to Slocan by the lake."

"So what's it like living around here?" Corky had asked.

Ned pulled the mail out of his box and locked the door. "Why? Are you planning on moving here from Idaho?"

"Possibly."

"It's like living anywhere, I guess. You gotta love snow during the winter, though."

"Lots of it?"

"Tons."

Corky's hand had itched to pull the snub-nosed .38 out of his jacket pocket and take Ned out right then and there, but a blue LandRover had pulled up at the bank of mailboxes and the woman who got out had hailed Ned.

"Thanks for the directions," Corky had said.

"Sure thing," Ned had replied.

Ω

For nearly a dozen years, while trying to make a go of the ranch, Ned had driven a logging truck. That was back when the Burlington Northern Santa Fe was still sending trains up and down the Slocan Valley, and the spur line that paralleled the gravel road to his property had served to shunt cars over to what had been a sawmill on the east side of Highway 6, not far from where the valley backed up against the mountains. Both sawmill and railroad line had gone the way of the dodo, and since then Ned had found other ways to subsidize his ranch.

On the day when things went so badly sideways, it had been drizzling most of the morning – lightly but persistently. Around eleven o'clock, the overcast sky began to break up and rays of sunshine started

slanting down through torn lesions in the clouds. Ned's clothes were damp from riding his tractor around the sloping field he had cleared of timber over twenty-five years ago, but being damp, cold or roasted by the sun was just part of being a rancher, and Ned loved ranching. He was getting the far field ready for seeding with alfalfa. He had passed with the tiller along the lower section of the field near the former railway line and was now climbing the slope toward the buffering growth of trees between the field and Highway 6, when, all of a sudden, his Border collie, Sam, came running across the furrowed earth, yapping in that energetic, side-curling way which informed Ned that they had an unexpected visitor.

"Oh, yeah. Who is it, Sammy?"

Ned eased off on the tractor's accelerator, simultaneously sweeping his gaze around the forested periphery of the ranch. While he wasn't able to pick out any unusual movements or telltale figures stalking the woods, he didn't doubt for a moment Sam's second sense about such things.

"Thanks, buddy. Come on up. You earned your ticket to ride."

The Border collie shot like a black-and-white, catapulted hairball up onto the tractor and sat panting next to Ned's seat. Ned flipped the lever that hydraulically raised the tiller's blades and proceeded to roll the tractor up to the gate in the fenced field. From there he rumbled along the access lane to the side yard outside the picket fence near the house, where, on each side of the gate, his wife Brenda had taken such pains to cultivate a pair of rose bushes now terribly overgrown by morning glory.

Back before Brenda was crippled by multiple sclerosis, they had loved sitting on the wraparound porch of the house overlooking the field that sloped toward the former railway line. Sometimes during the evening, Ned would pick out a tune on his guitar and she would make it come to life with her sonorous singing voice. His wife had died some twelve years before, leaving him with a son to raise. Zack was now taking a microbiology degree at McGill University, something Ned was quite proud of, given his own working-class background and how hard he had had to scramble to eek out a living after arriving in Canada as a deserter from the U.S. Marines.

Ω

Corky Veysey was a tautly coiled spring of a man with dark, curly hair and a five-o'clock shadow that appeared on his face at 2 p.m. every day. Like his friend Art Hanson, he was a member of the Lewis & Clark Militia that conducted night maneuvers once a month not far from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. He was also a member of the Minute Men, a loose-knit organization that was pressuring the U.S. government to start conducting surveillance along the border with Canada. To provide

an example for the Feds, the Minute Men had started the surveillance themselves.

Around the time when the anti-war monument made such a big splash on Fox News, he and Art got to talking beside Veysey's air-tight stove one very cold November evening prior to their fellow militia members showing up for night maneuvers. Art had related to him that he had known one of the culprits promoting the draft-dodger monument. As conversations between them were wont to do, the two Minute Men started tossing around plans in a jazzy, extemporaneous manner. One plan had to do with making an excursion up into Canada to engage in a preemptive strike that would teach the cowardly monument-builders a lesson they wouldn't soon forget. Corky Veysey was fifteen years younger than Art Hanson and looked up to him because Art had come back a decorated soldier from the Vietnam War. The only uniform Corky had ever worn was the uniform of the Lewis & Clark Militia, and while it was an honor to wear that uniform, putting it on often smacked of the type of play-acting engaged in by boys.

A week later, Art Hanson had phoned him to say, "I think we should make our preemptive strike a serious reality, Cork. Want to join up?"

"Sure."

"Meet me at my store after I close for the day and we'll go over what I have in mind."

Ω

On the day that Corky determined once and for all to take out his intended target, he was a little jumpy, a little nervous, because this was the real thing rather than a pretend maneuver. Originally he had intended to do the job at night, by sneaking up on the house and shooting Ned through a lit-up window. However, he quickly discovered that the turnaround on the Spur Line Road was used as a lovers' lane by young people in the area, which he became aware of quite inadvertently, after driving his F-350 Lariat Super Duty pickup truck up to the gate of the Flying Circle A Ranch and smearing blackout greasepaint on his face in preparation for conducting his assault on the farmhouse. Soon after, a car had driven up behind his Lariat and spun around at the widened turnaround and Veysey, with a sense of sudden alarm, had scrambled back into the cab of his truck and driven off.

Veysey now planned on waiting until Ned Folsom broke for lunch. Veysey would position himself in the forest behind the barn on the uphill side of the house. At the right moment, when Ned was sitting down to soup or whatever he ate at lunchtime, Veysey would remove himself from his hiding place and head down the hill toward the house. The dog would start barking, Ned would appear on the porch to see what was going on, and Veysey would shoot him at fairly close range.

His plan was simple enough, and as Art Hanson had cautioned him: “The simpler you make your plan the more likely it’ll succeed.”

“Gotchya.”

Art Hanson had observed him with his *I’ve-seen-combat* stare. “Are you sure you’re up for this, Cork?”

“Absolutely,” he said, despite the squeamish anxiety in his stomach.

“Remember, our advantage in this turkey shoot is the fact that we *know* they’re gonna be taken out. That’ll come as a last-minute surprise to them.”

Ω

After stopping the tractor beside the house, Ned hauled his stiff body down to the ground and whistled his usual command for Sam to leap into his arms. He lowered Sam gently to the ground and then made a show of stretching the kinks out of his limbs while slowly pivoting around to see if he could spot what was causing Sam so much aggravation. He said in a loud voice, “Ain’t nothing but a deer, Sam. Come on into the house.” However, Ned knew whatever was moving in the woods wasn’t a deer. A deer wouldn’t move so heavy-footed through the bush. Nor was it a bear. A bear wouldn’t push through salal bushes like it was trying to perform a ballet.

After making a show of going into the house, Ned latched the screen door behind him and the dog. However, to make things look unpremeditated, he left the wooden door with the glass pane wide open so whoever sneaked up could see directly into the kitchen.

“You stay here, Sam. Don’t let anybody in.”

To subsidize the cattle ranch, Ned had started growing marijuana in a big way back in the ’80s, shortly after the Burlington Northern railway pulled up its tracks. His first crops had been small-scale, tentative ones grown in the open among the feed corn he stored in his silo for winter feeding. Later, when he started growing serious cash crops, he raised it in the old Freightways trailer he had once hauled down the highway with his Kenworth. Later still, when he got into supernatural B.C. bud, he decided to proceed in a more businesslike manner. One autumn after freezing temperatures drove off the local picnickers and fishermen, he used his backhoe to dig a huge bunker underneath the barn, with a connecting tunnel to the house. The bunker’s quarter-inch steel roof was held up by supporting I-beams and was covered with three feet of hard-packed earth. Where Elk Creek flowed through his property down to the Slocan River he installed a small-scale, power-generating plant that produced enough electricity to keep the grow lights in the bunker burning, undetected, twenty-four hours a day.

Ned’s grow operation was another reason why he was always on the lookout for trespassers. On the day in question, when things started to go badly sideways, Ned was certain it had to do with someone who had sniffed out his underground grow-op. He thought it might be a narc.

However, if that was the case, it wouldn't be just one officer circling down through the woods toward the house; it'd be an entire assault force.

Ω

Corky Veysey thought he was being pretty stealthy. From his position in the undergrowth he had watched Ned pull his tractor into the yard beside the house. He had watched the yappy black-and-white dog spring from the tractor into Ned's arms. Ned had lowered the dog to the ground like it was a grandchild. Then Ned had stretched his back and gone into the house.

So far so good, Corky had reasoned. His nervous anticipation was like a caffeine-laced ball of earthworms writhing in his stomach. All the night maneuvers, target shooting and hunting he had done with Art Hanson hadn't fully prepared him for this moment. Unlike Art, he'd been raised in the suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio. A peripatetic drifter for much of his forty-three years, he had been in and out of jobs as frequently as some people changed their clothes. Always on the lookout for a place where people thought the same way he did, he had traveled to Idaho to seek out a survivalist group of some kind. There he would wait, heavily armed, for all hell to break loose in America, when men like himself would naturally rise to the surface to bring law and order back to the country.

One of the first places Corky frequented in Coeur d'Alene, intending to simply make some casual inquiries and nothing more, was Art Hanson's All-Seasons Sports Store and Gun Shop. Art told him to come back to the store after closing time at 7 p.m. and they would have a little talk. Later that evening Corky had left by the back door of the shop, with a big grin on his face, knowing he had hit a Bingo with his first try.

Ω

Because his father had been a marine during the Second World War, Ned had enlisted as a marine right after graduating from high school in 1964. He had been a gung-ho patriot back then, a kid with crew-cut hair who had participated in the state wrestling finals in the 167-pound division. A single tour of duty in Vietnam had cured him of his patriotism. The sense of duty and honor instilled in him by the marines had gone out the window for good after seeing, close-up, what his country expected him to do on the field of battle. Now whenever anybody asked him why he had chosen to desert while recovering from wounds on American soil, all he would say is: "You've heard about the My Lai Massacre? About Lieut. Calley? Well, that was nothing, my friend." One of his worst memories was of entering a Vietnamese village that had been carpet-bombed by B-52s and seeing body parts of women,

children and old men strewn like a badly executed human harvest in the churned-up, carter-ridden earth. It was amazing, absolutely amazing, how quickly flies performed their work. The sight of maggots and the stench of putrefying flesh were sure to remain with him until he was cold in his grave; the mere thought of it was enough to make him physically ill.

Ω

Corky waited five minutes before making his way down through the woods toward the house. He darted from one tree to another in the raindrop-laced forest, in a zigzag manner that led to the rear of the barn. Inside the house, he heard the Border collie begin to yap. He peeked around the corner of the barn, breathing heavily, waiting for his heart to calm down, thinking he'd next take cover behind the tractor that Ned had parked beside the gate in the picket fence.

By that time Ned had gone downstairs to the basement. He swung the solid bank of shelves that contained old paint cans and plastic containers full of nails back on its broad steel hinges, unlocked the steel door behind it, and pulled the paint shelves back into place. Immediately inside the tunnel was an antechamber equipped with a rack of rifles and a crossbow. He grabbed the crossbow and its accompanying quiver full of hunting arrows and hurried down the lighted tunnel to where it opened into a massive bunker. The bunker was brightly lit with grow lamps. The warmth and humidity was reminiscent of a tropical jungle, but was redolent of the scent of growing marijuana. Ned's current crop of supernatural B.C. bud was nearly waist high. At the far back corner of the bunker, a ladder ascended the inside of a breathing chute up to the loft of the barn, where the chute was vented through louvers on the forest side of the building. The breathing chute was disguised by bails of hay permanently stacked inside the barn. At the top of the chute, a trapdoor let out onto the loft.

Back when Ned had built the breathing chute, he had been a lot slimmer than he was now at the age of sixty-one, and in better shape, too. He realized as he was climbing the ladder that he should've planned on accommodating his larger girth, as it was a pretty tight squeeze getting both himself and the crossbow up the damn thing without also clattering against the wooden sides. When he got to the top he flipped the trap door back onto the loose hay in the loft and climbed out, breathless from all the exertion. Then, suddenly, he was gripped by a sneeze that he had to stifle in the crook of his elbow. Down below in the barn, a cow that was going to have some trouble calving stirred its hooves on the barn floor and moored in alarm at the clatter.

Ω

While standing at the rear corner of the barn, deciding when to skedaddle over to the tractor beside the house, Corky Veysey heard some clattering in the barn, but decided, after hearing it a second time, that it must have been produced by a cow, because he heard some mooing come from that direction, too. Corky dragged the sleeve of his jacket across his sweaty forehead, waiting for his legs to tell him when to dash toward the tractor. He had just started to run in that direction when he heard the screen door clatter against the jamb of the house and threw himself facedown on the ground about twelve feet from the tractor, his heart pounding in his chest. The Border collie was barking like mad. However, from Corky's vantage point on the ground, where he had a clear view under the tractor, he couldn't see anybody's feet step out onto the porch, and so he got to his feet and, stooped at the waist, finished crossing the yard over to the tractor, where he hid behind the large rear tire, breathing in the scent of recently turned earth that clung to the tread. Pulling the snub-nosed .38 out of the pocket of his windbreaker, he poked his head up over the rear fender of the tractor and observed the door to the house. Just inside the door, the Border collie had its front paws up on the screen and was barking its head off. That was when it occurred to Corky that something was wrong. Surely, the dog's excited barking would have brought its owner to the door to find out what was going on. That's when Corky heard what sounded like rusty hinges grating in back of him . . .

Ω

Upon glancing through the large peephole in the second-storey door of the barn, Ned realized from the shock of dark, curly hair on the guy's head that he had seen the fellow twice before – once at the side of Highway 6 when he had stopped to pick up his mail and again at a local coffee outlet that a neighbor's son had started not far from Appledale, a little place called The Udderly Wonderful Latte Joint. A large piece of plywood cut in the shape of a cappuccino-swilling cow replete with sunglasses said: "Come on in, get a buzz on." The curly-haired guy had been standing at the open window of the cappuccino outlet. After paying for his java he had walked back to his Super-Duty Lariat pickup truck and leaned against the right front fender. There he casually sipped at his stainless steel travel mug while watching Ned order a double-strength Americano and walk it back to his flatbed truck. As Ned was driving out of the gravel parking lot, the guy had given him a salute accompanied by a knife-thin smile, and that had caused Ned to look at him twice.

Ned knew he wouldn't have a lot of time once the loft doors were shoved wide open. He was a good shot with the crossbow. During the off-season he used it to stock his deep freeze with the occasional deer. Indeed, he preferred using the crossbow to using his rifles, even during hunting season. Ned cocked the crossbow and fed an arrow into the

slot. He quietly unlatched the loft doors and, with the toe of his right work boot, shoved them open. The guy down by the tractor heard the noise, but obviously thought it had come from near the main entrance to the barn, where, of course, he didn't see anything. Then he looked up at the door to the loft. When he saw Ned standing fully visible with the crossbow aimed at him, he inadvertently exposed the fleshy part of his neck just above his collar bones, and that was it. The arrow found its mark, but not before the snub-nosed .38 had cracked the silence.

"Shee-it," Ned swore, watching the man twitch on the ground. "Have I ever got a mess on my hands."

Ned left the crossbow lying in the loft and went down to examine the guy who, by that time, was quite dead. The arrow had gone straight through his neck so the tip was sticking out the other side. Ned broke off the shaft of the arrow, rolled him over in the dirt and checked to see if he had a billfold in his back pocket. There, along with a driver's license, he found membership cards to the National Rifle Association, the Idaho Minute Men and the Lewis & Clark Militia, leaving little doubt in Ned's mind what the fellow was doing in Canada. Then the telephone started ringing. The telephone was hooked up to a loud ringer under the roof of the farmhouse porch so it could be heard from the barn. Rather than responding to the ringing, he knelt beside the body, rolled it over and dug around in the front pockets to see if he could find a car key. He found a whole ring of keys.

Pushing himself to his feet, Ned looked to see if anyone had appeared at the locked steel gate, curious about the pistol shot. No one had.

"Fuck," he mumbled to himself. "What a way to complicate my life, you asshole."

Ned pocketed the keys and headed down the driveway toward the locked steel gate, on the lookout for anyone who might have heard the shot. Already a plan for getting rid of the body had begun to hatch in his mind.

Ω

During the next twenty minutes, Ned worked with the clarity, detachment and *otherness* he remembered from the '60s when he had fought in Vietnam. A kind of dissociation took place, as though an entity inside him was directing him and he was simply going along for the ride. If he had had to describe this state to anybody he would have called it 'going into combat mode.' He unlocked the steel gate, drove the dead guy's F-350 Lariat pickup truck onto his property and locked the gate behind him. Then he drove to the house and loaded the fellow's body into the bed of the truck. With a spade he got from the barn, he scooped up the dirt where blood had been spilled onto the driveway and pitched it onto the fellow's body. After that he pulled the truck into the barn and shut the large wooden doors.

By then, Ned decided that he needed a cup of coffee – that it was time to sit down and think things through. Because he had latched the screen door shut on the inside of the house, he had to go around to the door on the far side to let himself in. For several minutes, in order to calm himself, he stood with his hands on the rail of the wraparound porch and stared down the hill at his cattle herd. The Angus stood like black silhouettes in the field, which had greened up only three weeks ago.

“Shit, what a mess,” he muttered to himself, turning around to let himself into the house. Sam leapt up to greet him, frenetically wagging his tail. “We got a problem on our hands, Sam, old boy. Well, you don’t have one on your hands exactly, but I sure as hell do. Come on, let’s you and me have a cup of coffee. Maybe one of those store-bought Danishes, too.”

In the kitchen, Ned noticed the red light flashing on the answering machine. At first he thought he’d just ignore it. However, while the coffee was dripping through the plastic funnel on top of the glass pot, he pressed the play button and listened to the message. It was Ira Richler, the director of the Bring It Back Home Reunion. Ira’s voice sounded unflaggingly optimistic, as usual:

“First of all, I hope this message finds you in good health. Please return my call if it has. I’ve just had some rather distressing news. According to what the Nelson police told me a little while ago, some hikers ran across Brian Sorkila’s body on the railroad line that used to go through town. You know, the one up on the hillside. I don’t know how to say this, but it looks to the police like he was murdered. Because the police knew he was involved with the Reunion campaign, they came by the Kerr Building to ask me some questions. I can’t tell you how shocked I was. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Anyway, I thought I better call you. The police might want to talk to you, too. Anyway, I imagine they will,” and at that point, the answering machine cut him off.

Ned hit the erase button and headed out to the barn, where for the next forty-five minutes he worked like a well-oiled machine moving bails of hay around the barn so he could park the dead man’s truck up against the wall and surround it with the displaced bails. When that was done he used a rake to get rid of the tire tracks leading to the barn and, as an afterthought, opened the large front doors of the barn and secured them with S hooks so they wouldn’t swing in the wind. He hoped that little touch would make things look a lot more normal, a lot more open.

By that time Ned was feeling tired and in need of some nourishment. He went to the house to heat up a can of mushroom and barely soup. When the soup was ready to eat he took a bowl of it out to the table on the wraparound porch, along with a plate of cheese and crackers. There he sat watching his Angus herd graze on the field nearest the entrance to his property. He had eaten about eight mouthfuls of soup, when he spotted the Jimmy halt on the far side of the gate. A little

while later, an RCMP officer came climbing over the locked steel gate, followed by a second officer. Sam bounded up onto the seat of the chair across the table from Ned and began to bark.

“Calm down, old boy. Take it easy. There’s nothing to get in a big fuss about,” he told the dog, pinching off some cheese and tossing it to him. “Just what we need, eh? A couple of Her Majesty’s right royal bloody bouncers.”

Ned continued to spoon soup into his mouth. All of a sudden, he pictured himself in Vietnam, squatting under a camouflage canvas drummed on by a tumultuous downpour, watching a buddy of his writhe in terrible, screaming pain from shrapnel wounds to his stomach. Ned had dragged him by one arm through the gumbo to the safety of the trench and had hollered for the medics. The tin cup of soup in Ned’s hands had been lukewarm and his buddy, whom the medics had given up on, had been destined to die.

Ω

Ned watched the members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police walk up the long, sweeping curve of the driveway cut into the hillside above the field where his herd was grazing. Shortly before the officers passed out of sight behind the house, one of them noticed Ned sitting on the wraparound porch and waved to him. Ned tilted his hand in salutation. Then, with the toe of his work boot, he dragged the straight-backed chair, which no longer had a back on it, over to a spot in front of him so he could cross his feet on top of it. In the chair across the table from him, the Border collie began to bark several times, his body so tense he was shaking, but each time he received an admonishing glance from Ned.

“It’s alright, Sam. They don’t mean us any harm, I don’t think.”

Ned was raising a spoonful of soup to his mouth when the RCMP officers reappeared on the other side of the house near the tractor. They came through the gate of the picket fence and lumbered toward him with their arms jutting out on either side of the hardware on their hips. Ned noticed they were wearing bulletproof vests – not a good sign, he figured.

“Howdy, fellas. What can I do for you?” Ned said, recognizing both of them.

“We’re here to see if you’ve had any unexpected visitors,” said the officer whose name was Stuart.

“You’re the first I’ve had today. In several days, actually.”

“Things are going pretty much as usual, then?”

“As far as I know,” Ned said, looking in the direction of the field he’d been plowing with the tiller. “Little too much rain to do any serious plowing, but other than that, everything’s more or less normal.”

Ned shrugged in an attempt to let the officers know just how boring things were on the ranch.

“You’re doing some work for the Bring It Back Home event, aren’t you?” Officer Stuart said.

“That’s right. I’m on the board. Why?”

“Because one of your members was shot earlier on today . . .”

“Shot?”

“Yes, shot.”

“Is he gonna pull through alright?”

“No, he’s dead,” said Officer Brad.

“Dead!” Ned let his mouth hang open. A moment elapsed, became longer. “Who the hell shot him?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” said Officer Brad. “It’s got every sign of having been a hit.”

“A hit?”

“Yeah, a hit.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because nobody heard anything. He took a half-dozen shots to the chest, and yet there weren’t any sounds, apparently. That suggests the killer was using a silencer, and that points to it having been a hit.”

“Who exactly got killed, anyway?”

“Brian Sorkila.”

“Where?”

“On the old Burlington Northern Railroad Line. Up above Nelson. He was in the habit of going for hikes up there.”

“Jesus! Why would anybody want to kill him?”

“Like I said, that’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

“You’re not suspecting me of doing something like that, I hope?”

“No, of course not. However, we’re a little concerned that whoever killed him might try to target you or one of your anti-war buddies, and so we thought we better come out here to warn you. It might be a good idea to think about moving into town, even.”

“Sorkila lived in town. That didn’t save him.”

“True,” said the officer. “That’s true enough.” He took a moment to gaze at the cattle in the field. “Fine-looking herd of cattle you’ve got there.”

“Sometimes I think they own the place,” Ned told him. “Sometimes I think all I’m doing is running a spa for them. I sure can’t be running this place for the profit.”

Ω

Ned expelled a sigh. He set his unfinished bowl of soup on the floor for Sam to finish and rocked back onto the rear legs of the chair, watching the RCMP officers climb over the locked steel gate to get to their Jimmy.

“Well, Sam, it looks like we’ve got quite a mess to clean up. I think the best thing to do is not to panic. I think that’s what’s gonna save our asses.”

For the next two days, Ned followed his normal routine. On the morning of the third day, at 3 a.m., he revved up the backhoe and headed down the hill to where he was in the habit of dumping manure from the barn. Using the bucket attachment, he moved the manure pile to one side and then, with the claw attachment, he dug a hole roughly the size and depth of the dead man's pickup truck. The following morning, again at 3 a.m., he removed the bails from around the truck, although he left several bails in the bed on top of the dead man's body, and drove the truck down to the hole. He tied one end of a rope to the front bumper of the truck and the other end to the rear of his backhoe. He gunned the backhoe as fast as it would go and the truck disappeared into the hole with a loud crash. He untied the rope, punctured all the tires on the truck and systematically crushed the cab with the scoop of the backhoe so the glass broke out of the windows. When he finished doing that, he pushed the dirt he had taken out of the hole back into it and shoved the manure pile over the freshly turned earth.

That would be the end of Corky Veysey, he thought.