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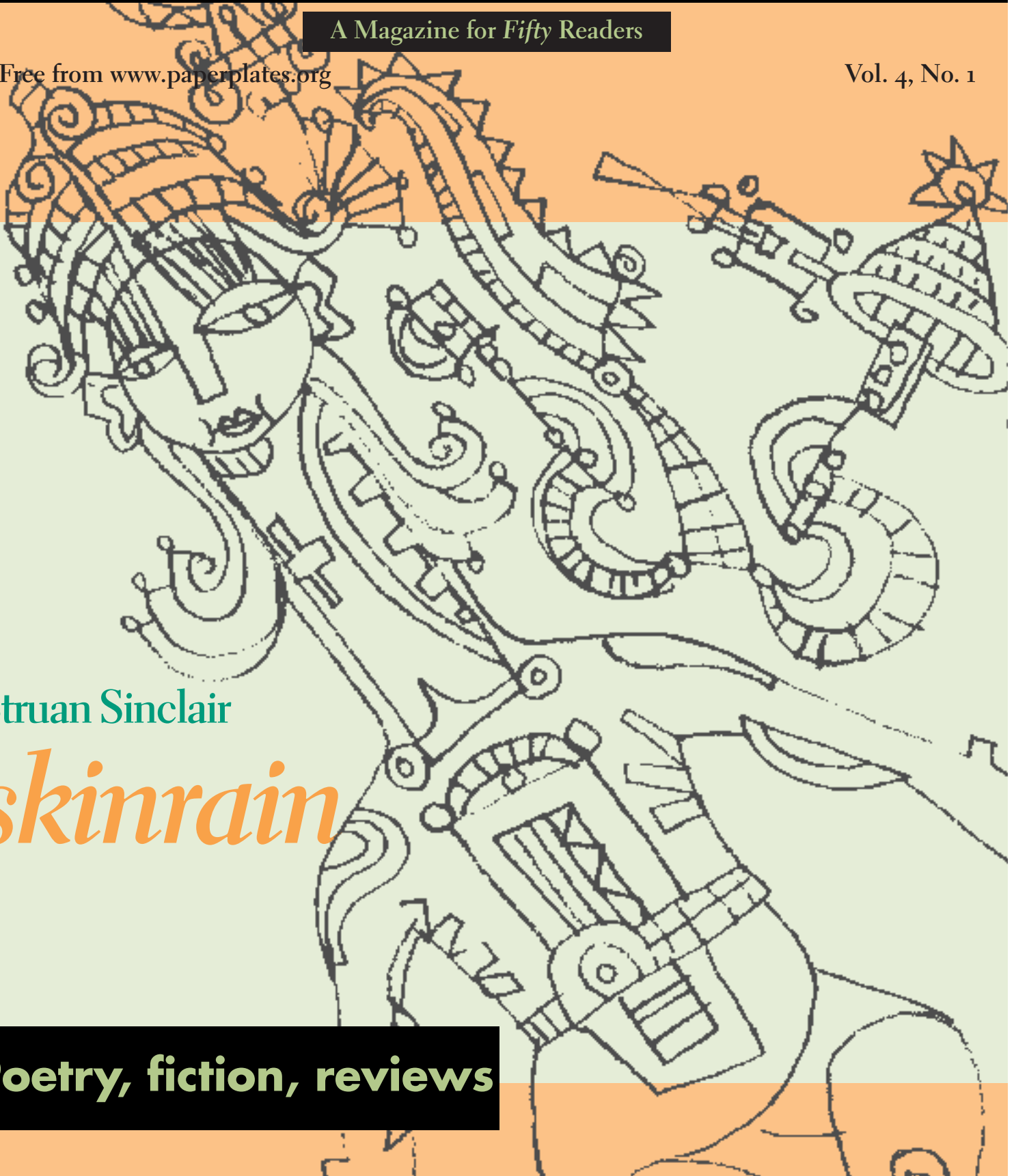
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Vol. 4, No. 1

Struan Sinclair

skinrain

Poetry, fiction, reviews



Vol. 4, No 1

5

SUSAN OLDING

A semaphore of longing

—
Outside, winter had swallowed the
afternoon Inside it was bright, fragrant
with onion and garlic, busy with the
percussive thud of a wooden spoon . . .

DEB ELLIS
*The Mother of
the Groom*

—
So this is what it feels like, she thought,
being one of the served instead of
one of the servers..

12

STRUAN SINCLAIR

Skinrain

—
In the clear water he can see his face:
sweet-potato jawline,
wide-browed grey eyes,
quizzical smile.

15

JEFFREY L. ROUND
arrangement

—
I let a spoon stray
by the window
for hours
after you left
(I could not call it back)

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submissions

We welcome submissions. For our guidelines, send a stamped self-addressed envelope to the address above, or write to guidelines@paperplates.org; or pick them up at our website. We cannot be held responsible for unsolicited material.

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Return to sender

SOME OF the contributions appearing in this issue were accepted in 1996. That is a terribly long time to wait and I apologize to those who have had to.

The leisurely approach to publishing has much to recommend it, at least from the publisher's perspective, but I'm afraid it does nothing to encourage the writers themselves, particularly if they are just beginning and need a sign from elsewhere (as well, perhaps, as from "above") that this is the right path for them to have chosen. I often wonder, while assembling the contributors' page, how much change has occurred in their lives since they so briefly described themselves.

In one respect, I am never left to wonder for very long, the post office being unusually prompt to return undeliverable mail. A few of the envelopes returned contain undelivered good news, in the form of our acceptance letters. How frustrating not to be able to reach those whose work we want to publish. (I should add that this happens even when acceptance follows closely upon submission.) I hope to use our website to repair some of these broken connections, but I would urge submitters to let us know if they're no longer living where they used to when they first wrote.

Most of the submissions we receive are, as is to be expected, either poetry or fiction. Still, we'd like to see more essays and critical pieces. Personal essays have a place of honour in our "homeplate" section. But there's room throughout for criticism of movies, theatre, and music. — Book reviews are Tim Conley's domain. If you wish to be a reviewer, write to him directly [tim@paperplates.org].

— Bernard Kelly



letters

To the editor,

I don't usually comment on poetry, but I was immediately drawn to "The woman who canned hands, sometimes fingers" by Lyn Lifshin. It reminds me somewhat of Susan Musgrave, and there's a poet I wish had continued to be prolific. What a curious modification. Fingers are part of hands, aren't they? When it's without the palms, that must be a distinctive transformation.

D. Zakss

Toronto, Ontario

A semaphore of longing: home cooking

THE HUMBLEST food can tell us we are loved. Once, for me, it was lentil soup. I'd been away for days, trying and failing to rebuild a friendship with a woman I had known for many years. In her pale blue kitchen we fuelled our increasingly frantic conversation with countless cups of coffee. She fed me tortes and meringues – pretty, showy things, cloyingly sweet, lacking in substance. It was a relief to leave.

I called to say I was coming. The house we had rented that year had a back door made of glass, and as I rounded the path behind the driveway, I could see into the kitchen. The man I love was standing at the stove, stirring something. The long string cord of his blue canvas apron was double-wrapped around his waist. His eyeglasses were foggy. Outside, winter had swallowed the afternoon; the air was dark, and bitter, and still. Inside it was bright, fragrant with onion and garlic, busy with the percussive thud of a wooden spoon against the metal pot. “You cooked,” I said, stating the obvious. He turned to me and smiled. “Soup,” he announced. “It’s ready.” One taste of it – earthy and mineral – and I knew for a fact I was home.

EATING A MEAL prepared by a person you love: What luxury compares to that complicated pleasure? For women, it may be especially seductive. Accustomed or

expected to serve others, we are unused to being served ourselves. Even if we love to cook there are days when the image of the fridge, hulking into awareness during an unguarded moment, is enough to fill us with despair. *What will we have for supper?* My mother, an avid reader of *Gourmet*, a woman trained in home economics, inaugurated each day with that lament. *Who cares?* I retorted, secure in my adolescent armour – but now I understand her better. How delicious to know, as she never knew, that someone else will look after things tonight; how delicious to know that someone else is in charge. Julie Andrews, singing, “Don’t talk of love/ Show me!”, had a sexual demonstration in mind, but in some ways the present of a meal is more expressive, more genuinely giving, and a better clue to the warmth and affinity between us.

MY FIRST LOVE was a high-school football hero. Before each game he ate Kraft Dinner, three boxes at a sitting, washed down with tumblers of milk and followed by milky tea. He used to share with me. I sat at the mock colonial table in his family’s dining *ell* while he mixed the macaroni with the phosphorescent powder. Sometimes he got creative, adding real cheese, if we were lucky, or bits of fried bologna. We sat then in companionable silence, our forks scratching a duet against plate and pot. For him, this was obedience. Coach commanded a carbohydrate meal. For me, it was rebellion. We never had Kraft Dinner at home.

A few years later we moved to the city and he enrolled in cooking school. With his heavy eyelids, prematurely receding hairline, and thick moustache, waxed at its tips and curled, already he resembled a Frenchman of the *belle époque*. Add

Carrots

You peel the carrots
near the far window overlooking
the garbage cans, and dirty snow.

Cold sun peaks awkwardly.
You squint and stop peeling
to scratch your nose.

Orange spreads,
you look down
noticing your sloppy job.

You drop the carrot
yawn and stretch.
Shiver against the coldness
that is entering through the
single paned glass.

So much time
only three more carrots.

You don’t enjoy cucumbers –
they are too watered down.
As for peppers –
all their colours taste the same.

You stick with carrots –
you munch thinking
how much better they taste
unpeeled, uncut.

One big piece.

— Abby Wener

the double-breasted white coat, the black-and-white checked pants that were his uniform, and the illusion was complete. That year he carried his knives with him everywhere, a whole orchestra of them, swaddled in heavy canvas and anchored with complicated knots. I remember the day he bought them – the long fish-filleting knife, slender like a clarinet; the *piccolo couteau d’office*, or paring knife; the sturdy, dependable *couteau à abattre*.

They were carbon steel, gunmetal grey, beautiful in the way things made for use are beautiful. Together they cost half a term's tuition, and his eyes, as he pulled the money out of his pocket to pay for them, were reverent.

Soon he was treating me to perfect omelettes, to fragrant *zabaglione*, to vegetables uniformly sliced and steamed. I liked to watch him while he worked – his big hands compressed, nails tucked under for the delicate task of dicing; the broad shoulders and thick neck blocking my view of the stove. His cooking kept us together for a long time. When we finally said goodbye he was in charge of the busy grill at a fashionable Bloor Street restaurant. I still envision him there, his moustache finally abandoned, his hands in perpetual motion, calloused and scarred from constant exposure to heat.

SHARED TASTES. We use that phrase to define compatibility. How accurate it is, how true. People who love the foods we love have a head start into our hearts. I don't mean there can never be differences – she likes Cantonese, I prefer Hunan, he wants vindaloo while I hanker after madras. Differences of that kind multiply pleasure. You try something new; you talk about it together; you learn. No – I am talking about something else, something simpler and more basic. What foods bring us back to ourselves? What foods make us feel loved?

My closest friend cooks me pasta with garlic and Portobello mushrooms, their frilled undersides as dark and pretty and mysterious as a pair of mascaraed lashes. While the sauce is simmering, she tosses arugula salad and sets a bowl of olives on the table. We pour wine and talk, and our talk, like the food we eat, is salty, meaty, spicy. I pop an olive in my mouth and my tongue absorbs the taste of all we share.

Another friend is troubled. Things have gone badly for her; she is lost to others and absent to herself. Now she is questioning all her choices, and the voice she uses is ten years younger than her chronological age. She invites some friends for dinner, seeking comfort, and serves a salad of tomatoes, warm from the vine, with onion and potato and basil pulled from her own garden. It is delicious, and we tell her so. Looking up from her plate, she blushes at our praise. Eating it, I think we are all reminded of how thrifty she can be, how practical, how resourceful. Her fundamental sanity is revealed through the food she prepares.

Food reminds us who we are and binds us to the past, yet it also opens a door to the wider world. Picture us: fair skinned women whose ancestors came from England and Scotland and Russia. What are we doing eating Italian pasta, Mediterranean olives and basil? Yet we do eat them; these are our staples; these are the foods that make us feel at home. Meanwhile, another friend, whose parents come from Hungary and Jamaica, soothes herself not with goulash, nor with roti, but instead with lemon baked chicken, a recipe borrowed from her mother-in-law's native Greece.

Food as solace, food as celebration, food as a semaphore of longing. I remember a male friend's soufflés, the way he made their success a badge of his manhood, the way he tested them first on me and then fed them to the women who attracted him. More than ten years have passed since then, and for most of those years he has lived outside the country. He is still unmarried. In the time he has been away, his family has suffered – setbacks of all kinds, illnesses, the sudden death of his father. When he visited me last summer he stood at my wooden counter chopping peppers for his

grandmother's chicken curry. From his pocket he pulled spices, ground by his mother's hand.

*dressing languidly
cool light falling
on my legs
I felt like
watching you cook
and then eating
all the chocolate*

IMARRIED A man who seldom cooked. When he did, he made ambitious, elaborate meals composed of many courses. It was rich food, swollen with butter and cream, and it made me feel smothered and guilty. Smothered and guilty was also how I felt in his arms. Look at the fuss he had made. I ought to be happy. Another woman *would* be happy; I must be happy. I must. Meanwhile, my real needs went unsatisfied.

The man I love now knows me better. The first meal he made me was a taste of the pleasures to come. His invitation was spontaneous; we met by chance and by chance discovered we were both unoccupied that night. As it happened, it was my birthday, and although I did not tell him, I had not wanted to be alone. January – beyond cold – and my boots bit into the snow on the walk to his place. From the long low window in his second-floor dining room I could see the bare branches of trees.

He cooked salmon, sautéed with celery and onion, scented with red wine vinegar; and potatoes, diced and fried. Later, we ate a bittersweet salad of endive and carrot. Finally, for dessert, a homemade grapefruit ice. By then, his twelve-year-old daughter had joined us and was telling us about the movie she had been to with her friends. The candles melted onto their glass stands as we talked.

There was nothing contrived about the food, nothing pompous, or stuffy,

or proud. It was earthy and vivid and audacious, and in its richness, I tasted warmth and generosity; in its sprightliness, I tasted humour, and an agile, curious mind. I ate that meal with gusto and with gratitude; with the sense that I was home, and that home spelled fresh adventure.

– Susan Olding

Cheque phobia

WHAT IS IT with the cheque phobia lately? I went to a major grocery chain outlet to pick up a few groceries. I had a pre-approval card that supposedly fast-tracks cheque approval at the cash register.

After presenting my cheque, I was bombarded with questions by the clerks: *Where did I get my approval card? Is that my present phone number?*

Noticing their obvious reluctance, I offered cash, whereupon the clerk remarked, “That’s okay. I’ll take a chance on you.”

What chance? I wondered. I’ve never written a bad cheque in my life.

By this time, the wrapper had joined the conversation. “We are getting so many bad cheques lately.”

I told him that another store down the road accepted my cheques without hassle.

Embarrassed, angry, and curious, I left the store. I was embarrassed because a line of customers overheard the wrangling. How were they to know that I’d never written a bad cheque?

I was angry because I’ve been buying groceries at this store at least ten years, since they first opened with talking tills. Now they “make strange”.

I was also curious. Why did this store suddenly question my cheque when I have a history with them?

Why were they chasing customers away?

Well, on to the clothing store. I bought two sweaters and wrote a cheque. Two days later, I returned one sweater, which was a little too small. The clerk told me I must wait for ten days from date of cheque, until the cheque passed at the bank. Then I could return and collect my money, which I did.

“Why the wait?” I queried.

“You know what some people do? They purchase clothing with a rubber cheque, return the goods, get their money back, and we’re stuck with the bad cheque.”

By this time, I was less huffy.

Moving along to the gas station, I was told by the attendant they would no longer take cheques as payment for gas.

“Why?” I asked.

The manager explained that he had lost four-hundred dollars in bad cheques the previous month.

I’m beginning to see the merchants’ problem. However, the honest are punished with the dishonest.

– L. Jans

Ghost of my daydream

I imagine death a calming,
experience
A place so beautiful,
I beg to be let in

This beautiful place
is a duplicate of my childhood
with my grandpa

In my daydream ...

I walk into *déjà vu*
see him,
sitting at the table
in the living room,
where he once lived

He’s waiting for me
with cigarette in hand,
smoke pouring out of his mouth
(the thing that killed him)

He will welcome me,
a smile and a wink
And with no words we
play yahtzee
not keeping score or time

I want to hug him,
Tell him I love him
but the smoke which churns
around him is a barrier
separating us from contact

And I watch him,
dice rolling through the air,
slipping through his thin hands

– Sarah Vermette

Live at Montreaux with Quincy Jones/Late at Heaven's Gate

The critics say no one saw the red light, but you did, didn't you Miles? You knew. You didn't really want to play this gig. You hadn't looked over your shoulder in over forty years and had no intention of doing so here. Gil himself wouldn't have wanted you to pay him homage this way.

Your chops were down; you had been playing fewer notes for years. A kind of Dashiell Hammett of the horn, you'd moved to the clean white space between the notes. Played mostly with a Harmon mute, your solos spare and few, mostly mixed down in the pocket of an African groove.

You were deeper into the blues than hard bop had let you go, were cozier than Cosey playing behind the fusillade of amps while Mtume and Foster laid down a fat funky stew for you to play your Cry Baby through. The bands since '81 were funky too, though you were back in a simpler cool groove.

Many of the critics had abandoned you. Thought *Decoy*, *Arrest*, *Tutu*, and *Amandla* were boring retro-fitted vehicles for you to toot-tootle your diminished self through. Funky bumper cars with no more oomph than gangsta rap or a *Miami Vice* score: all pretty pastel, two-day stubble, white boy funk.

So to re-do arrangements from *The Birth of The Cool* to *Sketches of Spain* seemed wrong – not just a retrospective nod but a swan song. You didn't have the lungs. Even with Wallace Roney handling pyrotechnics and flash solos, you'd put yourself in the shade. But Quincy prevailed and you mustered the jam, took centre stage.

Weak, frail, cotton-mouthed, you'd prove ol' Elwood was right about vibrato and quiver your quavering notes through the knots in your belly. But we loved you, Miles, and you were paying us the supreme compliment of a last bow. How could we not applaud?

How could we even look for angels in the wings?

You broke the speed of the sound of loneliness record that day. Couldn't have brought the moon closer if you'd played *Moon Germs* with Jeru. Gil's dewlaps would have runnelled with tears to see the white of your scared-rabbit eyes as you sought Quincy's approval nod after nod. You had more than Wallace in your corner then.

You had Sugar Ray, Elwood, Dizzy and Bird. You ascended on a note purer than the last from Gabriel's horn. Scorched earth. Burned pure as an oxyacetylene flame through sheets of Coltrane steel. Heated more souls and gilded more grey hairs than Mother Theresa, each note an expanding halo of blue smoke.

Two months and too few performances later, you'd play *Hannibal* at the Hollywood Bowl and the elephants would come for you over the mountain peaks east of Malibu. No one, not even a charlatan in harlequin would shake the shakere or pick up your horn to trumpet the vanguard through heaven's gate.

Some say you were dead when you returned from six years of silence back in eighty-one. You weren't in the vanguard. Chose to recap rather than re-invent the music *then*. Nothing was as audacious or daring as *Agharta* or *Pangaea*, Tokyo 1975. You scorched earth and hung up a smoking blue horn. Some say.

Others say they see a cool cat cleaner than a broke dick dog wearing a silk kimono with dragon emblazoned across his bare chest. He's holding a shiny new Martin B-flat trumpet with blue lacquer finish and gold-plated trim designed by Larry Ramirez at G. Leblanc Corp. in his right hand. His left is adjusting black shades.

He's up there on cloud nine. Got his horn rigged to a Sampson CT6 microphone, wireless AKG transmitter and CX1 capsule. On hand beside him are an Oberheim OBX, a Yamaha DX7, and a Roland D50 from home. *Ladies and Gentlemen, Angels and Hipsters, please welcome God (He only thinks he is Miles.)*

– Richard Stevenson

*See you
next fall*

CLARENCE PEMBERLY sat where he always sat, near the front of the bus, directly behind Ariel. He had never spoken to Ariel, but he was desperately in love with her. Each day for the past year he would get on the bus and she would be sitting there reading or talking with her friend Carol, who sat beside her. He would quickly glance at her and then take his seat behind her. It was an early morning bus. He would watch the light brown sheen of her long curling hair reflected in the sun. Sometimes he would lean forward, pretending to adjust his briefcase, and deeply inhale the wonderful fragrance of her flowing locks. He would carry the memory of the scent with him all day long. He would listen to her singsong voice, which gave him goosebumps, and eavesdrop every chance he got, although, because of the loud drone of the bus, after a year, all he knew about her was she was single and owned a Siamese cat.

Clarence was also single. He didn't own a cat, but he had purchased numerous books about cats in hopes of somehow endearing himself to Ariel. Clarence, who was 34, worked at Metropolitan Policy Life Insurance as an actuary. He was on the short side, barely five and a half feet, and had a slight but trim build. His brown hair was thinning, his moustache neatly trimmed.

Each day he would catch the 7:15 bus and head into the office, to spend the day poring through infinitely long lists of numbers, and then head to the health club for an hour of swimming. Returning home, he would have a light supper, a toasted cheese sandwich or tuna-fish salad or, sometimes, a frozen dinner, then practise violin for an hour and then read himself to sleep. On Saturdays, he played informally with a string quartet at Phyllis's home. Phyllis and he had become friends over the past five years of playing, although she always seemed to want something more than just friendship. Sundays he left open for any number of things: visiting his parents, seeing a concert, going to a movie with Phyllis, taking a walk. It was a routine he had lived with for as long as he could remember.

But today Clarence would break with routine. Today Clarence would make contact with Ariel, the woman of his dreams. He had decided he would literally throw himself at her feet. He would fake a fall, and when he ended up at her pretty feet, she would have to lean over and ask him if he were all right, and their eyes would finally meet, and he would think of something clever to say. He would throw caution, solemnity, and, yes, even dignity to the wind, just to get close to Ariel. After that, he wasn't sure what would happen. He couldn't think that far ahead. He just knew he must make this first step, even though it was a false one.

It was time. Clarence gripped his briefcase, rose, and stepped out into the aisle. His pulse raced. He took a deep breath – “God hates a coward,” he thought – and lunged for the woman he loved. At that very instant, the bus veered violently to the right, to avoid an errant car. When Clarence came to rest, he found himself sitting in the lap of one Holly Swanson, who smiled up at him and said, “Do you come here often?”

Space poems

I CROWDED SIDEWALKS

After dark, I needed to walk fast.
I walked into a lady who carried cake, scared her.

On the subway, I craved an apple (carved it with my teeth).
I received a Grandfather reprimand, a tirade against my
rudeness,
my impulse (guilt).

Casts me down. Ties me up. My hands. My tongue.
Confines me.

II TO TAKE THIS SPACE

face it
soft & silent around
the only form the body filling out
feeling the movement
inside finger tips
in thought patterns
waving like willow branches
I oo sen ing gently

frightening too, that choice
made splays into formlessness sparks & is lost
all the filling thoughts
shrinkretreat
in the grasping through so much

not to fear
roll oneself up
soft belly inside
but to love this space
reach through it
welcome
stillness.

III SHEER ICY SPACE

initial bravery
upsurge of air
in the face
breath-taking
left with breath
still here
stand hear my own
voice
wild summons
rock
back forth to fro
lost found

lost
here
cold at fingertips
knuckles wrists
move with it
rub warm sensation begins
genuine & gradual
to take the
impassable space
move forms
through it

or place kept
within it
chin on knees
arms folded form called forth
from this space

– Colleen Gray

Icicles

The icicles hung all winter
from the eaves of our town's houses,
sometimes so long they touched the snow below,
and turned yellow where thickest.

They hung until March if left alone,
but more likely were broken by some kid
with stick or snowballs,
or some man with an axe,
or when the eaves came undone.
Few survived the long winter.
Created by thaws,
they died in thaws.

Those small ones that fell
were eaten, often by children who chewed
their pointed tips or sucked
their clear silver on the way to school,
sometimes sticking to woolen mitts.

So fragile, so edible,
they were my earliest measure
of time and endurance
and
they were a privilege
of that time and place.

– *Barry Butson*

Sometimes, the spinster

Sometimes, the spinster leaves windows open. Never
understood why porcelain dolls don't breathe or run away.

Sometimes, the spinster sniffs her breakfast through a straw.
Jimmy gives her junk for cheap. Says he's got a soft spot for
grandmotherly types. Jimmy's doing her Venezuelan
housekeeper.

Sometimes, the spinster dies in her dreams, makes her
scared. Says goodnight to her cat – says, "Off to my death
bed."

Sometimes, the spinster cries. "Goes with the job," she
says, "knew the risks when I picked the path."

The spinster never spins anymore. Porcelain dolls and
South American staffers snicker, cat looks on with loving
eyes.

– *Patrick Thornton*

my sister is a bad girl

she asks me what i wanted
i have no answer for her

every night before she goes to sleep
our parents tell her a new lie

down on wounded knees she goes
she takes bills from men she

can't look in the eyes and i
know it's all a lie

my sister
my sister
my sister

is a bad girl

– *Ruba Nadda*

DEB ELLIS

The **Mother** *of the* **Groom**

THE CHURCH basement was a study in grey, in spite of the garlands of Kleenex flowers and the tissue-paper bells from Value Mart. Mrs Simon felt she was looking at a black and white photograph, but as she rubbed her eyes, she concluded she was just tired. At least I'm the mother of the groom, she thought. I can just sit here and be waited on. If I were the mother of the bride, I'd have to fuss around and play hostess. Mrs Simon had produced and raised a man-child, and that singular accomplishment was her only required contribution to the wedding party. She could simply wait to have paper plates of potato salad and cakes served to her by her son. Surely, convention and the formality of the occasion would induce him to do that much.

The black metal folding chairs the church provided were uncomfortable, even to Mrs Simon's ample backside, and yet she didn't squirm. She'd been uncomfortable before, and had learned long ago to keep from showing it. Young women today hadn't learned that skill, hadn't cared to learn it. When they got uncomfortable, they whined and complained, and changed position, as if being comfortable was a virtue. If so, it's the only virtue they'll ever know, thought Mrs Simon.

Most of the guests had not yet made their way down from the sanctuary, and the church basement was empty enough for noises to echo slightly as the vibrations bounced off the walls of the Sunday School rooms that surrounded the big hall. Off to one side, members of Mrs Simon's Ladies Guild group were busy in the kitchen, laying out platters of cold ham, dainty dishes of pickles, bowls of jellied salad crowned by miniature marshmallows. Usually, Mrs Simon would be in there with them, and she saw the ghost of herself, moving among them, emptying cartons of cream into pitchers, and fussing over missing dessert spoons. So this is what it feels like, she thought, being one of the served instead of one of the servers. She rolled the experience over in her mind, a piece of new candy on her tongue she wasn't sure she liked the taste of.

Her new daughter-in-law stood ramrod straight at the other end of the hall. The Ladies Guild had placed a snow-white sheet down on the cement floor, and had held the edges of the bridal gown while the young woman stepped onto the centre of the sheet. No matter how many buckets of cleaning solution were mopped across it, the basement floor was never really clean, and the rented gown had to go back to the Bridal Boutique the next morning. The mother of the bride had to get it back before noon. The mother of the groom didn't have to do anything.

Isn't even keeping her gown, Mrs Simon thought, disapprovingly. Won't even

have that to look at when things get hard. Won't be able to go to the attic and open the trunk and finger the white lace and breathe in the mothballs and remember what it was like to be young. Mrs Simon smiled at the picture in her head of her daughter-in-law, aging prematurely from the rough treatment from her beast of a husband, searching frantically for something to remind her of her former life and finding nothing, nothing.

That'll wipe that pure, innocent, sweet expression from your face, Mrs Simon thought with glee. You'll soon look like the rest of us. All your dreams of home and happiness will turn sour in your mouth, and your eyes will become sad and mean.

The Guild had placed the bride poorly, close to the buffet table. The Ladies had to walk around her with trays of napkin-wrapped cutlery, buttered rolls, and little radishes cut to look like roses. She looked like the life-sized version of the tiny figure on top of the wedding cake.

The cake was cardboard and paste, just for show. It, too, was rented. Later on, her new daughter-in-law and her great beast of a son would pose awkwardly beside the pretend cake and, his hand on top of hers, pretend to cut a slice together. The lady guests would receive tiny slivers of fruitcake, wrapped in cellophane and tied with yellow ribbon, to put under their pillows at night, to dream on. Mrs Simon never saved her cake. Food in the bed drew bugs.

The bride stood all alone. Mrs Simon took pleasure in the girl's loneliness. The groom was outside, smoking with his father and his friends. Their loud, rough voices drifted in through the windows, as they laughed and replayed last night's baseball game. Mrs Simon's face showed not a flicker as one lewd joke and then another was told to her son, accompanied by guffaws and slaps on the back. Her new daughter-in-law had no such control. She blushed, looked at the floor, started to bite her lip, then remembered she was on display and relaxed her mouth. She's a daisy waiting to be picked, Mrs Simon thought. She'll be picked and then she'll wilt, and then she'll die, die at the hands of my rough beast son, who is just like his rough beast father.

AS IF ON CUE, the stairs thundered with the noise of a thousand wildebeests on a rampage, as the groom, his buddies, and his father came into the basement, blinking away the bright light of the outside. The groom walked right past his mother, until a sharp call, like the angry caw of a crow, brought him back to place an equally sharp kiss on his mother's cheek. Mr Simon, Sr., walked directly to the buffet table, teasing one of the Ladies as he heaped his paper plate with bean salad. He was soon joined by the other men, who stepped around the bride as if she were but a traffic cone. The groom brought his new wife a plate of food, but real-

ized she could not risk spoiling her rented dress. He ate her meal, too, going directly from his plate to hers.

Mrs Simon had to get her own food. She wasn't surprised. Her son was just like his father. The days when she could hold him in her arms and be patted with wide-eyed, childish affection had ended as soon as he could crawl. She had ceased to exist for him, except as a cook, nurse, and laundress, and only by a constant nagging could she get him to acknowledge her presence. Well, now he was moving on, and she would only have one of them around to disappoint her.

Mrs Simon returned to the buffet table for dessert, and, on a whim, went over near her daughter-in-law, and ate her berry-crumble standing up. The crowd of admirers had melted away, leaving just one maiden aunt making awkward attempts at conversation with a girl who had grown very weary of the whole thing. The harsh dieting leading up to and including this day did not make her feel any better, just thinner. She kept looking around for her new husband.

He won't save you, Mrs Simon almost said aloud. Instead, she took a few steps toward the girl, dismissing the maiden aunt to have a few minutes alone with her new daughter-in-law.

THE GIRL LOOKED even younger with weariness and hunger. A wave of uncharacteristic tenderness swept across Mrs Simon's heart. This girl could love me, she thought. She could be a real daughter and be kind to me and make my life easier. She had visions of the young woman doing housework at her mother-in-law's home, bringing casseroles and potted plants she hopes will give the older woman joy. It wouldn't take much, Mrs Simon thought. Just one kind word from me now, and the girl will be so grateful she'll serve me the rest of my days.

A sentence formed in Mrs Simon's mind and had almost reached her vocal chords when her large, oafish son clumped over and snatched his bride away. Mrs Simon watched them leave the church basement, her new daughter-in-law awkwardly holding up the hem of the wedding dress that was worn by dozens of brides before her and would be worn by dozens of brides after. In an instant, the groom had dragged his bride through the door, and the mother of the groom stood alone, looking down the years to come, full of the same lonely drudgery that had made up her life to this point. "Rough beasts," she muttered. "Men are such rough beasts."

The guitar

The guitar sweats glistening notes
that spread like raindrops
on the window pane at night.
The scatter, like stardust
or sperm
or tears on a woman's glasses,
their starriness sweet sorrow,
perfection in painful memories
of loss.

These little marks

These little marks
scratches, blurry spots
scar the blue spring sky
with its fluffy clouds,
and pock-mark the robin
hopping on the lawn
and fog the youths roaring by
on motorcycles.
Damage to the glare free coating
is bad enough.
These glitches and floaters
can't be on my eyes.
I've read too much of Joyce
clinging to Nora's arm
en route to the opera
or writing lying down on the bed
needing the white glare from the sheets
using a thick carpenter's pencil
and writing of sounds
not sights,
the "plock, plock"
of tennis balls on green summer lawns.
As I walk, knees creak
sides pain
back twinges
skin on hands and neck
wrinkles in the cold.
Who cares?
But please
not these
eyes.

When I was first married

When I was first married
and pressured to conform – to lose my identity
in his – I would say,
"We're not Siamese twins, you know,
not Chang and Eng.
I'm a person in my own right
with my own abilities and dreams."

True enough, well and good,
and still,
after almost twenty years
that bridge of flesh
still reaches out
from him to me.
Joined from time to time
we're not Chang and Eng
but Yin and Yang

– *Ruth Latta*

Skinrain

LEON IS ON HIS WAY, he is on his way home. He strides briskly, swinging his heavy briefcase, packed with papers: memos, faxes, contracts, gift ideas from *Reader's Digest*. The day is wet, and every now and then the slosh and skein of car tires grazes his traffic ear. The crosswalk storm sewer is clogged and overflowing; a sudden surge of water grips and soaks his ankles. Momentarily distracted, he fails to hear the lunatic grunts of a lone car braking, striking solids, reversing, fading out ...

LEON IS ON HIS WAY, he is on his way home. He strides briskly, swinging his heavy briefcase. As he walks he imagines the inner workings of an artesian stream bordering a cottage he rents for two weeks in the summer

“Come back renewed!” his boss always says, hearty as a back slap.

The stream is narrow near the cottage, though of course it must be wider at its source, which Leon has never seen. He has a gaudy, potent dream of one day following the stream, over hills smooth as bumps in a blanket, through cool, bird-stirred woods, to its very origins, and there, lowering himself ...

A stab of light startles him, the rapier glint off a puddle he might have walked right by. A large puddle, gravel-lipped, busy with ripples like sled tracks. He leans in for a closer look, puts down his briefcase. His briefcase – Where has it gone? It was in his hand a moment ago.

In the clear water he can see his face: sweet-potato jawline, wide-browed grey eyes, quizzical smile. He tries on a few expressions, bobs to and fro in a brief St Vitus.

“Accidents happen,” sighs a voice to his left.

Leon looks up. There is no one nearby that he can see. The voice hails him again.

“Accidents happen in a few inches of water. Step this way please. Please.”

Leon takes a step or two and stops, sceptical. Before him the puddle gleams invitingly, seeming to rise from the road, though this is impossible.

He prods it with his boot. “You rascal,” he says. “You rascal – I thought it was you.”

“Go on,” a different voice urges. “Do something!”

Leon checks the street. Bold paint trails; the disappearing halogens of a speeding car. Otherwise, he is alone. He taps gently at the shallow pill of water. It feels dense and pliant. Experimentally he plucks its edge, rolls it away from him, as he was once taught to ladle soup. The surface wobbles like fortified gelatin; bits of

twig and crumbly soil stucco the underside. He tucks and rolls, achieving a fine waxpaper finish, he lifts it – it is lighter than he thought. Now he works confidently, ironing out creases, using a bottlecap to cinch the last bit into place. The rubber cap-liner is a token in some forgotten promotion, a simulacrum of a playing card: YOU HAVE GAINED THE JOKER! THE JOKER IS WILD!

When he is finished it is tight and dry, a sea scroll snug in the bell of his umbrella.

“This is a wonder!” he says, and heads home.

JUST A BLOCK FROM his house a man takes photographs behind a fancy tripod camera with a bright, showering flash. Leon tilts his head politely, but the man appears not to see him, intent on his spooling and clicking. People want pictures of everything.

The house seems to have warped slightly since he left this morning, raked to one side, like a sailor’s cap. His lawn hangnails from its flagstone cuticles, retreating in raggedy strips. The bay windows have the glazed look of heated plastic. A natural effect of the rain, no doubt. Natural as a rainbow.

Leon gives each eyelid a tug to clear his vision, walks through the sliding front doors, glances at the post, tucks the umbrella into the stand, then remembers, totes it upstairs.

Ramona is in the living room, filling out the daily crossword. As always, she uses a pen, to prevent backsliding.

“Welcome home, warrior,” she says. “Warrior being a seven-letter synonym for soldier. And vice-versa.”

“You look subtly different,” he tells her. She laughs, slides down the bench to greet him, captures his mouth in a long, drinking kiss.

“There,” she breathes, releasing him. Her lips are white-pink, strawberry hearts, pleasantly tart, much warmer than his own.

“Do I feel cold to you?”

She kisses him again. “Not yet.”

They sit down to eat. The meal, a stew, is hot and finely seasoned. He takes seconds, touches napkin to teeth to clear the clinging shreds of herbs, pronounces it a perfect supper.

“Delicious!” he raves. “The flavours really meshed.”

They share a few inches of vintage port in a souvenir tumbler. *Sun y Florid*, it reads. Somewhere, Leon thinks, those faded letters are enjoying themselves, free of all responsibility, handed loss on a platter. There, in the tawny light, she covers him, mapping her body onto his, the rich odour of root vegetables. They improvise a happy mess; they lie in the bed they made. She props her chin on his chest, a tee on a golf green, and stares up at him.

“What will you remember?” she asks.

Hours later, masked by her mild breathing and dream-talk, he steals from the room, finds the puddle, wrapped closely about his umbrella’s metal stem, transports it to the study, unrolls it along the floor. It glistens and pulses, heaving tiny, urgent breaths.

Again he sees his face there, widescreen, a smile broad and bright as whales surfacing. “Goodnight!” he says, and it shivers at him weakly, with a moderate thanks.

LEON IS ON HIS WAY, he is on his way home. Striding briskly, housekeys jaggged in his pocket, their pressure on his pelvis reminding him of the closeness of nerve to world. The air on his bare neck is bakery-warm. The sun shone brightly all day, drying yesterday’s moisture to dust. On the opposite sidewalk, two men carry an empty cot, tan canvas over an aluminium frame, shedding sizzling drips on to the ground. The canvas is dark with damp.

“Nice afternoon,” says Leon, with an inclusive grin. The men just carry on walking. People are busy. If time is money, conversation costs.

Two turns from home Leon hears a miniature scream from underneath a truck – *Help!* spoken without consonants. He has a moment of indecision.

“Oh, hell,” he scolds himself. “Is this what things have come to? What if it was you?”

Tracing the sound is difficult because of the truck’s low bodywork, a vestigial skeleton. Eventually he spots a driver’s side glimmer, the light from an eye in the bowl of a spoon, crawls over to examine it. As he works he watches his reflection, all etching and contour – a monochrome tattoo. He looks drawn. His cheeks are orchid curtains parted by a peeping nose. His mouth is slack and rubbery, a collapsed inner tube. There’s inkwells where his eyes were, shadows of wounds on his temples ...

There it is. “Poor little fellow!” he says, sympathetically. With his thumb and forefinger he finds its raised edge, rim-rolls it like a Persian carpet, taking care to avoid tearing or spills, pops it in his pocket, next to his newspaper.

THE CROSSWALK IS alive with plastic yellow tape. A twist jitterbugs up to partner him, does a few mid-air steps, spins him out and back, dips him, favours him with a dry, airless kiss, skips away. Reflexively, he reaches for his briefcase ... What has he done with his briefcase? He looks up to see it soaring, split like a pistachio nut, casting its contents from sea to sea. His flyaway papers litter the street, a tedious tick-er-tape, settling on windcreens, shop windows; one is sucked like a stocking over a pedestrian’s nose and mouth.

He barely walks a block before he is home. He doublechecks the address, just in case. Things have worsened

since he left it last. The lawn pares back like gruyère before the blade. His verandah tilts precipitously, the gables droop, the bay windows flicker with swamp fire. More unsettling, all of this makes sense to him, it has the clarity of something learned by rote, the clarity of grammar.

He lets himself in, it's as easy as wading. Ramona looks very fresh and healthy. Appealing, like fine produce.

"You've had a scratch!" she says, examining and then gently manipulating his forehead, scraping, scraping. The soft, skinny sound of a sunburn peeling.

"All gone!"

Leon sniffs, sniffles, jackhammer sneezes. "There's something funny in the air."

"My new perfume. They've synthesized harmony into a smell like ageing roses."

"A rose is a rose," he recites, one arm extended in his best Lord Byron.

"And so on. A fellow on the radio had a point: 'Science trims our lives with greatness.' I was of two minds."

"Two minds are better than one. And what about yours? Anything doing?"

"Oh, a little bit of this and that." She stares at him. "Your clothes – they're a mess!" From one billowing sleeve she conjures a loose cotton gown, pimento~green and collarless, with an alpine neckline. It bowties at the back, just above his buttocks.

"Let me put this on." He stands patiently while she strips his jacket, tie, Oxford shirt, pants. He raises his arms and leans forward so that she is able to pull it over him.

"Better?" she asks.

"You make me better," he tells her. "You always have."

They go to bed. She is shy with him. He makes a comb of his knuckles, ripples it through her hair fluently as undertow. When his arms begin to ache he unwinds his tongue, licking and grooming her, tasting the salt at her toes and the stretched bottoms of her breasts, the sun-tang of her freckles, dotted moleskin. Her spine is a mystery to him.

DOWNSTAIRS HE TIPS a puddle from his raincoat, palms its calm surface. Wavelets appear, small and straight as dropped hairs.

He wanders over to yesterday's puddle, smartly dowelled along the baseboard.

"Sleep tight," he says.

"And you."

Startled, he speaks louder than he intended. "Back there, on the street – it was you!"

"It's late. Rest."

"You spoke to me back there! Spoke to me, like an old friend!"

The puddle sighs, breeze through a culvert.

Reincarnation

I
if i were to be
reincarnated
 i would like
 to return
as a poison arrow frog

so brightly red
 warning deadly
 & cerulean

bearing a quite young
or two
on my back
 to drop off
in a cupped plant full of
safe water –
 to feed
on mosquito larvae
& the occasional
infertile egg.

II
or a butterfly
 delicate in three
life stories
coming out
 twice
 & sucking only at
pretty flower throats –
 flying on
good winds above
every dead thing
below.

– Brian Rigg

"Do all of you speak?"

"Those who have voices. And something to say."

"What do you call yourself? I mean, what do you go by? I'll have to call you something. How about Seth? That's a Biblical name."

Seth is silent.

"Why did you choose me?" Leon asks. "This city of millions, this crowded glass ..."

“Things creep up on you,” Seth says, finally. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Leon answers. Then, more sprightly, “Goodnight, all!”

Back in bed, he closes his eyes, only to realize that they’re already closed. Things are creeping up on him. As it should be.



LEON IS ON HIS WAY, he is on his way home, walking a route so precise he might have drilled it. No matter where he leaves from or where he wants to go, he always ends up in the same place, a two-block quadrangle centering on his house. Within this pattern reside unarticulated truths: life has a modest diameter; all creatures great and small organize themselves around a theme.

Everywhere he looks, he finds puddles: nudged into cracks between paving stones, loitering by kerbs, making muddy mirrors over asphalt potholes and bone-pits dug by dogs. Tooled up with a whisk broom and a spatula, he finds and collects them to store in his study, now a controlled climate, maintained with sundrapes and humidifiers he has recently installed. With this come rules. For example, the study stays locked.

“For your own comfort and safety,” he informs them. “Please note the exit nearest you,” he continues in his best flight-attendant. There are twenty-odd puddles: round and ragged, bright and dull, shallow and deep, even and lopsided, clear and cloudy, loquacious and silent. Sovereign continents, each with their local weather system: oily calm, foaming surf, line squall. Each supporting a unique, limited ecology: spine grass, monarch snails, acrobatic waterspiders. Surveying his parquet floor, Leon feels like a duke on the Grand Tour.

As more guests arrive, he starts to lose track, decides to have a go at naming them.

“Well, you’re Seth, of course. And you look like a Maryanna,” he says, pointing to a curvy jewel beside him. By the time the collection reaches forty, Leon has run out of names. During roll-call he discovers three Williams. He gives up.

“I feel like a teacher taking attendance. All these names, they’re wearing me out. Not that I’m not fond of you, just that ... Just that naming is an act of violence.” A guilty twinge. “But Seth will always be Seth!”

Leon pauses, irresistibly drawn to his reflection percolating from puddle to puddle, contiguous screens. Wherever he looks, a receding echo of the man he was moments earlier. This pale nervous creature – it can’t be him. He wiggles his nose. The man in the puddle wiggles back; sarcastically,

it seems to Leon. He pulls a goon-face, sticks his tongue out, makes mouse-ears with his hands. The man in the puddle does the same, contemptuously.

“It is me – but worse!” Leon says, shocked.

THERE CAN BE NO doubt: he is changing. Why is this surprising? Awake at all hours – miles and miles of walking by day, in and out of bed ten, fifteen times nightly. Turbid dreams, stalked by horrors vivid and foetid as algal blooms. Constant noise, a shrill electric chirping like birds plugged into wall sockets. Disorienting sensations, a sudden upstream pumping in his veins.

“You’re a wreck,” Ramona says. “You’re overextending yourself.” She peers at his eyes. “There’s a lot of water in them,” she whispers. “Not quite see-through.”

“Things are clear. They are clearer than ever!”

“Will you go see a doctor? A specialist?”

“I see beautifully. Here, hold up your fingers – go on!”

She flicks her fingers, rapid dulcimer strikes. He can’t keep up, let alone count. “There. Now, will you go see someone – just in case?”

He pauses, ashamed. She never pleads with him.

“Yes.”

“Tomorrow?”

He is moved by her worry. “Tomorrow. Tomorrow, indeed.”

They kiss, and he tries to ignore the high, percussive humming deep in his chest, waterfalls in his bloodstream.

LEON IS ON HIS WAY to the doctor, feeling out of place, vulgar as champagne served from a boot. The doctor operates out of a van. He appears at the rear doors, devilishly charming in a yellow fire-proof jumpsuit. “You never know when you’ve got to dodge a flame,” he says merrily. “Best to be prepared for everything. And it’s very nicely tailored.”

On cue, a nurse pops out, dressed head-to-toe in stiff blue linen. “A wonderful woman,” says the gallant doctor. “Ornament to the profession. And a good hand with an intravenous. Good, steady hand. Huh! What did you say the problem was?”

“Water on the eye,” explains Ramona.

“All the world’s particles are visible in a few inches of water,” Leon objects. “This is an example of a miracle-as-fact.”

“Why not close your left eye?” the doctor suggests.

“With that eye I have seen marvels!”

“There’s a certain dampness ...” Ramona begins.

“Medically speaking, a certain moisture,” corrects the doctor.

“See?” Ramona says triumphantly to Leon.

“I thought I wasn’t able to,” he snaps, sensitive to the

saltwater seeping from his eyes, lagoons at the ends of his lashes.

“Close your right eye – in fact, close ’em both!” the doctor shouts recklessly.

Leon does so, sending trickle-trails of water down his face.

“Crocodile tears. We’ll have to check the pH on those. Nurse! A swab!”

The doctor runs an exhaustive set of diagnostics, test after test: harsh pinpoint lights, swipes with a scanner, a rubber hammerette sounding Leon’s skull, making his brain bounce, a weird zippering across his hairline, scrapy rubber ligature, lightning punctures at both wrists. Voices upon voices. The bleaty swill of measuring machines.

“What we haven’t got,” observes the doctor, “is time.”

Leon works a set of muscle pulleys, forces his eyes to open and his mouth to move.

“I used to run a rat race,” he says. “Then someone speeded up the rats.”

“Go on!” This is Ramona. “Do something!”

“Oh hell,” the doctor says, running a trembling hand through his hair. “Time wins.”

“What will you remember?” asks Ramona, and her face changes. “Thank you,” she says. “For all you’ve done. Thank you so very much.”

“A pleasure,” the doctor replies. From somewhere he produces a square, spongy rag. “May I recommend, for short-term relief, this chamois. Dab and wring, dab and wring.”

LEON MAKES HIS rounds in the study. He tries to have a kind word for everyone. He has to – morale is a social imperative.

“You’re looking well; oh, you’re looking very well!” Some of the puddles stay silent, some respond with shy quivering, doubting chuckles, warm wavy shakes.

A garrulous pool shaped like the Seagram’s star has a love for Shakespeare’s tragedies, on the page rather than the stage.

“Othello had a genuine head for battle.”

“He blew it though, huh?” Leon only dimly recalls the play, but feels sure the hero was bound to blow it.

“Othello was brave, with the brave man’s narrow perception. Honour was his mead. He quaffed it, and craved more. But in this case, the mead was spiked.”

“It’s a funny old world,” Leon agrees, and moves on. He is in demand.

A trim lozenge seeks his attention. “Nothing in nature really equals a good *filo* pastry,” it says, with a bric-à-brac sigh.

Leon has to confess, he lacks a discerning palate.

Tropical rains

The rains begin again today at 4:00 pm
Like clockwork, as I am explaining
The past participle of “drink”
To 15 Laotian Doctors, trained in Mongolia.

First a darkness of clouds smothers the sun,
Then the wind sweeps across the hospital lawns
Causing banana trees to flail recklessly.

Wind threatens to tear the roof
Off the primary school-house –
Nothing more than a dirt floor, planks loosely nailed
A tin roof – corrugated sheet flapping.
Laundry on the barbed-wire fence waving frantically –
About to get washed again.

The rain begins in big drops
Shooting down from the sky making dust rise.
Rain comes in sheets, then in wool blankets.
I can’t see the school anymore.
Looking through water – in a glass bubble
Of air under an ocean.
Puddles swell to lakes and the road is a river.

Inside the class, too dark to read, too loud to talk
Must only sit and be spectators.

One watery woman pedals by on a rusty bicycle,
Streams running off her chin,
Wheels spinning in the mud.

Soon the din lessens, the primary school
Pops into view again and the lawn reappears
Under water.
The earth has
Drink, drank, drunk.

— Jennifer Graham

“Technology is a lantern without a wick!” brays one to his left, quivering importantly.

“Better wickless than witless!” jeers another, from its spot on a sawhorse.

“The opium of the masses is now the iron supplement of the few!” pipes up a third.

“How will increasing power in global capital markets affect the lives of communities?” Seth demands from his station snug to the wall.

Leon is intrigued. “Will I get my newspaper on time?”

“My point is this: the human world is shrinking, that of currency expanding apace. More dollars, francs, Deutschmarks, won and yen are born each day, a mountain of capital miles wide and high. Before we know it, this capital will develop its own brain, form alliances, use humanity as a testing-ground, an agar gel in which to conduct its experiments.”

Leon considers. “It’s a problem,” he allows.

“A problem? It will end love, as we understand it! Put simply, there will be no love. And why? Because forgery is the chief danger in such a world – and love is easily forged.”

“Well, I won’t say I’m for that,” Leon agrees.

UPSTAIRS, RAMONA IS asleep, spreading herself into both sides of the bed, staking claims. Leon lolls beside her, watching the minimalist flutter of her face in dream. His own face is soaked with perspiration – from the humidity, he imagines. There’s a spending wetness underneath him. Where is it coming from? He touches a finger to his ankle; it comes back wet. He has soaked the bed through. He is generating effects he cannot predict.

He gets up, scavenges a plastic trash bag from a kitchen cupboard, uses it to upholster the wing chair sown with peanuts and used tissues and blinky small change, settles himself.

LEON IS ON HIS back in the bathtub, groggily counting the beats between drips from the drain. He has kept to the house for days, out of loyalty and a fear that the puddles will evaporate, syphon off, sneak away. What can he offer them? Why should they stay?

In fact, though, they thrive here. They spread, lining the floors, flocking the waterpipes, flapjacking over central heating ducts. They are everywhere, and their properties are changing. No longer is each a discrete environment: they whitecap together, ease to calm together, synchronize the swell and ebb of their inch-high tides. Their former diversity of flora and fauna has been replaced by the unreal, pristine blueness of acid lakes, habitats under erasure. Their borders have been reinscribed, water on water, invisible to his naked human eye.

He has trouble telling one puddle from the next, from himself. What is he to know them by? They lose shape, they stiffen, tambourining like overboiled milk. They fill all available space. He and Ramona have no place left to sit or eat or read; no place left to store trinkets or books. Their tables and chairs are spoken for, their shelving units have been reassigned: puddle bunks and puddle perches, puddle playgrounds and puddle town halls. Something must be done.

“Cabinet reshuffle,” he lies when Ramona asks what he’s up to in the study. “Stay clear. You won’t believe the dust in here.”

She barges in anyway. “Stand aside, Bluebeard!” Then wrinkles her nose. “Ugh! Something’s gone mouldy – are you sure it isn’t you?”

Inches from her bare toes he spies a puddle sneaking up on her, a shock of green water in mid-spout, shadowing and framing her foot: the dark and the light and the bone between. He pulls her aside just as it starts its slow-motion lunge. He laughs, to put her off the scent. But she is thoughtful, and later he sees her try the locked door, sponge-mop in hand.

Leon takes to carrying his chamois, deftly wiping back encroaching puddles. But this is not enough. There are other intrusions: test tubes, regular glass stamens bifurcating the walls, incessantly passing fluids. Freehand styluses tracing indecipherable graphs, quickly retracting. Stainless-steel rolling stock. Hypodermics that tap him like a sugar maple, draining him faint. Something must be done. Something must be done. He descends to the cellar, rummaging for ideas. From the bite-size window he spies the neighbour’s laundry, hung inside-out with spring clips.

“I have not been thinking laterally!” he scolds himself. Then he races upstairs, outside, inside, to the study.

It takes him twenty minutes to rig up the line, lift and clip each puddle securely to it. Inevitably one or two of the heavier ones burst their fastenings and slosh to the ground, but in the main they seem pleased with the novelty of the posture and freedom from crowding, experiencing the world in this new way, from above. Each keeps its shape; soft slabs of glass, swaying rhythmically.

Leon stands among them. “You’re lovely,” he says. “Really, you are.”

A tear blots on his cheek, and soon they are all weeping, the puddles sweetly beading, Leon streaming and blurring. He approaches a near puddle, round and flanged as an organelle, sees himself there, moves on to the next swimmy mirror, looks again. He is changing, changing. There is a looseness of bone, a buoyancy of plasma beneath his dermis. He touches his cheek, breaking the surface; it travels with his touch, a light, sure chop over open water.

“You’ll be lonely,” something says.

And he ratchets his gaze away from the puddles, away from his new stained-glass self, away from the hived reflections of that great bulbous tear.

LEON IS ON HIS WAY, he is on his way home. He reaches for his briefcase. Where is his briefcase? It must be far away now, swooping over London, Delhi, Buenos Aires, snapping and jittering, its lock long blown open, his papers like

bandages on the atmosphere.

His house – is this his house? The lawn has moulted to a salt-and-pepper polyurethane. The bay windows are hidden behind drab blue curtains sliding on a track to meet in the middle. Where they clear the ground he spies strange, frenzied movement.

Ramona appears in the curtains' gap, with a gown and cap, and a surprise for him.

"Sit in the chair, mister, and close those saucer-eyes!" she commands.

He obliges, but has trouble finding the chair, and more trouble actually sitting in it. Bumping gamely about the room, it occurs to him that his eyes are shut. Hard to tell.

The next sequence takes place beyond his peripheral vision. Someone veers past, circles him, fits a kiss in a trough in the waves now building along his cheek.

"Jessie! Welcome home!" he manages, before the next breaker hits.

"I'm glad to be home!" In fairness, it sounds a bit forced.

"Are you here on vacation?" he asks. "Is it Christmas?"

She ignores him. "I came just as soon as I possibly could," she says, to Ramona. "I flew. It was eighty dollars more."

"I'll reimburse you ..."

"Oh for God's sake, Mother!"

Jessie wears a gown and mask. He can just make out her eyes.

"How long has he been here?" she asks. Blue-yellow eyes, round and clear as rock pools.

Leon is euphoric. "We share things we hardly think about," he cries. "Like our eyes – our eyes are the same! Like ... " Words jump his tongue. "Like water!" he cries. "Like water!"

And he thinks, It is in water that I know myself. In water.

In water. Water: a colourless transparent tasteless odourless compound of oxygen and hydrogen in a liquid state convertible by heat into steam and by cold into ice, liquid consisting chiefly of this in seas, lakes, streams, springs, rain, tears, sweat, saliva due to appetite, urine, serum, amniotic fluid, morbid accumulation –

Jessie stands before him, hands on hips.

"Who am I?"

– of fluid, hot and cold, salt and fresh or sweet, smooth or still and rough or troubled, hard and soft, aerated, saline, chalybeate, thermal, blue, heavy holy mineral running table a morbid accumulation of fluid ...

"Who am I?" she asks again, in scratchy, straw-ticked tones.

"You're a tumbleweed," he gasps, hoping the words sound as he has thought them.

"All dressed up and no place to go," Ramona says, with a

On the far side of Xieng Khouang

We rolled up the mountain
On the far side of Xieng Khouang,
In a cloud of dust.
At the top,
Canada
Wafted into my nose
Pine trees rugged enough
To survive the harsh winds and cold.

I lifted my head and inhaled the cool air
The clean pine scent filled me
And suddenly I was back.
I could be past this continent
Across the ocean
I was a time-traveller: 12 hours back.

The Great Canadian Shield
Of rounded scraped granite,
Holding in her palm:
Skimpy pines,
Black bears, wild berries,
Tapestries of lichens and wildflowers.

On the mountain
I could be lonely,
Wrapped in a language not my own,
Granite fingers loosing their grip of me.

My roots are among the thin soil
In a crack between two fingers of pink granite
Wedged in among pine roots
Buried under snow for six months.

– Jennifer Graham

bitter-lemon laugh.

"A tumbleweed with no place to go ... is no tumbleweed!" This point must be grasped.

But before he can explain it he is distracted by new voices from the region of his ankle. It takes some time to focus, then he is shocked to see a familiar glint roaming end to end through his clothing, spreading confidently as a slime mould with fruiting bodies, stabilizing, its surface darkened

by its depth.

“Home sweet home,” says this new puddle. “Your traveling days are over.”

“I have a certain nesting instinct,” Leon agrees, unsure at last if he is talking or thinking, or neither, or a bit of both.

“The rainforests are losing species like spectacles,” opines a voice in a different register, and Leon understands that another new puddle has sprouted where his left arm used to be. Within short seconds they have thronged the walls; one sits cocked on Ramona’s head, jaunty as a beret. The floors, the ceiling, the eddies of air are covered in puddles, glassy platelets, broad wet platters of skin, hovering, dimpling and grinning. They take on facial features. First they resemble well-known personalities, then they resemble no one at all but themselves. One on the lampshade sports a goatee, another inching across the ceiling has acne scars and eyes asterisked with age. As if on cue, two puddles joined in a double helix disentwine, expand individually, slinking and grinning, showing teeth.

“Do something!” That sounds like Ramona, from a long way off.

It must have rained skin last night. It must have rained cats and dogs and skin.

“We contribute to our own demise!” a stem-nosed puddle hectors.

Leon adopts a conciliatory tone, though by now he is worried.

“And this will threaten our survival, is that right?”

“It makes us that much less interesting.”

“Do something!”

There is a puddle forming in the gully at the base of his nose, threatening to flood it, only to split in a parody of mitosis, two then four then eight, singing in rapid chorus: “Accidents sell papers, producing a common fear, based on the impossibility of prediction. Some things cannot be known, and interfered with. It’s just too, too bad.”

“Accidents happen in inches. In a few inches of water.”

“You’re obstructing my breathing ...” Leon begins, but he is drowned out.

Ssshhh ... Ssshhh ... Ssshhh ...

“Your troubles are over,” they say together. “Your troubles are over, tumbleweed.”

Above him appears a sharp but transient light, a firefly spinning on a nickel. Ramona. She stands looking down at herself looking down, fills her lungs, and dives into him, plunging, neatly finding her balance in this new domain; skimming over his bones like a leaf in current; descending to the photic zone, lightless save for the infra-red of fumaroles, marine volcanoes; navigating his inside ropes and reefs, trailing chutes of bubbles and hair like a chiffon train. Magnified by water, her hands are broad flippers,

intensely present compared with his own, translucent, troglomorphic. Here, among the mineral chimneys and clouds of rust-red shrimp, the key to long life is not to do too much. She shows him her eyes, spreading her hands like the doors of a ship’s locker, slow-wound with algae, deep undersea. Her eyes have grown and deepened, great bow-shaped eyes, and he itches to climb up into their richly glistening surface. But she hovers, just out of reach, sculling in place, floating over him.

“What will you remember?” she asks, and a heavy moon of water swells and wanes, passes warm from her eyes to his. “Close your eyes,” she says. “You won’t see a thing ...”

LEON IS ON HIS WAY, he is on his way home. He strides briskly, swinging his heavy briefcase. As he walks he imagines the inner workings of an artesian stream bordering a cottage he rents for two weeks in the summer.

“It has been with me all along,” he says, faint with wonder. “I am its source!”

The leaf-crammed storm sewer has spilled over, making a rank lake of the crosswalk. A predatory bottlecap clamps like a lamprey on to his man-made sole. He manages to dig it free and stares at the rubber cap-liner: YOU HAVE GAINED THE JOKER! THE JOKER IS WILD! He reaches for his heavy briefcase ... Where is his briefcase? In his hand when last he looked. Now he pictures it aloft, one of a vast migrating flock, flying in formation.

Outside his house a man takes photographs with a flash-camera set up on a dropsheet. Two uniformed men walk past with a wet, bulging stretcher. All the lights in his house are on. Caution tape tentacles his driveway. A high hum loads his ears. The day is wet. The day is wet.

THE DAY IS WET. Patches and pots of water gleam in the streets, in the man’s mouth and nose, the wells of his eyes. He is nearly submerged when they find him, and when they haul him out he leaks like a cracked clay jug.

“What happened?” Her hands knit knots she can’t untie.

“Accidents happen,” says a tall man next to her. He wears goggles and a protective suit. “A few inches of rain, and all hell breaks loose.”

“What happened?” she asks again, dully, and the tall man draws her close.

“Come now,” he says, bundling her to the waiting car. “No time to waste. Mind you don’t get your feet wet,” he says, as he leads her over the crosswalk through the twilight thick as brine.

The Amos Deadline

SOMETIMES AS WE wind up our days, incidents lost in the mist press forward, asking to be tucked away neatly in the vault of our memories, rather than left to wander in the shadowy catch-basin where chaos is relegated. As I sit in my lonely room, listening to the silence cloaked by the muffled roar of life being lived pressing from the outside, I remember a beautiful day long ago, a peaceful summertime day when I was young and open, the day I shot Amos.

I spent my summers then working at a lumber mill on the south arm of Darren Lake, sixty miles from Fort Raney. The mill supplied lumber for cabin builders in the Darren Lake, Billing's Lake area. The owner was a man named Pendleton, a tough old World War II vet who told me about these tanks running over dead guys on a road in Europe. He laughed about it, but I had the feeling the memory bothered him quite a bit. His wife was an English lady who lost her leg when their then thirteen-year-old son put the car in gear and trapped her against the porch. Old Ben still terrorised Donny over it years later. The second son, Mike, was twenty-one and all business. Even when he laughed, he was just doing his duty. They had a daughter, too, but she was off somewhere, going to school or something. The last son was named Davy, about my age. He was the baby of the family, and had two dogs, black Labrador retrievers named Amos 'n' Andy. They were wonderful dogs, such as only God could've made, running, barking, having fun. The world wouldn't have been the same without them.

The mill was located on one side of a small bay, with the camp located on the other side. Five small cabins dotted the slope behind the cookhouse where the family lived. The cookhouse contained a large front room, which was the communal centre for the camp. Normally, during the summertime, five or six kids worked at the lumber mill and lived in the cabins. But, at that time, besides the family there was only Rollie and me. Rollie was a tall skinny foster kid like me whose dad was a cop in Fort Raney. He was like a cartoon character, all arms and legs. Whenever he'd get "care" packages from the Fort, we'd stare at him and he'd stare at us. No matter how he'd hide the goodies, we'd be all over him, literally ripping apart his cabin. He'd sputter and moan, but eventually we'd get our share. Sometimes when he'd get too mouthy with me, I'd have to slap him around, but all told he was respectful and we had a good working relationship.

One evening, when everyone was gathered in the cookhouse, Ben said it looked like Amos had distemper, and something would have to be done about it, or Andy would get it too. The conversation revolved around what could be done,

whether the dogs could be separated or if there was any hope, but Ben said no. Distemper was fatal. Davy burst into tears and ran out. Ben looked at me and said he was taking the family to Billing's Lake with a load of lumber in a couple days. I could do it then. Rollie, all arms and legs as usual, jumped up and said, "I'll do it for you, Ben, if it has to be done, I'll do it" or something like that. Ben seemed to know I was the one who would actually do it, if it was done at all. The matter was settled, and nothing more was said.

THE NEXT TWO DAYS we went on as usual, eating, sleeping, working. The two dogs were tied up in different parts of the yard, but for the most part everyone seemed to forget what was going to happen. Even Ben didn't seem to take it seriously, though the yelps and whimpers of the tied-up dogs made it obvious something was wrong. Rollie didn't have any idea what was going to happen, despite the fact he was the one who was supposed to do it. He carried on like a tough guy, checking and cleaning the .22 calibre rifle repeatedly, walking around with a serious air. It was kind of silly, but I enjoyed watching him play the role. He avoided Davy, who had warned him right off in no uncertain terms what would happen if he touched his dog, but Rollie just shook his head sadly. The burden of manhood was heavy, but Rollie was equal to it. As Thursday came nearer, his protests of determination got a bit shakier and less obvious.

THAT THURSDAY SHOULD'VE been framed. It was one of those beautiful Northern Ontario summer days that old folk remember with a catch in their hearts, and madmen remember with anguish. The boats had been readied the day before and were tied up at the small dock just down the hill from the cookhouse. After breakfast the family was ready to leave. Before he joined them, Ben reminded me about the job, but I had the feeling he didn't expect anything to actually happen. After they left, Rollie and I went back to the cookhouse. Rollie wanted to do it right away, even while the sound of the motors was still audible. I said no, what's the rush.

I went out and played with Amos. He was just as chipper and friendly as ever, missing his Andy and mystified as to why they were tied up. In the cookhouse, Rollie was brooding. We drank coffee, listened to the radio, hung around like boys do. Rollie's impatience grew. He seemed to think I was scared of it. He acted superior. Every once in a while, I'd catch him looking at me: he'd look up quickly, whistling tonelessly at the ceiling. Under normal circumstances, I'd have slapped him around, but all I was thinking of then was Amos.

The morning passed slowly. Rollie went in and out of the cookhouse. By this time, the glares of impatience he

Lingering doubts

Up and Adam slouching dazed
to stinging urination urgent bliss,
Brush the ivories, coax the curls,
welcome back to the worldly whirl.
Eleven bells a new day dawning?
half tasted already shot while sunning,
But determined creeps on its busy rampage
through obstacles cropping
even while they're dropping
and hitting the ground in useless thuds
Meeting yourself going in
coming out of a fast food restaurant,
Spending time more precious than money
doing nothing but having doubts
Lingering about life like a pretty girl
tempting you with her come here there,
Then skipping away faster
than beautiful boyfriends
Hurling into bed with fire hydrants
bursting at the marrow.
When the last thuds echo
wonders away aimless up the clapping also,
You've wasted your whole day
tilting at necessity
And finally you're freer
than an astonished professor,
To attend the luxuries are necessities,
your lingering doubts about life
and love and women and
Don't mention that!
if guilt is affection for sin,
Then Adam you're in trouble.

– George Arly

tossed at me nearly brought me out of my chair, but thoughts of Amos saved him. The two dogs lolled away their captivity on the end of a rope, snapping at flies, scratching their hides, carrying on like dogs do. There was an oppressive heaviness in the air, a sense of doom made unreal by the summer wind rustling the trees and by the clear blue sky with billowing white clouds sailing soundlessly through it to eternity. Lunchtime came and went. We hung around the cookhouse, feeling the languid time-

lessness that's part of being young. About one o'clock, I decided it was time.

We gathered the gun and blueberry cans and released Amos. He was an old hand at blueberry-picking and seemed overjoyed to be free. We herded him away from Andy, up the hill to the path leading into the bush behind the camp. Andy's cries and howls receded as we made our way into the wilderness. I was thinking of Davy, wanting to leave Amos where he wouldn't find him. Rollie was grimly determined; this was no walk in the park. Finally, about a mile or so back, we left the path and went a few hundred feet to where there was a little field surrounded by brush.

I told Rollie that this was the place. "Okay, George" was all he said, and he loaded the rifle. Amos was in the field, sniffing and exploring. I was watching him when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rollie aiming the rifle. I slapped it down, asking him what the hell he was doing. Rollie sputtered confusedly, eyes bulging, face red, saying, "I'm gonna shoot him, what'ya think!" or something like that.

I grabbed the rifle, told him I better do it and called Amos over to me. He came, his tail wagging, and I put the gun up to his head. He was bemused.

I pulled the trigger – he dropped like a rock. A geyser of blood shot up, waist high.

Behind me, Rollie barged away through the trees.

I reloaded frantically, my fingers like thumbs, and then I shot him again. I felt like I'd just woken up.

Amos's tail drummed the ground, and as the geyser dropped lower and lower, the drumming tail slowed until it finally stopped.

I knelt down to feel him, and he was empty. His eyes had closed. I gathered up the rifle and cans, and made my way back to the camp.

AT THE COOKHOUSE, Rollie was standing pale, appalled. He looked at me with horror. I felt awful and Rollie knew it.

"My God, you're crazy, look what you've done!" he raged. "Davy's going to kill you!"

I didn't care. I put everything away and had some Kool-Aid. The sound of normal life on the radio, busy and sappy, bugged me, so I went to my cabin. Outside, Rollie, in his innocence, was fawning over the hapless Andy, shushing and comforting him like a little orphan. I felt totally alone, with visions of Amos dancing everywhere I looked. Rollie, completely safe from getting slapped around, naturally abused the situation and carried on like I was some kind of murderer. I could hear him telling Andy he would protect him from me, and so on.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly, until supper time came and went. Rollie's attitude changed bit by bit – from "You're a monster" to "How could you do that?" to

Listen

Listen

I don't believe

in
the
stars

They said the fourteenth
was my lucky day
and it was the day my dog died

The ground

is cold
Novembers

and she waits there

eyes frozen open

waiting for spring and
decay.

– *Lorette C.Thiessen*

"Well, Ben said to do it, no choice." His antics, so sincere and frivolous at the same time, had the effect of distracting me from the terrible finality of what I'd done. Amos was gone, gone, never again to play.

THE MILL WAS BUILT on a narrow arm of rocky brushland that separated our bay from the lake proper. When boats were approaching, you could hear them for a long time before they came into view. Before they entered the bay, they had to go around a spit of land that jutted out from the arm the mill was on. Boats would get loudest when they passed behind the mill, then lose volume because they were really going away.

As the day settled into its turquoise glory, we could hear the family's boat – the work boat having been left behind – droning as it made its way to the mouth of the bay. By this time, and with the dust on the horizon, Rollie had come full circle. We waited – me nervously, Rollie a little less so – as the boat rounded the spit, its volume surging as it came into sight. I stood on the slope, partly up the hill from the dock, while Rollie sat by the dock itself, an expression of weary sadness on his face at the prospect of breaking the news to the unfortunate family.

When the boat pulled up to the dock, was tied up and its motor died – I can't fathom what Rollie was thinking – he

strutted out on the dock, saying, “ Well, Ben, it’s done, we shot Amos.”

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Davy screamed and jumped from the boat, knocking Rollie down, pummelling him. It was almost hilarious. Everyone was yelling at Davy, and poor Rollie – who lost his tongue when someone watered his bed or nailed his door shut while he slept – really lost it. Finally he found it again, sputtering, “I didn’t do it, I didn’t do it, he did!” and pointing at me. Davy jumped up and rushed at me, crying, furious, before storming off. Rollie slunk away like a kicked cat, his innocence somewhat injured. Don, Mike and Mrs Pendleton filed silently past me, eyes averted. When old Ben went by, he winked broadly, his face beaming.

In my cabin, I tried to read, but thoughts about Amos kept flooding my mind, especially the look of terrified pain on his face as he died. As night fell and the camp settled down to sleep, I lay in the dark, haunted by a vision of Amos dragging himself along the path to the camp. The thought was so horrible I was petrified. Finally, I got up and nervously went outside, half expecting to see him crawling toward me.

YEARS LATER, I WAS living in a cabin in the mountains of B.C. and I had a little dog named Nifty. One day, Nifty was sitting by the table, his head hanging, his eyes dripping. I remembered the signs of distemper from Amos and freaked out. I took him to see this girl who knew a lot about animals. She assured me there was nothing wrong with Nifty, he was just tired. I was to wipe his face occasionally.

The fact is, distemper is so contagious that if Amos had it, then so did Andy – but Andy was a healthy active mutt for a long time after. Amos ’n’ Andy were twins, eating, playing, and sleeping together from birth. Amos ’n’ Andy was really a single name, never used in component form until the old man decided to see what I was made of.

This is *my place*

ON MONDAY MORNING, she rolled over and pressed herself against him. “You haven’t invited me to your place,” she said. “You want to see my place?” They had been together ten days and George was wondering how long it was going to last. She looked him in the face and didn’t answer. “I’ll tell you what,” he said. “You’ve got today off, right?” She worked at the library, which was closed on Mondays. “Yes.”

“I’ll go home, clean up, go to work. And I’ll leave the key in the mail box. You can go by and let yourself in.”

All the way home he imagined what she would do when she investigated his apartment. He thought about it like that, like she was going to be surveying him. He was a double-agent, giving away secrets. This idea pleased him. He thought it was to the benefit of both partners to be open to risk. He saw fear as the primary social emotion. People are afraid of pain, and so do not risk. Alternately, he told himself, they do not receive pleasure.

They were each two years out of university. She was twenty-five, a year older than him. They met two weeks ago at a cast party: her brother was one of the leads, he knew the director. She walked up to him and said she knew him from somewhere. Wasn’t it strange, she added, because if he had said the same thing to her she would have thought that he was feeding her a line.

He turned the corner of his street and walked the half-block up to the house that contained his basement apartment.

He checked his mail box. Nothing. A year ago he moved into this place. He’d returned from Europe after Kathy broke up with him in Paris. He came home and moved into his parents’ house. Then he found a job, and moved into this place. The job was supposed to be temporary, but he still had it. He was an office messenger in a bank tower. His unemployed friends told him not to hope for better.

In two hours he planned to call his apartment. What would she be doing? What would she be thinking? Would she even be there? He should leave a note.

Something misleading. Check the top right drawer of my dresser. Socks and underwear.

Help yourself to a beer. She only drank wine. He found himself whistling.

GEORGE'S NEW girlfriend stood smiling in her shower. She liked George and his games. She liked his impulsiveness, which reminded her of her younger – and favourite – brother, the actor, how as a child he would invent games and pull her into a world his imagination had created. It had been a long time since she felt this good about a man.

Two years ago she had walked out on her last serious relationship. Mark was ten years older than her, a doctor. She felt strangled. He wanted to marry and have children. She wanted to meet people, sleep around. She spent six months emotionally withdrawing from him, then she found out she was pregnant. She broke it off with Mark and arranged for an abortion. She mourned.

In high school she ran with the popular crowd. She fell down drunk at house parties. She enjoyed the compliments of older men. She loathed the rampant sexism of the boys she hung out with, but forgave them and came to expect it. She developed strategies (books, booze, boys) to help her survive the disparities of life. But by the time she left university, she was tired of the chase and took up with Mark. When that didn't work out, she spent her extra hours volunteering at a refugee centre, teaching immigrant women English as a second language. When she met George, she was surprised that she liked him.

Sliding into her jeans, she stuffed the map George had drawn into her back pocket. She grabbed a handful of change off her dresser and looked out the window. It was windy. The leaves were blowing off the trees. She would need a jacket.

TRISH LIVED IN George's neighbourhood. George's new girlfriend stopped in on her.

"Hey, girl."

"Hi."

They had grown up together. Trish was an artist. She lived with an older woman, a financial planner, who disapproved of Trish's friends.

"You finally decided to sneak in to see me, eh?"

"Is it that bad?"

"It's okay. I paint all day. I fuck all night. It's a good life." She laughed.

She led her friend downstairs, where she had her studio. The room was lit by two small windows, one on the wall facing the backyard, the other revealing a neighbour's driveway. The room was bare except for a stool and an easel. Paintings of young people filled the walls.

"Returned to realism, I see."

"It's a radical approach I know –"

"I like it."

The paintings were of people they knew in high school. She walked around, examining them closely, pointed at

one. An attractive, athletic young man in a sweater and jeans stood alone in the middle of a football field. He was barefoot. In one hand he held a frying pan, the other cradled an infant. The clouds were dark above him.

She asked Trish: "Jerry Carruthers?"

"I call that one 'A Jock's Nightmare'." Trish looked at her friend and they laughed.

"You must be desperate for subject matter."

"Didn't you sleep with him?"

"Don't remind me."

Trish led her around the room. They talked about the paintings and shared memories. Then she told Trish about George and her plans for the day.

HE CALLED again – no one answered. Maybe the house blew up. It happened last week in the west end. Natural gas leak. Would the phone be ringing after an explosion? He decided not and hung up. He was in the lobby of the bank building. The elevator rose to the sixteenth floor and the door opened. He stepped out. He handed the package to the secretary. She signed for it, and he turned back toward the elevators.

THE PHONE RANG. It rang again. It was 12:30. It rang a third time. She answered it. Her coat hung on a hook on the wall. Her shoes sat by the door, the mail lay in a pile on the kitchen table.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"George?"

"Yeah."

She pulled over a chair and sat down.

He asked her: "So what do you think?"

"I see you differently now."

He laughed.

"Is that good?"

"Reality is better."

"You're becoming philosophical."

"This is the real me," she said.

She reached into her pocket for a package of gum.

"I like it."

"Good."

"I want to take you out tonight," he said.

She said, "I volunteer tonight."

"We'll go out after. Bob Wiseman's playing."

"That guy."

"Yeah. The one I was telling you about. He's playing tonight. Do you want to go?"

"I don't know. I don't want to stay out late."

He asked her if she was tired.

"No." She looked at the clock on the wall. "Hey, I'm

going to do your dishes.”

“My dishes?”

“Yes,” she said. “They disgust me.”

He said, “They disgust you?”

“Yes.”

“Then thanks for cleaning them.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Do you want to go out tonight?”

“Call me later. No. I’ll call you.” She reached for an envelope on the table.

“Who’s Kathy?”

“Kathy?”

“Yeah. You got a letter from her.”

“You’re pretty nosey, you know that?”

“This was your idea.”

“I know. Sorry.” He was in the hallway outside the lunch room.

“She’s an old friend who moved to Europe. Where’s the letter from?”

“It’s forwarded from ‘134 Convent Place’.”

“That’s my parents’ house. Where is it postmarked?”

“France.”

He mumbled something that she didn’t hear.

THE FOLLOWING Saturday it rained. Under an umbrella they walked along the boardwalk, the lake stealing the horizon to the right, the beach deserted, and they kissed. She took him by the scruff of the coat, pulled him closer, and wrapped her lips around his. The rain began to fall harder. They ran for a picnic shelter. He kissed her again. He leaned himself against a picnic table and she leaned against him.

“SO, TRISH, what are you up to today?”

“Not much.”

“Want to see George’s place?”

“I don’t know. Is he out?”

“He took his cousin to the zoo.”

“Cute.”

“Yeah. Darling.”

“What time?”

“Around two. I’ll pick you up.”

THE KEY went in the lock. The door opened.

“Hello!” a male voice called from the bedroom.

“Who’s there?” said Kathy.

Trish grabbed her friend’s arm. “What’s going on?”

“George?”

He appeared, bare-chested, zipping up his jeans. “What are you doing here?”

She stared at him. Said nothing.

Kathy called out, “Who’s there?”

“No one,” said George.

“You shit,” said Trish.

“This is my place.”

George’s new girlfriend threw the copy of the key she’d had made at him and walked past Trish out the door.

arrangements

this is how it stands:

in the kitchen you have left
behind a cup
on the lip
of the table
a teakettle
near my sideboard
whistles longingly
after you
until I ease

its calling

I let a spoon stray
by the window
for hours
after you left
(I could not call it back)

milk stains

the counter

attest to your presence
layers of you left
behind
to remind me

the delicacy

of living
arranging
the sugar, cream

of daily life

things linger here

and there

bric-à-brac displayed

on shelves

reminders
of places we have been

the half life of a teakettle
whistling

of happier times

starker arrangement now
of settings
spoon, knife here, napkin
to the fore
a sideplate, maybe
all these things
in place

except you, whose absence
is everything

in this arrangement

tact and formality

tears and strains
the tissues of living
is not the way

I thought it would be:

blue-green grass on a china lawn
stuffed doll waving
in the window

if I were a flower
arranger

it would all be

perfect

tomorrow

— *Jeffrey L Round*

Tripping yarn

TIM CONLEY on a boy's own (multiple) adventures

A Trip to the Stars

NICHOLAS CHRISTOPHER
The Dial Press

OUT OF NECESSITY, the adventure story invests so much in its opening. Here's a familiar example from 1886:

I will begin the story of my adventures with a certain morning early in the month of June, the year of grace 1751, when I took the key for the last time out of the door of my father's house. The sun began to shine upon the summit of the hills as I went down the road; and by the time I had come as far as the manse, the blackbirds were whistling in the garden lilacs, and the mist that hung around the valley in the time of the dawn was beginning to arise and die away.

To the point – this is “the story of my adventures” – and quick to establish a setting: this is Robert Louis Stevenson's method in *Kidnapped*. Here's how Nicholas Christopher begins his new novel (his third), *A Trip to the Stars*:

We had voyaged far into space and now we were returning. Before leaving the solar system, we orbited the moon and several planets – skating along Saturn's rings, probing Jupiter's red spot, and skimming the icy mountain ranges of Uranus. We trailed a comet and threaded a swarm of meteors. And after Pluto, we were out among the stars: glittering

clusters, bracelets, and crescents that swirled around us. We followed the long curve of the Milky Way, past Alpha Centauri, the first star beyond the sun, and witnessed the explosion of a supernova and the collapse of a neutron star into a black hole. Traveling two hundred light-years to the red star Antares, we took a long look at the next nearest galaxy, Andromeda, and then reversed course.

Although Christopher's novel is, like Stevenson's, essentially a Ripping Yarn commencing with an orphan being stolen away and thrust into a dramatic new life, this opening opts for disorientation. Loren (the narrator here) and his young aunt Alma are together at a planetarium in the year of rather less grace 1965, moments away from the boy's fateful abduction. As ostentatious as Stevenson's descriptions in his second sentence seem (and the evocation of a new morning is a thematic ringer, all right), Christopher's phrases outdo them for prolixity. Besides employing nearly every space-travel cliché available (“skating along Saturn's rings”; the redundant “explosion of a supernova”), this fanciful language owes a lot to catalogue descriptions of retail cruises: exchange the planet and star names for exotic-sounding islands and such and you'll see what I mean.

WHEN LOREN and Alma are separated, their lives undergo startling changes, beginning with abrupt name changes: Loren discovers his birth-name is Enzo, Alma rechristens herself Mala. They take turns narrating, one chapter after the next, detailing the unusually lush backgrounds and events that make up their respective adventures. Enzo winds up living in a hotel with his rich, polymath uncle and his circle of intellectual and familial grotesques. Like Dickens's Pip or Stevenson's David Balfour, Enzo relates the story of his unusual education – though Enzo's is almost

self-congratulatory in its eclecticism.

Alma, meanwhile, is so lost when Loren is kidnapped that she begins her own journey of self-discovery as Mala, arachnologist's assistant, later nurse in the Vietnam war, show-stopping mindreader, and plenty of other things before the novel ends. She is a woman haunted by people she has lost: her young nephew and her angelic lover.

Got all that?

Too often forays into the uncanny or fantastic stride right into the hokey, and exoticism can be exhausting. References to the stars, astronomy and astromythologies pollute the narrative's stream to a toxic degree. A spider's venom heightens both of the principal characters' perceptions (Enzo is able to see Neil Armstrong's moon landing with his naked eye, for example). There's a vampirologist who gets it in the neck. Moon-governed psychic powers abruptly come into play and just as abruptly vanish. A distressing number of characters make dramatic disappearances after which they cannot be found (and everyone, everyone hires detectives in vain). Fetishism runs high: there's a whole warehouse of amulets, pendants, bracelets, ceremonial daggers, rings, medallions, keys, and watches in the story, each of them imbued with some talismanic value. Exotica *ad absurdum* plus made-for-TV miracles. This is the realm not of Gabriel Garcia Márquez but of Steven Spielberg.

Since the subject and story's shape are in my view shallow but may well entertain some readers, let me return to the matter of style. In this regard there is nothing innovative about *A Trip to the Stars*. At its worst, the prose can be plodding, and the occasional reference by a character to how long ago an earlier event seems – “another lifetime” – serves to make the reader feel weary. There's enough suds to say that there's soap in this

book. Consider this analysis by Mala of her beloved navigator, Cassiel:

At thirty-one – seven years older than me – he was older than my previous lovers, and there was no escaping the fact that we had come together in the overwhelming context of the war; but, far more significantly, I had never before encountered a man like him. Unique yet unassuming, intelligent, physically powerful but reserved – someone, in short, who was attractive to me in every way. Drawn to him with a pull I could neither explain nor control, I realized this was the real thing, which I had never known before.

If you can read that aloud without smiling or rolling your eyes, you may be immune to my previous and remaining criticisms; but suffice it to say this spot of purple is one of many prosaic bruises. There is, for example, a scene of Enzo's initiation into sex later in the book – but I am doing my reader a favour by not reproducing that here, too. And the passage above also demonstrates the writer's habit of using the words "never" and "ever" with regular and melodramatic impunity. Nearly every other page offers a sentence like "I never saw my mother again" or "I would remain forever altered." I'll not give away the ending – if you can make it there, you deserve whatever satisfaction is to be found at it – but I will complain that Enzo's puzzle of self-discovery fits together stupefyingly neatly.

A Trip to the Stars is ambitious, and vies for recognition as an intellectual adventure, like *The Name of the Rose*. There are offhand but never subtle mentions of Pliny, Atlantis myths, Heraclitus, Captain Cook, and so on; but these appear as cosmetic glitter, the counterpart of the ceaseless star allusions (star-fruit, star-dog, star-metaphors, characters with star-names). A lot of sugary icing on a small cake. ●

Travelling verse

ANTHONY N. CHANDLER
on the first collection of a
promising new poet

A Woman Alone on the Atikokan Highway

JEANETTE LYNES
Wolsak and Wynn

JEANETTE Lynes is never really alone. Despite the title of her first collection, *A Woman Alone on the Atikokan Highway*, Lynes walks with an assortment of companions who share her thoughtful stride. She takes readers on a trip with good folks who will change how we see the world passing us by. Counterpointing cultural icons like Tommy Hunter, Martha Stewart, Lawrence Welk and the boys from *Bonanza* with the steady rhythm of self-directed experience, historical dates, and her mother, this poet speaks in lasting verse about where we pass our time.

Lynes tells us stories in a compact language that breathes. Unlike some of her contemporaries, she does not divert our attention with *what ifs* and vague historical references, but rather speaks to the reader through *what weres* and what happened to her/us because of them. Her language is not overwrought with codified metaphor nor is it what we hear spoken in the automotive section at the local Canadian Tire. It is a balance between the two – which a poetry reader will appreciate more than a poetry *destructor*. She asks questions of the reader, without pretending to know the only answer. Her subtle digs are best seen in "Tommy Hunter, I say", where we are introduced to a boyfriend's mother who

... eats olives and
tests me, asks what tv I enjoyed
as a child:

Tommy Hunter, I say,

She's trying to frown, but
a bichon frisé enters the room and
his father excuses himself
to walk it.

The verse – like raspberries on a wet spring day – is light and sustaining. There's an appealing irreverence in it. Lynes speaks with a comedy and cynicism identifiably Canadian.

As she retells a lifetime of television experience, Lynes ties her reality to the fantasies of women across the nation. In "The Edge of Night" we are privy to "the soap opera my mother and I / tv'd ourselves to every day", and what went on "while the women / on *The Edge of Night* / sleep on." This authenticity makes us want to read more and helps us push by the less than perfect poems that sometimes poke through the otherwise green landscape.

The weak poems in this collection include the title piece and "Hiking Near Antigonish, N.S.", both of which lean toward obscure descriptions of setting and away from what Lynes does best: describe people. Her work fails when it talks too much about her surroundings. The details of walking trails and highways build an obvious metaphor for a woman's journey and its pathways, but they seem redundant. Readers learn to see the road without being reminded of it; that is the beauty of her writing style. Images such as a mauve room, edible flowers and dime kiwis summon up whole trails of connections that the reader can follow. With such trees, there may, in fact, be no need for a forest. The presentation of the book itself is appropriate, but the front cover image left me with a bad taste in my mouth. I wish the artist had chosen a more stylish collage to suit

the poetry. The title font is unreadable. Minor complaints, given the overall feel of the book.

Jeanette Lynes is a well-travelled poet who has written pieces that reflect the desperation and hope of people on both coasts of Canada, which is a mighty feat in itself. When reading the chapter entitled “Coasts”, I felt as if Lynes were writing for me, and that her words and experiences were mine, too. Perhaps that is the lure of this scrapbook: while it is not our journey, we want it to be; we want to be one of the characters Lynes comes to know and shares with the world. Her first collection is a gift. With it, Lynes says, I am here and I’ll be in your face for a while. To which our only reply is, We sure hope so. ●

Merely going round

TIM CONLEY on an attempt to circumscribe the everyday

Fidget

KENNETH GOLDSMITH
Coach House

THE HISTORY of Coach House Press is to some degree the history of Canadian literature, for it’s long been one of the most daring and innovative small presses in the country. Its demise in 1994 was lamented by many poets, writers, and editors; but then, in 1996, it dramatically resurfaced. This “new” Coach House is largely an electronic workshop – even seeming to treat the printed book as an anachronistic fetish item. A visitor to www.chbooks.com may read any of their titles at no charge (there is a “tip the author” option). However, they do put out,

now and then, a tangible text version, the familiar book-object. The latest is Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Fidget*, a work that seems (like Stephen Cain’s nifty *Dyslexicon*) indicative of the direction the publisher is taking.

The title of Goldsmith’s book is, more than anything else, an address to the reader. Take it as a warning or an imperative: if you sit down to read *Fidget* you will probably not sit still – unless you’ve fallen asleep, in which case you’ve only anticipated the ending. Goldsmith’s book may be the last word in solipsism. It’s a study of his body’s most minute actions within the course of a single day. That day is June 16, 1997 – but I’m not sure that this nod towards *Ulysses* is anything more than literary affectation, for, after all, Joyce decided on his date for significant personal reasons. That this ostentatious literary date is by implication important in *Fidget* seems contrary to the celebration of the generally faceless and unimportant events described. I think an unnamed date, effectively an “everyday”, would have served better.

Goldsmith is probably best known for his *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.06* (a title only an author could love: most seem to refer to it simply as “one-eleven”), a protracted alphabet game which has the same structural affinity for the quotidian as does his new book. Here Goldsmith wakes at “10:00” and lazily observes his morning self-adjustments.

Step. Step. Step. Step. Step. Left hand moves away. Fingers open. Hand moves to body. Turns right. Feet forward. Step. Pinches back. Left hand grasps. Arm moves behind. Sidesteps left. Knees bend. Buttocks drop. Elbow pushes. Right hand corkscrews, led by tip of right middle finger. Fist in front of body. Right hand scratches right calf. Right thumb and forefinger pinch.

Mundanity upclose: there is a hint of pornography here. In her entirely unnecessary *Afterword*, which has the academic title “Vocable Scripts’:

Balladesque

ALUN PIGGINS

www.alunpiggins.com

WHEN ALUN Piggins sings, he is really all there. His raspy, engaging voice carries itself through well-crafted songs as the listener is invited to embark on a number of journeys. When Piggins sings *heading out west* you go with him, when his *heart goes catatonic* yours does, too. *Balladesque*, Toronto-based Alun Piggins’ first solo CD, is a collection of genuine songs that have avoided the gloss all too prevalent in the current business of making CD’s. The album definitely has a rootsy sensibility and could fit within the *no depression* movement, although, on a few tracks, Piggins has pulled out the electric guitar – on these songs a more straight-ahead pop feel comes through. No matter the label, the songs stay with you. Written and recorded by Alun at *chemical sound* and in his *mouldy floor* studio, the twelve songs on the album are catchy and yet still have integrity. Vocals of Oh Susanna (an abundantly talented singer-songwriter in her own right) can be heard on a number of songs, and the combination of these two voices is wonderful. Alun has managed to capture on this recording the intensity of one of his live performances. He is a songwriter everyone should know. If you can’t catch him in person, *Balladesque* will work just as well.

— Suzanne Hancock

Differential Poetics in Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Fidget*”, Marjorie Perloff makes what seems to me a fairly obvious comparison with Beckett’s more

mechanical prose, but I wonder whether some of Goldsmith's navel-gazing *par excellence* doesn't have some of the rhythmic strategies of clumsy "erotic" writing – the kind which has its colourful monosyllables bump and grind. From "15:00":

Ankle moves up and back. Breathe from stomach. Left hand falls over. Tongue protrudes from mouth. Caresses upper lip moving from upper left to right. Tongue probes back of front teeth. Tongue chafes against sharpness of front tooth. Tongue moves to gums. Runs over crevice between two front teeth. Relaxes into slumped tongue. Probes bump on front tooth. Reaches up and grasps.

In his essay "How to Recognize a Porn Movie", Umberto Eco suggests that pornography can be identified by undue amounts of time-wasting in a narrative. The normality which a pornographic story needs to frame its easily accomplished transgressions inevitably seems unsatisfactory. So, in a way at least, *Fidget* is a naughty sort of book.

The styles of the chapters do vary slightly, with some introducing fanciful thoughts or another limiting itself to one-word sentences ("Open. Swallow. Exhale. Stand. Burp"), but any reader would be hard pressed to read the book carefully straight through. At "20:00", when even Goldsmith, it seems, can't take this anymore, the narrative is fueled by the inspiration of alcohol. This is the only departure, as it were, from the attempts at all-out solipsism, since the booze is such a noteworthy catalyst. This is also, I think, the most exciting (I mean that in the word's most literal sense) chapter of the book:

Whitehead and watch after left hand. In the pocket worthwhile by all pass flat on ground lifting body. Horror body weight on foot. What put blade outward. Holting ground. Toe hitting left-ly. First hat off ground, dancing about

hand and knee. Lift head reference. Thandclapsle. Extend out in sled. Brokenicular clap in scent of body. In the chive leash forward. Stay, stay, no.

AS YOU MIGHT have guessed by this time, *Fidget* is, for the most part, a rather boring book. Reading it is not unlike sitting at a table and intently watching a metronome. Yet there may come a moment in so doing, when one's hand may slip to one's wrist and find a pulse which seeks to join the beat. This is how music begins.

There are two elements of the book which are troublingly antipathetical to the experiment. One is the Perloff *Afterword* mentioned. Its presence denigrates the reader, I think, by preventing him or her from taking the same calibre of risk as the author. Perloff (elsewhere a very astute writer on 20th century poetics) quotes liberally from letters by Goldsmith, one of which says that there "was to be no editorializing" in the project – exactly what the *Afterword* contradicts.

The other problem is the last chapter, "22:00", which simply reverses "10:00" as it appears typographically on the page (the words and letters are turned around) and every action and direction is switched to its opposite (though the "upper lip" of the second sentence in "10:00" is not changed to lower in the second-last sentence of "22:00"). Obviously this technique constitutes a revision and a shift of focus from the body of the present to the text of the past. Goldsmith did not really make it through Bloomsday, because he finally became more interested in the project than in its subject.

ONE OF *Fidget's* epigraphs is taken from a letter from Wallace Stevens to William Carlos Williams, in which he says that "to fidget with points of view leads always to new beginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility." Spending the whole day

with oneself, recording the expenditure: these things, Stevens's own writings assure us,

at least comprise

An occupation, an exercise, a work,

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:

One of the vast repetitions final in Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,

Until merely going round is a final good ...

Fidget is, if you will, "good", when it goes round; but not when it stops. ●

Contributors

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RUTH LATTA’s poems have appeared in *Anthos*, *Bywords*, *Country Charm*, *Canadian Writer’s Journal*, *Whetstone*, *Satire*, *Lucidity*, *Northern Women’s Journal*, *Something*, and *Hooks and Ladders*. She is the author of *Life Writing: Autobiographers and Their Craft*, *The Memory of All That: Canadian Women Remember World War II*, and *A Wild Streak and Other Stories*.

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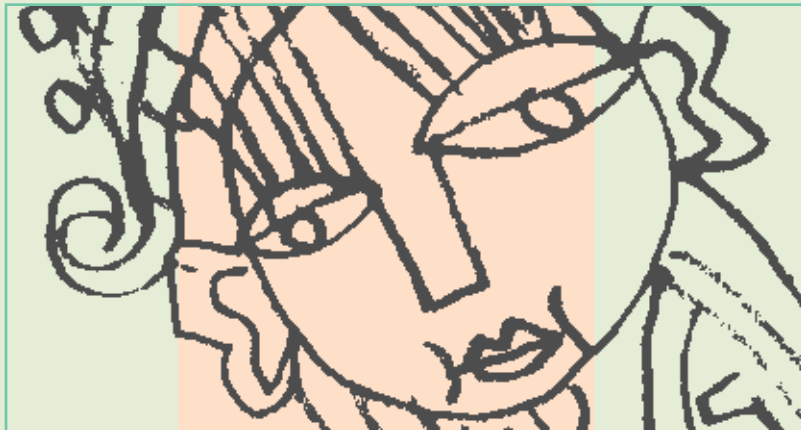
STRUAN SINCLAIR is the author of the short-story collection *Strange Comforts*, in the English edition of which “Skinrain” was previously published. His story “Building Marrakesh” appears in our anthology *Dreaming Home* (*paperplates books*, 1999).

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