

# paperplates

A Magazine for *Fifty Readers*

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Vol. 4, No. 2

telefoon

Poetry, fiction, reviews



# Vol. 4, No. 2

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## In memoriam

I'D LIKE TO dedicate this issue to friend and contributor Jack Yashinsky, who died in August. Jack's contributions appeared in Vol. 1, No. 1 (*First & Last*), Vol. 1, No. 2 (*Neighbours*), Vol. 2, No. 1 (*The Chinese Potter*) and Vol. 2, No. 3 (*The Grasshopper and the Ant*).

Jack was a professor of French at the University of Toronto. I first knew of him through friends who had taken his courses, either there or at the summer school held on the island of St Pierre. He had a formidable reputation, both as a man and as a teacher. He was debonair, athletic, humorous, and wise. One Christmas, my friends gave me two plain little brown mugs, on the bottom of which were inscribed the initials *JY*. (Jack was also a very talented potter.) Years later, when I showed them to him, he smiled and said that he had done much better work since. Even so, I think he was pleased to see how well they had lasted. They are certainly well made: of a size and roundness to fit in the hand, to warm it, as, originally, they must have warmed his. That link with him, once so casual, is now a serious comfort.

— Bernard Kelly



## letters

### *To the editor,*

Thought I'd take the time to respond to your editorial and D. Zakss' letter [in Vol. 4, No. 1] right away. First, the editorial.

Sometimes good things take a while to simmer. I sympathize with your dilemma, having been a small mag editor myself. Let me just say I think mounting your mag on the web is a great way to go. [...]

D. Zakss will be pleased to hear that Susan has been quite prolific lately. In spite of the sadness that has touched her life in recent months, she's hard at work on a third novel. She's up to 24 books now, not counting all the fugitive chapbooks, broadsides and what-have-you. Thirteen of those books are collections of poetry. If D. Zakss – or anyone reading this out there – missed her last collection, *Things That Keep and Do Not Change* (M&S, 1999), he/they should order a copy right away. D. Zakss may also be pleased to hear that Beach Holme have just released *What the Small Day Cannot Hold: Collected Poems 1970-1985*, a re-issue of her first seven books in one binding in a handsome paperback edition in their Press Porcepic imprint *Canadian Classic Series* – 406 pp for only \$18.95. A steal and must-have book for Musgrave fans. Marilyn Bowering has received similar treatment in the series recently, and fans of both these writers should check out Beach Holme's web site.

**Richard Stevenson**  
Lethbridge, Alberta

*Richard Stevenson's Live Evil: A Homage to Miles Davis has just been published by Thistledown Press.*

## Wentworth Place

Mrs. Dilke has two cats - a Mother and a Daughter - now the mother is a tabby and the daughter a black and white like the spotted child - Now it appears ominous to me for the doors of both houses are opened frequently - so that there is a complete through fare for both Cats (there being no board up to the contrary) they may one and several of them come into my room *ad libitum*. But no - the Tabby only comes - whether from sympathy with ann the maid or me I can not tell ... I have questioned her - I have look'd at the lines on her paw - I have felt her pulse - to no purpose - Why should the *old* cat come to me? I ask myself - and myself has not a word to answer.

- John Keats, journal letter to George and Georgiana Keats, January 4, 1819.

THEY CALL it Keats Grove now. But in 1818, when John Keats left the ironically named Well Walk, where he had nursed his dying brother Tom, and contracted the tuberculosis that would kill him a few years later, his name was not considered special enough to bestow on a street - or even on a woman. Poverty and shortness were formidable bars to romance. So, too, was his chosen profession. "Quite the little poet," quipped a neighbour. Other Hampstead residents proved more hospitable. Here, in a new semi-detached villa facing the Heath, first with the convivial Dilkes, and later, the fascinating Brawnes behind the common

wall, he shared quarters with his practical friend Brown, and wrote the poetry he is most remembered for.

Wentworth Place, Dilke called the house. It is white-painted stucco. A plaque indicates the site of the plum tree where Keats listened to his nightingale. Lavender lines the stone path to the blue door.

Inside, the air smells of plaster-dust and damp. Rot has set in; a reconstruction project is underway; donations are respectfully requested. Leaning over cool glass cases, I stare at a lock of the poet's hair (faded), a letter he wrote to his sister (gone brown).

Here is his pocket-sized Spenser, inscribed with one of his sonnets in a minuscule hand; here, the anatomy notebook he kept in medical school, its margins crowded with drawings of flowers and herbs. The herbs may have been prescribed as medicines. Perhaps he drew to help himself recall them. Or possibly he was day-dreaming; doodling to pass a dull hour. Either way, he graduated. The proof hangs on this wall - his licence to practise medicine. 1816.

The rooms are small, beautifully proportioned, and well lit. Not unlike Keats himself. But they are sparsely furnished, and as still and quiet as a cemetery. They don't give anything away. How different they must have felt, filled with the shouts of the Dilke's young son, or Fanny Brawne's high-spirited laugh, with the sounds of card parties, claret parties, other forms of bachelor amusement. We know that Brown fathered a child with "ann," their maid. She slept in the basement. The walls are thin. There must have been footfalls on the staircase, cries in the night. Shut inside as Keats often was for the sake of his faltering health, how could he have missed them? And what of the seal-like bark of his own tubercular cough? How could Brown and the Brawnes have listened to it, night after night?

The house refuses to answer. It shrinks from my touch and stiffens its lip. It won't reveal its secrets. *Who are you?* it says. *You, with your tentative fingers and too shining eyes. You are nothing but a star-struck girl. A silly colonial.*

I go outside to the garden, where I lean against the glass and stare back in. This is the pose ascribed by Yeats to Keats himself - "a schoolboy," "nose pressed to a sweetshop window." Even today, his detractors call him an upstart suburbanite. Not a colonial, like me - but who knows? Had he lived, he might have joined his brother, George, in America. They spoke of it in their letters. John Keats, of Kentucky. Why not? I see him in a field of bluegrass, his nostrils flared like a thoroughbred's, the wind tugging his auburn curls. "The sea, the sea," he cries. English and domestic to his core, all his life he nonetheless dreamed about travel and open spaces.

Back indoors, I climb the stairs to his bedroom. The bed is tiny. On it sleeps a black-and-white spotted cat. A sign explains. For years, she has been sneaking into the house, sneaking into this room. The staff have lost the will to continue evicting her. Perhaps she is the great-great-great-great granddaughter of that cat of Mrs. Dilke's - the young one, who would not come to Keats - making amends now for her ancestor's peculiar lack of taste, keeping company here, as I do, with the poet's immortal spirit.

- Susan Olding

# Reunion 1

Years ago my father  
came to collect  
me at English Bay.

I'd toddled  
there with my bucket  
and was digging up

a castle when they noticed  
I was gone.  
But *I* knew where I was precise-

ly and when my father arrived  
at the bay, I showed him  
which way home.

Today in a wheel of recollection  
*he* directed *me* –  
back along the corridor to the bed

beside the window where I  
helped him lay his head on the pillow  
to cradle the aching pain.

The lights strung down Grouse Mountain  
shine  
like independence day.

# Reunion 2

I brought him a pot of golden sun-  
flowers to lighten the hospital room.  
He asked with a laugh  
if those were Van Gogh's?

On Saturday morning the barber came  
to cut his hair and beard. It was  
then I noticed his ear – the right one –  
was missing a piece of its lobe.

# Cypress

Two tall  
friends dancing  
under the hood  
of a warm July night.

Heart to breast  
and around in a circle  
made imperfect  
by shifting feet.

– *Elana Wolff*

## Photograph of twin sisters

Sun glares in their faces. Mom stands on heavy feet, peering through the camera. The girls are paper dolls meeting each other. There is a shadow beneath their clasped arms. Dad's storm windows are side by side behind them, above them. Round green pop bottles on display. A sign advertising Canada Dry. The sisters wear the same shirts. Starched white cotton, white eyelets, white buttons. The red in their pants matches the freckles on their faces. As Mom commands her girls to smile, Nevis squints and Glenys squeezes her sister's hand too hard.

– *Jenny Charchun*

## real heroes live IN the sea

direct designers  
of  
fate  
use no needles  
or  
orifice  
as outlet/  
but  
madness  
as raw  
& unearthed  
form  
to endure  
mind  
where most  
pain  
is  
most  
pure

– *Laura Joy Lustig*

## The surf skateboards break

The surf skateboards break  
is despicably neat  
the chaos  
they skim off in speed  
should relapse,  
like all haphazard  
mastery ...  
Bummed,  
the kid hops  
feeling nimbleness tingle  
with orderly steps  
thus avoided:  
in leaning he turns  
jumps and claps  
his deft  
diving board down  
and the sidewalk  
waved  
rocks like a puddle  
more muddied.  
The young girl  
he trips in front of  
gives a ripple  
of laughter,  
adapts and moves onto her own  
trusty crest  
which then slips;  
so they drift  
whispering  
like two tides  
on the tips of Mack Truck-toes  
they lap flooded streets  
so relaxed ...

– *Brad Buchanan*

# Splinters

(i) ON A PRIMARY-coloured day in January, the kiosk attendant at Wylie's Baths popped out to the bank, and Lucy McLean's two brothers challenged the local lads to a barefoot race across the grey-hot wooden deck.

The local lads demurred. "Bit hot, mate," suggested one.

"You chicken?" asked Robbie McLean.

"Nah. Just like fire-walking, eh? Psych yourself up."

"Yeah, let's do it."

Thongs flopped like dying fish on the bleached boards – ready, set, go! A flash of suntanned legs, a blur of Speedos, touch the wall and back, then hop and yelp in the shade, crowd and shove around the tap.

Ten-year-old Lucy, unnoticed at first behind the pack, stood quietly in turn at the tap, raised her right foot then her left, trickled the cooling stream over her toes. They noticed then.

"Hey Luce, watcha go and do that for?"

"Dumb girl."

"Copy-cat."

Lucy was unperturbed, even when she saw she'd somehow managed to get a splinter in the fleshy part of her right foot, just below the big toe. She picked at it a bit with her fingernail, then left it alone and didn't tell the boys.

Robbie made a fuss that night when he found a splinter in the exact same spot and Mum, always convincing in executioner role, marched him off to the bathroom with boiling water and a packet of needles. Gavin snickered and calculated how much of Robbie's pocket-money he could extort in turn for not ratting. Lucy did not look up from her jigsaw-puzzle.

A week later, Mum noticed that Lucy was walking rather strangely, favouring the outside of her right foot. She sat her daughter down in the kitchen, whipped off her sandal and sock and looked in silence at the yellowish festering oval, big as a twenty-cent piece. Lucy observed the flush rising on her mother's skin and listed the many different shades of red in her mind – puce, tomato, rose, vermilion, scarlet, crimson, carmine. She made it to scarlet before her mother found her voice and lost her temper.

The doctor was perplexed when Lucy declined his suggestion that she hold her mother's hand while he prised out the splinter with his silver, sterilised tools.

"Mightn't hurt as much," he said.

"But it doesn't hurt now," said Lucy.

"It will when I get to work," said the doctor.

"How do you know?" she countered.

The doctor looked crossly at Lucy and more crossly at Lucy's mother, whose colour was now in the deep crimson range. He got to work, and who is to say that he dug a little less gently than a doctor is expected to do?

But Lucy did not flinch once, not once did tears spring up in the corners of her eyes. She sat with her foot stuck straight out in front of her and scanned a poster



about smoking that she could see over the doctor's shoulder.

"I don't know," said Lucy's mother to the doctor. "She just doesn't seem to – respond – like the boys do. Do you think she's quite normal?"

"Hmm," said the doctor. "How's she doing at school?"

"Oh, excellent. Top of the class. Not that it'll be important to her later. I'm more worried about – ". She lowered her voice and eyes delicately.

The doctor held up the splinter triumphantly and set about draining the rest of the pus.

"Plenty of time, plenty of time," he said soothingly.

"But she's not going to be pretty and she's far too bright – oh, I do get worried. Probably my fault for having her so late. Bit unplanned, she was."

Lucy decided that people who smoked deserved all the emphysema they got, and resolved to never kiss anyone who indulged in such a revolting habit.

**(ii)** THE YEAR 9 excursion to Wollongong came to an abrupt end at Bulli Pass when a semi-trailer jack-knifed and split the tour bus open like a can of sardines. Girls spilled out screaming and writhed in the road.

Hysteria rose and fell in waves as blood dripped from the gash in the bus.

Lucy slung her bag over her shoulder and tried to help her friend Marysia. Marysia's right leg was severed below the knee and she was muttering something about wanting to see the sparks at the BHP steelworks. She grabbed for Lucy's hand and fondled her fingers over and over until the ambulances and rescue teams arrived. There were lots of sparks then. Marysia let go Lucy's hand and clapped her own together.

"Look, look, just like fireworks! Isn't it pretty?"

"Yes," said Lucy.

Later, at the hospital, a nurse removed twenty-three slivers of window-glass from Lucy's hair and arms with a sleek pair of tweezers, and remarked about closeness to important arteries. Lucy listened to Marysia screaming somewhere in the distance and wondered about luck and associated matters. Marysia had begged to have the window-seat and Lucy had willingly agreed. It wasn't generosity, she hadn't really cared one way or the other. She knew she was Marysia's best friend, but she wasn't sure how that had happened, or if things operated in reverse.

*The Telegraph* reported that three girls and a teacher died at the scene. A series of eyewitness photos accompanied the report. Lucy examined the photos and failed to identify any of her classmates.

"Shock distorts," her mother informed her.

Marysia survived the crash but slashed her wrists a month later.

She'd been aiming for the next Olympic Games. Rhythmic gymnastics.

LUCY SAT UP straight on a wooden chair upholstered in green velvet. She was separated physically from her Headmistress by the width of a polished mahogany desk. She sat with her hands folded neatly in her uniformed lap and tried her best to focus her attention on the conversation and not on the Head's tortoiseshell hair-clips.

"Miss Harrison says you failed to attend the grief counselling session," said the Head.

"Yes, Miss Rogers," said Lucy.

"I assume you have a good reason."

Lucy knew she hadn't really made a conscious decision about going or not going to the grief counselling session. She also knew she had better think of a good reason and quickly, if she were not to incur the Head's wrath. Could you get a detention for not going to grief counselling?

"Um, yes," she said.

"Well?"

Lucy watched one of the tortoiseshell hair-clips detach itself from the Head's fat grey bun and slide down inside her collar like a caterpillar. And then it was all very clear. She knew exactly why.

"Because I don't need it," she said.

"Oh don't be silly, Lucy. You've all been through a terrible experience. In my day there was no such thing as grief counsellors. You're very lucky to have them now."

"But I'm not grieving," said Lucy.

**(iii)** LUCY ANSWERED an advertisement she found on the local supermarket's community noticeboard.

*Artist requires model. Late teens. No anorexics or soapie starlet aspirants, please.* She took down the ad and carefully replaced the drawing-pins in the board.

"Well you're certainly not pretty," said the artist. He walked around Lucy, lifted handfuls of her straight blonde hair away from her face, traced the line of her jaw. "But I don't want pretty. Take off your clothes."

Lucy did as she was told and the artist walked around her again.

"Okay," he said. "Tell me why you want this job."

"I'm saving for Bali," she said. "For after the HSC."

"Bali!" he repeated contemptuously. "Oh no, you don't want to go to Bali. Wall-to-wall pedlars and junkies and brain-dead surfies. Tell me you'll save to go somewhere else and the job's yours."

"All right," said Lucy.

So Lucy saved for Kathmandu and posed for the artist on Wednesdays and Fridays after school. She sat behind a sewing-machine or bent over an ironing-board, she creased

her forehead with the physical effort of mixing a cake or vacuuming the carpet. Sometimes she wore a checked apron, usually nothing at all.

"I'm doing a series of paintings on housework," the artist explained at the beginning.

Having said that, he hardly talked at all during the sittings, except when he needed Lucy to change her position, lift her chin or lower her elbow. He was pleased with her capacity to sit or stand motionless for hours, relieved that he could concentrate on the interplay of light and shade without the staccato intrusion of words, witty or otherwise.

Lucy concentrated on keeping still, and recited French irregular verbs, mathematical formulae and important historical dates to herself.

On Wednesdays, after the sittings, the artist brewed exotic teas and taught Lucy about exploring colour and shape; on Fridays he led her into the flat adjoining his studio and explored her body on the Japanese futon.

"Don't expect me to love you," he told her the first time. "Love is something you shouldn't expect in life. Don't expect it and you won't be disappointed."

Lucy did not expect love at all and so she was not disappointed.

She was perfectly content with the sense of physical harmony she felt when their separate body shapes fitted together and came apart again later, rather like a jigsaw-puzzle. Everything in its right place. She liked the neatness with which they rested, washed and dressed, parted with a friendly handshake at the studio door.

She hardly thought of the artist at all between Wednesday and Friday, Friday and Wednesday, except once, one Saturday when she found three splinters in the palm of her hand and realised they must have come from the headboard of the Japanese futon. But it was only a fleeting thought. Her next thought was to find a needle, quickly dig out the splinters. She couldn't afford the complication of infection in her writing hand so close to the trial exams.

IN DECEMBER the artist exhibited his housework paintings at a trendy Paddo gallery. Lucy dressed in basic black and strolled around unnoticed.

"Amazing, isn't it, how completely devoid of any emotion the woman is," said a vision in jade green satin and beaten copper earrings.

"Isn't that the point?" said her ponytailed male companion. "I mean, housework is simply not emotional."

"You only say that because you never do it, darling," said the jade green vision fondly. "Housework is terribly emotional for me. I feel quite suicidal when I have to tackle the toaster. De-crumbing is a dreadful chore."

"Spare us, Sophie," the ponytail implored. "Back on

track, dear, assuming there was a track?"

"What I meant, darling, was that the woman is so utterly blank, so expressionless, that you wonder if there's any depth at all, if she's got any inner life."

Lucy waited until they'd drifted away before she looked at the paintings. She thought the artist had captured her likeness exactly, although he'd painted her as ten years older. And then, for the merest of microseconds, the jade green woman's remark flickered across her mind-screen. No inner life? How silly. Everyone had an inner life, didn't they? The thought flickered away. Lucy went to fetch another glass of champagne and congratulate the artist.

The next morning she left for Kathmandu.

(iv) LUCY IS NOW in her third year of law. She has a corporate scholarship which pays for her tuition and living expenses, and she shares an inner-city terrace with two gay men, Andy and Bryce. Andy and Bryce share Lucy's passion for neatness: they do the housework methodically and without emotion, but beam with pride when they've achieved their goal of gleaming surfaces. Lucy is happy with her living arrangements; at least, she assumes she is happy because she defines happiness as the absence of dissatisfaction.

Andy and Bryce worry about her love life, or lack thereof.

"Do you think you might be a dyke?" they ask Lucy, pointing out that the total number of men she has brought home in the last six months equals zero.

Lucy shrugs. "Don't know. Maybe."

"Have you slept with a woman?"

"Sure."

"And?"

She shrugs again. "It was okay. It's okay with men too."

"Just okay?"

"Well, yes. What's wrong with okay?"

"Er, nothing."

Lucy heads off to the library to study. Andy and Bryce go shopping in King Street and discuss Lucy further over brunch.

LUCY IS PUZZLED by what she sees around her, in the streets, at uni, in the library behind the stacks. Couples touching, hugging, holding hands. She doesn't do any of that with her lovers. Not with the artist, whom she still sees on and off, or with a male law student her own age, or a slightly older lesbian she met in a bookshop. It's just sex, although both the law student and the lesbian are pressing for more, staking their claims for love. She meant what she said, sex is okay, but – . She knows that the rest, that love doesn't matter, but then she wonders why it doesn't.

She watches the soapies intently for signs or clues.

Fifteen-year-olds in “Home and Away” kissing and fondling and falling in love. Sure, they’re actors, but it can’t all be fake.

“How do they do it?” she asks Andy and Bryce.

“Easy,” says Andy. “Watch.” He puts his arms around Bryce and kisses him on the lips. “See?”

“Darling!” says Bryce, pretending to swoon.

“Oh please!” says Lucy, and goes to her room. She stares at the harmony of colour and shape she’s created with cobalt blue walls, white woodwork and furniture, red in the folds of curtains and bedspread.

Suddenly the clean edges start to blur, the colours run and swirl together and drain, drain away, until she’s left with nothing but a lifeless grey, the grey of too many drizzly days in winter.

“What on earth is that?” asks Lucy, coming home from lectures a week later.

“That’ is a Birman kitten,” says Andy, who looks inordinately pleased with himself.

“What’s it doing on our dining-room table?”

“Er, washing her paw,” suggests Bryce. This is indeed what the kitten is doing, with great application and determination, if not much skill.

“It followed me home,” Andy volunteers untruthfully.

“She likes it here,” adds Bryce.

“You get to name it, Luce,” says Andy.

“Her,” says Bryce.

Lucy looks at the kitten, which abandons its paw long enough to look back at her. Lucy is startled by the intensity of its blue eyes, and drops her folder. The kitten resumes its ablutions. Lucy leaves her folder on the carpet, which is most unusual for someone so neat, and stalks into the downstairs bathroom.

“Shredded drapes!” they hear her exclaim. “Ping-pong balls and kitty litter! Scratches on the furniture! Oh God!” Then there is a crash and a wail.

Andy and Bryce race to the bathroom, fling open the door.

Lucy is sitting on the toilet-lid, her head in her hands. There is a trickle of blood running down her fingers and the hand-mirror is shattered on the tiles.

“Hey Luce,” says Andy gently. “Surely you don’t believe in that crap about seven years’ bad luck?”

Lucy shakes her head vehemently. Andy carefully peels her hands away from her face and they see that she is crying.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with me,” she says, her voice wavering.

“Nothing wrong with having the weepies,” says Bryce.

“But I don’t – ”

“Cry? Well, it’s about time you started,” Bryce says briskly.

“Now let’s get you a Bandaid and we’ll all go have a cuppa. Earl Grey, I think. Leave the mirror, I’ll clear it later.”

“Close the door,” says Lucy, getting up. “Don’t want the kitten to get a splinter.”

They close the door and repair to the kitchen. Lucy puts on a Bandaid; Andy puts on the kettle; and he and Bryce indulge in their usual pretend-camp ritual of arguing about teapots and co-ordinating cosies.

The kitten is still calmly washing its paw on the dining-room table.

“What colour saucer for the kitten’s milk?” asks Andy.

“Blue,” says Lucy. “To match her eyes. I’ll get it.”

She opens the cupboard to search for a saucer. Andy fetches the milk.

## Ouija board

Beth is editing a textbook,  
the project growing longer  
with each hour she attacks  
her laptop: to revive a famous  
text written by colleagues  
years ago, now grown moribund  
as a weed-choked garden.

We're visiting my mother  
for the holidays, spent  
New Year's Eve slothful  
as pythons digesting pigs  
they've swallowed whole.  
But today, Beth's back  
fighting a deadline,  
as if battling a migraine.

When her editor's whine  
pierces the phone lines,  
I put him off with,  
"Dr. Cooperman popped down  
to make a copy for you,"  
as bald a lie as Micawber  
fending off creditors  
in *David Copperfield*.

"Hell of a way," Beth pats  
my hand, "to spend our vacation,"  
and returns, sighing,  
to move the mouse across  
the Ouija of her screen,

while I watch traffic  
from the apartment patio,  
and wait for morning,  
when we'll walk to the beach,  
sea air bidding us linger,  
to gather lovely, empty shells.

– Robert Cooperman

## Givers and takers

A girl at work asked if I was a  
"Giver" or "Taker". You might know her. She's  
The one who broke her hand in about three  
Places when she hit her boyfriend. I'd say  
First of all, that the act itself outweighs  
The ability to simply agree  
With one side or the other. I can't see  
Those things being separated that way.

I mean, you might start things by going down  
On me, or maybe my tongue's between your  
Legs, or next you're on top of me, or I'm  
On you, or later our appetite's found  
Putting you on your stomach, just before  
You give-in, when I take you from behind.

– Barry Ballard

## Violet note

in fresco blue  
of pharaoh's purple.  
They can't break out  
of a life embroidered  
into tapestry blue  
blue epic  
in which they don  
white carnations  
on lapels of suits  
they think are chic  
their homes protected by  
airtight wainscots  
lemon pledged  
by allegiant wives.  
They positively gleam.

– Laurie Calhoun

# oyster

nope.  
nope.  
nope.  
nope.

fluorescence  
on skin  
on fingers  
on face  
on eyes  
tightens  
her grip  
on those  
little buttons  
on those  
little pearls  
she keeps  
deep inside

nope.  
nope.  
nope.  
nope.

fingers weave  
the striations  
through  
her eyes

her skin  
gathers  
the debris  
through

bathrobe  
comforter  
ashtray

cushions  
magazines  
bowls  
baseboards  
earth  
ceiling  
roof and sky and

there –

– on *Jerry Springer* –

she releases  
a new pearl  
deep inside

– *Russell De Giacomo*

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# Teletubbies

We'd never fuss and fight like this in the grassy land of the Teletubbies  
bunnies wander recklessly not afraid of the teasing Dipsy  
We'd never grunt and growl like beasts if filled with Teletubby fleece  
'cause under the wrathful eyes of their sun god Orwellian headsets would send us to bed  
Laa-Laa never picks on Tinky Winky when he from time to time does sport a purse  
what's more they'd never glare at you or me even when we fuss or fight or curse  
Build repetitious self esteem  
it's bye-bye time for Teletubbies ... AGAIN!  
... Just watch my tummy glow ...  
We'd never fuss and fight like this in the grassy land of the Teletubbies  
bunnies wander recklessly not afraid of the teasing Dipsy  
We'd never grunt and growl like beasts if filled with Teletubby fleece  
'cause under the wrathful eyes of their sun god Orwellian headsets would send us to bed  
Laa-Laa never picks on Tinky Winky when he from time to time does sport a purse  
what's more they'd never glare at you or me even when we fuss or fight or curse  
Build repetitious self esteem  
it's bye-bye time for Teletubbies

– *Duncan MacDonell*

## *Fred's wall*

ON FRIDAY the unthinkable happened. Fred's bus was late back. There were two things I knew about Fred, he kept mum and he kept time. He was never late. Something must have happened.

Always mindful of Holliwell's reputation our secretary began a cautious enquiry. Her quick phone round showed that none of the other drivers had spotted Fred or his bus stranded by the roadside, there was nothing on the police radio, and the local truckies had no news of any disaster on their wave band. Until definite news came, neither she nor I could do more.

But I wondered. After all, it was I who had persuaded the boss, Mr. Holliwell senior, to hire Fred. What if he'd taken umbrage at the tour party's behaviour and gone off and left them? He'd been sacked as school bus driver because he'd dumped a whole busload of misbehaving kids by the road and driven back to the depot with the empty bus. And before driving school buses he had taken early retirement from the municipal bus company, much to the bus company's relief. I never did find out why. It had taken some pleading to get Holliwell's to hire Fred, but he was perfect for the kind of tours I had in mind. And Holliwell's, struggling to maintain a fleet of buses and stay in business, let me have my way.

Fred, you see, was taciturn. He never chattered, you had to persuade him to talk, which is why he was my most popular driver. Holliwell's Tours now specialized in educational trips for the Open University, the University of the Third Age, and the intellectual tourist. It was an ever-growing market and the last thing the culture vultures, or education enthusiasts, wanted was a jolly, "Ho, ho, ho, have you heard this one?" bus driver to lower the tone of the trip. Fred was a gem, as close as a clam, and not at all likely to interrupt the expert leading the tour. And he enjoyed his job, or so I'd thought.

"It's summat to do and I like doin' it," he'd say to me as I handed him his day's clipboard full of instructions and teased him about his destination. He'd taken the geological field trips, historical tours, and other cultural exhibitions in his silent stride. Even Mr. Holliwell was pleased.

All I could do was hope that the professor and students had been extra keen, Fred had obliged, and they had stopped more times than the original schedule allowed for. But it was hard waiting.

Fred drove into the depot at seven. His passengers stepped down briskly and stood in a close group round the driver's door. My anxious enquiries as to what had happened were brushed aside. Fred emerged. Professor Ross fastened herself onto Fred's left arm, her assistant grabbed his right. He was surrounded by the students and hustled over the road to the pub. I followed. Mr. Holliwell would want a full report and I needed to know if my star driver was still ascending or had descended rapidly onto his backside.

What I couldn't understand was what had happened. Fred had been driving the group for the whole week, and he liked Professor Ross and her class of dedicated, second-chance scholars. What had he done to make them so late and cause this reaction?

They had only been on the Hadrian's Wall trip. Living so near the Wall, we did six big week-long tours with Professor Ross, who was young, pretty, and easy on the ears. She also knew how to manage Fred.

Unfortunately I knew that when I'd told him he was driving the Hadrian's Wall trip, his comments had been something a little out of keeping with his usual close-mouthed attitude.

"Romans now," he'd said over his pint and a ploughman's as we'd shared a lunch break in the pub. "Julius Caesar's lot, I seen them in 'Ben Hur'." He scratched his head. "What do these students want to spend a week poking around an old wall for? Dunno why they make all that fuss about a few tumbledown stones." He had a total lack of imagination; a broken wall was just a heap of rubble to him and he couldn't imagine it as anything else.

"It's Professor Ross, Fred," I said, knowing that she was his favourite.

"Well, at least she keeps to the schedule." Then he smiled, his face slowly opening out, the lines uncreasing. "She said them Romans built that wall just to keep out the hairy Scots." He nudged me with a hard elbow. "That's you, Mary MacDonald." He swallowed the last of his bread and cheese and sniffed in a reflective way. "Pity them buggers building it, stuck up there on the moors." Fred liked town comforts, enjoying the country in well organized episodes of 'Country Practice' or 'Wild Britain' on the television. So what on earth had he done for two hours in the middle of the moors?

THE STUDENTS told me that Fred had rolled back to the bus at five o'clock, not three. He'd come walking out of nowhere along the wall from an area the group had already searched thoroughly. When he wondered what the fuss was about, it had taken Professor Ross and her assistant several minutes to convince him that he was truly two hours late. His watch said three p.m. The party now wanted further explanation. It was more than idle interest; what few words Fred had spoken had whetted their curiosity. Typically Fred buried his nose in his pint of Taddy's ale and wouldn't speak.

I silently begged him to stay mum, for I remembered what he'd said on Monday. "Prof. wants the class to follow in Hadrian's footsteps. So we's going from east to west along the wall." He'd frowned. "Mucks up the schedule you gave me." Then he'd flicked a quick smile on and off. "She'd have had us arriving in them Roman ships if she could." He didn't seem too put out. "Spent the morning in South Shields looking at the harbour and fort, afternoon in Newcastle at the exhibition in the museum." He slowly downed several mouthfuls of ale and shook his head. "I dunno why she don't send me on ahead and then they

catch up, walking the bits of wall all the way. She has me stopping the bus every third of a ruddy Roman mile to see where a turret would've been. Bad for the engine." There was an indignant edge to his voice. As a driver, he took pride in keeping his bus in perfect condition. I feared that his two-hour delay had been deliberate.

"Fred, come on, tell us all."

Don't you dare, I thought.

Fred ducked, retracting his neck like a tortoise. He looked harassed. Professor Ross tucked her fair hair behind her ears, settled her elbows firmly on the table and leaned towards Fred. "You can't keep us waiting for two hours, then drift back and tell us you were watching a television program."

I kept my face straight with difficulty.

"Film."

"What film, Fred?"

"Filming, you know, practising for one."

Faces frowned, glanced at one another, searching for understanding.

I smiled slightly. Nice one, Fred.

"You mean," said the assistant, "that you were watching a film being made." His voice rose, questioning. "Cameras, lights, actors, extras, crew, generators, trucks, all that sort of fuss?"

"Yeah ... well, not ... ." Fred was unable to continue. A babble of voices denied the possibilities. No one had seen any piece of a film crew.

My ribs hurt from holding in laughter.

"But, Fred," said Professor Ross, "we were the only bus at the fort car park. And I don't think more than five cars came in all afternoon. We met a few other people walking the wall. No film crew. We split into small groups and scoured the wall looking for you. We hunted the countryside. We couldn't find you and we didn't see a thing." She sighed.

I wondered where he had hidden himself.

Fred wiped the froth moustache off his lip and came out with a full sentence. "Actors, it was just actors practising at the turret on the wall."

Eyebrows and shoulders rose in silent comment.

"But, Fred," again protested Professor Ross, although very kindly and gently, "there aren't any remains of turrets left along that stretch of the wall, there isn't even much wall."

Fred almost squirmed. "They rebuilt it ... the film people." He swallowed more ale amidst their puzzled comments, then ducked again as the questions began. Almost every student had a query.

"You mean you saw the wall rebuilt?"

"In stone?"

He shook his head.

"A sort of false wall?"

An indignant denial.

“A wooden cut-out thing?”

Fred snorted.

“What was it made of then?”

“Grass.”

I choked over my lime and lager and allowed the pent-up laughter to escape as a snort.

Professor Ross raised her hand for quiet. “Was the turret a stone one, Fred?”

He nodded.

“And recessed into a wall which was a rampart covered with turfs?”

Fred pulled his ear thoughtfully. “Aye, wooden posts and grass sods.”

The assistant looked at the professor then at Fred. “You mean, you could see the wooden supports?”

“Well, it was just built like and they was capping the top bits.” Poor Fred forced out another sentence. I decided he could have free lunch for a week if he kept this up. No one would be complaining to Mr. Holliwell; they’d all be too busy trying to sort out what Fred saw. My best driver was safe.

A male student, in tweed cap and jacket, quietly whispered to Professor Ross that he had walked all that was left of the wall in that direction for nearly three miles and seen nothing.

Fred heard. He was tired of the interrogation and hard pressed. “Well, I did, and I wasn’t dreaming neither,” he growled. He had woken up to the fact that I was listening and his job might be at stake. He became, for Fred, truculent and garrulous.

“I went for a stroll. The rain looked like it’d hold off for an hour so I took myself away down the wall.” There was a listening quiet and he wet his lips with a quick sip. “There’s a bunch of big rocks in a dip like” – he took a longer sip – “the wall bends away a bit. There was a shower and I sheltered below the wall, in the rocks. When I moved round the bend there was this new bit of wall and one of them turrets I’ve bin hearing about all week.” He glared at everyone, defying them, daring them to contradict him.

“Attaboy, Fred, I thought, you’ve got ’em now.”

No one interrupted. Fred was talking straight, reporting what he’d seen. I mentally applauded his performance.

One of the students brought him another pint and the group stopped hovering and sat down around him to enjoy their drinks. The atmosphere had eased; they were prepared to forgive Fred and discuss the mystery.

The retired policeman spoke up; he meant well. “Must have been a dream, eh Fred?” he said, trying to make a joke. “Spooky, huh?” There were friendly smiles all round.

Fred turned donkey and dug in, all stubborn and contentious. “It was a film,” he said.

And you stick to that story, Fred, I thought, because Mr. Holliwell will accept it.

EVENTUALLY THE students drifted off home and left Fred, Professor Ross, myself, and a retired clergyman. We paid for an extra chicken in the basket, for Fred, and under our courteous attention he eased up, becoming something approaching his usual stolid self.

“Has your watch stopped, Fred?” The vicar’s remark was quietly casual.

Fred glanced, blinked, then shook his head.

“But it’s two hours out?”

“Aye.” Fred lifted one shoulder and looked uncomfortable. Wisely we sipped or nibbled, keeping our attention directed away from him.

“It was for a film.”

No one disagreed.

Feeling more comfortable he even grinned. “You should have seen ’em.” He directed his attention to the professor. “You’d have been chuffed, watching ’em. Shame ’others didn’t see.”

“I wish I had,” she said, and the vicar’s restraining hand on her arm warned her not to ask for more.

I halted mid-swallow and only just avoided staring at Fred. Now what was he at? He’d smoothed everyone down, I didn’t think there’d be complaints. Why was he going on?

“It was just like you said, one soldier doing sentry-go at the top of the turret, helmet on and spear in hand.” He paused, reflective. “There was more than four soldiers though, nine down below, working on the wall.” Fred grinned. “They even had a bossy sergeant-major.” He chomped on his chicken leg with enjoyment.

“Did they do a good job on the uniform? I mean did it look right?” Professor Ross, with much visible effort, kept her voice restricted to mild interest.

“Well it looked all right to me, the sandals was good. Them helmets were something else though, wouldn’t have cared to wear one, some of ’em didn’t either.” Fred had finished his meal and there was less than a quarter of ale in his glass. He lifted it as though to down it all in one gulp, then paused. “I’d like to see all the film, bit I saw was good. The soldiers, they was jossing around as they worked, sharing a drink in a skin bag.” He looked at his own drink. “Then I heard this *thwick* past my ear and a *tock*.” Fred used his fingernails to sound out the noises on the wooden table. “The men, they flattened themselves, yelling. Their sentry’d been looking the other way, of course. Behind me there was a bit of heather among the rocks and I couldn’t see who was there but *tock, tock, tock* went these little arrows into the wall. There was a mad scabble to get over the wall to the other side and the biggest bloke, he boosted everyone up. The sentry chucked a rope down to help. *Thwick, tock* flew more arrows but everyone finally scrambled over the top. The big bloke went last and he let out a roar as an arrow pinned his wrist.” Fred chuckled



sympathetically. “Still he managed to yank himself free. Lost his wrist band though, it dropped off down into the ditch.” Fred rummaged into his pocket and brought out a short piece of metal chain made of linked silver rectangles. “Maybe you can find the film company and send it to them, Mary Mac?” he asked and dropped it onto the table in front of me.

We all stared at it, then the vicar spoke to Fred. “Perhaps it wasn’t a film company, Fred.”

Fred shook his head. “Look, Reverend, nothing else it could have been. You can’t tell me there’s any other explanation. I know what I saw and it was real.”

Professor Ross, who had been examining Fred’s find, protested. “Fred,” she said, “this is a legionary’s good conduct bracelet.”

“So,” said Fred cheerfully, “must have been a good film company to copy one of those right.” He saw her face. “Well, hang me,” he said. “You mean you think it’s genuine, a Roman one?” There was no reply. He looked at me. I half expected a sly wink. I didn’t get one.

“Well, we did search for you very thoroughly,” the vicar said, his voice carefully neutral. “Perhaps something strange happened.”

Fred looked across at Professor Ross and the vicar. “You silly buggers.” His tone was indulgent. “I thought you was the educated ones.”

I nudged him sharply under the table but he ignored me, just looked at their faces.

“I don’t believe it,” he said at last. “You mean you think I saw real Romans? Like ghosts?” And he burst out laughing. “Daft beggars!”

Then he looked hard at me. “And how about you, Mary Mac, what do you think?”

What I thought wasn’t for public hearing and I’d give Fred hell when I got him somewhere private. But where did he get that bracelet? I ran the warmed silver rectangles through my fingers, then chinked the links into the palm of my hand. “I don’t know, Fred,” I said, “I just don’t know.”

Fred stared at us. “It must be all that book learning,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s addled your brains.”

And he laughed.

## Fat planet

It’s late in the afternoon  
early September  
perhaps the hottest day  
this year.

An anxious feeling begins  
(some gland buried deep  
in the brain) telling  
me not to leave until  
the last of the sun  
is gone. A desperate  
pleasure, the air shot full  
of ephemera.

In front of me on  
the bright green lawn a  
squadron of used up men lying  
in various postures.

Run down every night, bodies  
full of poison, they nourish  
themselves on oblique sun and  
dreams of the fat planet where  
everyone abandons hope and  
gains the kingdom.

The body oblivious to any  
laws of reason or justice.

– Dave Sidjak

## Temple of the tooth

Ancient wonders? There were many  
but little-mentioned is the Temple  
of the Tooth, the Buddha's tooth.  
It was in a shrine, on the high plateau  
of Kandy in the centre of Ceylon.  
The tooth was coveted by many  
as the constant pilgrim flow showed.  
They had come to worship from as far  
away as Burma a thousand years ago.  
Many kings and emperors had dared  
to acquire that treasure, that tooth  
of the great Buddha, that sacred thing.  
They had thought it had magic potential  
and so the king of Ceylon prospered,  
selling elephant teeth at exorbitant prices.  
And if taken away the tooth would return  
always flying back through the air,  
leaving behind a simulacrum. And today,  
the one and only tooth is still there  
in a golden box within a box  
within an ascending scale of boxes.  
But it is no longer an elephant's molar  
having grown into an elephant's tusk.  
Is it any wonder that when you rub  
his tummy, the Buddha doesn't smile?

## Under the willow tree

The sun rising  
yet another day  
as he knew  
looking at air  
grasping tendrils  
beautiful once  
but not now,  
now that  
they had grown  
into hunger  
and thirst.  
Still  
he couldn't leave,  
breaking  
and twisting  
the wattles  
with difficulty,  
suffering  
like some ancient  
Chinese  
reluctant  
in parting.  
He had to wait,  
enduring  
for it would,  
it must  
happen  
or ...  
did Siddartha  
fake  
the whole thing?

– Giovanni Malito

# A little to the left and smile now

It's been days since i have left my usual paths  
feels like i am walking on a cheap treadmill.  
I can't seem to collapse this feeling  
there is a two storey house  
stucco, garage in front, no yard  
growing from my trapezoids.

I am bogged down in making sense  
out of my brother's messy life gone  
out of why my friend's baby died  
two hours after it was born.  
And because this last story is the most fresh  
it covers up all the others i have taken in  
with a soft yellow blue pink blanket.

I have tried to feel a little for each story  
no matter how small  
but today i am sapped.  
Tired out by the way stories try to connect  
float in my mind like the pieces of a crazy quilt  
wanting to form a unit  
regardless of aesthetics.



I wouldn't give up the holding of hands  
only wish i had more  
that we all did.



After i wrote all that i took out some photos  
of when Rob and me were in Italy.  
There i am smiling as though it goes on forever  
and you can see how light i was then *frizzante*  
standing in front of Moses or in the Coliseum with cats  
or in front of a fruit stand.

And there is the one  
i am sitting on the grass  
in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa  
my back to the camera.

I remember i was watching people line themselves up  
so in their photo it would appear  
as though they were holding the tower up.

I remember someone German came up to me  
asked me to take a picture of him and his friend  
doing that. I remember he thought i must speak  
German. That it was a nice camera.  
And after that there was a group of four.

Two couples. Japanese. Wanted theirs taken vertically.  
It was difficult to fit them in.

Then i went back to sitting.  
God it was hot that day.  
I remember thinking how photographs never really capture  
the tilt, the way it seems to be leaning backwards  
eyes closed  
waiting for someone to catch it.  
I was thinking  
it's holding.

# I will not cross that bridge for you again

This is how friendships disappear  
in a clash of ideas  
in a poof of black powder smoke.  
Before this i would have led you  
to the helicopter tree hidden  
in the sprawl of a wheat field  
beneath which centuries of women  
have ground peppermint leaves in their molars  
applied them to the feet  
of mothers sisters friends.

But instead i suppress the instinct  
to hiss magenta at the misogynist subtext  
of your decrepit and deaf, limp argument.

Later i ride my bike high over the river valley  
across the sad old bridge soon to be closed for repair  
to where you live  
drop a copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* in your mailbox  
then ride looking down into the chasm and flow  
the whole way back.

– Shawna Lemay

## Horizontal words

I wrote the horizon,  
picked up my pen  
and drew a line for the sea,  
zig-zagged that same line  
                  up and down  
for the mountains  
at the end of the world.  
I changed direction there,  
fell off  
                  over the edge  
into the place where lines  
                  hang down  
with people swinging on them,  
people who thought the horizon  
went on forever –  
                  people like me.

– *Joanna M. Weston*

## Wrong poem

A protest poet  
Speaking of iniquities  
Sounding man's inhumanity  
To man  
  
Roaring bestiality to beast  
Has great difficulty  
With runaway rhythm  
  
Righting its grammar  
Perfecting the structure  
Of the piece that screams  
The necessity  
  
Of perceived wrongs!

– *Charlene Mary-Catherine Smith*

## Wild pigeons at Armour Beach

Three days to Christmas, yet the sun beats  
time on a string of wire; some forty pigeons  
wild, huddle against arctic wind.  
Exiled from rafters they have designed  
their own community.  
  
If they dream they dream of shadows beyond the sea antici-  
pating songs of arrival.  
  
They have no dreams of family.  
No brothers and sisters vanish into the skies  
only to return as hawks and badgers.  
  
They have only each other and the long line  
that keeps them moving  
                                  home today  
holding their lives to a bright tree  
a ringing in their feet  
like the voice of a distant father.

– *Paddy McCallum*

# Under instructions to write poetry

This is what it takes to be damned.  
Write the poem anyway.  
Here is the self-absorption  
and here is the incurable gushing  
and here is the obscure path  
and here's the way to say  
it straight and plain,  
where your doubt can have no doubt.

And here's the subject matter ...  
faces in espresso coffee,  
telephone calls late at night,  
the dead littering the streets,  
the politicians hiding  
behind their faces,  
the soldiers camped behind the ridge,  
the worst that must always follow.

Expose the mourning  
to your love of it.  
Greet the mountain side  
with your cannon roar.  
Strafe the lilies  
with fighter jets,  
torture the bed stains.  
Have a father's hate  
take on the hate  
of ten million hating fathers.

Let it happen everywhere.  
In the wrestling ring  
of the loving god.  
In the dark fields  
of approaching night.  
In the mirror.  
In the stars.  
Give it back to the bastards  
who give it to you.  
Poetry, they'll call it,  
for lack of your better words.

– John Grey

# Artemis' glade

I wouldn't normally have asked about  
The interview. It's not how things are done.  
If there's something to say then he'll say it.  
But rules were bent when I knew he was looking,  
And slowly the tumblers of confidence spun.

Now it came in a rush. He was taking  
The job in Toronto, leaving wife and son  
Behind. The obvious imbalance  
In child care, I learned, was symptom rather  
Than cause, for his marriage had also gone.

Next morning early a gentle rain fell.  
Mist lay pooled in the still ravine. Twenty  
Yards ahead of us a deer crossed the road,  
Trailing in its wake fog and steam. Neither  
The dog nor I moved, watching until  
Five deer disappeared up the wet hillside.

Rumps swaying, taunting tails, none of them  
Turned to look at us. It made me think of  
How they go: the so-called lover with his wife,  
Their son, the house and sixteen years of life.  
Having seen the deer of Artemis' glade,  
By his hounds he is hunted, in their jaws flayed.

– Gordon Sisler

## *Blue heaven*

**T**HE PICTURE frames a couple in their late twenties silhouetted against a crimson sky. It's hard to read the expression on their faces, but if you look closely, you can detect a shadow of a smile at the corners of her lips; he's leaning forward on the table, holding her fingers holding a tea cup, as if trying to keep her from falling into an abyss of darkness where that smile could be lost forever.



“The train is coming,” she says, and smiles, for she is drawn into the evening's ritual. The leaves of the peach tree have often cast shade over their table in the open yard of the café facing the cross-roads. The railroad in front comes to life at the same time every evening. It was there, seven years ago, that an accident took her sight from her.

He watches a photographer walk up to two old men a few tables down, put the Polaroid to his face, flash a picture, ask for the money. One of the men shakes his head and the photographer walks away. The old men and the solitary lady veiled in black – who is often at the café in the evenings – get up to leave, and the couple now have the place to themselves. He can hear the heavy rumbling of the railway coming to life far away. He reaches for her hand, her fingers clasp his.

“What do you see out there?” she asks.

He looks at her, a blind queen wrapped in her beauty on a cool summer evening. A few rose rays of sunlight filter through the leaves of the peach tree and fall upon her left cheekbone. “The sky is orange,” he says. “And there are two clouds melting up over the horizon.” He's holding her hand, playing with her fingernails, unconsciously chipping away at the crimson nail polish.

She withdraws her hand and takes another sip from her cup, puts her hand in his again. “What do those clouds look like?”

“They look like two whales.”

She smiles and asks, “Do the whales love each other?”

“Yes. They love each other very much.” He raises his cup and holds it to his face. He knows her next question. He feels the cup warming his cheek.

“Does one of the whales soothe the other one?” She picks up her tea-spoon and draws imaginary lines on the table-cloth.

“Both whales soothe each other,” he says. “But one of them is prettier.” They both laugh.

“Don't you see anything else?” she asks, and now there's a faint smile at the corners of her lips, and he knows this is her favourite part of the ritual.

“Yes. There's a young couple having tea at a café high up on a hill.”

“Are they having a good time?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about them.” A breeze brushes a wisp of her auburn hair.

“Her earrings sparkle in the sun.”

“What colour are they?” she asks, her hand touching his face, turning his features into images.

“Colour of the moon.”

She moves her fingers over his forehead, nose, over his cheek; then two fingers lightly brush his lips. “What does she look like?” she asks.

“Small and slender.”

“What else?”

“Large blue eyes.” He sees the corner of her lips twitch, and he’s sorry to have mentioned her eyes, although he knows she would have asked him to if he hadn’t. He holds her hand, kisses her fingers.

“What else?” she whispers.

“She has her hair tied back in a bun, it makes me want to reach out and let it flow down.” He reaches forward, kisses her lips, gently pulls the pin, her hair unfolding and draping her shoulders.

“Are there people who are truly happy?” she asks, and her eyes search out into the setting sun.



HE IS NOW far away, lying back on the grass with his head in her lap, looking up at her face silhouetted against the blue sky, taking in the greenness of the leaves all around them. He brushes her cheek lightly with the back of his fingers. “What are you thinking about?” he asks. “Everything’s so green,” she says. He pulls her down towards him and breathes her auburn hair. They kiss, she puts her arms around his neck. As she slowly straightens, her hair falling wild around her face, he looks into her eyes – windows into a dazzling blue heaven.



THE TRAIN lets out a whistle, a hollow longing in the dusk. The sky turns crimson. With the elegance of a queen she raises her cup in the air. The train howls a second time, and he sees her hand holding the cup tremble. The train howls again, and he sees her shuddering, and she’s sitting beside him in the passenger seat, and he’s driving towards the railway tracks, and he’s telling himself they can make it through in time ...



IT ALWAYS comes back to that, he thinks, and in a flash he pictures himself framed inside a tragic story whose ending he could never alter. But he discards the thought as it enters his consciousness.



HE LEANS forward and holds her fingers holding the cup. “Yes,” he says. “There are people who are truly happy.”

## Long straight

Along the long straight road that marks the passage home from Edmonton, you sleep, wake up and explain to me your new ideas on the old theme of relationship. At home the cat sits between us and it’s his antics that enliven our life but now it’s just us two and I imagine myself as a tangent running alongside the hardly guessed at depth that your life is, all that went before and everything approaching now from ahead. And thirty years from now, if we’re still alive, still living together, who knows but maybe we’ll talk about that city, the way 13th Street becomes 14th, winding out toward the west (where Indians used to roam) and then spills over the gentle knoll to the river. We might argue whether the sun shone that morning as we rushed around before leaving. And then we’re sliding along, almost as if in dreamy retrograde, looking up and back at the mental hospital at Ponoka, discussing how things might have been at various junctures of each of our lives (complexity multiplied by at least two) and you telling one long slow story after another.

– Dave Sidjak

# Gloria's

# *opportunity*

**G**LORIA'S BEDTIME prayer was the same as usual except for the additional supplication that she be chosen the next vice-principal.

She always knelt beside the bed, elbows on either side of her magazine, hands church steepled, and prayed to God that when some man did it to her, it would be in spite of her protests. That way, the event would be the answer to a prayer so the responsibility would be God's, not hers. She would be absolved of the wrenching guilt she had always felt whenever she responded momentarily to a kiss or a touch or even a meaningful look, the guilt which had always prompted her to push away and say no.

Thirty-eight and still waiting. It was not something she allowed herself to think about. She was above that and too busy with teaching, writing, aerobics, tennis, martial arts, community service, church, so many things. The opportunity for promotion had made her even busier. Besides, her mother had always implied that a much later marriage than her own at twenty-three would spare a woman years of certain unspoken responsibilities. Mummy had once whispered the words "customary indignities."

"Look at you," her mother said when she popped in to say goodnight. "Pretty as a picture saying your prayers. Like when you were a little girl."

Gloria slid her magazine under a pillow while Mummy was pointing at the wall glittering with gold-framed pictures of Gloria taken by Daddy: saying her prayers at six years in the peach satin nightie from Paris, dancing at her seventh birthday party in the lavender tutu from Milan, flying in the garden swing at eight revealing the lace panties from Belgium she ought not be wearing under her school uniform. She was always so impish, so spirited. And why not? So bright. So much prettier than other children. So much better dressed. Mummy drew Gloria to her feet and kissed her.

There had been no kisses other than her parents' for nine years, no touches for four years other than brushes usually classified as accidental or playful; but glances – meaningful if Gloria knew anything – continued unabated whenever she was alone with a man. Indeed, in public too.

She was aware that boys in her senior classes eyed her breasts if she dared let down her guard for even a moment by removing the jacket of her suit on warm days or by squaring her shoulders to relieve fatigue. And they ogled – not just her Italian shoes – if she allowed herself for a moment to relax her legs by crossing one over the other while she sat on the front of her desk reading literature to the class.

In her heart, Gloria knew that most of the brushes, even occasional bumps, which occurred at church around the coffee urn after her adult Bible class, were not accidental but rather were silent tributes to her well-kept figure and fashionable dress. Both attributes, she acknowledged, were in short supply on Sunday afternoons in the church hall where she conducted her class in the manner of a literary seminar. She knew that no



other woman there could be considered stylish or attractive, though three or four made pitiful attempts to disguise their thickening bodies. An accidental brush by one of the men was always followed by an apology intended, Gloria felt, to justify his leering at the part of her brushed.

She was unsure whether all men did in fact respond that way to all women – her female acquaintances implied as much – or whether she was uniquely provocative. She leaned to the latter view. She suspected that she alone was the magnet which made quivering compass needles of principal Garnet Barr's eyes. She found it hard to imagine that Garnet Barr would ever call Patsy Herd to the principal's office and look at her that way. Fat Pat and Hippo Herd, the students called her. Patsy was Gloria's associate in the English department and her frequent bridge partner. Together they had organized the Women's Crisis Centre and the Women's Self Defense and Martial Arts Club at the Community Centre. Gloria supposed that Patsy overate to compensate for being homely.

It was Gloria's lingering belief, one she had never allowed herself to articulate except poetically, or even to fully formulate, that she herself exuded unusual amounts of some volatile hormone (in a poem she called it *hormonic scent*) which, mixed with her tastefully chosen perfumes, drove men wild. It was, she felt, just one of her attributes like *her honey-hued hair, worn now buzzed into a lush bush within which she languished like a bird of paradise flashing among luxuriant blossoms of amber bougainvillaea*. Images like that of herself appeared in poetry she submitted resolutely to unappreciative literary magazines under the name Sylvia Shalamar.

"Well, it's official. Patsy Herd is applying too," Gloria told her mother and father immediately after grace. Both parents sighed. Neither they nor Gloria seemed unduly disturbed. All three unfolded linen napkins and adjusted them properly on their laps, appreciating the feel of damask, Mummy and Daddy at the ends of the small Empire table in the bay window and Gloria between them. They always ate in the dining room with candles and heirloom silver whenever all three were free of evening meetings.

"Not to worry dear," Mummy said, "The size of her. Patsy hasn't the physical or social stature to be high school vice principal. And family counts for something around here. There's my social position. And Daddy's of course."

Gloria's mother was the youngest child of old money garnered from long-gone canning factories and tidily invested, hardly a fortune but enough to ensure position. She was principal of the largest public school feeding into the high school. Generations of children, now prominent throughout the county, had mythologized memories of the elegant Mrs. Noble, bejewelled and smiling, always kindly but imperious, a queen.

After thirty-five smiling years in the pulpit of the county's largest church, Gloria's father, the Rev. Milton Noble, was about to retire to the county's best golf course. The youngest son of an impoverished clergyman's widow, he had been a handsome youth, chatty and easy-going, working his way through school by photographing children and selling Bibles, encyclopedias and aluminum siding. Mummy had brought him home from college, introduced him to all the right people, and given him a sense of direction.

"Patsy does have a Ph.D.," Rev. Noble said as he prepared to carve the lamb. "Lest they incorrectly assume a positive connection, we must point out to appropriate people that a degree for some obscure dissertation on maternal images in classical literature has no bearing whatsoever on running a school."

The other candidates were of little consequence. They were men, and it was widely believed that the promotion should go to a woman. A campaign to that end had been quietly launched and had already won media support. The one male applicant better qualified than either of the women was forty-one and unmarried, and Rev. Noble had already raised critical questions in appropriate circles about his suitability, since little was known of his private life, too little for comfort.

THE INTERVIEWS lay ahead and Gloria waited anxiously for her meeting with the selection committee headed by board chairman Frank Boyce and including principal Garnet Barr. Twenty-one years ago, Frank Boyce had shoved his tongue in her mouth and she could still taste it. It happened after the senior prom. Mummy had warned her. Mummy knew boys. Gloria ran from Frank's car into the house and closed the door. She peeped out at the car. In bed at night with her magazines, she still played over in her mind the possibility of opening the door and going back to the car and forgiving Frank, provided he promised to behave.

Frank Boyce's oldest son was in her grade eleven class and Gloria sometimes caught him looking at her, thinking, she was sure, of thrusting his tongue in her mouth. He was cocky like his father. She felt obliged to tame him. Sometimes she kept him in after school and had to patrol back and forth in front of him, at the end of an exhausting day in high heels, while he wrote a soliloquy many times, until he could say it to her from memory: *Is this a dagger I see before me . . .*

Over lunch Patsy Herd said, "I'm so nervous about the interview I sat at play practice and didn't hear a word Joan of Arc said." As usual, they were co-directing the school entry in the drama festival.

"Honestly, Patsy, you're making something out of nothing. I couldn't be bothered. They'll ask some silly questions and then toss a coin. Anyway, what difference does it make

who they choose? I mean, really. We'll go on working at the same old place, still play bridge. I don't know why I ordered this cheesecake. You have it, Patsy."

Gloria's decision to apply had been prompted by her mother. Mummy had come home from a meeting of the Principals' Association and reported that the high school vice-principal had surprised everyone by announcing his decision to take a job in Africa.

"It's the will of God," Mummy said. "With Daddy retiring and me only two years away it's His way of keeping us where we've been for generations, in leadership."

For just a moment Gloria hesitated, thinking her greatest strength lay in the classroom. Students responded to her style. But she also enjoyed organizing and leading and had impressive experience: twice chair of the Crisis Centre, president of the tennis club, head of volunteer instructors for the Self Defense and Martial Arts Club, Sunday school superintendent.

Gloria decided her rapport with students, her flair for public relations, her chic were needed at the top to balance the plain male toughness of Garnet Barr. Except that he was tall and regarded by some as good-looking and had searching eyes and ran a tight ship, everything was wrong about Garnet Barr.

FOR YEARS Gloria had compared him unfavourably to the reliable parade of smooth men that came to her in every issue of *Playgirl* magazine and stayed with her in the locked left compartment of her briefcase as she went from bedroom to classroom to committee room. She thought Garnet too hairy. She had seen his arms in summer shirts and his legs when he lifted weights at the community centre. His muscles, she felt, were obscured by the bristly pelt and she had no desire to look at, much less touch that roughness. It reminded her of something, perhaps that oversize teddy bear from childhood that caused her to fall from a horse when Daddy wanted to photograph her riding with it. Or perhaps the next-door neighbour who gardened so much – her father's friend thirty years gone – who looked like a stuffed bear and kissed her with his scratchy beard.

Garnet Barr's lips were hidden by a moustache and beard but occasionally they, or his tongue, showed pink and wet when he spoke excitedly about school football or hockey, activities which Gloria thought unattractively violent. She imagined that ugly tongue lashing out at her. She envisioned a garden scythe sweeping down from above and cutting it off, saving her.

Certainly, Garnet Barr's wife was all wrong, not the nubile complement one would expect to all that hairy strength but, rather, a dumpy little matron with sturdy legs given to wearing jumper dresses and blouses reminiscent of

the uniforms Gloria herself had worn unwillingly as a child at private school. Gloria imagined Garnet manipulating his wife like a coy schoolgirl, doing it to her suddenly and secretly, ramming at her, in the garden shed, and then sending her on her way with a handful of shopping money, jumper and blouse readjusted. Men, she knew from her work at the crisis centre, were like that, respectable men.

That particular image, of Garnet Barr ramming in a garden shed, recurred so often that she now dismissed it automatically by thinking of the smooth young man – whichever was her choice in the current issue of *Playgirl* – that she took to bed each night. Her picture men were always languid, passive, immobile.

Gloria said to her father, "Six of Patsy's students handed me these class assignments to qualify for the Creative Writing Club. The red marks are Patsy's. The green ones are mine. Notice the errors she missed, the suggestions she failed to make? Dozens. I'm amazed how careless some teachers are. Or lazy. Or incompetent. How can we expect quality education unless we have dedicated teachers?"

"May I borrow those, dear, just for a few days?" Rev. Noble asked.

Besides board chairman Frank Boyce and principal Garnet Barr, the selection committee included an overweight male superintendent of uncertain loyalties and two school board members, both women and both, like Frank Boyce, former students of Gloria's mother. One woman was a prominent member of her father's congregation while the other was well known to him at the golf club.

Rev. Noble smiled and said, "Leave the board people to me, three out of five."

But of course Daddy didn't know she had rejected Frank Boyce's tongue and had detained his son, even though it caused him to miss hockey practice. Gloria thought it best to approach Frank herself, casually. She asked him to empty the coffee urn after Bible class and told him his son showed promise. (He didn't, really, by her standards, but perhaps by other people's.) She said she was sorry it had been necessary to detain the boy.

"Hell, no," Frank said. "Do him good."

Encouraged by that, Gloria said, "I'm sorry about what happened."

"What's that?"

"In the car."

"What car?"

"Yours."

"When?"

"After the dance."

"What dance?"

Frank's wife came along, and as they left he said, "Whatever it was, give him another detention."

At first, Gloria thought he might actually have forgotten the night of the tongue, but the more she thought about it the more impossible that seemed. No. He was pretending, to hide his hurt pride. He was nursing that old wound and would revenge it by voting against her. She saw that. She knew she had to make sure of Garnet Barr's vote instead.

GLORIA CONSIDERED perfumes, running several stoppers past her nostrils while she contemplated her irises in the dressing-table mirror – a poet's challenge, now ultramarine, sometimes verging on violet. It was from her own eyes that many of her poetic images arose.

*Obsession or Eternity? Eternity.* She dressed before the mirrored wall in a state of nervous anticipation, at once constructing poetic metaphors and selecting clothing with careful calculation, adding and subtracting “eyelighting” blue accessories to and from the new fitted dress of raw amber silk.

In Garnet's office, Gloria closed the door behind her, heart racing. She had never done that before, never closed that particular door, yet the sound set off familiar reverberations in her head. The office felt suddenly claustrophobic, cluttered with tables and relics and ferns in planters. Team trophy cups on shelves looked so like old cans and pots that she was concerned about getting her dress dirty. Her hands flew protectively to her skirt and she stepped back. Her foot brushed something, a wicker waste basket, but a garden basket flashed through her mind. The slight stumble unbalanced her just momentarily, but she could see it had given Garnet Barr the opening he was waiting for. He grabbed her, and she could feel the hair on his arm, see the jungle on his face advance to engulf her.

She screamed, “Help! Help!” Her nails sank into Garnet Barr right through his beard.”Help!” Right through his shirt. “Help! Help! Help!”

He reached to push her away.

“Help! Help! Help!” She drove her knee into his groin, seized his hairy arm, twisted her body exactly the right way, and flipped him to the floor. The needles of his compass-eyes flickered wildly then pointed upward. Blood flowed from the back of his head and threatened one Florentine sandal. She lifted that foot and sank her spike heel through the beard and into his neck.

## History, night

The man who invented the clock  
after all  
came from a dry country  
and loved water.  
He watched it fill, then tumble  
intelligent and bright  
over the dark wood of  
the slow wheel.

His work done he dozed  
in the belly of a cistern  
his eyes bleary and  
dry from thinking.  
Boredom, the blank inversion  
of night,  
the way the skull  
engulfs the world and  
pushes it out.

An hour before the sun rose  
a woman walked naked in  
and out of moon-shadow, old  
chiaroscuro.

– Dave Sidjak

# Creamery

Working with him  
Saturday mornings from 8 til noon  
sometimes I'd ride my Lambretta  
to the shop (remember one time you  
almost lost me when the engine  
froze at fifty locking the back  
wheel and I just missed that  
telephone pole) from the house by  
Quito School all the way to Palo  
Alto I felt so grown up with my own  
machine whether the scooter started or  
not which half the time it didn't I  
painted it myself had the motor apart  
by myself but needed help putting it  
back together (remember when you no  
my stepfather helped me buy that Austin  
Healy with the spare engine in the trunk  
and the loose rear wheel and the wiring  
so crossed that hitting the brake pedal turned  
on the headlights) those four hours on  
Saturday mornings seemed eternity itself  
a hundred glances at the clock until coffee  
break time when we'd walk to the snack shack  
or drive to the creamery lunch counter  
so I could smile at the counter girl (remember  
her name do you I don't who finally asked about  
me after I had gone to Connecticut that summer)  
then back to the shop for another interminable two  
hours (remember how you always gave me the worst work  
thank you) scraping oil pan sludge and bottom  
scouring gaskets from heads holding trannies  
on my stomach like iron lovers while he  
bolted them down in a kind of father and son  
nepotistic threesome metallic group grope  
(remember those outlines of the tools you  
had me paint on the board where they hung  
where the paint dripped and dried reminding  
me for years I shouldn't hope to be the  
artist that you should have been) and the  
constant stream of visitors to the shop the  
bosses in their sterile suits asking for work  
on their personal vehicles the milk truck  
drivers confessing their mechanical slash  
marital problems the parts house guys from  
next door with shit to shoot the glass shop  
owner down the alley way with a Chevy to sell  
(remember no I guess I never told you  
how much a part of me those once

discarded disregarded Saturdays still are  
that aren't) funny how we love what we hated and  
miss now what we never dreamed we had (remember that  
you said working in grease made you look  
younger because it kept your hair from turning  
white) and now I know it was a discovery of a part of  
myself that I would never have made without  
sweating in the semi-clean coveralls with his  
name on the pocket (remember the near-hospital  
smell of the little washroom where we washed  
up at work's end next to the compressor that would  
start suddenly and scare the hell out of me and  
make you laugh) and if there is a moral if there  
is to be a neat wrapping up of what I learned  
those years of Saturdays from 8 til noon it  
is this: get life under your fingernails so  
it never comes out not with hand cleaner not  
with nail files not with death (remember why  
without you I used to drive past the cemetery  
where her seventeen years were buried on  
my way home never stopping at the grave) I  
can't recall the last Saturday I worked no  
brass band played to mark its passing no  
gold watch was given in thanks for a half a  
decade of Saturday service no one said goodbye with  
a tear in his eye or a lump in his throat  
or a hand extended (remember not even you) and now I  
know yes now I know that every day is hello for  
the first time and goodbye for the last every  
day is a wiping the grease from our faces and  
the blood from our torn fingers every day is  
making the trucks run one more day with  
baling wire and coffee cans of nuts and bolts  
every day is smiling at the girl behind the  
creamery counter and not remembering the  
first time I saw her for the very last time

– *Dennis Collins Johnson*

## Soo saga

TIM CONLEY on a struggle between irony and sincerity

### *The Shadow Boxer*

STEVEN HEIGHTON

Alfred A. Knopf

384 pages, \$32.95

IN HIS 1997 collection of essays, *The Admen Move in Lhasa*, Steven Heighton confesses that he has felt the “pressure” to write a novel:

These days the career arc of the “serious writer” involves a kind of corporate hierarchy where poetry – the original and densest, most difficult form – is on the ground floor in the janitor’s store-room, short stories a couple of lights up with the clerks and gofers, while the novel, stogey in hand, golf-shoes up on the desk, lords it in the penthouse ...

Writers are to try their hand first at poetry or stories, then, after publishing a book or two, move onward and upward.

It’s a nice caricature of a definite pattern (“trend” is too weak a word for the phenomenon, which is after all an adaptation, of sorts, of the classical hierarchy: *Write eclogues and pastorals if you like, Virgil, but when can we expect an epic?*), and Heighton’s uneasiness is well-founded, perhaps even vital. “I’ve a perverse itch to buck the career plan,” he further notes, “and write something perfectly unmarketable – like an epic poem in *terza rima*. About a goatherd. In Idaho.”

Sevigne Torrins is the protagonist of Heighton’s first novel, a young man

with much to prove to himself. (He himself is, in the course of the story, writing a novel.) *The Shadow Boxer* has a little bit of epic to it, but no *terza rima*. It is conspicuously marketable: the Canadian *Kunstlerroman*, Great Lakes and Stan Rogers included. But derogatory generalizations are easily made and are of no use. There is a mould for this book, true, but most books have far worse ones, and in any case it’s Heighton’s individual skill that’s of interest.

MUCH OF Heighton’s prose is pungent: like the Canadian novel it most resonates beside, Patrick Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails*, the bold reach of the writing in *The Shadow Boxer* works well with subjects of geography; topographies of setting and character. Sault Ste. Marie, “The Soo”, is the formative setting, and one which, because it impresses itself upon Sevigne’s consciousness, must make a similarly important impression upon the reader. At this Heighton succeeds admirably:

The Soo was like Chicago minus the jazz, the jagged skyline, those terrific used-book stores and about a million women – so his father used to say. That left the broad shoulders, the broken teeth, and every year more dock and mill and factory workers wageless as another firm padlocked its doors. Bad place to be a dreamer and a “fem” – the sort of boy who’s pondering the possible outcomes of the epic war between Tolkien’s Orcs and the Dwarvish folk when the dodgeball slams him in the temple.

Whether the descriptions of Toronto – the Big City site for Sevigne’s temptations and fall and the locus for Heighton’s satirical thrusts against materialism in the arts – are so effective, I remain less convinced. Admittedly, the naïf’s descent is, like many things in the Coming-of-Age vein, no easy feat. Sometimes, when you dive into an asteroid belt of clichés, you get hit.

Gangs of teenagers slouch around him wearing ragged layers of black on black and black hoods over gaunt, pallid faces. Once from amid the layers the bare navel of a girl winks at him and makes him ache deep down. Decisive professionals hustle past, men, women, faces pinched and blanched by the wind, even the black faces ashen with cold and the Asians sallow – so many more of them now than in the seventies, he feels he’s arriving in a city he has never known. Despite the cold everything is moving with feverish animation. Looking up he would not be surprised to see clouds scudding along the towers with hallucinatory speed, as in a time-lapse film.

The dull pops of culture shock and the mundanity of human traffic aside, the last sentence is just clumsy. “Looking up” is redundant or at least in the wrong place, and given that the descriptive mode here is cinematic, comparing what is to be glimpsed to “a time-lapse film” shows a regrettable lapse of narrative concentration. But where the ground Sevigne treads is rougher and more textured, so is Heighton’s prose. The fantastic settings of Cairo (there’s an almost surreal golf scene by the Nile, a strong testament to the writer’s previously displayed skill at short fiction) and isolated Rye Island (a portrait of the artist as Robinson Crusoe) are unexpected, imaginative, and economical.

*The Shadow Boxer* refers to Sevigne, who struggles most often with and against himself; but it also fits Heighton, for there is an intriguing struggle within the writing. If his prose can be called muscular, it’s because there’s a feeling of exercise, of strenuous effort matched with discipline. There’s a difficult balance being sought in this book – palpable to the reader – between sincerity and irony.

Heighton championed a poetics of sincerity in *The Admen Move in Lhasa*, implicitly (and, in an age of

relentless irony, rather daringly) expressing a concern about the proximity of amoral irony to apathy, life without passion, and art without risk. “A little sincerity is a dangerous thing,” remarked Oscar Wilde, who knew both passion and risk; “and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal.” There’s an excellent point there, a warning about sincerity’s limitations. (But for poor Wilde, unable to resist an opportunity for a flippant remark, his own insincerity was his downfall.) *The Shadow Boxer*, though infused with emotion, avoids the sentimental. Things get surprisingly rough, at certain points, – some of Heighton’s men use their fists for their most meaningful statements, and that winter sojourn on Rye Island is no picnic – and, at others, sexual, in the least embarrassing, sometimes nearly startling manner. Sincerity often emerges as a virtue, and Sevigne usually encounters revelations to this effect when one-on-one with another individual, either in fisticuffs or in bed. For example, though he may not be “pure of heart”, or an all-out Percival, Sevigne is told by his lover, Mikaela: “*You don’t snigger, you don’t know everything and sneer at everything.*” (The italics, trademark signals of important messages, are in the original.) Out of context, this might sound almost syrupy, but within the course of the novel the grasps at grace (of one kind or another) do grow more desperate and often, as at the novel’s end, poignant. This struggle with and for sincerity can be invigorating.

ON THE OTHER hand, Heighton’s ironies seem borrowed, and at times even uncertain: nearly all of them are connected with literature, or what passes for it. (There’s a weird fascination with literary quotation in the book, too, which is swell in the playful jab sessions between Sevigne and his autodidact father, but a bit much

in the many chapter titles and epigraphs.) There are neatly acerbic instances on this score, such as when a frustrated Sevigne gives up trying to write a restrictively miniature profile of Gissing’s *New Grub Street* for an encyclopedia (and there follows on the next page an oblique reference to another novel on the scribbler’s sorrows, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*). Scenes with a crass advertiser recruiting for jingles, however, are ready-made, paint-by-number parodies. Some of the fey demitasse spoons used in the Toronto poets’ espressos appear to be recently washed and shined from previous use in Russell Smith’s books. The dialogue, so carefully thought out everywhere else, in these moments turns to caricature.

I have other minor points of criticism and of praise, mostly character-related (it’s odd, for example, that Sevigne’s mother seems to become the most rounded and intriguing woman in the book, though she is almost never centre-stage), but they’re of less value and, besides, the driving force of *The Shadow Boxer* is the writing itself. Despite its unevenness, the urgency of life and the errancy of spirit are in this novel. I recommend it – but I still have an eye cocked for that goatherd in Idaho. ●

## To go?

ANTHONY N. CHANDLER  
on a collection that left him  
*buzzless*

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### *Some Late Adventure of the Feelings*

MARK SINNETT  
ECW Press  
75 pages, \$14.95

ADVENTURE ENTAILS intrigue, fosters amazement and changes how we engage with the world. In Mark Sinnett’s *Some Late Adventure of the Feelings*, adventure transforms itself into a game of self-absorption, choked verbosity, and “I have read this, and know this obscure (*fill in the blank!*)!” After reading Sinnett’s poetry I couldn’t help feeling as if I were being seated next to your typical Starbuck’s junkie, who is wacked out on Kerouac and wants to be a writer. Indeed, there are enough references to café paraphernalia, fruit, and the morning paper to make you wonder if he wrote the entire book while collecting hole punches on a coffee card.

Sinnett’s poetry has no easy entry point. There are no vivid images; just words upon self-involved words. We get no sense of character, place, or mood, but are introduced to a writer who is moody in a moodless place. Interesting characters and cultural icons are replaced by namedropping. We hear how he will write, how he is writing, and how he has written such marvellous little pearl onions for us to dine out on.

I find the images themselves inaccessible, as in the following stanza from “You”:

And even more sharply than these things,  
 (those noted above and also the myriad arm and ankle tattoos  
 on display these parts; the sheepskin harness on a muscled and grey  
 dog hauling groceries, as well as the awful xylophone player with one arm and  
 one hell of an excuse)  
 I see the future of you and me.

I CAN ONLY assume that the author is speaking of two tattoos: one of a dog hauling groceries across the tundra and the other of an untalented one-armed xylophonist. Why are these poetic images?

First, who would ever have such nonsense tattooed anywhere? (I doubt any tattoo artist would render such work, for fear of being ridiculed.) Second, why does the poet concoct images so incongruent with the emotion we're expected to be sharing?

*Some Late Adventure of the Feelings* is written as if it were a private journal, the reader being given a glimpse into the romantic life of two lovers (*Sam and I*). Each poem is supposed to represent some inner feeling for the reader and writer to explore. That is the concept, but it really doesn't work. The code the poet uses is simply too opaque. The reader can't suspend disbelief long enough to be sympathetic to the plight of these postmodern lovers.

Another unfortunate feature of the book is Sam herself, or, as we come to know (and loathe her), S. Sam is so flat and so obviously idealized that her existence interests us much less than it should. Fragments of Sam are featured sitting at a coffee shop wearing "tortoiseshell glasses", with salt on her neck and the back of her knees, or "on campus this morning, resuscitating

dummies", or in "Cuba loping the city's broad and battered seawalls". (Is S. a sweaty coffee addict who works for St. John Ambulance when she is not traipsing across the tundra having igloos and groceries tattooed on her body?) S., like an unaware Juliet, shows no concern for her Romeo. And Romeo?

You're on the phone. I can't believe it. I'm calling and you're on the phone.  
 — from "Haiku You Left As A Message From Thunder Bay"

Powerful stuff. And for our next trick — an acrostic in the shape of a coffee cup!

*Some Late Adventure of the Feelings* is Mark Sinnett's second published book of poetry; his first won the 1998 Gerald Lampert Memorial Award. I found this latest offering pretentious. The collection seems clumsy and spliced together. However, if you're into coffee-shop poems about love's bad days and those little hints of possibility that keep you coming back for more, then this may be just the fix you need. ●

## Faint pencil shadings

L. ERIN VOLLICK on a poet's experience and art

### *Land Without Chocolate: A Memoir*

FAIZAL DEEN  
 Wolsak and Wynn  
 68 pages, \$14

THE CONJUNCTION of writing and experience poses an interesting dilemma for both writers

and reviewers. When experience is written about, there is a fictional, protective layer around it; inscribed into the writing is a frame, or space, if you will, for experience to be encountered by the reader. Experience is also, for the most part, considered "untouchable" — even within this sheltered, written space — due to its subjective nature. Many would argue that you either "get" what the author is saying, or you don't.

But I'm not a big adherent of this school of thought. There is an integral point where experience and the art of writing meet. We the readers have to find avenues into the work regardless of our own understandings of the author's experiences. We do not judge the experiences, but only how they are constructed as art. Faizal Deen's poetry in this collection prompts discussions of this sort, and it is that very place — the place where experience and writing merge — which is both the power of, and point of failure, of his writing.

*Land Without Chocolate* could serve as an exorcism of demons. The author, Faizal Deen, attempts to wrestle with complex constructs of his identity, an identity that has been obscured by race, custom, and sexuality. The poems move from early recollections of childhood, with captions such as "Daydreaming in the Colonial Classroom", to the final poem of the book, "Burials", depicting the grown son's coming to terms with his place in the world.

LANGUAGE, MORE than imagery, plays a pivotal role in reading Deen's poetry. There are subtle and unsubtle variations of language throughout the body of this work, ranging from the dialect of ancestors ("In this light C.R.R. James looks like my grandfather / coolieman niggerman jumble-up man fighting man / all the same she says he was called the spicemasher") to



examples of the young postmodern artist, where Deen makes numerous references to language as an influence, as in the poem “Reading”:

They might have been your words  
from the book that stood up  
in your mind shining making  
claims to some island of desire  
we might reach out for amidst  
these unspeakable leaps  
of imposed alphabet wreckages  
always tripping me up into living

For the most part, Deen’s use of repetition and cadence evokes a singsong litany in many of his poems (he thanks Alex Boutros and Kaarla Sundstrom, Montreal’s illustrious spoken word duo, in his “shoutouts”).

But language, with its high and low diction levels, is in constant conflict in *Land Without Chocolate*. The narrative of a young man lost in the colonized gardens of Georgetown is swept away by the more tired devices of self-referential language critiques that crawl into the backbone of his poems; the “self” searches for the words to speak of repression, rather than describing it. In other words, the poems become embroiled in a myopic academic formalism. The poem “Maps”, for instance, uses elevated, nondescript language that fails in just this way:

... in migration sweet white  
stains hungry for new colonies my  
maps have  
fled all that can save me now from  
these  
wooden parameters is the setting of  
one perfect fire ...

IN FACT, repetitions that occur in his poetry sound a lot like: “That business about / we being locked / in desire.” We never find out what those desires are. The poems fail in these instances simply because they talk around the issues; the poet’s intentions are pulled to a surface level, a level of writing without depth.

At its best, however, Deen’s poetry finds inroads into the stories that have captured his heart. He finds ways to express experience – and a splintered, diffused identity – distinctly, as in the poem “Confuse the Gentlemen Dem”. Here Deen utilizes his ability to create rhythmic, mesmerizing language, dotted with slang and rich images:

... you felt the dairymilk soothing the  
downs of your throat  
and you remembered the first man who  
gave you chocolate and said  
hold my cock and all the while you  
were thinking to yourself  
that this is real it is English and it is  
real ...

In this poem Deen at least partially allows the reader a glimpse into his world, an inroad into the mire of politics and yearnings that appear more often in this collection as impressionistic strokes of the pen.

But I don’t wish to sound voyeuristic. The poetry in this collection can be enjoyed on the level of its rhythms: I think it makes great spoken word material. The poems can also be enjoyed on an academic level – if you’re into post-colonial and “representation” theory. On the other hand, it strikes me that Deen’s difficulties in this collection are due to the frustrations of his own self-examination. How is it possible to connect to a national identity that has been erased (perhaps) from your personal memory but not from your skin? How can one balance the new world with the old, without tripping up on dialectics without synthesis? Moreover, how can one inscribe experience, even the stories that one hasn’t necessarily lived through (though we are shaped, too, by the experience of our families), into poetry? Into any art?

*Land Without Chocolate* is a very ambitious first offering. It attempts to delve into sexual and personal identities seemingly in conflict with every

part of the author’s life. This is never an easy task – but I truly believe that when Deen lets his readers into the delicate pictures that as of yet remain faint pencil shadings, his poetry will have succeeded at merging art and experience beautifully. ●

## Foul freedom of silence

STEPHEN CAIN on a new look at an old genre

### *XEclogue*

[Revised Edition]

LISA ROBERTSON

New Star Books

96 pages, \$14.00

REVIEW A revised edition of a text that seeks to revise a genre, interrogating origins and finding new ways to get around old problems. Can a feminist reading of the pastoral salvage a mode that inherently ascribes the feminine to the idealized, utopian state within Nature? Where can “Libertie” be found when the feminine body has been made incorporeal – phantoms of “Phantasia”?

Lisa Robertson, throughout her wonderful *XEclogue* consistently avoids the easy answers and, if not solving genre problems explicitly, at least negotiates the aporias and biases of the eclogue, the pastoral and the Georgic admirably. Any objections that might be raised to her project – of binarism, essentialism, or reductivism, for example – are amply interrogated, and ultimately justified, both in her own “Prologue” and in the body of the text itself. Eliminating the male perspective from the pastoral altogether would have

been one, perhaps easier, strategy, but in *XEclogue*, the presence of the Roaring Boys allows a male voice that is typically ribald but also provides a satiric and self-mocking counterpoint to the gynocentric dialogues of Nancy and Lady M.

Throughout *XEclogue* the speaker(s) refuse to “kiss the rod” (or the Rood for that matter: the Christian elements of the pastoral – through Christ’s earthly representative, the “Pastor” – are completely absent) in favour of the symbolically vaginal:

Then kissed the cup and sipped  
a little

Though almost choked drank slowly  
Tickled with strange measure  
She faked a pretty anger.

But, again, this displacement is not at the expense of the Lacanian phallus, but rather the capture and appropriation of the “detachable penis” of power:

“We invented power. Power is a pink prosthesis hidden in the forest. Between black pines we strap it on and dip our pink prosthesis in the pool. The plastic glitters with clips and buckles beneath the surface of the pool.”

SIMILAR STRATEGIES abound throughout the text. For example, the forests in the poem are not the Frygian Green Worlds of solace and transformation but the sites of dangerous “phantasie” where the Roaring Boys lurk. Even the very title of the text refuses a monologic reading. An X confronts the reader before the Virgilian *Eclogue*. As X appears before the word, rather than through it, it is clearly not a Derridean act of being “under erasure”, although this is perhaps present. Similarly the Christian element (as in Xmas) is, as noted above, absent from the text. Rather, the X seems to imply *chiasmus*, the rhetorical term for balancing. Here, as in the Classical worldview, the terms on the scale might be Woman and

Nature. Post-structuralist critics have, however, pointed out that in a serified X, especially one with a swash or flourish, one stem is inevitably thicker than the other: the sign for balance is then itself unbalanced. In Robertson’s text, this chiasmatic unbalance implies that Woman cannot equal Nature.

Rewriting the pastoral, or locating a locus from which women can be present in the pastoral and still be at “Libertie”, is the central struggle of *XEclogue*:

“I needed a genre for the times that I go phantom. I needed a genre to rampage Liberty, haunt the foul freedom of silence. I needed to pry loose Liberty from an impacted marriage with the soil. I needed a genre to gloss my ancestress’ complicity with a socially expedient code; to invade my own illusions of historical innocence.”

Robertson succeeds brilliantly by not merely inverting or parodying convention but, in the act of re-reading and re-writing, interrogating and exposing the gaps and problems in traditional representation: “nostalgia can locate those structured faults our embraces also seek.” And it is a task that Robertson, in her privileged historical and cultural space, does not remove herself from:

“To question privilege I’m going to shame this word. I will begin by gathering around my body all the facts, for they affect my person.”

However, just as *XEclogue* lacks the typographic ingenuity and beauty of the author’s other work, *Debbie*, it is also less wide-ranging in its formal and thematic elements. While *XEclogue* is faithful to the goal Robertson sets for it, it is in *Debbie* that she really opens the field of interrogation of classical modes and their presence in the western canon. Perhaps this is to be expected, as the epic looms larger in the Western imagination, even to the present, in ways that the pastoral has not. That

*More than Meets the Eye:  
Watching Television Watching  
Us*

JOHN J. PUNGENTE, S.J., &  
MARTIN O’MALLEY  
McClelland & Stewart  
254 pages, \$29.99

“Television is too pervasive, powerful, and influential to be viewed passively. We teach people how to read critically, how to interpret history, how to solve problems, so why not teach them to watch television?” Using contemporary U.S. and Canadian TV programs, the authors show how, for the most part, it’s pretty good fare: with some minor exceptions, TV’s not too violent or too sex-laden. The authors aim to make people everywhere more media literate so that they can determine just how adequate TV really is. Then the public, the users of media, will intelligently ask for more of the same – or demand drastic changes. The last part of the book documents individual cases of where and when television coverage has shined, e.g., Princess Di’s funeral, the Challenger disaster, O.J. Simpson’s trial, all the Kennedy situations, etc. It was worth the read merely to be reminded of how many such cases there were.

– Jim Sullivan

being said, I would be curious to see where Robertson sets her sights next – there’s no point in her doing the epode after the epic, and the Georgic and Satiric modes are already ever-present in both collections. Perhaps the elegy is next – or, even more attractively, the epithalamion, which, judging from *Debbie* and *XEclogue*, Robertson has the ability to renew and revitalize in ways that never fail to fascinate. ●

# Contributors

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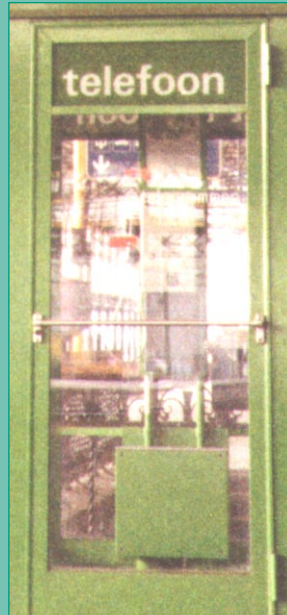
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