

# paperplates



A Magazine for *Fifty Readers*

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Vol. 4, No. 3

**Poetry, fiction, reviews**



# Vol. 4, No. 3

9

BERNADETTE DYER

## Man Man

Man Man imagined that was what snow must look like in foreign lands. He had never travelled and had never even been inside the plantation house ...

PAUL HARRISON

## The Spot

I saw the shadows of two men and two women enter the building, their elongated silhouettes projected from the streetlamp onto the window shades.

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SUZANNE MCLEAN

## the jupiter flower

crablike i lunge  
my legs over your legs  
our bodies reclining  
joined in a perfect "v"

AMY JO HUFFMAN  
Coveting the coffin

I stand  
over the coffin.  
The cold contagious scene  
grows numb.

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# Four in hand

## paperplates

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### ***submissions***

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

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CONFETTI IN our hair, champagne on our breath, we open the door to 2001 with neither a welcoming nor a threatening gesture. The inevitable needs no cheering on, cannot be frightened off. It's simply there, ready to take in another four issues. I say "another", because this, though a few days late, is the fourth issue to be (officially) published within the limits of one year. As such, it marks a unique event in the career of *paperplates*, the little magazine that could ... do just about anything but become what it purported to be, a quarterly. That it should have managed to deserve the name this time is a credit to the combined efforts of the editors: Tim Conley, Bethany Gibson, and Suzanne Hancock.

Other parts of the *paperplates* empire show as much of an inclination to grow: The first series of our electronic chapbooks, *paperbytes*, will come to an end this winter, the second series starting shortly thereafter, with a slightly modified design. Our non-virtual entity, *paperplates books*, will be publishing a novella by Norman Ravvin in trade paperback next fall (we hope). Smaller, hand-bound volumes, no less tangible but in limited editions, will start to appear, next spring, from our new imprint – *espresso* – under the direction of Cary Fagan.

A brief note, finally, about e-mail submissions. They get lost – how easily they get lost – especially the ones from pseudonymous addresses like "waxing-poetical@myisp.com", with the all too common subject line "poem". Often, the submitter obscures her name even further by using someone else's account – what seems to have been sent by "robert.browning@duchess.com" was actually sent by his cubicle-mate Liz. None of this makes it any easier to file the message, and thus track the submission, electronically. It would be helpful, then, (particularly since the address [magazine@paperplates.org](mailto:magazine@paperplates.org) is meant to be used mostly for submissions) if you would put in the subject line only your surname and a keyword from the title, e.g., "Browning/Aurora". – As for fiction, unless it's really short, we'd still prefer to receive those submissions by surface mail. After all, the editor doesn't read the stories until they're printed out, and the publisher can be just a mite tardy in printing them. Where's the advantage? If you're intent on saving yourself the cost of postage and stationery, send us an e-mail query with a sample of the work (about 500 words). We'll tell you whether we want to see more.

– Bernard Kelly



## Spanish lessons in Ronda

**M**OST TOURISTS come here only for the day. Lined up outside the early 20th-century Hotel Reina Victoria are numerous coaches, conveyors of the many day-trippers from Spain's Costa del Sol: British, French, German, and Scandinavian tourists seeking respite from their coastal lives of golfing, sunning, and souvenir shopping, and looking for a slight hint of authentic Spain long vanquished from a Mediterranean coast (once lightly populated by fishing villages, fishers, and domestic goats) now concealed by dense layers of high-rise hotels, genuine Irish pubs, and inescapable exhaust fumes.

These day-trippers, aptly, visit Ronda's famous Tajo, an impressive gorge that descends so steeply and so suddenly that the flowering cacti must cling tenaciously to the autumnal rock. They visit Ronda's bullring of the Real Maestranza de Caballeria, the place where modern bullfighting was developed, in the early 18th century, by Pedro Romero, whose statue graces the entranceway, as does that of Antonio Ordóñez, matador extraordinaire, who died not all that long ago, his body shortly to be exhumed for burial in Ronda's bullring. And the day-trippers from the Costa del Sol also visit Ronda's famous Puente Nuevo, an 18th-century bridge that unites La Ciudad (the old town) and the Mercadillo (the new town). Beneath this bridge is a chamber – a prison

world for many during the last centuries, although the renowned bandits of Ronda reportedly could vanish into thin air from inside its desolate walls. According to Hemingway, citizens were tossed, alive, from the bridge during the early days of the Spanish Civil War.

The views from both the Puente Nuevo and the Mirador paralleling the north side of El Tajo are reason enough to spend a short while, or a long while, in Ronda: from here, you may see the relentlessly rugged Serrania, the valley carpet lightly flecked with farms, white houses precariously gripping the rock face of El Tajo, and the deceptive Rio Guadalevin – all natural and architectural achievements that inspire awe and contemplation, and hasten the unpacking of cameras from cases.

I SPENT not one afternoon but several days in Ronda; and my views of the Tajo and my walks across the gorge were many.

Despite being in Spain for one month, I never entirely adapted to the Spanish working-day schedule, to those days precisely called *dia laborable*, “labourables.” So it was that I spent several dawns by El Tajo, several dawns wandering the narrow, quiet streets of La Ciudad while the sensible Spanish slept.

In Andalusia shops and businesses are usually open from 10:00 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. and again from 5:30 to 8:30 on “labourables.” Bars and cafés open around 8:30 or 9:00 A.M., sometimes closing from 11:00 until 2:00 P.M., or thereabouts, when they open again for lunch, the main meal of the Spanish day. Even if they remain open from late afternoon until 8:00 or so, it is unusual to be served a substantial meal then, because dinner takes place from 8:30 until 11:00 P.M. or midnight. I took to carrying apples, green grapes, and the white bread warmly

and inexpensively available from the many *panaderias* that populated the streets of Ronda.

Usually, I arose a few hours before the Spanish working day began. The early rising and concomitant early departures from lodgings became my unintended test of the patience of operators of *pensiones* and hostels during my time in Andalusia. All passed superbly, despite their being dressed informally in pyjamas when they unlocked the enormous, wooden, double doors decorated with knockers of brass. Often, I was the first customer in local bars, eagerly awaiting piping hot *café solo*. In Ronda, the Franco-Spanish proprietor of my *pensión* sleepily opened the enormous doors for me, and I'd walk the short block to Café Alba, a tiny, family-run establishment, a sign above its grill-work announcing: *Churros*.

I did not eat *churros* (deep-fried, donut-like tubes and circles of calories) for breakfast during the first two weeks of my month in Spain. The unhealthiness of deep-frying, the empty calories of white flour, and the heavy presence of heated oil initially terrorized me and my waistline and kept me safely distanced from morning sweets. This distance temporarily translated into hunger once I was away from the Costa del Sol with its hotel-buffet breakfast of eggs, cold meats, cereal with warm milk, processed cheese, and baskets of white bread. At least there was cereal – and some attempt at a continental breakfast. Later, I discovered crusty *bocadillos* with *queso* for breakfast: huge, white rolls the size of our foot-long submarine sandwiches, topped with slabs of mountain goat cheese, and I became content.

Yet, morning after morning, as I sipped my *café cortado* in the wealth of cafés of Andalusia, I'd watched the Spanish (men and women of all ages) drink their espresso or their thick, dark chocolate that makes Nestle's

version look like sandy water; I watched them devour plates of *churros*, croissants brushed with sweetener, white rolls painted with vibrantly green olive oil, and chocolate-filled pastries. Canadian donut-eating, a national pastime, is mere child's play next to Spanish breakfasting. What is one double-chocolate donut compared to a pastry dripping with dark chocolate, brushed with liquid sugar, and as big as a flamenco dancer's tambourine? What is one Boston-cream donut and coffee with cream and sugar compared to deep-fried *churros*, dunked – time after time – in a clear glass of thick, dark, syrupy chocolate?

If I may make one generalization about Andalusians (and I know generalizations are fraught with fallacies, but this one is fraught with food), it is that they love to begin their mornings with a pungent contradiction: sweet pastries and slightly bitter espresso. If they give you *tostado*, then you'll have sweet peach jam or vividly green olive oil to slather, not drizzle, on the hard roll that became crustier with heating. If you want *churros*, then you'll receive a platter the size the *churros* master thinks you can eat. At one breakfast café in Ubeda, I was confused by a sign

that read: *Churros 800 pts.*, quite a high price, I knew, for this breakfast food. I was perplexed only until I saw the platter loaded inches and inches high with foot-long, tubular *churros*, this served to a table of two women. At another café in Jaen, a ravenous diner poured a couple of packets of sugar over his *churros* before eating. And at another café in Granada, a table of four took turns dipping them into one of their tablemates' chocolate. You could tell they profoundly enjoyed every mouthful of chocolate-covered, deep-fried dough, every oily bite as it slithered down their throats.

I'm not certain it was a conscious decision on my part to begin eating *churros* for breakfast. I know that, before I began to eat them, I had already progressed from drinking *café con leche* to *café cortado* to *café solo* and that I had become skilled at ordering orange juice squeezed from real oranges in dejuicers that unfortunately aren't yet sized to fit on my kitchen counter. I do know that I ate my first of many *churros* at the Café Alba in Ronda.

On Calle Espinel, a street named after one of Ronda's men of letters, Don Vicente Espinel, who is credited

with adding the fifth string, or the *prima*, to the Spanish guitar, the Café Alba is unremarkable from the outside. A few red, plastic chairs are placed around white, plastic tables, this colour scheme matching that of the Coca-Cola sign that protrudes from the second floor. Inside, on the first floor, is a wooden bar, around which people cluster, order, chatter, drink, and eat. Also inside on the first floor is a huge vat of churning, boiling oil, at which stands the *churros*-maker who masterfully manipulates a wooden paddle and a foot pedal.

There is a precision and an agility to *churros*-making of which I only became aware after watching the *churros*-maker at his vat.

Upon hearing an order from his wife, this order including the number of people to eat the *churros*, he'd place pressure on a foot lever, and from a tiny spout positioned over the huge vat would issue a thick stream of dough, which he quickly whisked into a circle with his paddle. Not too much later, he flipped the now circular *churros* with the paddle; after another quick flip, he placed the deep-fried *churros* onto a tray covered with a paper towel.

A shimmering coil of tawny gold, the

## mean

I am a meany, a real genuine honest-to-earth mean woman. I kick the cat, don't answer the doorbell, let the phone ring eight times, sell the TV from time to time. You don't think that's bad? I don't even answer letters or return phone calls or renew magazine subscriptions. I don't fill prescriptions. Further, I kick out boyfriends, divorce husbands, disown children, move away from neighbours, change jobs frequently. I turn over garbage cans and upset blue boxes. I used to break milk bottles and remove promotions from front step mailboxes. Now I monkey PC keyboards and delete documents, even interrupt cellular phone calls. I'm a bad dude. I've a mean streak so wide you can't find the edge. I steal the float from fall chicken dinner cash boxes, put sugar in salt shakers in cafeterias, and remove the remote controls from motel rooms. I'm mean. Why, I have a high-pitch whistle that disrupts sound systems at loud public dances. I've been known to holler Fire! in a crowded movie theatre or two. One Friday night I walked into a tavern with an exposed shotgun. That got the same reaction as when I vomited in a Sunday brunch restaurant. Mean. I'm figuring a way to crash the Internet. Any ideas?

– Lea Littlewolfe

*churros* tasted surprisingly good and was surprisingly light. It heightened the slightly bitter flavour of my espresso, and it tasted absolutely delicious when dunked in heavy, hot chocolate. Spanish *churros* deftly shaped by a *churros* master in a genuine *churreria* are as different from North American *churros* sold at Costco and other amusement parks as pure orange juice is from concentrate, as Andalusian *chorizo* is from supermarket sausage, as *jamón serrano* is from *jamón york*.

Thus my mornings in Ronda: bidding *buenos días* to the patient, pyjama-clad proprietor of my *pensión*; drinking espresso and devouring *churros* at the Café Alba; and then walking to El Tajo to watch the play of early morning light on its formidable walls. El Tajo's dawn-illuminated walls are as tarnished gold as a *churros* from Café Alba. It is a gold whose warmth comforts the eye and reduces the rigidity of the gorge's rockface that is so central to Ronda's history.

RONDA'S HISTORY is lengthy, even infinite. Built on an isolated ridge of the Serrania, Ronda is divided by El Tajo, which, at its greatest depth, precipitously drops many metres. It is the sheer drop on three sides that made Ronda a natural fortress, seemingly impregnable. Beginning with the Celts, many people made Ronda their fortified home: Carthaginians, Romans, Visigoths, Moors, and Christians. The Moors left a lasting impression on Ronda: sturdy walls, an Alcazar that the French largely demolished in 1809, baths that are among the most complete Moorish baths in all of Spain, a minaret on the Santa Maria la Mayor, and a small bridge, the Puente de San Miguel, on the eastern side of the gorge. The Catholic king Ferdinand only managed to capture Ronda from the Moors in 1485 because he used metal cannonballs – the first

time metal cannonballs were used in Spain; hence, an element the Moors simply could not have anticipated.

Both its physical abruptness and its commanding views of the pastoral countryside and nearby white villages make Ronda a natural fortress, a desirable spot for those who have a penchant for conquest. However, just as surely as the talented bandits of Ronda could vanish from the prison chamber hanging beneath Puente Nuevo, I'm sure that, when people decided to settle in Ronda, it was at dawn, when the gentle play of light showed them that El Tajo is not always threatening, not always harsh, not always impregnable. At dawn the cold stone seems warm; rock pliant. At dawn, heights are scalable.

Day-trippers from Spain's Costa del Sol see El Tajo at its fiercest: when noon-time sun roughens its edges and textures and depths. Visitors to Ronda at dawn see El Tajo at its purest; deceptively mellow, its walls silently reviving three-thousand years of history.

– *Connie Brim*

## Fourth confession

I'm a thing caught between time and eternity.  
I'm half Buddha, half Bo-Peep.  
I take the shape of the unwell  
to keep from being noticed.  
I was the boy who lost his kite on a young day.  
My greatest sin is being clumsy.

I'm colourless as music, and just as complex.  
Lately I've taken on the orange pain of arthritis.  
It's a small, flat pain, not unlike certain prayers.  
I've been an observer here all my life.  
Nuns are drawn to me, and sometimes the thirsty.  
I tell them applause can be subtle as an axe.

I saw an avocado angel from outer space once.  
He was standing in the old meadow  
entertaining prayers of bad humour.  
When I asked him for the names of what I was,  
he reminded me that silence is like glass,  
and left without leaving so much as a lump.

– *Fredrick Zydek*

---

## First night, your parents out of town

Your cold comforter,  
thin – a thin comforter! but  
sufficient for you –  
and I'd never even thought

of, much less seen, walls  
painted navy: cracked and more  
seductive than all honest  
conversations you drew me

through – stepping in was awe –  
my whole nights I'd slept at home,  
you, unknown to me,  
were here, sleeping in my room.

– *Peter Douglas*

## I am a cigarette burning between your lips

I am a cigarette burning  
between your lips  
it is heavenly  
your soft moist mouth  
tasting me  
teasing me  
plucking at me with those  
slender fingers  
stroking me  
with musical precision  
as ash falls from flame

I am a lucky creature  
thinks the man watching  
from afar  
to be kissing you  
as your lips press down on me  
while you inhale  
and the sexual release  
as the smoke explodes  
from your lungs.

Do you see him watching you  
there – behind the pillar?  
His eyes devour your body  
and burn me with jealousy.  
He wants to be the cigarette  
burning  
between your lips

until you check your watch  
sway those hips  
and drop me, mercilessly,  
into a shallow puddle  
that kills

– *William Dickenson Cohen*



BERNADETTE DYER

# Man Man

**N**O ONE KNEW the plantation as well as ten-year-old Man Man Jefferson, for he walked all of its forty acres daily and had done so for years. He knew the old plantation house that stood on the hill overlooking banana, coconut, and citrus groves had been built during the time of slavery, and though not many people remembered those days, he certainly did.

Man Man enjoyed the peace and tranquillity of the garden in front of the house. He admired the roses that climbed on trellises in sprays of red, yellow, and pink, flowers that lost precious petals in the noonday tropical sun. Man Man imagined that was what snow must look like in foreign lands. He had never travelled and had never even been inside the plantation house, choosing to remain a fair distance from it, as he had been told to do a long time ago.

For the better part of each day, Man Man would meander down the steep incline, following ancient pathways through fields and groves until he came to where the air was heavy with salt and the land kissed the sea. He wasted no time chasing dragonflies as other children did, and was not distracted by bird song, for only the sea called him. The sea knew his supple black skin, knew his meagre frame and how easily he moved in and out of the water, and it was beside its shores that he once left a bundle of his best clothes and never reclaimed them. Other dark-skinned urchins like himself congregated at the seawall. And even now they spoke of him and imitated what he had done as they climbed nude up the jutting rocks, their eyes as wide as copper pennies as they hurled themselves into the swirling waters below, shivering, and knowing that not all of them would return unscathed.

Then one day a huge steamship came into port, and if Man Man had been with the other boys, he would have seen it, but he was up at the house worrying the chickens in the pens. He liked to hear them squawk as he ruffled their feathers, and loved to imitate their clucking. Had Man Man been at the beach, though, he would have seen when Geraldine Belmont, the new bride, arrived from England, which was far across the ocean.

Being up at the house, Man Man only saw young fair-haired William Belmont, the landowner dressed in his Sunday best, cross the yard, mount his dark bronze horse, Bonny King, and embark on a mission down the hill. Later, because he was walking the forty acres, Man Man missed the return of the lovers to the plantation house, missed seeing the red-gold hair of Geraldine Belmont glint in the hot sun. He missed seeing her eyes as deep and blue as the ocean, her smile as all-encompassing as the surrounding vistas. Had Man Man been there he might have seen William Belmont swell with zest as he swept his bride over the threshold, laughing as they entered the house where all the servants lined up to receive them. There was old Miriam, the brown-skinned cook with dimples in her faded cheeks, and stockings rolled up at her

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knees; Solomon, the curly-haired, dusky-skinned teenage houseboy who was rumoured to be a Belmont himself; Joseph, the old faithful black gardener who coaxed roses to bloom in the tropical surroundings; and, last of all, Sheba, the housemaid and assistant cook, with flaming kinky red hair and copper skin, wearing a surly look on her pretty face, realizing perhaps that her embraces were being replaced.

Man Man did not see the new bride until a week after her arrival. He had been out back admiring new roses Joseph had put in, blood-red flowers with petals as smooth as a velvet dress Man Man's own mother had once worn. So engrossed was he that he was quite unaware when Geraldine came up to him.

"Do you like roses?" she asked, her soft English voice foreign to his ears, her pale complexion and eyes momentarily startling him. He tried to wrap his tongue around words, but nothing would come out, so he turned his head away shyly. Geraldine sensed his confusion and invited him inside. "Come," she said, "have a drink of juice or something."

But Man Man only shook his head, endearing himself to her as he moved aside in his shabby clothes and bare feet.

"Poor thing," she said out loud, following him with her eyes before she noticed the long line of banana groves that snaked up the hillside for miles behind the house.

"It's dreadfully dark there," she said, as if warning him, nodding toward the silent trees. "Has there ever been any danger of robbers hiding in there?"

Man Man did not answer, though he had seen many things, seen lanterns weave up the hillside to the house, heard when all hell broke loose, and Miss Constance, a former landowner, was raped, beaten, and driven mad, then confined to a nursing home. The same Miss Constance who had once been kind to him. He had seen death, too. He had watched it visit the old house again and again, and he had witnessed both good and bad. He saw Sheba bury a girl child beneath the spreading banyan tree, and he had heard old Miriam thanking the Lord for all the good she was able to do for others through her long years. But Man Man said nothing as he walked away, head down and silent.

When Geraldine went into the house and asked Miriam about the boy, she failed to get any clues to his identity. It was almost as though Man Man did not exist, for Miriam never spoke of the many Christmases she had left small food packages for him on the back steps, and she made no mention of the bundle of antique clothes found at the sea-wall and passed down by family through generations, or how her heart had kept hoping and hoping.

Geraldine next approached Joseph the gardener, but he only waggled his tired old head and mumbled, "Some things are best left well enough alone. The boy has been

here for a long time." From what little she could gather, Geraldine learned that the boy was a loner and that he was seen mostly on Friday nights when the plantation held a gathering for storytelling and revelry, for one or two regulars had seen him there.

THERE WAS A full moon on the night of the gathering, and all the servants, field hands, and labourers from other plantations came. Before the stories started, they built a roaring fire and passed around foaming tin cups of cane juice and rum. Geraldine watched from indoors, impatient to join in, but was gently restrained by William's kisses as he explained that her presence would ruin the spontaneity of the event. She watched and listened from the darkened dining-room window, well aware of all the comings and goings of mothers, fathers, children, and old folks, and the young men whose backs were weary from lifting and loading, and the full-lipped young women who invited their kisses.

Then, at last, Man Man came as silent as a shadow. He kept well apart from the others, blending in with the dark, his copper eyes bright with listening. Geraldine wondered if he was lonely. He seemed an outcast, sitting there with no arms encircling him, no broad lap for him to snuggle in.

It was long into the evening before the stories ended and the revelry wound down, and William Belmont was fast asleep, but not Geraldine. When the people began to disperse, she raced through the darkened house and exited by the servants' quarters. She searched out Man Man from the crowd and, finding him, kept her eyes on him. Startled by the sounds of crickets and frogs and the yapping of dogs in the distance, however, she almost collided with old Joseph, who was hobbling home.

"Sorry, Joseph," she said, trying to catch her breath. "Please come with me!" She sounded so urgent that Joseph obliged, tottering after her into the retreating moonlight.

"It's late, ma'am," Joseph mumbled. "Your husband will be missing you."

But Geraldine Belmont was not to be deterred. Together they followed the boy from a safe distance, dodging in and out of foliage even as he wandered into the forbidding banana grove.

"Let him be, ma'am," Joseph whispered. "He knows the land like the back of his hand."

But Geraldine ignored his words, her attention firmly fixed on the clearing she now saw ahead. In the full moonlight Man Man paused and wearily bowed his small head, his hair silver in the light. Then, without warning, the moonlight retreated, and Man Man, too, was no longer there! No twig snapped to betray his presence, no animal or insect called, there was no movement in the brush, only the dark night yawning.

Geraldine, and old Joseph moving as fast as he could, hurried into the clearing, eyes wild with searching out the boy. But only a small boulder stood sentry, a stone field marker perhaps from the old days. Geraldine saw that there were words carved into its smooth surface, words old Joseph could not read, words older than him. She bent low and, with trembling lips, read the inscription out loud:

Here lies Man Man Jefferson  
Aged 10 years  
Who departed this life on May 26 by drowning  
In the year of Our Lord 1806  
May he rest in peace.

## Thomas' table

It is of solid oak,  
lumber treated in primitive mills,  
styled from colloquialism and myth  
The master craftsmen  
were Hebrew and Greek,  
incorporating, heavily, Aramaic design  
A Jew good with chisels  
carved in relief along the edges  
and in his shop a king sanded,  
with 220 grit,  
preparing the grain for generous coats  
of English etymological stain  
My friend Abe calls it neo-classical  
Mary says it's florentine  
Hank thinks it contemporary  
Anyway you classify it  
the mighty oak  
is now my coffee table,  
finely turned woodwork  
upon which have rested  
many ostracized volumes  
Through their pages  
I have looked back in defiance,  
yet – touch me –  
I am still of flesh  
I cannot season food  
but with my own saliva,  
masticating and digesting my bread  
with the juices of agnosticism,  
expelling what I cannot use,  
my mind growing fat with wonderment  
on the rest  
Even the Sumerian mushroom  
I have savoured  
(not crucified but sautéed)  
only to regurgitate later  
but still the taste was exotic –  
coming up as well as going down  
On my coffee table, too,  
I rest my plate and feet,  
feeling full and satisfied  
as I watch the late-night evangelists,  
*maitre d's* at the altar  
dining dry-mouthed on their pulpits,  
splinters sprouting  
from their petrified heads

– JJ Matts

## The opening

One reason for opening the bag, of course,  
is to force the aroma out.  
It is, however, not essential  
that you invite others to attend;  
it depends on the mood you're in.

Opening the bag should be done slowly  
out of respect for what's inside.  
When it's time to bring the bag up to your nose,  
just go slow; it's a matter of respect  
and you get the full aroma of what's inside.  
Don't be shy either, bring the bag right up to  
Why yes, you sir – have a question?

– *Richard Brancato*

## His underwater sights

*To Brett*

My six year old nephew tells  
me about his first swimming  
lesson and how he had his eyes  
open underwater for the first  
time. He was fascinated with  
the blurry images.

I applaud the youngster.  
The uncle who cannot swim.  
A man terrified of large water  
masses and cursing when water  
splashes into his eyes in the  
shower.

A man dreaming about underwater  
landscapes without the swimming,  
without the fear of water in a  
great depth from the surface.

I hold onto my nephew's dreams  
of swimming praying his under-  
water sights remain fascinating.

– *Ronald Kurt*

## Indigestion in Disneyland

Donald Duck and Mi Lao Shu  
(Mickey Mouse in American)  
go over well with my wife's folks,  
down home in Ji'an, China.

They laugh at the seven dwarves,  
sing along with Mary Poppins,  
but the room goes silent  
when Siamese cats purr into view

Singing, "We are Siamese  
if you please." My wife blanches,  
asks me, "What does it mean?"  
How can I explain a touch

of Americana,  
The Great White Way? In  
the bathroom is toothpaste,  
Darkie, a favourite brand

imported from Hong Kong,  
the trend setter for China.  
The tube features Al Jolson  
in black face. How do I  
explain?

"Oh, they're Siamese."  
She sighs with relief.  
"From Thailand. That  
explains it." Now  
they can laugh.

– *Joseph Farley*



I HAVE BEEN evicted again. In the end I think it was all a problem, as the politicians say, of a lack of communication; though I can now, after some calm time away to think about what happened, understand some of their objections. There was nothing unusual about it, really; the habits of the other tenants did not mesh well with mine. All I will say is, I don't like noise, or noisy people, and I am not afraid to speak my mind and take action to protect my rights when it is necessary. The details are disagreeable; I won't repeat them – the little incident is over and now I'd like not to bother with it any more. The neighbours and I simply agreed to disagree, and we decided it would be best for everyone if I found somewhere else to live. So that's it.

About the new apartment: the bedroom is near the front entrance, and on the first night, sleepless and lying on the creaking army cot, I saw the shadows of two men and two women enter the building, their elongated silhouettes projected from the streetlamp onto the window shades. Bored with sleeplessness, I counted their steps as they clomped in boots upstairs to the third floor.

Soon after, the two women came down and leaned against the rail of the landing, their shadow forms stretched across the blinds as before. They spoke in what sounded like an Eastern European language. Were they Czechs or Poles? I couldn't decide. The women talked in warm, playfully jaded tones: good friends long familiar with each other, unhurried in their conversation. The contralto voices – the murmur of them – soothed me, and I began to feel drowsy.

The loud voice of a man woke me. They now talked in impeccable English, with only a trace of accent. The one woman's voice had become toughened, inflected with defiance, hardened with a brusqueness I sometimes hear in those who have lived hard lives in poverty. Had she emigrated from a harsh country? Was she a refugee?

"I'm not going up there again. He gives me the creeps," she said.

"What are you talking about? Why were you so rude? You didn't need to be so rude to him," the man said.

"I didn't want him to talk to me, and so I told him. I don't like him – you know how I am. I don't care either. I want to go."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I told you, I get a bad feeling from him. I don't like him. I don't want anything to do with him."

"What do you think, he'd attack you? For fuck sakes, don't you think I could handle him. There's Yergen and me with the two of you. He wouldn't do anything, there's nothing wrong with him. Don't you think I could protect you?"

"I don't care. I don't trust him."

They stopped for a moment, frustrated at the impasse, the man shifting his weight from one leg to the other, impatiently tapping his ring on the iron of the rail. The

woman sat glowering. She puffed on a cigarette.

“You’re being stupid. – We just want to have a couple more drinks. Come up with me.”

“No! – Why won’t you listen to me? He scares me. I don’t want to go up there. I got a bad feeling.”

“He wouldn’t try anything.” He sighed.

“Oh, I’m sorry if I spoiled your evening.”

She turned to the other woman and spoke to her in the foreign tongue.

The woman laughed back falsely.

“Forget it then,” he said.

“I don’t fucking care. I want to go home.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” He stood at the opened door. She did not say anything.

He waited for a moment, expectant. “Fine. I’m having a couple more drinks. You do what you want.” He climbed the stairs.

The two women began talking again. Strangely, the woman who had been arguing now spoke as casually, calmly, as before the man had come down. I thought, *My, she’s a strong one; she can switch herself off and on so easily; very strong.* They spoke again in the foreign tongue.

Storm clouds had been rumbling in and rain began to fall in fat, heavy drops. Soon the sky turned violent with lightning and hurled the rain down.

The women did not come in from the downpour. Laughing, they stood in the rain with faces upturned as the water streamed over their arms and through their hair – I imagined I could see them – now darkened and limp from the torrent. Short of breath from laughter, they bunched their skirts, wringing out the water onto the steps. I lay in the cot, embellishing the shadows that moved across the blinds.

Then there was nothing. I woke to the sound of a work crew digging up pavement across the street.

THAT MORNING while shaving, I found a spot on the bathroom mirror – wiping away the steam with a towel – there – a black flaw in the glass, like a perfect dot of paint, right at the level of my cheek. Drunk with sleep, I thought it was a blemish on my skin, and with a washcloth I rubbed at my face. Then, realizing, I rubbed across the glass with my palm; but felt nothing. It seemed to be below the surface, not a chip – or so fine I could not detect it with my touch.

If the spot were a flaw from the mirror’s manufacture, and not a speck of some kind, I wouldn’t be able to get at the thing to clean it away; this would be an annoyance, having it reflected in my face every time I washed (it was just at that height, of course).

I leaned over the sink and looked closely, breath fogging the glass, the mark seeming to enter into the widening black of my pupil, and, distracted, I was caught by the intricate

veins in the whites, and saw myself reflected in the tiny mirror of my aperture.

But the spot itself: a perfect, black circle, as though it had been etched by a drafter’s compass and coloured in with a flat, unreflecting pitch: a tiny eclipse in the glass. Little things like this bother me; I may as well be honest. I kept returning to the mark in the mirror, after making coffee, after dressing, after lacing up my boots, with the door open for me to leave, to see whether I had missed some quality that would tell me if it were a chip in the surface, a fleck of paint – anything that would name it.

My grandfather, a military man, a true Presbyterian, severely intolerant of indecisiveness in people (he used the word “slovenly” with such contempt, and in many instances where I didn’t think it applied), who after the war did well in business as a sort of efficiency expert for hire, used to say to me, when I was little, always to ignore the little bugbears of the mind, that every fear looked on in clear light is a puny creature. I think he saved that speech for me because he saw tendencies in me that troubled him.

Whenever my worries come I don’t think of the old man’s rational aphorisms, though I know he would have wanted that – it’s all fine and well to stand tall for Reason, but Reason never stops the itch I get. Sometimes I think of the picture of the old man my father kept, a photograph of my grandfather in uniform, standing beside a soldier wearing a mischievous grin, my grandfather’s stern expression making an absurd contrast: defiant in the nobility of his authority, with a touch of contempt: the immovable leader. He used to make jokes out of the side of his mouth, straightfaced as everyone around him laughed (always a rather commanded laughter, I think). I picture this stoic look to ground myself, remembering his steadiness when the little flea of a compulsion tickles. A dripping tap can begin something awful for me, and I think my life is built from little obsessions, timed out with them: checking the stove once, twice, three times to make sure – *make sure* – it is turned off. *Is the door of the apartment secure?* Maybe the last check jiggled it loose. *Did I really lock it, or am I thinking of yesterday?* One can never be completely sure about anything.

And now my little spot.

If I couldn’t clean it off I’d have to phone the landlord to ask him to get me something new, or I’d have to stop looking at my reflection altogether to avoid seeing it.

I stuck a band-aid over the mark. With the pink strip covering it, I felt much better; and I made a wish, hoping that below the band-aid the spot was slowly healing, that the glass, protected from infections in the air, would fuse itself back together, heal like flesh. But as I left the apartment it occurred to me: *You silly ass, what do you think you’re doing? You’ve stuck a band-aid on the mirror. How will you explain*

*that to guests when they go in to use the washroom?*

I went to the Library, as I often do. The librarian and I have come to an understanding. At first, I didn't understand her methods and thought she invaded my privacy. The first time she helped me, I asked for Lermontov's work on magnetism and electricity. She seemed to know the book even before the title was off my tongue, and led me straight to it, suggesting – (!) – other related works that I had not even mentioned yet. I was taken aback; I had never before come across anyone with such abilities. Not only could she read my mind, but she read it before my thoughts had even happened. This disturbed me terribly, and I had difficulty coming to terms with it. I had more trouble sleeping that night than I usually do.

If any doubt lingered, it was snuffed on the following day. In a glass case near the front entrance was a display of books, all on subjects – and this shook me – in which I had a keen interest. She knew even before I came in what I would want and, in a flagrant violation of my privacy, had put me, my curiosities, in full, naked view of the general public. I left immediately. I thought of what I should have said and done, had fantasies of this, of taking on a supremely magnanimous and masterful air and telling her (soberly, without spectacle, with the graceful reason of a platonic king come down for a moment from his meditations) the wrong that must be corrected. Then, seeing her mistake for the first time, she would bow with apologies and thank me for my wisdom, and I would say, as though a parent to a child, "That's all right, dear. Stand up straight. I forgive you." And everyone there would secretly admire me. – If only! Instead, I had skulked away, sweating, with my eyes to the ground.

When I had regained myself, I decided on a dignified strategy. I phoned the library regularly, careful to indicate that in no way did I wish to talk to the tall red-haired woman, wanting to avoid the power of her extraordinary mind. I asked her supervisor if he was aware of her unusual methods; he said he was not. I asked him if she had taken special training at the School of Library Science; he did not know. I asked him if he had ever heard of the CIA; he had.

Having played with him, I asked what training his staff had in human rights, whether they were aware that they had violated my human rights. I must have caught him off guard; he became flustered and did not have an answer. These sorts, these bureaucrats, always read from pre-scripted texts, and the truth comes out of them only inadvertently, when they are caught by surprise. I demanded to know who gave them their directives. Did they know what they knew on their own or was someone in the administration handing them down the information? What were the channels? His answers were inadequate. I told him that many a government commission would like to hear about the questionable policies of his

## In Heaven: a resurrection dream

He shall see them again in Heaven  
the cheese  
the vegetable dip

the half tin of crushed  
pineapple the ancient heel  
of bread The Bible says  
they also serve

who wait in the ark of winter who are  
passed over in favour of  
phone-in pizza whose "best before"  
days are numbered and forgotten

But they shall be lifted up  
in the new communion resurrected  
fresher than Safeway ever dreamed The leftovers  
shall be made whole sardines  
and strawberries joined in one  
bizarre divine recipe

And all will be sweet-smelling and wholesome  
in the Inglis of eternal life  
And there will be no more wailing and  
wrinkling of the nose no cruel clatter  
and scraping of plates at the trash

no sickening grey-white mould  
of unprotesting patience  
as acquired in the bachelor's fridge

— *Glen Downie*

library, and that this, after all, was still a democracy, and he had to respect my rights as a citizen. "Have you, sir," I asked, "read George Orwell?"

He gave me some palaver about how they at the library were information consultants who geared their skills to the special needs of each patron and that each librarian is bound to a code respecting the privacy of the client – no one gave them directives, each assistant worked independently. Crap. Maybe a child would buy that line, I didn't.

How then, I challenged, could one librarian know so much without somehow gaining permission from the officials to look through my government files? Did he think I was so

uninformed as not to be aware of the fact that these files existed? “Logic is still logic, sir, and I am not naive. For instance,” I said, “the red-haired woman wore a dress of bright green, a colour I hate, on a day she must have known I would be in the library. How did she know I would be coming in, and how did she know that colour disturbs me?” I declared to him that I would not be taunted.

But, as I mentioned, we have come to an understanding. Now the red-haired woman, out of consideration for me, removes herself to one of the back offices whenever she knows I am in the building. Not everyone would do this, and I believe this shows her to have an especially sensitive nature when it comes to the feelings of others. I recommend a promotion. If I could find her phone number and address I would tell her how much I appreciate the gesture, but her supervisor tells me the code of privacy works for employees as well as patrons. I’m sure he does not mean to insult me. I agree with this policy of caution. The supervisor now takes it upon himself to help me personally with my research, and whenever I come into the library he appears immediately at my side to attend to my needs, asking me, with an urgency that I must admit I find flattering, if he can be of assistance. I will not try to pretend this extra attention does not pique my vanity just a touch.

The supervisor helped me find every book in the collection on glass and mirrors: etching, blowing, firing, colouring, sands and processes; I could barely lift the bag stuffed with volumes. The load knocked against my knee as I walked back to the apartment, and I read through the day, searching for a quality of glass that would help me understand how to fix the flaw. But I found nothing helpful and decided to phone a windshield repair shop.

My eyes were tired and blurry from reading, and the thought of squinting through the densely printed pages of the phone directory was too much. I lay back in the dark instead, after a long while dragging myself from the bed. Feeling along the cool wall for the light switch in the bathroom, I heard a pounding noise coming from one of the other apartments, a heavy fist on a door somewhere above on another floor. A large dog began barking; a man roared angrily at it. From far off a police siren wailed, then faded away into the Doppler effect.

I found the switch and turned on the light. In the mirror a sliver of the spot peeked over the edge of the band-aid. Nausea surged up in my stomach. *Had I completely covered it in the morning? Was it bigger than I remembered?* I felt light-headed and stepped outside the bathroom, closing the door with exaggerated gentleness. I felt my throat constricting. One must accept these strange events. There’s more in heaven and earth – and all that. I performed Madame Souza’s exercises, imagined daisies, gentle breezes, stubbornly pushing panic

back into its hole. Madame Souza is a remarkable woman, and her methods have made a difference in my life. I take a pragmatic view now with these surprises. If the physics of the world is going to be capricious, there is not much I can do about it.

I embraced the door and listened, hearing my heart beat. I badly had to use the washroom, but I simply, even with Madame Souza’s daisies and gentle breezes, could not open the door. I needed a potted plant to piss in.

I rushed outside and relieved myself into a cedar tree at the side of the building. A woman with a little girl following behind in a yellow raincoat passed by. I greeted them. We met again by the elevator, and after a moment of awkwardness I asked her if she had been having any trouble with her mirrors. She told me, in an unneighbourly tone, that she certainly had not. I wanted to tell her what a relief this was for me, but she hurriedly entered the elevator, and I only had time to say that I did not think the hairstyle she wore suited her, that a woman of her age needs to keep length drawn away from her face.

Blowing into my cold hands, I walked back down the hall to the apartment. The fresh air had braced me, and my thoughts were clearer as I dug through the drawer of the bathroom sink and pulled out another band-aid, placing it carefully over the growth. I swallowed two sleeping pills and burrowed my head under the pillow.

In the morning, the spot had grown to the size of my outstretched hand, the band-aids forming a pink equator through the middle of the circle. I peeled them off the mirror and stared at the thing for a long while, emptied, and placed a palm over it, expecting warmth, perhaps even a pulse, spreading my hand so that black wedges showed through a fan of fingers. And in the quiet I wished myself peace.

I thought of phoning 911, but these events are difficult to explain; it would be like saying gravity was no longer gravity. The officer would pause on the other end of the line and then, with cheery professionalism, assure me a report would be written – nothing would be done, of course.

My little eclipse, like a cat’s gaping pupil, a black sun burning up all the oxygen in the apartment – the malignancy would have to be; so the cold March night would have me until I came to terms with the new room-mate.

Grabbing the tartan quilt off the cot, I left the apartment and wandered through town – on the steps of City Hall routing through a garbage can for old newspapers. I picked out a bench in Victoria Park, lay down after layering the papers along the seat, and covered myself with the quilt, stuffing the sports and business sections around my legs, pulling a balaclava over my eyes. The headline, *Leafs Continue Losing Skid*, repeated itself, and I fell asleep wondering about the team’s troubles.



MY MOTHER always said everything looks brighter in the morning. She was a positive sort. Surely she was the one who brought the young woman, wished her upon me from wherever she is now. In life, Mother worried over people's happiness, and I am sure that, in death, the committee which decides what department a soul is most suited to would have seen immediately she would do good work in the offices of SMALL INSPIRING MOMENTS. Who else would have thought to send me, in the early morning, the beautiful young woman who strode along the park path past my bench, tall and noble, walking with a strangely coltish repose, as though she had only just learned to cultivate a professional look of seriousness? The energy of her purpose had a youthful joy in it that lifted me; and I felt I should give her something – but she walked by with such contained vigour that I did not want to disturb her rhythm. Besides, what did I have to give? I had only old newspapers. I watched her until she disappeared into the insurance building on Dufferin Street.

Remembering the apartment spoiled my vision of her.

I gathered up the papers, stuffed them in a trash can by the Boer War memorial, and walked along Richmond Street, looking into the shops. And there it was – in the glass again – hovering where my face should be in the reflections of the plate-glass window. Although now it was more of a vague shadiness than the perfectly etched circle of the bathroom, a shadow which darkened over my features. With the morning sunlight shining, I had trouble adjusting my eyes to see it. I moved a step to the right, a step to the left, and the thing followed along. As I walked down the sidewalk, looking into the glass of each store front, in the reflection the black shadow of the spot bobbed in place of my features.

It was in car mirrors and windows, in the polished brass of the post-office door, in the face of the giant thermometer outside the insurance building, on the plating of the modernist tin horse in the park, on the butcher's counter at the farmer's market, on each leaf of the bank's revolving door, in the sunglasses of a father strolling past with his baby daughter. Until the early afternoon, I looked in every reflecting surface, hoping to see myself returned, and each time the spot would adopt a different quality: now cloudy; now more shadow than cloud; now blur; now the deepest pitch without form; now the new moon; now a cat's yawning pupil; now purple velvet; now the last shades of purple and blue before black. Each possessed a different quality of darkness, some clear, some not. But the one which upset me most, which made my heart fall, was the dark of which I could see nothing, not even that there was nothing there, a sort of nonthought, an unreflection, a presence my mind could not hold, as though it were a terribly important

thought tantalizingly out of reach. All the others had a sort of bleak beauty for me as I saw each subtle change in quality from the last. But this nonreflection in every sixth or seventh reflection, this made me promise myself that I would stop looking altogether (though I didn't) because it seemed to tug at a thread within that I thought would unravel me.

How to describe such a feeling? I remember that when I was little I used to have a recurring nightmare in which I was convinced I was awake. In it, I lay in bed bored and languorous, as though I had overslept and couldn't find the energy to get up. After lingering a while, I pulled away the sheets, and every time, my limbs – I could feel their heaviness before – were not there. My body, as well, was gone. I was no longer body at all, just a kind of hovering shock after the complacency of the boredom – a hovering exclamation within parentheses. Every time, I chastised myself bitterly – *You were so blind. – Why didn't you see this coming? All the signs were there, you idiot.* – as though I knew I had fallen again into an old habit of deliberately forgetting something, though I could not describe what it was exactly I had forgotten. I had done "it" again: a sort of not remembering to remember. The sixth or seventh nondark was something like this dream.

I SPENT HOURS walking from one end of town to the other, through the industrial parks to the suburbs, through the old core of the city, then up past the University to the farmlands of the north end, then turning round and heading back where I came from, stopping occasionally along the route to check myself in some reflective surface. Soon the spot stopped changing. It settled into that blank or black space that did not have enough quality for it to be nameable, or describable. I would look at it and have to fight to concentrate on the act of looking, or I would lose the conscious thread of what I was doing, as though the space ate away at my short-term memory. Part of me, always half forgetting, would say, "Now, why are you standing here looking into glass again?" It was like fighting with a terribly seductive drowsiness.

I rid myself of reflections. Back at the apartment I gathered up everything that would mirror me – unplugging the toaster and tossing it into the garbage bin; turning the television to the wall; gathering the pots and pans and cutlery and packing them in a box, shoving it into the closet. I borrowed a screwdriver from the superintendent and undid the bathroom mirror and leaned it, its back facing me, against the door. I covered every reflective surface in the apartment with teatowels, blankets, washcloths – until the rooms were cleansed of mirrors.

I could not sleep that night, either, and rolled over to stare out at the skeletal shadow of a tree branch on the blinds.

Awaking before sunrise, feeling unrefreshed, I waddled into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, pulled on yesterday's clothes and left the apartment. The streets were deserted, the sky dull and overcast with fall – the air disgustingly humid and smelling of rotten leaves. A blue van drove by with "Strantos Bakery" painted on the side, a rusted back bumper hanging on at an angle. One by one, the streetlamps began to flicker and slowly fade out as the sun rose through the haze. I tucked my chin into my coat collar as the cold breeze found my skin, and felt a peaceful loneliness while walking along in the early morning quiet.

As the light rose I saw them, all the windows. Every one, on the houses, on the highrise at the end of the block, on the cars parked on the driveways and street, every one of them the colour of shale rock, the flat black of chalkboard. It was as though they had all been replaced in the night by thin stone slabs. I ran my hand along a car window – chalkboard, or something similar.

I felt nothing. What I mean is, I was not shocked, only amused and a little giddy. The office tower at Wellington and Queen had turned into a thirty-storey monolith, the same colour and consistency as all the other windows, all its glass and metal a perfect, light-absorbing black. The bleak beauty of it was magnificent, and I stared, transfixed, as though its worshipper, in awe. It seemed the supreme centre of everything, the parent of everything.

I thought: *the river*. I walked quickly. Approaching it, I could not hear the flow of water. Once there, of course, I saw, as I leaned over the railing of the bridge and looked down, my hand on the metal girder for support, that the river too had been transformed. The water had frozen into the smooth slate-black substance. I climbed down the bank, almost falling down into a bramble bush, and jumped onto the flat of a small peninsula of bank. Muck oozed up to the ankles of my boots. Gingerly, I stepped onto the water, thinking of Christ as I began to walk across to the centre, shoes scraping on the surface; and I wondered where the fish would have gone – all dead, probably, or petrified somehow. As I made my way down the centre of the hardened water, I began having trouble breathing – until, at last, after about a half mile, I was gasping for air like a fish caught and writhing at the bottom of a boat. Up ahead, people waved and pointed; one man, alarmed, jogged down the steps, began stripping off his clothes. But I had suddenly grown tired and thought it best to lie down. I became so calm and warm as my breathing eased and drifted off, with a feeling of peace.

## A day in Texas

You hit on a surprise,  
it's the electric chair  
you swapped for  
blue suede shoes  
at a yard sale  
somewhere in Chainsaw,  
Texas, 1957

you wait  
in the window of the building  
for the Mexican officers,  
with light operatic faces,  
that raped the poor  
soaked with yesterday's sweat

living by the fever  
of a thousand dreams  
you become enamoured  
of the boys who bathe  
in tin tubs beneath the sun  
and expect crowns of pearls  
but recover ribbons of seaweed  
from the wrinkled ocean.

## Mink Stole

You saw  
Mink Stole  
in the art theatre  
somewhere cavorting  
in Maryland's heat  
for the camera

I kept the negative  
in different hiding places  
smelling grass  
near the subway stop  
expecting love  
to be discovered  
like marvellous stars  
of the underground.

– B. Z. Niditch

## the jupiter flower

crablike i lunge  
my legs over your legs  
our bodies reclining  
joined in a perfect “v”

i am remembering sweaty palms  
a cold gymnasium floor  
a hundred pubescent girls  
lying on their backs  
rising onto feet and hands  
hovering - just for a moment  
then skittering expertly, randomly  
across the floor

in a candlelit room  
twenty years later  
you bring me without  
moving a muscle  
and my world is suddenly  
the colour of violets

– *Suzanne McLean*

## little square teeth

little square teeth  
set in a laughing mouth  
frantically wide  
grey eyes  
too exuberant a heart  
for such a little body  
my kissing girl

## pretend you never

pretend you never  
slid your fingers  
slid your tongue  
never your penis  
into my body  
gave me gasps  
never gave me joy  
filled my empty spaces  
with your flesh  
never ever never

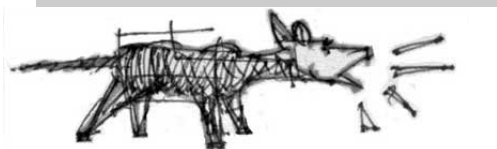
– *A. Mary Murphy*

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## *Turtles in the river*

**H**IGH, GUSTY clouds are blowing away. In the late, low afternoon, he turns from the highway onto the dirt road. He stops for a moment, looks along the road ahead, and has a drink of water from a thermos. The car is hot, baking hot. He hardly sweats. The sun falls onto his chest and arms – he feels like a granite rock, soaking in the heat.

The dirt road strikes through a patch of flat cactus to which a few floppy, red blossoms stick. Grey-green sage and mesquite bushes stagger about. Grasses once grew here and there.

He takes a few easy and deep breaths, breathing in relief. He feels good, calm, without difficulties for the first time in many years. He has finally made the decisions. He looks at his watch, unstraps it, opens the door, and drops it onto the sandy soil just below the car. Black ants swarming over the soil carry bits of debris and seed. He lifts his straw hat by the brim and wipes his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

He restarts the motor, puts the car into forward, drives slowly down the dirt road with the sun in his eyes. A steady but hot breeze blows across him from the wing windows of the car. In no hurry, he turns on the radio and finds only one station. The air flowing by seems slightly cooler on his left arm hanging out the window. Johnny Cash beats out of the radio.

The visor is down to keep the sun out of his eyes, but it is still difficult to see. The air is dusty and the sunlight slips almost horizontally into the orange space of the car. He likes the dryness of the air and the dust devils dancing in the distance. He stops to watch one move across the road. The side of the car becomes too hot to touch. The radio, the sun, the heat, the beautiful spin of the dust – his breathing – it seems enough for him. Where has he been?

When he reaches the beginning of the hills, the road becomes rougher, sometimes just a vague direction defined between bare rocks. At the top of a broad hill he stops and looks carefully into the direction he is driving. The easy hills stretch before him, their tops skimmed by light. A few cumulus clouds extend toward him from the north like a pink tongue. The land is empty, quiet, hot, friendly. He finally notices the distinct smell of hot, dry dust, of sage, the sweet smell of the world. He sits in the car, breathing, enjoying the faint movement of air against his face and its movement into and out of his lungs, looking at the hills, aware of his place.

Driving in the dusk he can barely make out a road, never mind that there is barely a road. Driving slowly, he enjoys the cooler air on his arm and on his face from the wing windows. The radio is full of static and the occasional words of unintelligible songs. He likes to keep it on for the pink light: it feels familiar, he's at home. He remembers how he felt when he slept in a crib, he remembers how he would lie in the crib with his bedroom door open and listen to his parents talk and to the radio they listened to; he

remembers how comfortable and safe he felt, how secure. His eyes soften. The light from the set sun barely lights the horizon.

In the dark he remembers how he used to go on vacations with his parents and his brother, driving across Kansas and Oklahoma to Texas and back, watching constellations of small towns moving outside the windows in the cool, clear air, listening to his parents talk, his brother asleep. He wondered – and wonders now – what those small towns were like; he imagines what happened there. He can still see the cottonwoods which grow alongside the rocky-bottomed rivers, recall the wind before thunderstorms blowing leaves down the streets, while he smelled the on-coming rain, waiting for the sudden reverse of the wind and the clap of thunder. He stops the car for a few minutes until he is ready to go on.

He doesn't know why he is here. He knows this is where he has planned to go for many years. And the way in which he has planned it. He's made the decisions. But why, he doesn't know. He doesn't ask too hard, he just peers into the light of the headlights streaming ahead of him, watching bugs flit through the beams.

The words of a lost friend run through his head, like a rope of thoughts, and he stops the car again for a few minutes to let himself think them. *A foolish man awake in the doorway of spring, the beautiful sorrow of all life circles me. The wind blows and blows. I fall headfirst into the blue fields of grace. A foolish man I am, the wind blows and blows, the grass bends and grows, all flesh is grass, I fall headfirst, into blue, green, brown fields of grace.*

He bumps in a northerly direction until the car runs out of gas. It splutters a few times, jerks ahead a few feet, and quits. He turns it off. It is the middle of the night, finally cool. He has driven since noon, but he is not tired. He has no reason to conserve energy for the next day by sleeping. He can sleep when he wants.

With his flashlight in hand, he shrugs on a small backpack, puts the strap of the waterbag over his left shoulder, and slowly continues in the direction of the sunset. He walks slowly, avoiding brush and cactus, listening to the sound of sand and rock underfoot and to small skittering sounds nearby.

When the gibbous moon arises, an arrow pointing to the invisible sun, an arrow pointing to time forward, he buries the flashlight in the sand so that the light points into the sky like a beacon. He leaves it but looks back once in a while to see if he can still see it. It soon fades.

His eyes become adjusted to the bright night. Stars suddenly appear on the edges of the night where the moon does not wash them away. The sky is enormous. Enormous. He refuses to look up after a first glance, he could become

## Coveting the coffin

“My prayer when I saw her  
was to die, to be in death  
with her.”

— Brooks Haxton

I stand  
over the coffin.  
The cold contagious scene  
grows numb.  
Part of the plan.  
The blind details.  
White lilies in pink satin  
surround stark peace.  
And I feel a need  
to lie down.  
Beside her.  
To lie with her.  
To be inside her blue beauty.  
And cross my hands  
over her breast.

Together,  
then we will watch  
the procession.  
The foolish ants  
marching in file.  
To carry away our grief.

— Amy Jo Huffman

lost. He walks.

The twit of a single bird wakes him. He opens his eyes without moving and examines the few feet of ground before his face. It ends abruptly at the rock in front of his face: the rock is half buried in the loose soil and coloured lichens cover its side. He looks for some time: the scarious brown, green, grey, and black variations. Ants scour the ground and the surface of the rock. He thinks briefly of the time it might take the rock to be eroded away by lichens. He watches a few pillbugs in the shade of the rock and the movement of a few grains of sand falling into an antlion pit. An eddy of air moves a wave of fine sand before his eyes. He closes his eyes again and takes several deep breaths.

The yellow sun is barely over the tops of the hills. The light falls into the world from all directions. The air is still cool. He sees that he has slept between three waist-high boulders on the edge of a field of rocks flowing over a hillside. During the

night he was walking between low hills, following a shallow valley, finding a way between the stones. More, but smaller, are scattered up the direction he is headed, where the valley gradually disappears.

His calves and feet are relaxed. His feet are warm and feel broad and open, as though he is standing entirely flatfooted on the ground. He shoulders his pack and water bag again and walks up the small valley. Immediately he walks differently than he did the day before. His hips are relaxed and the small of his back is not pushing him forward as it used to. He wants to talk with the world, to cry with joy, to exalt, to burst open. He feels like he is walking along the bank of a river, an endlessly wide river, a river which can talk with him.

When he was very young he was walking to find his brother along a dusty road next to a slow and scummy green stream clogged with isles. He was barefooted and the dust was dry and fine, it felt like hot mud between his toes and he walked slowly to enjoy it, knowing where he was going. Turtles lifted, sank, and floated in the river. He walks, adjusting his straw hat, the morning sun to his back. The coolness is gone from the air; he knows what will come. His feet are relaxed, and carefully he fends and wends his way between the stones and larger rocks strewn across the slope of the hill.

Flecks of mica in the stones attract him; he picks a few stones and tastes them, tosses them across the landscape when he finishes. He talks with a few scorpions and a few snakes. He introduces himself to all of them as The Man, "I'm The Man," he says to them. "How are you? Do you like it out here?" He lets them introduce themselves, wondering at how so many of them have such ordinary and familiar names: Bob the Scorpion, Sam the Snake. He supposes these aren't their real names, but he guesses it will suffice, and perhaps their real names are hard to catch. Maybe snakes and scorpions have the same problem with one another. Who knows?

At one point, he stops and sits in the shade of a rock. He feels around in his backpack and finds an electric razor. He realized as he walked that he had forgotten to use it earlier. He shaves with it, creating a small buzzing noise which seems to close him off and isolate him from the space he was just walking through. The buzzing somehow separates him from where he was. He buries the electric razor before he leaves.

At another point he stops to eat again. Another can of tuna fish and another yellow apple. He loves yellow apples, even when they are beginning to dry and wrinkle, as this one is. He buries the empty can again and sets the apple core on a rock, stem up.

The Man adjusts his straw hat, wipes his sleeve across his

forehead, and walks further. By this time, he is up the gentle slope in which the shallow valley ends and is still negotiating around rocks and stones.

When he comes over the top, he sees that he has broached a flat plateau where rocks and stones are interspersed with more sand and sandy soil. He doesn't want the difficulty of walking on sand so he turns to his right to skirt the area. The sun is high and bright, the sky blue and clear, vast and almost empty, a few cirrus clouds overhead, thin and striated, high, emphasizing the emptiness of the rest of the sky. He sweats now and drinks. He walks slowly, tiring now, bored with the emptiness of the sand and with the lack of variation in the landscape. He sees the occasional tracks of hares, mice, and snakes. A hawk circles. When he comes to an arroyo funnelling down the side of the hill, filled with large rocks at the bottom, he is tempted to sit in the slight shade it offers, but he is afraid of the snakes he thinks must live among the rocks.

Instead, he spreads a blanket in the shade close to the base of a boulder and sits with his cheek on the cooler rock. It smells distinctly and he touches it with his tongue. It tastes slightly salty and familiar, as pebbles do, but otherwise he has no name for it. He rests and decides to stay there. The sun will set behind the rock, it will remain shady. He is tired, very tired, he closes his eyes. He sleeps.

Thoughts and images swirl in his head, rush through him without order. He remembers many old dreams, the woman in the pool, the man and the woman outside the cave, the honey tree, his old dreams of flying and thousands of dreams of being in a brick city or back in school in a brick city, both fascinating and repulsive, his original dream of fear which he had understood once, the yellow chick which is jerked to attention for some reason, and his sense of dread. He remembers his children and his pride in them, and then his first wife, his second wife, other women, friends. He is no longer asleep, but he keeps his eyes closed, breathing, remembering the sweetness and confusion of his life, the still embarrassing stupidities and the satisfactions. Strange how shallow those satisfactions were and how deep the stupidities seemed.

He shakes the sand and ants off the blanket he has slept on and lays it on the ground again so he can sit on it and lean against his boulder, already beginning to feel like home. This is where I keep the water bag; this is where I keep my pack. I put my straw hat on this small rock. Home.

Again, he takes out a can of tuna fish, the can opener, and a yellow apple. And the fork. He opens the can and eats the tuna fish. The best yet. It's hard to get tired of tuna fish. This time when he digs the small pit for the can, he drops in the can opener too. He buries both and collects a few small rocks from within arm's reach and places them



## Sickness

Swollen limbs jut oddly out  
Strange and still, incongruous.  
In this world seed's original grace  
And a little love  
Come to what they always would –  
Fruit dropped off trees  
Ripe and ready to sink  
Into the earth swollen themselves  
With clouds dwelling within.  
This is the real plan.  
Not the flight, escape into others.  
Not how when the moon comes full, something of us  
Filters out second-hand light.  
Cicadas rage on, out of control.  
Crickets chime in with the wind.

## Evolution, dog piss, trash & lies I won't tell

The dog in the back yard shivering: I don't care.  
Rain descending from the orange sunset sky like fire  
Though I do not catch: I am as safe as cool stone wet.  
The dog – he wasn't shivering at all when you-know-what.  
As beautiful as my daughters – three and five – when he shit  
From one end of the house to the other  
Making our house smell like Hell.  
No dawn as beautiful as the raining one, no glorious king.  
It's cold, I won't lie.  
The dog lies in a puddle shivering.  
Evolution is kinder than we think: I say it again and again.  
I was pissed, I won't lie.  
When I found it.  
Trash on the floor – coffee grounds, envelope, broken glass,  
Tampon, candy wrapper, rough draft, beer cans, paper  
towels ...  
And the dog in the middle of it it all – happy as Hell.  
I made the dog urinate on himself, I won't lie.  
Just by staring at him – that menacing human stare  
And a brief series of swift, stiff kicks.  
My eyes are green-blue, my belly fat, my nose pointed.  
I'm a raging bull, I won't lie.  
When I'm angry.  
The dog's not coming in.  
Doesn't matter – rain, snow, ice, hail.  
Evolution will provide.  
It always has.  
I won't lie.

– James S. Proffitt



## A hole in the tarlatan

TIM CONLEY on a new view of VN

### *Nabokov's Butterflies*

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Edited by Brian Boyd and Robert Michael Pyle

Beacon Press

782 pages, \$45.00 (U.S.)

EXACTLY WHERE the word *butterfly* comes from is still a matter of speculation. The German *Milchdieb*, literally “milk-thief,” shares with the English name the connection to popular myth: the insect was thought to descend greedily upon dairy products left out by careless housekeepers. In the power of names, beauty retains a mystique of mischief.

Etymology and entomology are caught together within the deftly grasped net of Vladimir Nabokov, though it is sometimes difficult for readers to get past C. P. Snow’s old “two cultures” divide between the arts and sciences to appreciate the combination. As Ronald S. Wilkinson succinctly put it: “The problem is this. Scientists think of VN as an important entomologist who wrote fiction.

Literary critics think of VN as one of the most important twentieth century literary figures who somehow fancied insects.” Neither assessment is entirely accurate for its exclusivity. Nabokov was at the same time the author of such major works as *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and a meticulous translation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, as well as a

dedicated and respected student of what he preferred to call lepidopterology. His logophilia — if I can call it that without tarring him further with attributed perversions — naturally extends to the precision of entomological nomenclature and in his names for catches one finds latinized the words and women of his life and fiction: *Verochka verochka*, *Morpho sylvia*, *Neonympha dorothea*, *Charaxes vera*, *Arlequinus arlequinus*.

As its title suggests, *Nabokov's Butterflies* seeks to reconcile the two VNs. This lapful of a book contains excerpts from well-known works like *The Gift* as well as from letters, lectures, scientific articles, and some unpublished works. The arrangement is chronological, but the degree of focus is various: selected fragments range from brief guest appearances by a moth in a fiction and passing mention of a hunting expedition in a friendly note to more detailed meditations on the science and passion. Fans of Nabokov will enjoy re-encountering certain passages, such as this impressive depiction of defeat from the renowned memoir, *Speak, Memory*:

I remember one day when I warily brought my net closer and closer to an uncommon Hairstreak that had daintily settled on a sprig. I could clearly see the white W on its chocolate-brown underside. Its wings were closed and the inferior ones were rubbing against each other in a curious circular motion — possibly producing some small, blithe crepitation pitched too high for a human ear to catch. I had long wanted that particular species, and, when near enough, I struck. You have heard champion tennis players moan after miffing an easy shot. You may have seen the face of the world-famous grandmaster Wilhelm Edmundson when, during a simultaneous display in a Minsk café, he lost his rook, by an absurd oversight, to the local amateur and pediatrician, Dr. Schach, who

eventually won. But that day nobody (except my older self) could see me shake out a piece of twig from an otherwise empty net and stare at a hole in the tarlatan.

New texts, several of which are translated by Nabokov’s son Dmitri, provide new insights into both the subject and the writer.

BOYD, NABOKOV’S most thorough biographer, and Pyle, a practising lepidopterist, make an admirable editorial team in the production of *Nabokov's Butterflies*, an anthology with fine photographs and illustrations lavishly published not, significantly, by an academic press or even by Vintage, which holds the rights to all of Nabokov’s fiction, but by a non-profit publisher. (A personal plea, if anyone is listening: is it too much to hope that someday *Poems and Problems* will come back into print?) Perhaps unexpectedly, the lengthy introductions by each editor — not to mention the bibliography and numerous notes — are actually worth the space. This volume requires an armchair and devotion — perhaps for this reason “anthology” is not so appropriate a description as “treasury” might be. Lovers of flame-encircling clauses and/or subordinate moths will bask in this book’s glow while readers who like beginnings, middles, and ends neatly kept together may be inclined to pout and turn back to a novel.

Not incidentally, a non-naturalist like myself can learn quite a few interesting things about the creatures that minds like Nabokov’s feel compelled to study so lovingly. *Nabokov's Butterflies* is one of those fascinating books that make us as readers feel quite like naturalists ourselves, snatching glimpses at the beauty of passing phrases. The writing found in it participates in an adapted form of what Nabokov calls the “charmingly sly conspiracy” between nature and reader:

Certain whims of nature can be, if not

appreciated, at least merely noticed only by a brain that has developed in a related manner, and the sense of these whims can only be that – like a code or a family joke – they are accessible only to the illuminated, i.e., human, mind, and have no other mission than to give pleasure – we are speaking of the fantastic refinement of “protective mimicry,” which, in a world lacking an appointed observer endowed with artistic sensitivity, imagination, and humor, would simply be useless (lost upon the world), like a small volume of Shakespeare lying open in the dust of a boundless desert.

*Mariposa, farfalla, féileacán* – sadly, I don’t know the Russian – isn’t it wonderful that language affords us so many gorgeous names? In French the butterfly is *le papillon* (my personal favourite, at least at this moment), naturally related to the verb *papilloter*, to twinkle or flicker. Nabokov’s lambent, *papillotant* prose is well preserved in this outstanding album. ●

## Body dragging

ANTHONY N. CHANDLER  
on a first novel about a final journey

### *Nine Bells for a Man*

PETER UNWIN

Simon & Pierre

268 pages, \$18.99

FEW TASKS could be more miserable than transporting a corpse across the Canadian landscape to its final burial place. Although there are precedents, tales of voyageurs removing the flesh from comrades’ bones, placing them in a rum/molasses/tar mixture, and lugging them down to Montreal from Hudson Bay for a proper burial, it was

never an enchanted voyage for any of the parties involved. In his first novel, Peter Unwin revisits the convention of dragging a dead body on what would be a difficult passage with no load to bear. At first glance, a hybrid of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Robert Service’s “The Cremation of Sam McGee” (1907), and Gordon Lightfoot’s “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald” (1976), it stands on its own as a historically based narrative. With *Nine Bells for a Man*, Unwin has created a compelling chronicle that gives the reader a true sense of the vast nature of such a journey. He convinces us that we, too, would drag a body to its grave, though it might lead to our own.

Set in the fall of 1912, this novel traces Robert Pachel’s trek to bury the body of Herman Brown, his wife’s brother. Pachel’s passage is anything but commonplace for him; it is not an easy voyage by land, rail, and ship. Pachel is a man who has never stepped beyond his front door. His sole consolation for leaving the safety of his Saskatchewan porch is the honour of being in the local newspaper and the knowledge that he is fulfilling a family duty. The reader senses his fatigue, his desperate ache to be home next to his wife, and his intimate fears of the New World he sees speeding by him from a rail car bench. Pachel wants only to be filling the bowl of his pipe with hard-earned tobacco, and fingering the lid of his Eaton’s pocket watch. The railroad is a path by which Pachel does not want to travel, but he has no other choice. The plush coffin he is transporting must return to Ontario, and he must be its courier. Unwin endears us to Pachel by making him a Romantic hero who goes forth bravely without any real sense of danger. It is Pachel’s naiveté that demands our sympathy as his ship sinks on his maiden voyage to the outside world.

Just as Addie Bundren does in Faulkner’s novel, Herman Brown makes a brief appearance at the beginning of *Nine Bells for a Man*. He is a man with dreams that end in Saskatchewan; a man who wants more from life than to shoot prairie chickens and marry a prairie wife. To Herman, chickens and wives are simply obstacles to knock down and move beyond. Herman Brown refuses to evolve with the New World timber industry that has begun to move its way across Canada from the Maritimes. He cannot come to grips with the end of the familiar timber industry, and therefore heads West into the flat void. It is a void that he will not escape alive.

Despite the tragedy inherent in the novel, the reader is not left entirely bereft of hope; we find it in the three salesmen from Ottawa and their fight to stay alive. With only a single, wet buffalo coat and a dampened gas light between them, these men cling to their lives onshore, just as they cling to Brown’s coffin in the stormy waters. They make the positive connection between the Old World – the buffalo coat – and the newfangled lighter as the instrument was passed from one man to the other in turns, and in turn they fired their breath on to it. Harper’s buffalo coat moved in the other direction. They huddled on rocks, trying to spark life into Joe Harper’s automatic gas lighter. They pressed insensate fingers to it; Harper’s thumb grew cloven and dented from flicking at the stone. Peverly flicked for so long that a growth of powder, like a black sickle moon, showed under his thumbnail. He held the instrument in his hand and glared. It irritated him that such an efficient-looking device could not keep men from dying.

These men survive not only through sheer will, but because they combine the traditional with the newfangled. Even though the simple lighter does not bend to their will and

provide the needed sparks, they succeed in making it shoot stars to light their survival fire. Unlike Pachel and Brown, who resisted change and were frightened by technology, the salesmen embrace what is useful. It is their pragmatic sense of survival that Canadian readers will appreciate, for that is what we face when, like Pachel, we move beyond our front door.

The strength of Unwin's novel lies in the fluidity of his story. We follow his characters to bad places, but it is the journey itself which seems to be most important. *Nine Bells for a Man* does not pretend to be more than a wonderful and intimate narrative. Unwin does not attempt to redefine Canadian literature, only to retell a tale born in history. (No pretentious quotations here from Moodie, Tennyson and Browning, as in the chapter headings of Atwood's *Alias Grace*.) It might be complained that he does not deliver anything new: others having done the body-dragger concept, as well as the stormy night nautical disaster, to death. Nonetheless, Unwin's focus on the simplicity of his characters provides the reader with a novel of honest depth – a brilliant first novel and ideal reading for those rainy days spent thinking of travel. ●

## Tangible poetry

L. ERIN VOLLUCK on a notable new story collection

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### *Sanctuary & Other Stories*

JENNIFER DUNCAN  
DC Books  
187 pages, \$12.00

**A** FEW THINGS you should know about Jennifer Duncan's collection: (1) it was short-listed for this year's *Toronto Book Awards First Novel Award*; (2) it was also short-listed for the *Upper Canada Brewery Short Story Collection Award*; (3) it received the "Best Thesis Award" from Concordia's Master's program in creative writing.

These accolades made me wonder what the big deal was. I tried to obtain a copy from my local bookstore, only to discover that the first print run had sold out and the book was being reprinted as one of DC Press's most successful *First Writer's Series* releases. Now, after reading it, I must admit that all the hype was well deserved. *Sanctuary & Other Stories* is a collection of bone-jarring, detail-dripping, confused yearning stories. Mostly short, clipped pieces, they range from an anarchic house in Toronto's Annex to scenes at the Cameron House nightclub.

"A Kick" pretty much sums up the theme of the collection. The narrator of this four-page story can't get a job and his girlfriend leaves him. He's being kicked out of his apartment. Suddenly, due to a filing error, he has to pay back all of his student loans immediately. In the midst of all this chaos and confusion, he ends up kicking out the glass door of his bank.

He's arrested and charged, but he's still glad he did it. As the narrator explains:

And there was this one great flash when the window broke and the alarm went off, as I was falling back to the ground, this one great flash of straight clean triumph. For that one second, I felt like I'd really made a point.

He's the ultimate posterboy for a generation of 'have-nots': no money, no job, no prospects, no hope. And yet, he isn't pathetic – his *situation* is. As lost as this narrator seems, there is a tangible poetry to his actions, a vagrant *raison d'être* that is just coming into being by the end of the story.

The characters in this collection are notable in that they are all up against an amorphous, agonizing set of circumstances. Seasoned by defeats, by losses, they map themselves into their environments in the only ways they know how, searching for comfort, security, a path out of their oftentimes nihilistic situations. They seek exits to what they view as the meaninglessness of life.

Characters are linked by shared bars, pasts, living arrangements, turmoil, poverty, and youth. Sexual abuse, anorexia, parental abandonment, and the scars of childhood all play starring roles. I had more than a few apprehensions about the subject matter: it seems difficult – nigh impossible – to write about Toronto's youthful and colourful misfit community without cliché. Or, worse: making it inaccessible to any readers other than former members, who can read about their hangouts and grow misty-eyed over the demise of the Twilight Zone nightclub.

Duncan avoids this by choosing her subject matter self-consciously and with the meticulous concentration of a jeweller. She enters these old arenas – as in the title story, "Sanctuary", about a kid who is continually thrown out of her house by a crazy mother,

has sex with strangers in exchange for a place to crash, and sells and pops uppers – but she’s not just presenting the underbelly. She’s *revelling* in it. She digs into her characters, their motivations, draws them out with a fresh, clear understanding and an obvious empathy. “Sanctuary” is not so much about a young woman’s plight as about her bizarre, rebellious survival. The originality of this story, and the others, lies in the details.

At their best, the stories demonstrate small, redemptive, and utterly beautiful moments. The final story in the collection, for instance, “The Scrapbook”, is one of the most arresting: it unfolds with exquisite, perfect timing and detail. And, like all of her most compelling characters, the characters here lean towards philosophizing, or even making living art out of, their suffering. Matt, a young man who has been homeless until Kisa picks him up and allows him to move into her anarchic household, finds stability in the little things:

One by one, he takes Kisa’s appliances out into the backyard and piles them carefully in a rusty shopping cart. Then he sits on a milkcrate and begins to clean the toaster oven. The sun hazes down and he hopes it will wash the pallor of his skin. He likes making things clean. Not like they are new but like they are appreciated. He would like to be someplace long enough to keep things clean. To feel he had a right to insist upon their cleanliness.

Kisa, an enigmatic, depressed character, is searching for belonging. Pictures of families adorn her walls. She needs a list just to get herself up in the morning, a chart to tell her what to do, and a tarot reading to tell her how to do it. Like Matt, she is under no delusions as to the way she lives in the world:

She is used to living with boyfriends. Since she was fifteen she’s lived with maybe eight of them. She is used to liv-

ing with anybody. Sudden pop-n-fresh half-baked intimacies. Taking women she didn’t really know to the hospital in the middle of the night as they bled profusely from their groins. Foiling suicide attempts by coming home early.

The beauty of a story like this is that the characters have been searching for ways to cope with their loneliness, their betrayal, their pain, and they often fail. They find brief respite in the intricacies of each other’s stories, in making that very great, very real attempt to know one another. Duncan’s psychological insight into the lives and motions of her characters is often profound.

Not all of the stories are fully realized, however. A case in point: in “The Red Moon”, about an angry young woman and her ex-boyfriend, Duncan fails to transcend the familiar subject matter: the story hinges on an interrupted reconciliation under the moonlight; the characters lack the three-dimensional quality of the longer pieces. Nonetheless, overall, Duncan’s unconventional, daring, and lush prose style grants the reader complicated glimpses into a world that shines with humour, pathos, and a curious kind of hope. ●

## Battle wary

SONNET L’ABBÉ on a novel of disengagement

### *The Rules of Engagement*

CATHERINE BUSH

HarperFlamingo

300 pages, \$29.00

THE ABSENCE of gore in Catherine Bush’s novel about the effects of war and violence is particularly conspicuous if one is familiar with the film of the same title, a testosterone-fuelled post-Vietnam exercise in American military self-justification that came out of Hollywood last year. In the film, the “rules of engagement” become the constrictive, peacekeeping-oriented goals that military men’s combat training uncomfortably serves; for Bush, these rules are examined as the agreements between nations on how to fight: the ironic formal handshakes before the bloody battle. Where traditional Hollywood fare offers traditional combat scenes and the obvious characters caught up in them (i.e., generals, foreign affairs ministers, ambassadors), Bush makes careful and illuminating choices of characters whose relationships to war vary in immediacy and moral implication.

The detached tone of the novel works to characterize Arcadia Hearne, the book’s narrator and protagonist, as a woman who has her guard way up. She is a war-studies researcher but has yet to set foot outside peace-filled borders; rather, she spends her days researching battles and contemplating intervention strategies. (Imagine a devout vegetarian who has never met a cow, much less seen an abattoir, who tries to understand humankind’s taste for the juicy rare steak.) The story opens in London,

where Arcadia lives, having fled there from her hometown of Toronto after two men fought a duel over her. She has spent the past ten years building a life there that has no ties to her past. Her carefully constructed world begins to shift, however, when Arcadia's sister, Lux, asks her to deliver a sealed package to Basra Alale, a woman she's never met. Arcadia is then drawn into an intrigue of illegal immigration and to a new awareness of the plight of international war refugees.

We are then drawn into a subtle mystery: what is inside the sealed envelope, and what is Basra's story? Once Arcadia has played her small part in this stranger's life, the academic questions she asks herself every day begin to take on a new significance. At first, we see Arcadia appeal to the reader with statistics, and although we sense her compassionate character, we are unsettled by her emotional appeal made with cold numbers:

By 1950, 50 percent of war-related casualties were civilian. These days, the ratio of civilian deaths to military is five to one. Over 80 percent, in other words. Nearing ninety, some say. Over fifty million dead in conflicts since the end of the Second World War. And rising. Even refugees in safe havens are targets these days. (Think of Srebrenica.) In the Balkans, the creation of refugees has become a specific strategy of war.

As the narrative progresses, Arcadia becomes more and more in touch with the individual, emotional aspects of conflict and slowly allows herself to consider her own personal dilemmas.

Arcadia's curiosity about Basra leads her to pursue Amir Barmour, and her interest in his refugee work soon takes a romantic turn. However, the instant that Arcadia finds herself a participant in a covert immigration operation in England, she strikes out physically at Amir, then bolts, avoiding engagement in yet another terrain

of muddled rights and wrongs. But her return to Canada forces her to confront her feelings about having been the object over which two men became violent.

There were times when I was aware of the author's deliberately hand-weaving the tale of the duel fought for Arcadia as an allegory for wars fought over territory, and Arcadia's flight from the scene of the duel and its aftermath as an act of taking refuge. I wanted to be lost a little more, rather than guided through a "concept" plot that strove to make an interesting yet unlikely premise plausible. The relationships set up between the characters (e.g., between Arcadia and her love-interest Amir, or between her and her father) seemed to promise an eventual revelation or new perspective for Arcadia, but as a narrator she remains frustratingly detached and reveals little of the emotional impact these relationships have on her. For example, we know that Arcadia disapproves of her father's work in the nuclear power industry and that there has been tension between them as a result. When the two are reunited after ten years, it is completely believable that they should not address their issues directly, but strange that Arcadia should not seem concerned or affected by fresh evidence that she and her father will probably never resolve their differences.

I felt the same frustration with the characters in the "past" narrative of the duel between Neil and Evan. We hear young men stating beliefs, speaking about passion, but where do their ideas come from? Why do they believe what they do? Perhaps Bush means to frustrate our desire to understand people. Perhaps she is suggesting that violence blooms up out of the banal, and that our motivations are hardly ever morally passionate but more often simply juvenile or selfish, and incommunicable.

The most interesting aspect of this

book is how the main character wrestles with her own complicity in conflicts ranging in scale from the domestic to the global, and how she moves from strategies of avoidance to a decision to act. In the moments when I had put the book aside I found myself considering some of the issues this story touches on: the cold, exclusive nature of first-world immigration policies; the privilege of Canadian citizenship and our user-friendly passports; the lengths to which people must go simply to be able to walk in the street without fear; the ridiculous reality of the international community attempting to enforce peace with guns.

For me, *The Rules of Engagement* appeals more to the head than to the heart. I suspect that the reader who expects graphic passion and violence may be disappointed by the coolly evaluative position from which the story is told. However, I would suggest that those looking for ferocity should turn to the prose itself and take note of the vibrant language and the lyricism of its descriptive passages. No doubt the main achievement of this novel will be its capacity to escape the confines of its covers, inserting its indictments and musings into the casual thoughts and dinner table discussions of its readers. ●

# Contributors

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