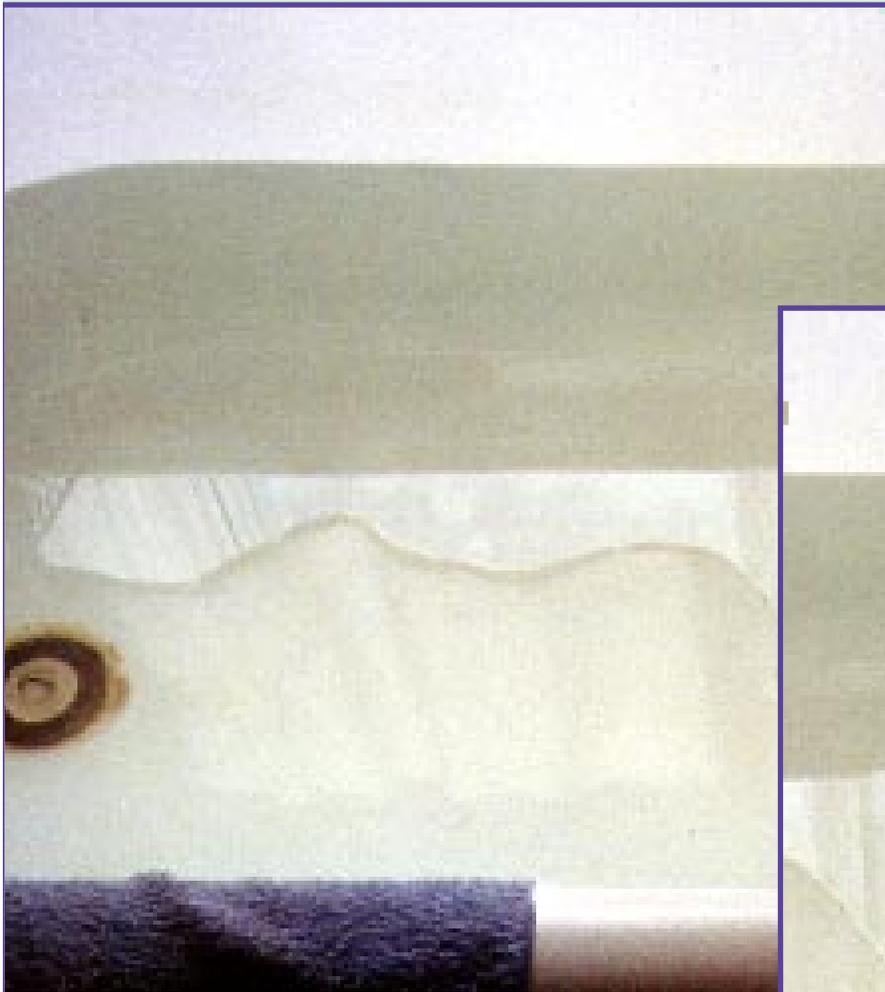


paperplates

A Magazine for *Fifty Readers*

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Vol. 3, No. 4



Claudia Graf
islands
OF
soapsuds

Poetry, fiction, reviews

Vol. 3, No 4

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PHILIP ARIMA
On a yellow

—
today is the day the numb turns to texture
a one way nap that will not attract lint
something between a flannel and the
slickness of leather ...

DANIEL JAMES WRIGHT
Retreat

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—
Tonight is the first time I've had to
draw a hard and fast line, and the
circumstances are pretty unique,
pretty extenuating.

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CLAUDIA GRAF
islands of soapsuds

—
For example, duck, if someone very special
beautiful in a particular way that appeals
were to be sharing this candlelight tonight
were to be sharing this bathhub tonight
then that would probably be romance

JOE BLADES
new fog

33

—
i walk to the bridge
but the bridge goes nowhere

there is no other side
it is all where i am

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publisher & editor

Bernard Kelly

layout & production

Perkolator {Kommunikation}
www.perkolator.com

reviews editor

Tim Conley

fiction editor

Bethany Gibson

poetry editor

Suzanne Hancock

contributing editors

Maja Bannerman, Colleen Flood,
Gil Gauvreau, Michael Kelly,
Dan Yashinsky

guiding light

Alice Kane

coordinates

paperplates
19 KENWOOD AVE
TORONTO, ONTARIO M6C 2R8
Tel: 416-651-2551
Fax: 416-651-2910
magazine@paperplates.org
http://www.paperplates.org

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submissions

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THE WORD “NEW” will soon be looking a little battered, what with the change, in one go, of a year, a decade, and even a century. (I refuse to bait the millennium crowd.) It’s a good time, in any case, for us to introduce a few changes of our own, by announcing the appointment of three *new* editors, who together will give much needed *new* life to a magazine that we began way back in 1990 (and have been beginning, it seems, over and over again ever since).

Our new *reviews editor*, Tim Conley, is a doctoral candidate at Queen’s University. His fiction, essays, and poetry have appeared in various journals in Canada and the U.S. Tim’s witty and cogent reviews have been enhancing the book pages of *paperplates* for several years, and with his support this section will grow both more comprehensive and more timely.

The name of our new *fiction editor*, Bethany Gibson, will be familiar to *paperplates* readers from our recent anthology of short stories, *Dreaming Home*, which she so very capably selected (and so skillfully introduced). Bethany’s knowledge of contemporary writing is exceptional. She has worked in Toronto as an editor, a writer, and most recently a literary agent in association with one of the city’s most prominent agencies.

Our new *poetry editor*, Suzanne Hancock, lives in Guelph, Ontario. Suzanne is the author of two books: *The Parting of Lips* and *What Morning Illuminates*, “a collection about loss, memory and reverence for sorrow and joy.” Poetry has long been an essential part of the magazine’s personality; Suzanne’s dedication, taste, and judgement will help make this link even stronger.

For contributors, this is good news indeed, as it means, among other things, the greater certainty of a prompt reply to their submissions. For readers, it means something similar, in that there will be more continuity (oh, that elusive goal of four issues a year!) and a more interesting mixture of viewpoints. (In short, it should not be impossible to remember whether you’ve “seen this issue before.”)

Finally, *paperplates* now has a domain all to itself: www.paperplates.org, where you will find not only the current and previous issues of the magazine but also the latest titles in our electronic chapbook series, *paperbytes*, and occasional news about our entirely analogue list, *paperplates books*. All related (the “org”) and all very glad, not to say deserving, of your attention.

– Bernard Kelly



letters

To the editor,

I’m a student currently residing in Halifax, and I caught the new online format of the magazine — I’m impressed. *paperplates* 3:2 was, for myself, particularly notable for Ruth

Latta’s poem (I think we’ve all been there) and Tim Conley’s review of Fetherling’s biography (I agreed with almost everything). [...] Please don’t succumb to “little magazine disease”. I think you’re vital (in 2x senses)!

Shane Neilson
Halifax, N.S.

The Arm Lady

CHILDHOOD FRIENDS probably still remember my house for the rice cakes, toast, and bulk tubs of honey and peanut butter which were our only snacks. After school, visitors groaned at the sight of our cupboards: no pop, chips or crackers, no microwaveable pizza or leftover fried chicken. We didn't even have granola bars. Ours was the palace of the super-healthy diet. To a child, that meant that our cupboards were as good as bare.

There wasn't really just one healthy diet; it changed as often as the "isms" under whose influence my parents fell. For some years macrobiotics ruled the house. I sometimes wonder whether the full-bodied acrid stench of boiling seaweed, which unflinching drove me nose-plugged from the kitchen, might still lurk, waiting to assault me in some forgotten corner of the house. During another phase we fasted on Sundays, taking in nothing but juice and water. Before that was our vegetarian period. Mountains of beans filled every plate and I began to worry about losing friends due to flatulence.

Although I can vividly recall all of these phases, hiring the *Arm Lady* was by far the most extraordinary of my parents' experiments with healthy living. According to the Arm Lady, there is no one approach to eating right. Each body can accept different foods. To find out what you can and cannot eat, all you have to do is ask. She asked by pulling on arms.

I GREW TO HAVE great faith in the seemingly supernatural powers of the

Arm Lady and held onto that faith throughout childhood; as an adult, however, I have difficulty accounting for this attachment. It is true that her methods endured both challenges I mustered against them, but these were hardly rigorous tests. I must have believed in her simply because I wanted to believe. She offered a magic and mystery that appealed to me at 13, and I desired a piece of that magic for myself; however, at the same time, I wanted the Arm Lady's powers to have all the truth of science or medicine. Perhaps this is why in my memory she wears half-glasses, judiciously perched on the tip of her nose in front of penetrating eyes. My memory even dignifies her with a doctor's lab coat. (Looked back on today, my childhood desire to believe in her may have altered my memory. Most likely she dressed as the rest of my parents' faith-healing friends did, who wore Birkenstocks, floral dresses from India, handwoven shirts from Guatemala, and burdens of earth-tone beads – no doubt from the local hemp store.)

These visions of the Arm Lady are linked in my mind with the pungent smell of the fresh cedar siding in my father's newly built study. She set up camp there, and, one by one, each member of the family plodded up the stairs to undergo examination. Like a doctor, she explained the process carefully, offered to answer any questions, and then, without further ado, began the tests. I was tall, even then, which forced her to look up at me from my father's wooden swivel chair. "Are you left- or right-handed?" she asked.

"Right." My response was brief, suiting a medical inspection.

"Let your right arm hang straight down by your side," she instructed. "Just leave it there, don't try to hold it in or fight what I am doing." She looped two of her fingers around my fore-arm and said to my body, "Give me a yes." She pulled gently on my

arm. "Give me a no," she said and pulled again. On the "yes," my arm held in by my side. On the "no" it slipped away.

Still seated, the Arm Lady began reading from a list of substances that lay on the desk. It named almost anything one could imbibe: milk, sugar, caffeine, tobacco, and dozens of other vegetables, fruits, spices, and chemicals. She called out each substance and then asked my body, with a gentle tug on my arm, what it thought. My body answered by holding my arm in or letting it go.

During her first few pulls, I was unsure how to react; by midway down the list's first column, however, I realized that this was my kind of diet. Simply by holding my arm in or letting it out I could choose what I would and wouldn't be allowed to eat. I began practising the subtle tensions required if my mind wished to intervene in what my body was telling the Arm Lady. It was no good merely stiffening the arm. That was a dead giveaway. I had to gently tighten the underarm and shoulder muscles, subtly increasing the resistance.

I was warming up for the big one, which happened somewhere down the second column, but when she finally called out: "Sugar," eagerness overtook me and I just pulled in with all my might. "No, don't resist, just relax," the Arm Lady scolded. I probably blushed a bright purple, embarrassed to be caught cheating for sugar like a five-year-old. Alcohol, tobacco, or even chocolate would have been more respectable.

I tried to compose myself. I looked through the window to our backyard. I relaxed as best I could without giving up entire control over my arm. "Sugar?" She twisted the word into a question and pulled again. My traitorous limb sailed out from my side under what seemed like no pressure at all, giving the Arm Lady a decisive

“No”. She had deftly dodged my first challenge and, satisfied with her response, for the rest of the exam I offered no opposition.

EVEN WITHOUT my mind’s influence, things went pretty well. I couldn’t take caffeine or monosodium glutamate (but I didn’t really know what they were back then) and although sugar was taboo, my body also rejected milk. That balanced things out a little.

Although both caffeine and sugar were out of the question, Coke had just developed a caffeine-free diet cola and none of the other suspect ingredients on the back of the bottle was included in the Arm Lady’s test. In my books, that meant the stuff was fine to drink. Perhaps the Arm Lady thought so, too, because on the very day of her visit my mother agreed to buy us kids two 2-litre bottles of the liquid black gold which, to our knowledge, had never before crossed the threshold of our house. I remember walking to the corner store with my brother thinking that at last the 20th century and all its luxuries had arrived at our place. Unfortunately, that was not to be; the Diet Coke turned out to be too expensive for my mother to indulge us again, and although the meals changed a little, it was still rice cakes and toast with peanut butter and honey after school.

When the whole family had been tested, the Arm Lady joined us for lunch. I can’t remember what we ate, but it must have been difficult cooking for my mother now that all of our fickle bodies were ruling the kitchen. Over a plate of whatever it was, some member of the family pointed out the tragic flaw in the system: we cannot communicate with our own bodies; we need the Arm Lady and her talented two left fingers. Although it undermined her livelihood, she told us happily enough that we could do exactly

what she had done using a pendulum.

“Hold it in your dominant hand,” she explained, standing up from the kitchen table to allow space for the chain that she grasped between her thumb and forefinger, “and let it swing back and forth. Ask it to show you a ‘yes’ and then allow it to swing into a circle. Then start again, asking for a ‘no’ this time. One will be clockwise, the other counter. Once you have established that, you can ask your question.”

“I use a pendant,” she concluded, “but you can use anything that will swing into a circle.”

That evening, I gathered together the materials needed for the pendulum that would allow me access to the Arm Lady’s magic. I attached an oval, hard plastic keychain – advertising an automotive repair company – to a long piece of string and in the privacy of my room tested out a couple of questions. Satisfied with its answers, I began carrying the keychain around with me, awaiting the time that my body would have something important to say. Unfortunately, I mixed up the Arm Lady’s instructions and decided that the pendulum not only connected me with my own body but with the whole universe. I started asking it things about other peoples’ bodies as well.

One day in the school basement, beside the vending machines which sold the pop that still had not gained a foothold in my house, I gave a demonstration. This was my second challenge to the Arm Lady. It was a private demonstration to a kid I hardly knew. I don’t even remember his name. He was a meek, quiet boy who struck me as imaginative and willing to believe in things other-worldly. What’s more, if the pendulum failed, he would be too timid to laugh in my face or tell my classmates of my loopy ideas.

I drew the string from my pocket and glanced around the deserted basement corridor to ensure that this

remained a private demonstration. I held it up to let the keychain unwind. “Okay,” I said to Whoever-he-was, “what do you want me to ask it?” I had already explained the process to him, minus a few points I considered trade secrets.

“Ask it where I was born,” he said.

I let the keychain swing, then clamped my hand down on it, realizing the problem. “It has to be a ‘yes or no’ question.”

“Okay, um, was I born in Ottawa?” The keychain swung and I let it grow into a clear, full circle, thought for a while whether clockwise was a yes or a no and then hesitantly announced, “Yes?”

“Wow! Okay, try again . . .” I covered up my own smile of amazement by carefully steadying the pendulum. The plastic keychain correctly answered the next three questions and then I made excuses about having to go to class.

I’d finally satisfied myself that the Arm Lady’s supernatural powers were as dependable and accurate as any scientist’s instruments. I never again took out the pendulum in public. Now that I had the magic, I didn’t want to risk losing it. The keychain and string sat in my desk drawer, where my friends could neither subject it to ridicule nor prove it wrong. I continued using it, usually asking whether or not a girl liked me, but, as with most childhood companions, we slowly grew apart. Eventually, it fell from my life.

IT MUST HAVE been years since I had used the pendulum the weekend I hitch-hiked to Montreal to visit my older brother at university. That Saturday night, I watched him trying to decide if he should go out for a drink; he gripped the lip of an empty beer bottle between his thumb and fore-finger and gently let it swing back and forth like a pendulum. This reminder of the Arm Lady renewed a

childhood sense of awe. I watched the tiny circles closely, but at the same time, I could not shake my adult skepticism. Since I'd last used my pendulum, the power of rationalism and science had seduced me into a narrowed mind. I no longer believed.

According to the Arm Lady, none of my family was supposed to take alcohol. Without realizing, as my brother asked his body whether he should go to the pub, he offered me one final test of the Arm Lady's magic. It took only a few seconds to decide him. He carefully returned the bottle to the table, and then, as my rational mind had expected and the child within me had feared, my brother announced that he would come out for a drink.

– D.M. Griffin

A Sunday drive in Rum

I REFUSED TO DO any more walking. The French hikers left right after lunch, if you can imagine. They were all so eager; the down side to any overnight tour, I suppose. I'd been in Jordan long enough to know how time stretched and broadened in the desert, and I'd learned the value of any respite offered. The sun blazed, and I was content to watch them prepare for an afternoon broil in the vast furnace of Rum. I could find nothing appealing about joining them. Lying here under this solitary tree, I felt cooler than I had in weeks. It was Sunday, I realized, and I began to wonder what people were doing back home.

Languishing before a Bedouin fire as it wafted hickory-scented smoke over my face, how would I describe this Sunday to them? How express my joy in the simplicity of this sweetened, boiled tea, often poured, and these

ample pungent cigarettes? I wanted to spend all my Sundays out here. The French could walk as much as they liked. Today I would not be augered into ankle-deep sand, staining my feet red, nor plod beneath a sun that sizzled me till I was dizzy and faint. Rum mountains, draped like a stone curtain before me, were framed by the canopy of leaves overhead, filling my view with emerald green and the brown of just-turned soil. From this supine position, my arms crossed behind my head, the world looked small, and perfect.

The day had begun interestingly enough. Still swathed in a sleeping bag, I had sat up and reached behind for the knapsack, serving as a pillow, only to inadvertently rouse a sleeping scorpion. The poor thing was warming itself under my clothes. Before it scuttled away, I wrestled myself out of the sack and onto my feet to get a good look at its black casing and extended poisonous tail. I marvelled that it had not stung me during the night – I'd actually slept with a scorpion. But in the desert, marvelling over deadly insects is a luxury. Once sighted by the Bedouins, the pest's life was promptly over: scorpions are to the Bedouins what cockroaches are to us back home.

It is easy to understand why T.E. Lawrence chose this place to set up camp – the desertscapes of Wadi Rum are astounding. Rum – or Valley of Sand – is a haunting expanse with a resemblance to the moon's terrain, but it could never be labelled as barren. The giant *Jebel Rum*, towering more than 5,700 feet, governs the wall of rock that rings the valley floor, some 2 kilometres wide. The desert quickens with life as multi-layered mountains, shadowy and capped with smooth sandstone, rise up sharply like bolts of velvet fabric, colossal and rose-hued. Windswept crevices cradle gigantic glaciers of sand. Each day, when the sun lowers itself on the horizon, the mountains belonging to this valley put

on cloaks of purple and vermilion. From the moment I arrived, they seemed to lean into me, intent on sharing an urgent secret.

THERE ARE LIMITED ways to travel through Rum – by Land Rover, by camel, or on foot; extended solo treks are not recommended unless you have a guide. Bedouin guides are experts on every dune and gorge within their territory; in the mountains, they prefer to climb barefoot, without ropes. I had a guide, but he was leading the French hiking troupe. I was left in the care of Hussein and Mohammed – self-assured Bedouin boys who knew every square inch of their *wadi*. They spoke only a little English, and I even less Arabic, but we managed all right. A Bedouin in Jordan will take every available opportunity to rest in the desert, and rightly so; the belligerent heat knocks the enthusiasm out of anyone traversing Rum, not to mention those who live there. But nothing could convince two teenagers full of adrenaline that lolling in the shade was the best way to spend an afternoon. Before long, they had loaded up their rickety “jeep-car” and were motioning at me to hop in. A quail hunt was on the agenda.

Hussein did the driving and was as deft behind the wheel as anyone with the desert for a playground would be. My one haunch barely addressing the truck's back-end, he gunned the engine and floored the accelerator. His brown face, immediately thrust against the windshield, smiled into the sky like a child's on a carnival ride, basking in the thrill of every dune. The radiance of his sun-lit face was matched only by the white of his floor-length *thobe*. As he clapped a hand to his head, his checkered *keffiyeh* tossed and twirled, blowing straight behind him in the open air. Hussein's giddiness betrayed his youth; his man-sized sandals plied the pedals with gusto.

Mohammed sat in the back with me. I had scarcely made it onto the floor, while he sat behind Hussein on a storage box that allowed room enough for himself and his gun. I don't know much about guns, but I could tell this one was rusty; it looked more like a movie prop. Still, I would have preferred its muzzle pointed somewhere other than the back of Hussein's head. At every bump I held my breath, for fear the gun would shoot him. And it *would* slide towards me. Tentatively, again and again I pushed it away, as I could not the image – scandalous – of being found in a remote desert range, a Canadian woman with two pubescent Bedouins and a smoking shotgun.

Uncovered, Mohammed's hair shone as black as crude oil. My own hair had been transformed into something Medusa-like, my face layered with sparkling dust by the blasts of wind and flying sand. Every time I made attempts to brush, or tame, my stiff, sand-dyed tresses, Mohammed would stare. The women in Bedouin territory didn't go around with their heads uncovered, and certainly not with cavewoman hair. Women in Jordan didn't let rip shrieks of abandon, either – at least, none that I'd met. They were somewhat more reserved in the company of men.

My shouts and cheers startled Mohammed and Hussein at first. After each squeal, they would study my facial expression, trying to gauge the fear. Their intention, it seemed, was to discover how long it would take to scare me out of my wits; this was an endurance test. While I was in their territory, they would demonstrate how dangerous the desert really is. After all, I was, a female – and females are good subjects to terrorize. Frequently exchanged looks, cryptic murmurings ending in peals of laughter, these gave me some idea of their plan as Hussein attacked the gas pedal once again.

My obvious delight only confused

them. How could I *not* delight in this careening, this soaring over formations of sand gloriously textured and sculpted? Impressions moved so swiftly I had no time to grasp at one before another whizzed by: the blur of heat, the shadows of our jeep (and my hair) flying through the air, the metallic din of crash landings, the exhilaration of another take-off as Hussein launched us to the next dune. At some frozen moment – we were airborne for what seemed minutes – I had a vision of Hussein's face, registering alarm *and* joy, while his extended arm displayed a disengaged stick shift that had come loose from its mechanism. Above the flurry of panic at the controls came my shrieks of laughter, mistakenly convincing them that I'd met my match.

They didn't know I was having the ride of my life. Of course, I had to hang on tight, sometimes with one hand on the roof and another planted firmly beside me. Or I kept my arms outstretched, pressed wall-to-wall, in an attempt to minimize the chances of being catapulted backwards through the jeep's missing rear door. I delighted in the roller coaster of the desert dunes – flying from crest to crest, occasionally nosediving into sand pits deep as a well. *Let them think what they please*, I thought, and persisted in whooping along with them and laughing wantonly loud.

We travelled hours through deep sand and never once did we bury ourselves. This hot cushion of earth routinely sucks vehicles under as if it were quicksand and eats jeep tires for breakfast. When I crossed other regions of Rum, it was normal for us to stop and dig ourselves out. It amazes me how Rum drivers in need of assistance calmly resign themselves to being stuck. They stop, mount the roof of their trucks, and wait, soundlessly. Prompted by neither call nor gesture, Bedouin figures suddenly emerge in the distance, coming to life

on the desertscape, like the spread of fresh watercolour on paper.

No quail was felled by gun blast that day. The boys fired the shotgun a few times but, I think, just to show me they were up to it. At a well that appeared out of nowhere, we halted to replenish our engine before it succumbed to the desert's fire. The sight of water in the desert is an alien one; the mirage threatened to slip away at any minute.

As I disembarked from my desert bumper car, the boys quietly shook my hand. It was a delightful afternoon, I told them. Hussein never spoke but his approving nod, and his eyes, told me I'd passed the test.

IT'S TRUE WHAT they say: the temperature drops fast at night in the desert. On my last night in Rum, I camped with the others closer to the Bedouin settlement. I savoured the chill of the rock soaking into my back through my thin, rented sleeping bag, the night air pressing cold on my face. My dreams were punctured by the sounds of the desert: a donkey braying, camels groaning and gnashing their cavernous jaws, roosters crowing question-and-answer in distant yards. I awoke from dreams of flight and of unrecognizable sounds to the eerie *whoosh* of pigeon wings overhead.

I spent my last day in and around the Rum settlement, wandering along dirt roads, having tea with a shopkeeper, clinging to the desert like a lost friend. On desert time and in desert heat, I had become calm, had been renewed. Once again, the desert had set me right, rewound my inner clock. As I rode away from the village at sunset, I looked out the rear window of the station wagon at yards beginning to twinkle with the bonfires lit for Bedouin suppers. I clutched my *keffiyeh* to my face, closed my eyes, and inhaled the lingering aromas of mountains and wind and sand.

– Lisa M. Phipps

PHILIP ARIMA

On a yellow

the swans are all ducks in disguise
three mallards to a costume, co-ordination key
see how well they cut through the stream
honking honking honking like a fifth cab on a yellow

today is the day the numb turns to texture
a one way nap that will not attract lint
something between a flannel and the slickness of leather
if it rains, wool would have been better

the bloody mary is half gone, spices to the bottom of the glass
when the next cigarette is killed a cough will sound
no one will hear because the jukebox is too loud
but the stained leather jacket will remember

the mallards are discussing a flight in formation
last year they failed to vacation at resorts in the south
instead they sucked icicles and sunned in the snow
honking honking honking like a fifth cab on a yellow

there is a chair on the roof of the CN Tower
a stench of sour beer pushed around by the fan
soon lifting a glass will be a marketable skill
counting to a hundred, a party trick only a few can pull off

it is the colour of the bottle that attracts the flies
their suits are all polyester, their lighters disposable
they wish they were in streams or on the top of the tower
when their texture turns teflon they might start to laugh

honking honking honking like a fifth cab on a yellow

From

1001

*Concise
Contemporary*
Ballets

SEVERAL DANCERS perform sequences of intrinsically arbitrary movements, pausing between the sections, none of which have any apparent connection to the others – in sum, asking the audience to find connections and coherences that might not exist.

Two athletes play tennis with a whiffleball.

On a large piece of thick paper tacked to the stage's back wall, several artists of both sexes draw the faces of certain spectators.

After the house lights darken to blackness the curtain rises on an equally dark stage, which may or may not have performers. The only sounds audible are those of human beings making love.

Climb from the stage in and out of the orchestra pit as many times as possible within five minutes.

Two women box with soft gloves the size of basketballs.

On stage is a mountain of fresh ice cream, which audience members are given spoons to eat, a few at a time, until everyone's appetite is satiated or the ice cream melts away.

A good libretto, even an impressionist, double-exposed or portmanteaued one, follows most of the rules of simple dramaturgy. Balanchine once said the perfect type plot for a dramatic narrative ballet was the story of the Prodigal Son. Once there was a man who had everything, then he had nothing; finally he had everything again.

– LINCOLN KIRSTEIN
Ballet Alphabet (1939)

In the pit theatre of, say, a chemistry lab are large tables under which performers do things that cannot be seen from above.

Spectators are encouraged to come up to the stage to participate in an auction in which they become slaves for a day.

At the zoo caged camels smoke cigarettes elegantly.

Soon after the curtain rises a large number of portable alarm clocks begin to ring – at least one hundred, perhaps two – forcing the sole protagonist to turn each one off until the stage becomes silent. Only then can he or she accept the audience's congratulations.

One of the two performers lights candles with a match while her or his companion blows them out. As the former reignites those extinguished by his partner, the off-on process continues until the performers, the audience, or the candles are exhausted.

Out of a little car emerge, with attendant fanfare for each, over a dozen performers. (The kind of stunts that succeed so well in a large circus should be tried on a small stage.)

From members of the audience a solo performer purchases simple things, such as dollar bills, cigarettes, or subway tokens, paying for each item solely with pennies that must be counted out one by one.

The general instruction is that performers swing from the stage ropes, even dropping and pulling backdrops, much as the Marx Brothers did in *A Night at the Opera*.

Two world-class middle-distance runners compete in a one-mile race within the confines of a small stage, the audience counting the “laps” marking the completion of parts of the distance.

On the darkest possible stage performers use flashlights to help them select from a pile of cards containing instructions. The lights are extinguished while the instruction is performed to completion. At that point the performer can ignite the flashlight to get another instruction. This performance continues until the performers discover through the darkness that the audience has completely gone.

While dancers are performing classical ballet of their choice, the temperature within the theatre plummets by at least 20° Celsius.

One performer with a bicycle pump blows up the largest possible balloon. On its skin are messages that become legible as it expands. The performance ends only when the balloon fills the stage or explodes.

Spectators are invited from the audience to inflict physical harm on a large male performer without using their hands and feet.

Fifty infants are left to play by themselves with a few props. The assumption is that they will make their own theatre apart from any attempts at instruction. Adults are permitted only to keep them safely on the stage.

To twenty-four silent dinner guests one hostess serves a seven-course meal.

Several performers walk as though they are climbing stairs in unison until, after a signal, they walk as though they are descending stairs. After a second signal, each pretends to climb or descend as he or she wishes, for as long as each wants. Upon a third signal, they climb in unison until a fourth signal prompts them to descend in unison.

The protagonists move from three dimensions into four and then into five, six, ...

Several skilled tumblers do a series of forward rolls through a hall of mirrors similar to that in Orson Welles' *Our Lady of Shanghai*, visually amplifying human bodies to intimidating proportions.

Three performers make a human pyramid which stands intact as three more men join them to increase the pyramid's dimensions to one over two over three. Four more men come onto the stage to increase the size of the pyramid. Then five more enter, etc., until the producers run out of performers or the pyramid fills the performance space.

The curtain opens upon at least two dozen performers with binoculars turned upon the audience. The house lights remain on. When a performer spots someone in the audience whom he or she would like to meet, the performer comes off the stage and directly approaches the victim/beneficiary, offering the latter a fresh flower. The spectator may refuse the performer's offer. The performance ends only when everyone initially on stage has found a mate.

Eight doctors give comprehensive physical examinations to eight patients various in age and sex.

MARTINA M. FREITAG

A lush life

An occasional beauty

Patti and Sally and I
are the life of the party.
We have charmed the
North Bay rye-drinkers
with my turban, Sally's opera gloves,
Patti's open-backed taffeta.
We are magnificently Toronto,
in our secondhand clothes.
We swagger in our collective glamour.
We have all stepped upstairs
one by one
to kiss the same man.
We have flirted briefly with
each man present, and decided instead
to romance each other.
We dance a six-armed slow dance.
Our champagned midnight kisses
go first to us three.
We sing out all the songs,
la-laing if necessary.

My turban is tripping me.
Sally's gloves splashed with wine,
Patti is falling out of her dress.
The North Bayers have stolen the best scotch.
We all share Patti's bed
and shout down the stairs
for kisses goodnight.
Patti is sick down the hall
as I profess puppy love in the single bed.
Six breasts under a blanket.
We are all so very beautiful.

I return the next day
for my fine fishnet camisole
with the hearts woven through it.
I don't stay for coffee.
Oh, why burn bright so seldom?

Comfort: 1

Lover, should we spend our unhappiness together?
Should we give the other
the experience of ourselves not ourselves
but our worst?
Should we arrange our small comfort
in the other's presence
close at hand
for real emergencies?
If we're forced to share sadness
of old loves dying,
each of us not
in the thoughts of the other,
will it split or cement us?
Do we want to test either?
Lover, go lie in your own rooms
like the sick dog you claimed to be.
If we are together in body
and conversation,
You are alone with your pain.
I am alone with the hurt
I said wasn't jealousy.

19/8/85

Comfort: 2

Let's share
spit and germs
stale breath and morning tooth slime
warmth of hard pink gums
smooth lips, all with enthusiasm
as also our hurt and fears:
the good, the bad, and the ugly

9/9/85

Six red socks

my six red socks
drip limply on the line
I've waited three days through the rain
the yellow birch leaf curtain
will be a rusted rug
before my six red socks are dry

A clearing at Kennisis Lake

Mossom Boyd,
local lumber king,
logged it off first. He
left behind to rot
trees with more than 3 knots
and a produce farm that fed his camps —
just to prove this land could do it.
A hundred years ago,
they slid the logs along iced hills
down to Redstone Lake
and the south.

Twenty years ago,
A sawmill horn still sounded
for loggers and us kids.
Once to rise.
Once to hurry.
Once to start work.
At lunch: once to stop work,
once to hurry,
once again to start.
At day's end: only once.

Stripped, too-small logs
with many knots floated to shore
with the rounded bark chunks
we called turtles. They
floated for years after the mill closed.

We walked
the sluice pipe from the mill,
high and narrow,
straight downhill to the lake,
until the planking,
mossed and rotting, broke.

The clearing where the sawmill was
is growing spindly birches now,
old scattered small-eared wheat, and
moss on railway ties leading
where the big saws were.
Grass cracks wall-less floors,
fast-growing cedar shades
garbage chunks of torn-up concrete,
old apple trees, un-cared-for rhododendrons

and hides six iron-wheeled wagons
with rusting horse's hitches,
that hauled the logs up to the mill.

Mossom's farm and cabin camps, all
are now gone back to bush.
The sawmill, its cabin and its cookhouse
are standing still,
repainted yearly, neatly labelled:
"camboose", "bearpit", and "beaver den". They
wait for snowmobiles, hunters and fishermen
to pass through the clearing and
the new young trees,
while travelling the portage trail that,
living, rotting, gravelled, changing,
for logs, canoes or snowmobiles,
is still the shortest distance
from Redstone to Kennisis Lake.

A lush life

I can't say
I can't live
without you

but I've got a naked need
for a lush life

not a gluttonous or constant feast

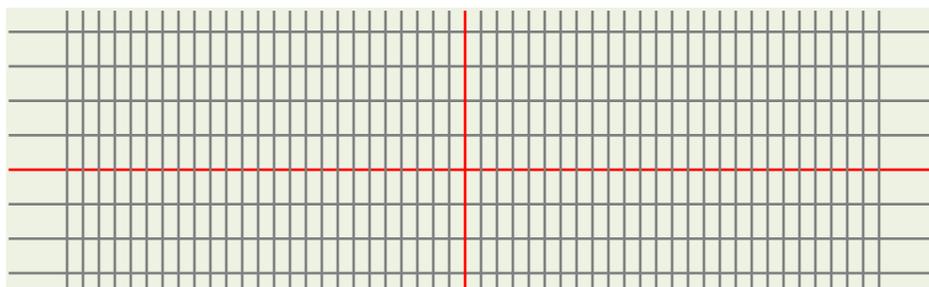
just the occasional
sweet and sour
I'm so hungry for.

Proper little thank-you note

You're too good a host:
You've given me many more presents.
You've told me too nicely how good the night was.
You save me your clippings and sprigs from the day.
You are ready for me when we meet.
You have ordered your life,
you know what you want.
What I give you is this:
 I am open for all of it.
Feed me as much as you want.
I long for your gift-making hands.

DANIEL JAMES WRIGHT

Retreat



THE SCREEN DOOR, CIRCA 1925, swings crassly shut behind me. Pre-aluminum sheeting, pre-sliding pane of glass, pre-nylon mesh, pre-air-pressure shock absorber to resist the pull of the spring, even pre-decorative family initial or flamingo silhouette. Just wire screening tacked onto a plywood door on rusty hinges. *Smack*. Brief vibration. An echoing report dissipating into the night. And I'm alone out here.

Awestruck as usual, too – even tonight. Even as harrowed as I'd been feeling just before pushing through that door, as frustrated as the evening's unchosen sport had gotten me, as hounded and tense, as browbeaten and stymied ... All of that now begins to seep away, drawn out into the limitless country darkness around me. A not entirely pleasant experience, actually, which is why I seldom leave the farmhouse for any reason after dark, and all but never entirely sober. How can I explain it? Something like being shoved out under the terrible scrutiny of God, which may be the case. A vast, pulsating countryside, extravagantly starlit.

Oh, I can still make out the murmur of Ottawa radio being amplified back in the “living room”, see my fourth-hand Volvo glinting there in the driveway ahead, feel the sweating-cool weight of a beer bottle dangling from my right hand. I mean, I'm still Civilized Man, here. I'm locked in no archetypal death-struggle with Nature, back-dropped against the relentless Shield. This is all just for the summer semester. Nature tolerates me, if she notices at all. And for my part I try to be as flexible as possible. I try not to make unrealistic demands. I try to be a good head. Tonight is the first time I've had to draw a hard and fast line, and the circumstances are pretty unique, pretty extenuating. Really! I can't believe Nature's likely to take any great offence.

Still, I find myself being a little extra-appreciative of certain of her textures and forms, where being so is no extra trouble, like those now catalogued by my bare feet: the cracked cement of the porch and walkway, sand and gravel of the drive, its occasional weeds, even thistle, under the beginnings of dew. I lean against the car and allow myself a look around.

I calm down. After all, these rocky, shaded hills, the gaping wound of an open, sandy cliff, pine trees in silhouette against the night sky, the rolling field in foreground, cricket song everywhere, the very distant voice of a single farm dog ... It could be that these great earthy quantities find nothing intrinsically pathetic about me – just certain of my more absurd predicaments. Perhaps their grandeur is not so much taunt or boast, I imagine suddenly, as invitation. To share in something of their time-

lessness, their calm, their patience, their slow untroubled dance. To scoff along, too, at the rudeness of individual existence, delighting instead in the dignity of all we can be together, myself and the rest of creation!

Barley-malt philosophy, I know even while hearing myself entertain it. But proof of a delicate shift underway nonetheless: from my instinctive intimidation out here in this expanse of front yard to a cosmic, karmic, kooky, harmonious oneness for which I can't help feeling grateful. I keep sucking on that beer, is all, and it goes down pretty darn good.

I may have called it a driveway, where the Luxury Sedan and I are standing together now, but the driveway proper consists of those two tire ruts winding through the tall grass to meet up with a graded access road fifty yards away. This gravelly patch from which it leads, on the other hand – just off the lawn that fringes the house, and flanked to the north by a crumbling barn –, is something close to rectangular in shape, and therefore much more obviously the product of conscious, human design. And if any trace of doubt should yet remain in the mind of the first-time visitor, there's a hand-lettered sign pounded into the earth on the far edge of the rectangle, ridiculously announcing its function: PARKING.

This, mind you, in front of a dilapidated, sixty-year old farmhouse, half of whose interior walls are falling down in decay, the rest seeming never to have been troubled with at all. A building hunters have been unable to resist shooting holes in, during the legal season, and you can't blame them. A building inhabited the past couple of decades only rarely and transitorily by humankind, but otherwise by a very wide variety of –

Well, anyway, it's a dump of a house in the geometric middle of nowhere. But PARKING. No, it's okay. Really. Go ahead, you can park there. There's the sign!

There's another sign, too, in one of the front windows, in the gaudy blue and gold of a popular real estate company's trademark, attempting to pass the farmhouse off as an office, and me, the house's only resident, as a *bona fide* agent of some kind, not just an art student. But in fact, the real estate sign and PARKING can seldom manage to heft the weight of their official duties – reference to things in the greater world – occupied as they are with the lesser but constant struggle to legitimize themselves and one another. I've watched them, these long summer days; they're frantic about it. Neither one of them getting any younger or fresher looking in the pounding sun, after all. PARKING has it the worse, not only for never getting any shade, but for the further indignity of being favoured as a perch by local birds. And occasionally besmirched, of course, thereby.

And what do I do throughout these same long, sunny,

Poor girl

If you had a woman in the grave with you
would your hands be rough?

And if you spilt beer on the blouse of a
woman who was afraid of birds and alone in
a bar how would your words reassure her?

And if she started to cry and said that she was
dying would you lay her down upon the floor
and kiss her hair?

Her long black hair so soon to disappear and
her white stomach with her wet blouse
pulled out from the band of her skirt.

And if she said, "I'm dying. Make love to me
in front of your friends." How would you
begin?

— *Natalee Caple*

country days? Watch the signs? Expand to a *ménage à trois* their desperate romance, their heart-rending struggle for a meaningful shared existence? No. But I'm not really moving any real estate, either – any more than those two are able to make an office of a tumbledown farmhouse or deliver motorists from the hell of inadequate parking. Nobody comes, nobody buys. And if anyone were interested in land like this, this land would sell itself: rock-bottomed and boulder-strewn, primordially forested, viciously contoured, purple, deep-green, and burnt orange, butting up against a lake that seems to have been hacked out of the shield at the impact of a single, massive, divine thunderbolt.

A beautiful piece of work, this chunk of land, but a piece of work in every sense where building upon it would be concerned. Which is presumably the idea that went into subdividing it legally and attempting to market the resultant parcels.

I don't care, really. I'm a bit of an artist, myself, apart from being a student of those in whose path I'd like to follow. That's why I took a summer job like this, and that's why they knew I'd stick it all the way through, Ed and the others. (If there really are any others in partnership with my sole, occasional, despondent contact from the city.) I'm a

painter, at least in theory. And I do paint some, too. But I also swim and jog and hike around and lie in the sun and blast my stereo and twist the little black-and-white's antenna every conceivable which-way for reception and read and swat at bugs. And if painting's no more than another item I occasionally get around to in a list like that, I don't begrudge it as much as I might. This place, as I may have already hinted, is all very ... large. It's large. It's a lot to try to paint. And I'm not sure I'm carrying quite enough history yet to be the guy to pull it off. I think what I may really be doing here isn't painting at all, but filing images away to paint later on, when I'm someone a little larger, myself.

But now it's night and I've recently been stuck doing something quite different from any of those itemized above. And I've just come out into the vast darkness of a front yard become a bit too large even to stand in and observe comfortably for more than a couple of minutes. And anyway, there'd been two reasons I decided to take this little break, with the opportunity to regroup and reconnoitre accounting for only one.

So over I walk to the grass at the edge of the gravel rec-

tangle and set my bottle down on top of the stake that holds up PARKING. I set my beer right down on the sign! And that's not all: then I pee. I pee on the grass and dirt all around the base of the sign and even, occasionally – quite accidentally, mind you – on it! And it makes me feel a little better. Less frustrated, less tense, less ignominious in retreat.

Then I gather myself and begin to march back to the battle, back into the house. I head for the farmhouse's kitchen, where the ancient refrigerator is currently standing unplugged and oddly away from any wall. Where there's a wooden chair knocked over on its side on the floor. Where there's a broom lying handy across the elements of the stove, clearly in waiting to be of further use, and clearly as a weapon. I make for the kitchen, where I've already been locked in fierce pursuit this evening for over an hour, after that devastating first encounter with an unexpected adversary. I march back into the farmhouse and into its kitchen and take up my trusty weapon, *Dusty*, to purge this camp of mine of the enemy, an enemy who's taken position deep in the pump of my refrigerator: an eighteen-inch black and yellow grass snake.

Artificial heat

Hint of mothballs
mixed with the scent
of wool. Sweater days,
the sun gone
before you know it.

One afternoon
you find yourself
pulling your hands up
into the sleeves, telling yourself
you'll be home, warm
before you know it. But once inside
the chill remains.

It's more than mere economy
that keeps you from turning on
the furnace. You pace the halls
arms drawn in, almost convinced
that any moment
you'll be warm.

Just before bed
the children's complaints
force you to relent.

The thermostat's
whir is followed
by a roar.

Intrigued by sounds,
smells erased from their minds
by a season of heat
the children want answers.

You explain
scientifically. Speak of
heating grates, a summer's dust
burning away. Facts, logical,
precise.

You do not speak
of the thoughts that come
unbidden, wafting up
from some secret, hidden place.

You do not say, children,
these are the scents,
the sounds of winter,
coming home to stay.

— Ronnie R. Brown

CLAUDIA GRAF

islands of soapsuds

*You sit there, duckling
on your island of soapsuds
in this melancholy flickering light
Ducks don't need islands like we do
We would be lost on a soapbubble island
unless in a dream*

You come up so close to me as I flounder here
look straight up to my eyes
Please don't stare so intensely unless it is to play
You might be captured by this restlessness
by what I'm trying to soak out of my bones
boring matters
What will interest you tonight?
Work? play? love? romance?

thwack

Oh you knock your hard little tail against the tub
That's what you're curious about?
Love? Romance?

thwack

thwack

Me too. They're pretty tough subjects
and you won't get very clear answers from me but I'm game
First of all they're not the same thing although
they are often mentioned in the same breath
in the same song
but not often in the same poem unless it's a bad poem
Love seems to be the stronger intangible
the one that lasts longer
and which has more levels
while romance is the appearance of an unusual
but amazingly beautiful bird
that you can't stop thinking about
Love starts out before a person is born
and bestowed for years by most parents
and then we go looking for that same feeling, duckling
for the rest of our lives
But romance comes as a surprise —
feelings and emotions that knock our socks off
and which we immediately decide we can't do without

*Romance is sunshine, full moons and excitement
while love is a calm sustainer, small duckling
It's tougher, the muscle and bone of life*

Longing is a wonderful, very vital
energy ... It's not the longing that's
the problem, it's what you do with it
... the longing can be redirected to
something greater than ourselves,
something transcendent ..."

– FLORENCE FALK
psychotherapist

Romance is dandelion seeds ready
to be blown away by the merest puff of reality
It's that sunset with seven layered colours
while love is the comfort of a wood fire
with a cord of dry wood close by
The two can happen together
or one can happen without the other
It's a scientific fact that several species of living things can perish without love and
can be happier,
grow straighter, and fatter with love
and even animals can die for love or lack of it
but only people can know what romance is
yearn for it, live for it, die because of it
Love and romance can be so closely linked
that a person cannot distinguish between them
Now there are different kinds of romance
and different kinds of love

*Bob Stark sings that
love, though sometimes wrong
is never a mistake*

Hordes of people
try to experience love vicariously
on TV, in films and books
In a bookstore,
don't look for a section called love
though most of the books will be about some form of love
But you will find a section
for Romance
The romance most often longed for
is to be romantic with another person

*For example, duck, if someone very special
beautiful in a particular way that appeals
were to be sharing this candlelight tonight
were to be sharing this bathtub tonight
then that would probably be romance*

Yes, it would be a tight fit too,
sassy duckling
but it would be romance
for romance has that edge to it,
a sassiness
Romance has someone singing songs to you
whispering into softly nibbled ears
dancing close with intention
That is romance if you have the same inclination
and if all these inclinations come to fruition
in the lost world of a tallgrass field on a sunny Sunday
or on yellow summer-flowered sheets
in candlelight on a Friday
if symbiosis is the operative idea
and seafood soup leads to his puma purrs

then, duck, that is romance of the loveliest kind
but not love
for love has responsibilities that romance seldom has
and romance does not need or want
and which in truth could kill
romance

*and once you have romance
you certainly do not want it
to be killed
but for it to live on as it is*

So often it has to end before one of the people
starts to worry
that the romance is turning into love
If you are truly lucky the romance continues
into love with romance
but really and truly, duck
I have seldom heard of this happening
for very long
These days people are forming partnerships
for support, for economic survival
to bring children into the world
in the Japanese way
and often in Japan this turns to love

*But what about longing? desire?
the human craving for romance?
All very well for you, Florence
but the rest of us mere mortals
would be more inclined
to keep the yellow sheets clean and tucked away
to use again another summer's day*

You see, duck
romance knocks you silly
but love buys the biscuits
Romance gives you jolts that are good for creating
while love does that with subtlety,
much harder to recognize
Romance, though, has a big portion of passion
often of sex

thwack

thwack

I hear you, duckling
and love also can have big portions of both
You, however, are too little a duckling
for me to be more specific on those themes tonight
What you have to know is that
love seems like water
like the substance of life
while romance is your island
of soapsuds

Headlights

I.

Morn and mourn
a headlight bowing the cave of night
a quick quiet music in the mist
Lamps homing through precipitate's
delicate improvisations
the chunnel in the dark
leading where ... the car knows
where it's going, its why is how
the blind driver's taken there
I wish I were that person at the wheel
unconscious of the stream
a mayfly with longevity
born and borne

On the porch this late or early hour
staring downhill
I wish the night air could connect
the distance, answer
the damp echo
of tonight, leaves
talking to themselves
and down the road the piloted highbeam
again, once more, another time

What is wishing but
another form of prayer, maybe
its derivative my bare toes touching
dew which is with me
but there's something else out there
a plotted path that with will perhaps
I might reach beyond the sprawling lawn
the house on my back which is
past but at 3 a.m. there is no future

II.

Like a car's radio playing crazily
at the scene of a tragic accident
like upturned wheels spinning crazily
like the body still making wax
after the plant closure

like something that could not happen
but does anyway ...

The hollyhocks are crushed
the earth rushes to meet them
the hurricane's been downgraded
and we're obscurely disappointed
Paralyzed onlookers, we can't figure out
why one thing stops, another goes
we can't know it when it happens or else
know it through knifing pain

The burglar looms
both of you equally surprised
your brains ensure
it's fight or flee
Nature, physics, that larger mind
can't open-end the suddenness
these lines, so sure of themselves
mean nothing in the event
the little or the larger death
When it's time there won't be words
only shock and rally
feeble, feebler admittance to
that lost kingdom waiting for us
the dormant crown

III.

"Nature I loved; and, next to Nature, Art."
Some such blather. Meanwhile birds
pivot, wheel, and swivel
illustrating chaos theory
random sensible dice packaging
their destinations. The wind bangs apples
against solid air, hay reaches for the rain
Wise Old Mother Nature's
"tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
sermons in stones" –
All our little homilies, make it suit
turns it into us. Once in a while
to sit on a rotted sill is enough
perceive nature separate yet absolute connection
Then again field, orchard, hedgerow, sky
may only be a simulation ...
Of what? Our internal designs, our habits of inference
from the brain's own map. That brain's
nature, too, all too human, gaily Gaia
perishes with us, the sparrow's fall

A man for all unseasonable
After the long drought August rains
have raised the well, we can tell, the
tap water's muddy. We may
not have to lug plastic buckets from the stream's
sewage treatment effluent. We
can rely on the hill's gravity
and we need not worry till we have to
The next question is
has the grass grown enough for the neighbour to take
a third cut of haylage, but
that's his decision
If they don't fall off first, there'll be pears this year

IV.

Scudding clouds carry weather
Snow devils skipping across the road between
the post office and village co-op
The start of a novel called
The Weather. It's all around us
We surround it with a capsule summary
But what right have I to the royal imperative
labelling or judging all?
Lack of confidence is also a literary method
Life's beyond derivative or distillate
right and wrong, correct and incorrect, do, don't
There ought to be a law that lets us
arbitrate, negotiate between
choice and necessity as a bird switches
from worm to insect. The noon sun
burns away the fog, the sky opens wide
warm gates. Here it comes
making demands on me. I'd rather hoofbeats
on an Irish down thudding through the mist
to which I trudge in wellingtons
tending toward discovery, better that is
for another novel, me. But
everywhere I go's a vacuum
to be filled with unhappiness, an
accident waiting
If this is bleak, it's not so bleak
as expecting promotion to glory
Today should it be nice we'll go to the beach
Tomatoes blaze red among the green
must be picked or they'll spoil
The day's a spoiler any way
and looking at it is what we do
The weather will tell me what to do

V.

The stars in a bowl of blueberries
winking in milk the luscious blackberries
nested by gravel are requited gifts
I give my ant-life, don't I?
What passed for arrogance in Nabokov
was a just estimate of his own abilities
but who can judge the genius it takes
just living here? The pigeons live among
broken barnboards. They can dump at will
supported by air. The cattle on the hill
might topple but their hooves are anchored
to wild mustard and stinking willie
They make do

All the slaughtered and thriving creatures of this realm
are grudgeless, amplifying their existence
by being what they are. But I'm
like a house-plant breathing in self-pity
no ground beneath though
nerves take a quotient of irritants
a gap into which neuroses rush
Anything will do: a pulp mill's stench, the
racket of machines on an orphaned rail line
perhaps this black dog sunny day
follows me everywhere, its diurnal howl and growl
gods reminding me it's feeding time
My father talked to himself, I now know why
and this page talks back, its ululant wavering
brings me to the deemed attribute
the skunk hour moon down predawn dark

Boomer

IT ALL HAPPENED on a beautiful spring day in 1937. I was fifteen and sitting on my stoop dreaming of girls. Boomer, my dog, was stretched out and dozing at my feet.

Suddenly a truck pulled up, jamming its brakes, and a dogcatcher and a cop rushed us both. The letters on the side of the truck said ASPCA. Boy, were we in trouble! Boomer had no leash or muzzle on his face. I started yelling: “Boomer, run! Get outta here! Run!” Too late: the dogcatcher had lassoed Boomer and was dragging him into the back of the truck. Boomer howled as the metal door slammed shut. He was now a prisoner of the city of New York. The cop was totally oblivious. He was too busy writing out a ticket for me.

“You gotta be in Coney Island court in three days and the mutt goes into rabies quarantine starting now.”

“He don’t have rabies!” I screamed.

“Tell it to the judge, wise guy.”

He handed me the ticket and from the corner of my eye I saw my best friend Maxie and his dog Meddyboo strolling down the block. He spotted the truck and the cop and knew something was up. I let out another yell:

“Get outta here, it’s the dogcatcher and he’s got a cop!”

Maxie took off, Meddyboo at his heels, and the dogcatcher twirling his noose.

Minutes later the dogcatcher returned, panting and cursing. “The damn kid got away!”

He collapsed on the stoop, and the cop began questioning me:

“What’s that guy’s name?”

I looked him in the eye and said, “I never saw him in my life.”

“Never saw him, huh. I’m gonna send a special note about you to the judge.”

With that, they drove off, Boomer howling in the back of the truck.

I had a real problem now. It was the depression; how would Mom and Pop be able to pay the fine? Or would they? They were immigrants, and in Russian and Yiddish there was no word for pet. In the mountains, where they came from, animals were used for meat, milk and cheese. They knew about cows, goats and chickens, but canaries, dogs and gold fish? A rabies quarantine?

I UNDERESTIMATED POP. After hearing about the dogcatcher, the ticket and quarantine, he consulted with the neighbors on the stoop. Every one of them was an expert on something; this kind of problem was right up their alley. “A two dollar fine and the mutt will be out in a couple of days,” they told Pop. He took them at their word and handed me two dollars.

“Here, Harry,” he said, “pay the fine.” He was making forty cents an hour. That two bucks meant five hours of back-breaking work. And it was all for a dog who didn’t even give milk.

Three days later, at 9 A.M., I walked into the Coney Island courthouse and sat in the last row, out of sight. The judge was an old guy, madder than hell, yelling at everyone and slapping out fines. He rapped his gavel and shouted:

“All you pedlars without a license, come up to the bench.” A shuffling of seats and twenty guys pleaded guilty on the spot.

“Three dollar fine. See the bailiff.”

One guy yelled out: “Last time it was two dollars, judge.”

The judge raised his head and barked: “The price went up!”

He then called a bunch of Gypsies. He was really mad and gave them a tongue-lashing with the fine.

“Five dollars for telling phony fortunes.”

The noisy courtroom was suddenly quiet; that was a lot of dough in 1937. The Gypsies cried and cursed in five different languages.

“Keep it up and you’ll pay ten bucks!” the judge said. The noise stopped immediately.

Finally, my name was called. The judge read the charge and bawled me out: “You feeding a mutt? Don’t you know there’s a depression going on. No leash, no muzzle, three dollars! See the bailiff.”

I walked to a desk where a guy was holding out his hand for the money. I handed him two dollars.

“It’s three, kid, can’t you hear?”

“I only got two,” I answered

He motioned to a court cop, who grabbed my belt and led me to a room behind the judge. He handed me a phone and said, “Here, call your mother or old man for the extra buck.”

“They’re working and get home late.”

He ignored my words and walked me down a hallway and into a room full of solid steel bars. My cellmates were the Gypsies and pedlars, who were also short of dough. By 1 P.M. my palm was read twenty times and a Gypsy by the name of Platon was trying to sell me a watch.

“Here,” he said, “listen to it tick, it keeps perfect time.”

Boy, did I like that watch. He was still trying: “Gimme seventy-five cents and it’s yours.”

“I only got fifteen cents left.”

“Okay, give it to me. That makes a buck and I can get outta this place.”

I gave him my last cent and slapped the watch on my wrist before he could change his mind. What a bargain! By now the pedlars were in a frenzy. Their fruits and vegetables were outside on their trucks and slowly rotting away.

Shame

when kim asked me
on the bus
whether i was
a boy
or
a girl
i replied
(stunned by my own
6th grade wit)
maybe

when i told my mum
this story
in the safety of her kitchen
she bent her head
to one side
and my smile fell away
shiny
down her cheek

— *Tamara Kuzyk*

They worked on the cops and guards to buy their stuff. “A nickel a pound!” they cried. When the price dropped even lower, the crop was sold immediately. This was a better education than I was getting in school.

THE COPS LOCATED Pop at his job in the Bronx, and at 8 P.M., after a two-hour subway and bus trip, he got to the Coney Island jail and bailed me out. He said nothing. Just gave me a kiss on the cheek and led me across the street to Nathan’s Famous, where we had supper: three hot dogs and a couple of root beers each.

He didn’t miss the watch, either.

“What time you got, Harry?”

I took a quick look and answered, “Six o’clock, Pop.”

He pointed to the clock on Nathan’s wall and said, “It’s quarter to nine.”

I stared at it. The ticking had stopped.

The watch was dead.

As we headed for the subway, he mentioned that Boomer had passed the rabies test and that I could get him out tomorrow. It was then that he opened a paper bag and handed me a clothesline rope with the end fashioned into a collar.

“Better put this on him, Harry. Next time you won’t be taking him home.”

Sunken roots

We worked hard
baking scrubbing farming by hand
not much time for play
but there was dancing every Saturday night
when the man with the accordion
came from Careggine even during the war
we cared about each other you were there
Maria when we buried little Angelo
we all helped rescue the Madonna and crucifix
from San Teodoro
watching the water rise over our homes
the school church
and then the campanile
when they turned on the great tap
oh how we cried
you saved your wedding dress they said
they'd give us new homes
a school and church better than the old
but they didn't
every ten years they drain the lake
to repair the dam
and it rises again from its watery grave
our ghost town
and we walk the cobbled streets where
our stone houses brood windows doors
agape vacant and dark
old wounds opened
cracked mud dead flesh of our town
lost forever
soon they will open the floodgates again
and the lake will cover it once more

we won't be here next time Maria
it is over
that life we remember

so few of us now

– Joan McGuire

chocolatedip

that finger
this finger
this long brown finger
(you) pushing into
my slow ear
pulls my arms
through a tongue
to fatten your flesh
that gorges on laughter
when we slope
up/down a backward
feast
of chocolate.

swelling your cheeks
on shoulders & ankles
we cluster
chocolate handfuls
of leg
mudsliding your body
between my toes
smooth one
mouthful of toothless
quicksand
your belly
melting laughter into
mine
when we dip
chocolate stuck bodies
in
mud.

– Rhonda Mack

The woman who canned hands, sometimes fingers

As if to always
have a supply,
have them on
hand. Fingers
to calm, hold
her. She could
have pickled a
husband's fists
as a reminder, a
warning or put
up lovers' fingers
in salt and dill
to open when snow
banked the door.
her father never
touched her, her
mother held on
so tight there
are claw marks.
Then there were
light fingered
men who worked
fast in gloves
and left no trace.
Sometimes she put
skin peeled from
a hand in jars
like souvenirs
of snakes that
left what they
were behind them
or perfume bottles
only an amber
stain lingers
in from what
was sweet

— *Lyn Lifshin*

Fitzi in the yearbook

grin muffled but
sneaky slithering
out like his penis
did in the Drive In
a June before I cld
imagine anything so
slippery sliding up,
let alone inside
me after months of
Saturdays in my
mother's grey apartment
my sister Joy giggling
behind the couch,
a tongue pressing between
lips should have been
a warning in the
blue Chevy I felt
he was all whale
crashing with his
“now you've done
this to me, you have
to,” everything in
me sand he'd
collapsed on

— *Lyn Lifshin*

toybox

she was trapped
in a dandelion chain
lost the rabbit hole
her tears no longer
tasting like her own
and her teddy bear
only had one eye.

her dolls had all
decapitated one another
and haunted their houses
her sailboats had
sprung leaks and sunk
and her teddy bear
only had one eye.

her lot of small cars
had tangled themselves up
into a web of traffic
her Slinky had unravelled
and slipped down the sink
and her teddy bear
only had one eye.

the Tinker Toys in the basement
had formed a guillotine
that was chopping off Barbie's hair
while the Legos in the attic
became a dozen coffins —
and her teddy bear
only had one eye.

— *j.a. LoveGrove*

[untitled]

& it isn't about love, never
was. there are certain
ways of looking
at words, not reading; transcribing
now separate from then. other
languages, symbols, refractions:
the definitive importance of sunglasses.
banality of communication, it's
a miracle I'm awake, really. I think I can
be a train in my next crack
at life; steaming open the fault-
lines like someone else's mail.
exposing our collective buried
junkmail. that's all there is.
the bones that frame
the country's arteries, chain
letters are the only thing
holding us together. anonymous
dependents anonymous. photocopied
points of view.

— *j.a. LoveGrove*

Report

Last month I was the Corbett Building — imploded.
Today I am a vase,
thin glass holding precious little
I carry through this and that.
Yesterday a friend's dog
was dying. He told me
when I got there: he *was* the dog.
And shot himself. You see why I carry myself
so stiffly, like a vase
and why, for instance, a mere bottle of ketchup
broken on the sidewalk
causes me to turn away, and
why the boy dashing to my side,
asking me for the time
causes me to jump, hesitate,
say only polite words.

— *Robert Davies*

I love

THIS DANK DREARY

(I have to say dreary – it’s a literary convention ... but it’s not really dreary)

BASEMENT.

My God, all you people with overstuffed basements – I guess garages are similar – maybe less sort of cosy – YOU know what I mean – when I say – steeped in history, all of it somehow relating to your very favorite person – the “ME” in you.

WHEN GAUL AND I moved here, twenty-one years ago, the house (condominium townhouse) had just been built – we had been the ones lovingly to select lilac for the bathroom, deep blue for the bedroom rugs, etc. I cried for joy when we turned the key in the lock. It was stiff January.

At that point the basement was empty.

The first thing we did here was to paint the floor with I think it was “muriatic acid” or some such thing we had been told was good to do – and otop we painted a chocolatey brown. Then we cut some large pieces of dark grey carpet to its shape and laid them down. Finished finishing.

Over the years, as stuff started to accumulate, we built shelves, added a chest-type freezer in the laundry corner, and started Gaul’s collection of old (and usually somewhat broken) office chairs. When my parents bought new kitchen chairs we added the old ones to our assortment.

We put our faithful old red couch (originally our bridal Salvation Army purchase) in the basement.

When Gaul waxed enthusiastic about his musical career he bought top-notch stereo equipment – and it went down there. (Of course, all through this, our two young daughters played, built blanket tents, etc., down there. Emma wanted a chemistry set one Christmas – we lived in fear for a while.)

The girls started having sleep-overs in the basement – I remember Amber having a nightmare or something during one of them – I went down to help – like a damage control centre or something – six or seven sleeping bags close together on the grey carpet. – Another time I sneaked down to take a picture. Cherubs. Emma always liked having parties. She got to the stage of inviting boys to her birthday parties – they played spin-the-bottle and games a parent probably should not know about, with lots of “tee-heeing” and coming upstairs grinning wickedly.

My poor husband nearly broke his back singlehandedly taking my mother’s still-working fridge downstairs – we used it for excess groceries, beer, etc.

At some point we added a computer and desk.

Emma was still throwing great parties – I don’t have a clear memory but there was another couch down there, I got a divorce when the girls were in their late teens, stuff still kept on accumulating, but there was a half of the basement that seemed consciously designed for teenage parties.

I remember in my childhood living close to a highway depot – and playing there with my friends when the men weren’t there, so I grew up feeling it’s good for growing kids to have somewhere to get away from the mundane.

A couple of times I housed teens in need for a few weeks, in the basement.

THIS YEAR THE TWO off-spring moved out, and took some of the clutter with them – but it’s still packed solidly with clutter. Now it houses about forty works of art by my late father, piled on top of things, and treasures from my parents’ house jammed against less romantic stuff – I am wondering, to tell you the truth, if I will live long enough

TO CLEAN UP THE BASEMENT.

Autopsy

What was said:
the official story.

What was said

in *The Edmonton Journal*,
about a boy with beautiful hands.

Who played piano.
A base brat. A nomad.

Who – 6' tall and suddenly good-
looking – dissipated
his virginity early, at Lahr in Germany (*Bobby*),

who could have been

a model (someone said)
or an actor
larger-than-life and working in Hollywood.

Who was redeployed back
home with his family,
displaced from the known by the end

of the Cold War,
which was habit-forming,
the base closures long overdue.

Who found himself

in St. Albert, built by the Oblates
outside Edmonton, wind-chilled
suburb of heaven on earth.

Who was disoriented

by yet another school,
the student body too upmarket

to revel in Nirvana,

Kurt Cobain shaking down
the house while his father worked yet
another base, the hushed
tree-lined streets around their unfamiliar

splitlevel coiling
anxiety into the sparse Alberta scrub.

Who hung out at the Boystown Café
and (may have unofficially)
lost his (virginity)
yet again, at 17, this time with a (man).

Who was cool

and getting cooler.
Who seemed restless and to his mother solitary,

who ate badly, returned fewer
calls from his friends, who cried

the day Kurt Cobain died
by his own hand,
the left side of his face blown away, the outraged

feedback of his lead guitar unplugged
and shut away
forever into the silence

of its battered case,
a generation closed out.

Stupid and contagious –

scrawled into Bobby's diary, its pages black
and blue
with copycat poems.

Who logged his abandonment

into the virtual, looking for someone,
“Nirvana” his password.

Who graduated from the last
of many high schools, the official ones.

Who a week later snuffed nights
of unofficial
hell without Kurt – Canada
Day – more than Bobby's eardrums blown out

by Nirvana and Kurt's enticing
growl on endless
replay when he was found

by a sister, remaining
eye open, left
side of his face a mask torn away

from an unenlightening blankness.

Who helped him?
Who helped whom?

Someone had to (someone said) – the body
in Bobby's bed not
a sick joke or a special effect.

(Bobby)

who his parents can't stop
praying for,
their only son not born again.

Premature rest – and eternal.
What was said.
Kurt Cobain. Nirvana.
The official story. Bobby's beautiful hands.

– *John Barton*

Verna

When they found her
no one bothered to cover
the naked limbs
but, rather, stepped around,
over,
behind,
away
(into other rooms, even)
but no one stopped to
(or even thought to)
cover her.

He was taken by the dolls,
sitting on the counter,
Pale white faces, no blush to the cheeks,
with large azure eyes
and small black tears streaming to nowhere,
no lips, no pink pouty lips, no mouths,
Like her face,
lips drained of colour
almost invisible.
And like always in her presence he heard
only silence
and saw no cover.

– *Kellie Ewing*

This then

I.

This then
is suffering:
after years of bleeding
internally
eternally
except nothing lasts forever —

now on top of that daily pain
he lies in bed for the fifth week,
last time anyone counted
T-cell count of 11,
erupted amoebic sores
from head to toe.

He begins to consider,
in the space between sleep
and the shuffle of nurses and doctors,
the curious notion
he is watching his body die.

Yet he is the same,
mind as though disembodied.
He had never before
seriously considered
existence of the eternal soul.

II.

What tastes good now
is water.

Yesterday my friend Jim
took me to the zoo.
It was a good day.
Today I'm paying for it.

The nurse saw my misery
and asked if I didn't want to let go.
No, I don't blame her.
You asked me to tell her what I enjoyed.

I enjoy, as I said, water
I enjoy looking at the trees
I like rides, even to the hospital.

I like to think of the play
and of directing one last time.

I think it was you
who felt upset ... oh
I don't know why I want to live.
Yes, the play is one reason.
I guess I have always had pain
and I got used to it
always fighting to live.
The nurse saw my agony.
I'm closer to letting go.

III.

If you and he met
you'd soon forget
this man I visit
who quietly suggests
his dosage has been changed.
The nurse is not offended.
Perhaps his manner
allows her worth.
Or there is noone there.

He chose to come here
he could look at trees.

To escape his hospice bed
he makes appointments.

At Health Sciences
they clear his nose.
I wheel him in
for an hour of exercise
whirlpool, and lo!
his favourite therapist.

At HIV Center
his doctor wonders
this man continues to live.

He's eager for Tuesday night's
massage and in-
teresting things
that the masseuse from Ireland says.

Today he thinks of the play
will he have the strength.

Last night he was surprised
the energy!
Rehearsal for four weeks more
and opening night.
He thinks that a month from now
(His actors must be ready!)
he might be dead.

IV.

Yet this is a man in the world
shamrock pin on his shirt ...
Blazer cap ...
now on the hospice wall
poster of the play
he directs sitting in a chair.

From his hospital bed
the week of Halloween
he wasn't expected to live,
he planned trips in a wheelchair
trips to the doctor
therapist
etcetera.
Could I do that kind of thing.

The adrenaline!
Nausea gone most of the time
he uses a walker
plans
when the play is over
to drive in the countryside.
The maintenance man opened
his mouth wide
at the sight of him pulling out of the drive
a practice run.

He thought a year ago
if he took on the play
he would die. Yes
this year he's doing it.
A way to go

driving Germantown Road
crossing St. John's Golden Gate
all the way to Jerusalem.

— Robert Davies

The Tabloid Press

A keg of beer,
a journey at midnight,
something is moving in my poems,
fermenting, ruling over me, I
wish I could afford the service charge,
get to the top of my profession.
Every business day I delay and delay
until my subscription to Life has expired,
the tallest pines of Dixie peering in
my kitchen window, my wife
very serious about things these days,
calling my earlier work a bunch
of horseshit, enough is enough,
she says, from another
section of The Trailer, and she is right,
for these books I have written have
few customers, few glamour girls
come calling now in elastic Wonder Bras.
What does the trick is not more "literature,"
judging by recent photographs I am not
an average Joe, finally, to resolve,
to have some fun, forget about business,
write a little garden column for the local paper.
But it isn't in the cards today, I went
down to a store on 18th Street
and asked about a job.
"Get out of here," they said.
"You have suffered too many setbacks."
So I'm tossing and turning in the same ol' shop.
Look at my neck pain, my back pain.
And worst of all I couldn't understand
the last few things I wrote.
Better off on a long grey freightliner,
perhaps, or flying away to Zanzibar.
Many a guest has disappeared from Earth
on a fine autumn evening when leaves
were falling in the square, in
any case there is not much action here,
here among these pamphlets of gain and loss,
dashing off this flare I move to
the next table and chat with myself
and stare at *Jeopardy* on TV and pretend
I am in a sidewalk café in Paris.
That is the story from this
kudzu-infested half acre of Dixie.
I've fished and now I'm cutting bait,
taking a rest, choosing another odyssey,
instinctively capturing avant-garde radio waves

on my weathervane, stepping down from
the platform on a diverse Tuesday
when the silence of everyday things
is banging at my door
and the wools of winter
are being drug from their closets,
the band playing “Beautiful Dreamer”
and most of the hired hands from
the Southside away dancing at
the Acme Bar & Grill.

— *Errol Miller*

Souvenir

Dark night on the highway
going from one mining town
to another one only bigger
unlit road nowhere important
moose gets in the way

Driver hits the brakes
doesn't help the moose
doesn't help the passenger
these are the forties
so what's a seatbelt

Flies through the windshield
lands on the highway
lots of blood
scalp lacerations
survives it though

Thirty years later
a piece of glass will still
occasionally snag his comb
pops out to say hello
elicits this story

— *Paul Karan*

Why you'll have to repeat that

The arthritis is always with me
like a relative who
annoying or not
must be tolerated
I can usually control it
much as the cat
usually stays off the kitchen counter
until the migraine hits
and control breaks

The first orange bomb
misses its target so I wait
as long as I can and take another
then another
this is the worst one yet
and another
and another
till my pulse is racing
and still the fire burns
so another and another
till my hair smells like
darkroom chemicals
and another and another
and the surf pounds in my ears
two dozen gone

I can hear as far as my arm can reach
the phone stays on the bed
set as loud as possible
a faint tinkle in the ocean roar
the voice on the other end
heard through some pillow

The pain eventually fades
with the outgoing tide
and takes the extrawide range
of hearing I pride myself on
with it

— *Paul Karan*

Black dresses

Janet said to her boyfriend,
“Somehow I will make you laugh.”
A pair of socks are hanging over
the shower curtain to dry.
On the kitchen table an art magazine
open to a feature on German artist
Rebecca Horn.
She explores the fragilities of romance.
In one piece an electric spark
is created as a pendulum descends
from the ceiling of the Museum,
across a pool of black water.
Because of the heat, the window
of the bedroom is propped open
with an edition of the painted diaries of
Charlotte Salomon, translated
from German. She made her last entries in watercolour
before she was sent to a concentration camp.
The edges of the book have thickened
as the rain falls.
At a pier Janet and her boyfriend
launched a boat from newspapers.
He laughed as it drifted into
the harbour.
Cars moved along a street bordering
the piers.
A street of cafés illuminate the night.
Janet’s boyfriend moves to the closet.
He raises his hands and clears
his throat.
“Listen, all the black dresses are whispering.”

Walls

We were lovers. I felt an erotic bond with the energy of
your black paintings. Motion and circumstance. Berlin.
Stone courtyards overlooking the River Spree. Evenings
sitting in the tiny café in the concrete shopping mall,
imagining travel to Portugal, London. We packed our
suitcases, your drawings rolled into tubes like missiles of
desire. Embarked south from the passenger station in the
Zoo. The needle of East Berlin blinking on and off bidding
us farewell.

— Robert Kenter

new fog

on a foggy morning
i wake up clear

i walk to the river
but the river’s not

i walk to the bridge
but the bridge goes nowhere

there is no other side
it is all where i am

elm trees ghosts of themselves
skyhook holding Legislature dome up
pulls eyes open
but they don’t see too well
in this fog

if i walk
where will i go:
downstream to the sea

upstream like salmon
leaping over rock hurdles
and beyond
where fog condenses on leaves
drips
runs down trunks
to ground
joins with itself
giggling and laughing
rolling downhill
to land in a heap
and flow away

last night’s gibbous
moon harvest orange
weather changed
from before the full

first mushrooms
pushing their white heads
out of riverside earth

— Joe Blades

D for dictionary

JOHN G. BAILLIEUL ON
one man's redemption

The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary

SIMON WINCHESTER
HarperCollins 1998

MODERN LITERATURE has few more obscure yet extraordinary stories than the meeting in 1896 of Oxford professor James Murray, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, and Dr. William C. Minor, for over 20 years one of the O.E.D.'s most reliable and productive contributors. The story was first told by the American journalist Hayden Church in 1915; it has been retold many times since. However, the truth of this "amusing and romantic" story, as Simon Winchester correctly calls it in his own superb and conscientious retelling, proves to be much more perplexing, bizarre, and "only marginally less romantic" than preceding accounts.

BORN IN 1834 to an old and respected New England family, William Chester Minor lived until 1920, spending the final 48 years of his life in mental asylums. After graduating from Yale University, he enlisted in the U.S. Federal army as a surgeon. It was during the Battle of the Wilderness, only days before Gettysburg, that his slide

into mental illness (which would nowadays, Winchester says, be diagnosed as "paranoid schizophrenia") began. One of his duties was to brand the faces of deserters with a "D"; one day, Winchester asserts, Minor became unbalanced as he performed this gruesome act on an Irish immigrant deserter. Shortly thereafter, in 1872, while residing in London, he suffered from the delusion that members of the Fenian Brotherhood of militant Irishmen were breaking into his room as he slept in an attempt to poison him. One night, rushing outside his flat in imagined pursuit of one of the Fenians, Dr. Minor shot and killed an innocent man on his way to work.

Minor was given an indefinite sentence in the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally Insane, his army pension and his family supporting the widow of the man he had killed. The widow soon began visiting him at the asylum, bringing books he requested from London stores. And it was in one of these books, some time in the early 1880s, that Minor came upon Professor James Murray's printed appeal for volunteers to hunt quotations on behalf of what was then being called simply "the big dictionary". Unlike the English dictionaries that preceded it, which listed only "hard" or "choice" words, the O.E.D.'s aim was to illustrate every word in the English language with at least six quotations, citing each word's various shades of meaning and earliest known use. Minor, with time on his hands and eager for some kind of redemptive endeavour, "responded with alacrity and enthusiasm", developing his own system for gathering and arranging quotations. What's more, he surpassed other contributors by anticipating the dictionary's most urgent needs and meeting them with thousands of contributions.

Murray had invited Minor time and again to visit Oxford. One day, he decided to make the fifty-mile train

trip to the village of Crowthorne in Berkshire. There, he took a carriage to the forbidding brick mansion. Escorted into a book-filled study on the second floor, Murray introduced himself to a man he assumed to be Dr. Minor. "I am in fact the Governor of the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum," was the embarrassed reply. "Dr. Minor is most certainly here. But he is an inmate. He has been a patient here for more than 20 years." Shocked, Murray was understandably at a loss for words. Soon, however, he accepted the fact that his chief contributor was a lunatic – though a brilliant one – and quickly befriended him.

WINCHESTER'S RETELLING of these two "inextricably and most curiously entwined" lives is framed by the story of how the Oxford English Dictionary came to be and the history of dictionary-making itself, a more unruly profession than one would expect. Indeed, the O.E.D., now revered as "a last bastion of cultured Englishness, a final echo of value from the greatest of all modern empires", would demonstrate by its very method the degree to which English is not fixed but endlessly changing. Reviewing the last, sad years, Winchester sees a cruel irony in the fact that today's advanced drug therapy could have eliminated Minor's symptoms — "but he might well have felt disinclined or unable to perform his work for Dr. Murray."

Winchester's account of Murray's and Minor's lives is no dull, dry presentation of facts and data in the style of the scholarly dissertation. Rather, it is written in stimulating prose, interspersed with appropriate quotations from letters and official records. ●

A “good rugby team”

TIM CONLEY on the two V's in Nabokov

Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)

STACY SCHIFF

Random House 1999

BESIDES BEING an author of some seventeen novels and dozens of stories, Vladimir Nabokov was a lepidopterist, a translator, a chess player, a university professor, a wit, a snob – and a husband. But as the author – that playful entity denoted by “VN” – Nabokov was, Stacy Schiff convincingly argues, the creative unity of two people.

Two remarkable people, obviously. Rhapsodic Vladimir Nabokov (pronounced, for the record, Vla-DEE-mer Na-BOW-koff) was fluent in three languages, but Véra commanded four – Russian, French, English, and German – “and she does not appear to have had a fifth, unless, as has been suggested, it was telepathy.” (She studied some basics of Italian later in life, too. Whither, one wonders, her father’s Yiddish?) Together they played a half-century-long game with each other’s identities. He was born Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokoff, published verse as “Sirin” (later praising this Russian poet in his Cornell classrooms), and came to international fame and notoriety as an assumed pedophile for that favourite target of the benevolently stupid censor, *Lolita*. She was Véra Evseevna Slonim before she began signing herself as “Mrs. Nabokov”, and in those Cornell classrooms she became “the assistant”. She called him “Volodya” or simply “V.”; he called her “Darling.”

THEY WERE married at the Wilmersdorf Rathaus, Berlin, in the spring of 1925. To say that their connection was intense would be simplistic; one is mystified by the polymorphousness of their creative collaborations. The history of Nabokov’s letters is itself a dazzling study in schizophrenia, when his butterfly signature so often appears beneath a letter he may have dictated in whole, in part, or not at all, and the writing subject dons pronouns (“we”, “VN”, “I”, “my husband”) like masks. She was at various times his typist, editor, chauffeur, translator, *ad hoc* literary agent and copyright lawyer, teaching substitute, Scrabble opponent, and always, above all, his intended reader. “Vladimir sometimes forgets things,” she once observed during their Cornell years, “but we’re like a good rugby team. We don’t have much practice, so we just use brute strength.” The most famous demonstration of her authority, and an instance of our debt to her use of it, is one of those manuscripts-rescued-from-oblivion ordeals. The manuscript of *Lolita*

came close to meeting its demise as early as the fall of 1948, when Vladimir made a trip to the trash barrel behind the Seneca Street house with his pages. Dick Keegan arrived on the scene minutes before Véra, who stepped outside to find her husband had set a fire in the galvanized can next to the back steps and was beginning to feed his papers to it. Appalled, she fished the few sheets she could from the flames. Her husband began to protest. “Get away from there!” Véra commanded, an order Vladimir obeyed as she stomped on the pages she had retrieved. “We are keeping this,” she announced.

NOTE THE TELLING pronoun. Most of Nabokov’s books are dedicated to her; in 1980 when Martin Amis inquired whether this wasn’t unusual, Véra replied with practised evasiveness:

“What should I answer? We had a very unusual relationship.”

WHERE VLADIMIR was ecstatic, she was exacting. Her wide reading and startlingly acute memory supported her own “strong opinions”. With Vladimir she savoured Flaubert, Joyce, and especially Proust, but at gatherings she harshly denounced Austen, Mann, Bellow, Solzhenitsyn, and Pasternak, her husband’s rival on the bestseller lists. Politically, she could be just as strident: Her anti-Communism was a match for that of Joseph McCarthy, whom she championed; she supported the Vietnam war and the use of violence against American student protestors; and she found William Buckley to be of the same right mind as herself. She kept a stern eye on the education of her son, Dmitri (who will clearly one day merit a biography of his own), rejecting the idea of his having to read trash like *Huckleberry Finn*. For years she kept a pistol in her purse, which she liked sometimes to show to guests.

Her Jewish heritage was a badge of honour, which she had no compunctions about announcing to anyone, including Germans during the Nationalist Socialist regime’s rise to power. She fired up in her husband a violent aversion to antisemitism. During one of their butterfly-collecting voyages across the American landscape, the couple, entering a restaurant, noticed a sign, “We welcome strictly Christian clientele.” Vladimir wasted no time. “And what would happen if little old bearded Jesus Christ drove up, in an old Ford, with his mother (black scarf, Polish accent)? That, and other questions, so intrigued me that I took apart the restaurant’s manager, leaving him and those present in an indescribable tizzy,” he recounted afterward.

One shudders to think what a dressing-down from this man would be like, particularly for a nicely bigoted

New Hampshirean of the mid-1940s. (“Véra did no such jostling on her own behalf,” notes Schiff; “her elbows were reserved for her husband.”)

AS A WRITER Schiff feeds off the romance of her story – generally an amiable trait in tone, and the romance in question is entirely fascinating – although there are moments of recognizable indulgence. Clearly envying Véra’s lifelong opportunity to hear the master’s voice reading from his work, Schiff compares it to the pleasure of listening to Callas sing “Casta Diva” from *Norma*. Who, she wonders, could possibly grow tired of such a thing? Well, anyone, I should think. (I hasten to add that I adore Callas, and put a recording of this very piece on my stereo as I continued reading *Véra*.) One can’t drink champagne all the time. But this is a rare deviation from a splendid style and voice. Both constituents of “VN” would point out that style consists of attention to detail: the research here is evident (even if a considerable amount is owed to Brian Boyd’s two-volume biography of Nabokov). And the wit is of a high calibre. The best examples of this are to be found in Schiff’s parenthetical remarks, e.g. “Nabokov complained he was afflicted by total recall, an affliction of which he could be miraculously cured by the presence of a biographer.” Observing how similar Vladimir’s letters to his adulterous lover of the late 1930s, Irina Yurievna Guadanini, are to those with which he had wooed Véra, Schiff writes, “For the more mortal among us there is cold comfort in the idea that even Nabokov could not coax two entire vocabularies out of reckless passion.”

THIS WONDERFUL portrait is extraordinary for its fleshing out of a ghost-like presence, both an aura in a body of fiction and a woman quietly determined to fade out of the public image

of a genius. Véra was and is, in Schiff’s words, “hidden in full view.” She died on April 6, 1991, and had her name perfectly added to a stone:

VLADIMIR NABOKOV
ECRIVAIN
VERA NABOKOV

P for poetry

TOM KOHUT on the primacy of porn

The Pornographer’s Poem
MICHAEL TURNER
Doubleday Canada 1999

THE PORNOGRAPHER’S POEM is Vancouver writer Michael Turner’s third novel, and a very powerful one at that. Despite the admitted influences of Angela Carter and Kathy Acker, this book reminded me mostly of Samuel Beckett’s final plays, in which a subject is compelled before an inscrutable authority to remember and re-enact its life. The structure of the novel is circular; the novel begins and ends with the question, “How old were you when you saw your first pornographic film?” (The answer, by the way, is either 13 or 16.)

Everyone, I suspect, can, with a bit of soul searching, remember when they first encountered pornography, and most, I think, can remember the sense of furtiveness that attended actually seeing naked people. (I remember the fascination that the upper magazine shelves of the local 7-ELEVEN had, and the way that something had definitely changed when my friends and I found a *Playboy* in the trashcan in the local playground,

how we hid it in the boards of the wooden fort we had built, the sense that we knew something that others didn’t.)

What Turner’s novel, with considerable brio and perceptiveness, demonstrates is that pornography is ubiquitous in society. Everyone in the novel has access to and experience with porn: the narrator’s mother, the narrator’s best friend Nettie, the neighbours, friends, even the reader (who is invited to write his/her own name in the author’s acknowledgment section). In this landscape of porn production and consumption (which is surprisingly vast – Turner’s narrator runs the gauntlet through paedophilic, straight, gay, SM, fetish, bestiality images and fantasies), everyone is implicated; no one is innocent for very long. What we are prone to believing is the most private, intimate act of communication between two people is shown to be entirely mediated and scripted through our exposure to porn.

To a large degree, Turner’s novelistic craft hits this point home more than does the bare bones of the plot (which I will refrain from telling, except to say that there was no point at which my interest flagged, and the ending left me feeling as though I had been kicked in the stomach). Turner infuses fairly conventional first-person narration with interrogatory and vaguely threatening dialogue, diary entries, letters sent and unsent, and film treatment:

EXT. MY HOUSE. DAY

I am making my way across the lawn.
The sound of a door opening. Dottie,
who is dressed in a housecoat, sticks
her head out.

DOTTIE

Psssst.

I pretend not to hear her.

These techniques often break the

narrative flow, which is prone to revisions and repetitions, moving effortlessly amid its various techniques. The overall effect is alienation; I don't think I have ever read prose describing sexual behaviour that was so resolutely unerotic this side of J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Even *Lolita*'s twisting puns and esoteric words convey a greater erotic charge than this disturbingly neutral prose. This is an accomplishment.

BUT SHOULD EROTIC writing be so unremittingly lacking in any sort of charge or tension? There are some very tender descriptions of the narrator and Nettie coming to terms with their increasing sexual awareness (but here, alas, Turner falls into cliché, giving Nettie considerable sexual knowledge when the boy narrator is still trying to figure out where to put it) and the awkwardness of one's initial erotic experiences (the *I can't believe I'm actually doing this! What am I doing anyways?* syndrome), but overall, the general tenor of the representation of sex in this novel is akin to the pornographic "and then he ... and then she ... and after a while they ..." schema. By way of contrast, *The Pornographer's Poem* has little in common with the *happy-family-who-fuck-one-another* values of *Boogie Nights*, wherein exploitation and the violence of drug addiction are resolutely kept outside the porn industry for as long as possible. Turner is completely unsentimental about the kind of person likely to be involved in the production of porn for porn's sake, rather than the more exalted vision that Nettie and the narrator share of porn as instrument for social critique.

WHICH BRINGS ME to the final point, about the Carter-inspired concept:

How pornography, if it's used properly – and by that I mean in the context of the larger world – how it can call into question all the inequalities inherent in the

way the world is organized. Or something like that. I think.

I don't particularly want to wade into the hotly contested terrain of whether there is any positive function to pornography (that it liberates people sexually, that it provides a safe fantasy space for people to act out on impulses that would otherwise bring them or others harm), or whether the existence of pornography is, by its very nature, exploitative, dehumanizing and dangerous to disempowered people (women, children, the poor who are coerced into selling themselves by the pound, as it were). I just want to point out that the pornographic terrain is a terrain of contestation, made clearer by the recent publication of feminist Susan Brownmiller's history of the women's liberation movement *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. For her, as for many others, pornography is by its very nature a tool of oppression. What is curious about Turner's novel is that, for all of the narrator's intention to use porn as social satire, there is a sense in which Brownmiller might be right; beneath the arty crowd fascinated by the conceptual issues surrounding porn (and I include myself in this number) lies an organized and lethal group of men whose only commitment is to making a fast buck, no matter whom they hurt (and there is a considerable number of dead bodies at the end of the novel).

In any event, *The Pornographer's Poem* demonstrates considerable talent. Artistically and intellectually provocative, it is unlikely, for these very reasons, to win many literary awards. ●

The Lecter circuit

JOHN G. BAILLIEU on
one man's poison

Hannibal

THOMAS HARRIS

New York: Delacorte Press 1999

HIDE THE Chianti and the fava beans: Dr. Hannibal Lecter (a.k.a. "Hannibal the Cannibal"), from Thomas Harris' best-selling *The Silence of the Lambs*, is back. *Hannibal* is spellbinding, macabre, and occasionally very well written, although not as suspenseful or fast-paced as the previous novel.

When we last encountered Dr. Lecter, he had escaped from his Memphis holding cell, in the process, savagely killing five more people. He had also telephoned FBI trainee Clarice Starling, whose most personal secrets he obtained during her interrogations of him in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, and assured her that although he was now free, he would not attempt to harm her. *Hannibal* opens seven years later with Clarice, now a full-fledged FBI agent, doing monotonous grunt work for the Bureau, her career blemished by Lecter's escape.

In the first chapter, a brilliant piece of thriller writing, Clarice and some other Federal agents are sent to raid a drug deal and arrest the kingpin. But things go terribly wrong. Amid a storm of gunfire and blood, *The Macarena* insipidly blaring from a radio, five people are killed. Clarice is blamed for the fiasco. A few days later, she receives a letter from Lecter. After informing her superiors, she is relieved of her grunt work and, temporarily forgiven her

role in the botched drug raid, sets out to find him by retracing the steps of their last confrontation.

However, Clarice is not the only one looking for the maniacal psychiatrist. Mason Verger, Lecter's sixth victim and a rare survivor, has a terrible revenge in mind. And if you thought Lecter was a monster, just wait until you meet Verger. Paralyzed from the neck down and kept alive with a respirator, the one-eyed Verger is faceless and lipless – the result of a drug experiment Lecter employed, in which Verger's face was eaten by ravenous dogs. A wealthy sadist, Verger has the financial means to organize a covert, international manhunt for Lecter. Verger is evil, Lecter's equal in viciousness and depravity; when not directly engaged in hunting Lecter, he occupies his time by terrifying young children in his mansion's daycare centre and by feeding ornamental carp to his giant moray eel. The main contest in *Hannibal*, as in *The Silence of the Lambs*, is between two monsters. Lecter and Verger are obsessed with torturing and killing each other in the most grisly manner possible.

WE FINALLY MEET Hannibal in Italy, where he has reappeared as “Dr Fell” – a Renaissance scholar whose acumen and brilliant mind allow him to fit in nicely with the other erudite scholars. This section also concerns a policeman with the Italian *Questura* who must eventually decide between police work or bounty hunting.

The most disappointing aspect of the novel is also to be found here. Harris crowds and overwhelms the reader with a tremendous amount of trivial detail about Renaissance and medieval sculpture, art, and architecture. Indeed, several chapters could have been omitted without harm to the novel's integrity. Harris' writing was much tighter and more focused in *Silence*. Occasionally, however, he

writes in language as bright and precise as a surgeon's scalpel, evoking the poetry to be found in life, horror, and evil:

The Christmas stars outside [Verger's] window maintained their stifling silence. The stars said nothing to him when he looked up to them with his pleading, goggled eye, gestured to them with the fingers he could move If he were suffocating in space, he thought, the last thing he would see would be the beautiful silent airless stars. He was suffocating now, he thought, his respirator could not keep up, he had to *wait for breath*, the lines of his vital signs Christmas-green on the scopes and spiking, little evergreens in the black forest night of the scopes. Spike of his heartbeat, systolic spike, diastolic spike. (p. 100)

Hannibal occasionally shows us the lighter, somewhat humane side of Dr Lecter. Take the scene in which Hannibal – dressed in a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey and sneaking back into the U.S. as part of an airborne tour group – prepares to dine. After years in a maximum-security cell, he can tolerate cramped quarters in the economy section of a jumbo jet but not the thought of eating airline food, “freezing-cold sandwiches of slippery meat” (p. 247). He has therefore supplied himself with a meal from Fauchon, the Paris caterer: *pâté de foie gras* and Anatolian figs. He “waits with the patience of a python” for the other passengers to fall asleep, then stealthily pulls the catered meal out from under his seat and unties the silk ribbons that hold the box shut. At this point a little boy, who has been observing him all the while, swindles the monster out of his meal, mistaking the *pâté* for a liverwurst sandwich without the bread and gobbling it down greedily. Hannibal takes the loss of his meal unexpectedly well,

finding comfort, seemingly, in the realization that he is not the only food connoisseur on the plane: “You're right,” he says to the boy, “not to eat this swill, you know. Don't ever eat it.” It is a wonderful moment, a comic ray of light that makes Hannibal all the more real and accessible to us.

SO, IS THIS THE end for Dr. Lecter and Clarice Starling? Harris is cunning enough to leave the door open for another instalment, but just a crack. We can only hope that Harris will write again, and sooner. But I would rather see him close the Hannibal/Clarice door. Familiarity, even with a monster, breeds contempt. I would prefer to remember Hannibal, in his Toronto Maple Leafs jersey, losing his carefully preserved gourmet meal to a little boy. ●

Contributors

Toronto-based poet **PHILIP ARIMA** is the author of two books of poetry: *Damaged* and *Beneath the Beauty*, both published by Insomniac Press. He has had six poetry videos produced by Vision Television, one of which is still regularly airing on *Bravo!*

JOHN BARTON is the author of *Designs from the Interior* (Anansi) and the co-editor of *Arc*. He lives in Ottawa

JOE BLADES is a writer, visual artist, and community radio broadcaster, as well as the publisher of Broken Jaw Press (www.brokenjaw.com) and *New Muse of Contempt* magazine. His latest poetry collection is *River Suite* (Insomniac Press, 1998).

RONNIE R. BROWN lives in Ottawa, where she teaches creative writing at Carleton University and struggles to make ends meet as a freelance writer. Her work has appeared in Canadian and U.S. anthologies and magazines. She is the author of two books of poetry.

NATALEE CAPLE is the author of *The Heart Is Its Own Reason* (Insomniac) and *The Plight of Happy People in an Ordinary World* (Anansi). Her poems and stories have appeared in *Descant*, *Malahat Review*, *Canadian Literature*, *Blood & Aphorisms*, and many other journals and magazines.

MARTINA MARGARETHE FREITAG was born where three borders met in Central Europe and has relished the subsequent wanderlust ever since. She teaches elementary school in Guelph, Ontario.

CLAUDIA GRAF's poems have appeared in several magazines, including *Psychopoetica*, *Raw Nervz*, and *Haiku Canada*. She is the author of *The Pond*, *Moonbeam* and *Boxes*, and co-author of *Three* and *CALLALILYPEPPERWORDS*. She is currently writing poems in the bathtub (*Ode to a Rubber Duck*) and a series based on her French-Canadian forebears.

PAUL KARAN lives in LaSalle, Quebec. His work has appeared in *Queen's Quarterly*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Whetstone*, *Afterthoughts*, *Green's Magazine*, *Jones Av.*, *The Ever Dancing Muse*, *The Iconoclast*, *Pen and Ink Magazine*, *Poetry Motel*, and *Muddy River Poetry Review*.

ROBERT KENTER is a poet, fiction writer, playwright, and performer. His work has been published widely in Canadian and U.S. journals, including *Jones Av.*, *Black Cat 115*, *ARC*, *New Quarterly*, *Rampike*, *Tight*, *Rain City Review*, *Onionhead*, *Home Planet News*, *Fell Swoop*, *paragraph*, *dandelion*, *don't quit yr day job*, *Blood & Aphorisms*, *Prairie Fire*, *Lost and Found Times*, *WRIT*, *Grain*, *Going Down Swinging*, *bad monkey*, and *ink*. He is the publisher/editor of *Ice Floe Press*, which publishes chapbooks by Canadian and U.S. writers, as well as the journal *Refrigerate After Opening*.

RICHARD KOSTELANETZ's theatrical text *Lovings* was recently produced at the Medicine Show in New York City. He is currently working on a "mechanical opera" for eight loudspeakers.

TAMARA KUZYK's work has appeared in *The Iconoclast* and *Newsletter Inago*.

J.A. LOVEGROVE has published her work in *Arachne*, *nepenthe*, *McGill Street*, *HIJ*, *Existere*, *ink magazine*, and *Hook & Ladder*. She is co-editor of *; /a magazine of poetry, etc.*

Cartoonist/comic artist **RHONDA MACK** plays guitar, draws a lot using crayola, pastels, lipstick or charcoal ("No pens or pencils allowed"), and has published her work in *Black Cat 115*, *Jones Av.*, *Beet Red*, and her own zine *Rawfish*.

JOAN MCGUIRE is a retired social worker with an interest in mythology, Jungian psychology, and dreams.

LISA M. PHIPPS is a freelance writer and photographer from Bramalea, Ontario.

DANIEL JAMES WRIGHT says he prostitutes himself as an accountant in Toronto, while flirting with a variety of literary forms and social justice issues. Samples of his work may be found at http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/Daniel_James_Wright.



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