

paperplates

A Magazine for *Fifty* Readers

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Vol. 4, No. 4

A photograph of a person wearing a flat cap, seen from the back, looking out of a window with a grid pattern. The window is made of dark frames and light-colored panes. The person is sitting on a wooden bench or ledge. The overall scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window.

Poetry, fiction, reviews

Vol. 4, No. 4

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TEJ GIDDA

Patience in Movement

—
He crossed his arms *and thought about apparitions at extreme heights, where water boiled because of pressure and blood burned because of extremity.*

LINDSAY ZIER-VOGEL

I knew then

—
The shadows in our house were bookshelf deep, an infinite cross hatching of dark on darker, enormously black and tightly woven.

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ELLEN FREMEDON

St. Patrick's Day

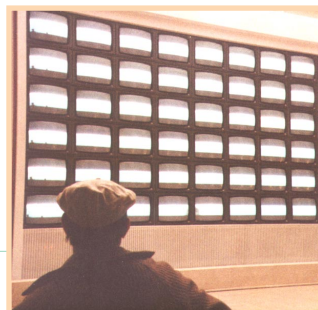
—
Patty was just the name she had made up for the mysterious ghost of St. Patrick who had been in touch every year for the last seven, until just last year.

SUZANNE HANCOCK

At the motel / One more

—
My room is hot and dark,
I've kicked all the covers to the floor save
one white sheet
and I sit up, walk to the window.

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Pass the sunscreen

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submissions

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SUMMER ARRIVED this year in Toronto with all the animosity of a defective element that would sooner scorch the bottom of the pan than warm up the food inside. Which is to say, it didn't work as intended. Suddenly, we were in shorts and teeshirts, struggling with the weight of an airconditioner that spends most of the year stowed under a side table and wondering at the fragility of a sash window that did not so much slide open at last ... as die, far too slowly, of grief. From the newly painted deck, we could see the CN Tower grow ever less distinct as the air grew smoggier and our own breathing yet more audible. There is something about empoisoned air that teases out the very worst thoughts, the ones that, in purer mixtures, simply burn themselves away. We are not merely mortal now, we are moribund, and every ice-cream cone that tonight succumbs vaguely to the worrying of our lips will tomorrow be added to that inner burden dragging us down, down, down ...

Summer also brings with it that other sure defeater of optimism, the rejection letter. Magazine editors whose schedules have sagged sociably through winter and spring find their usual distractions absent, their friends abroad. Out come the undated, unsigned form letters, to be inserted into the stamped self-addressed envelopes that several months before had been told not to return but with loving acceptance. However gently worded the unfortunate message, its effect upon the addressee is always the same: disappointment, anger, uncertainty ... in a word, pain. Those of us who send out such letters as well as receive them feel it just as keenly. Whatever perspective we thought we had acquired is lost at the sight of our own name in our own handwriting lying among the morning's mail: our offering to the gods has been refused. Was it no good, then? Possibly. – After all, we won't improve if we can't admit we're improveable. – But possibly not. (Here's the benefit of experience.) Magazines reject submissions for a variety of reasons, many of which have little to do with the quality of our work and more to do with their operation:

They may have reached their quota. They may have thought the work too long. They may have published a contribution recently with too similar a theme or subject or tone. They may be attempting to show regional diversity (a quota of a different kind). They may already have published us and would prefer we go elsewhere for a while (or forever). They may be attempting to shape the magazine so that it attracts a particular kind of reader. They may have a personal aversion to certain forms (stories about animals, poems with rhymes, etc). They may be attempting to reduce a backlog of submissions and feel compelled to reject outright what they would normally consider worth debating. They may be running out of money. They may be running out of steam.

Some magazines, we're pretty sure, will never let us in no matter what we send them. Others, occasionally, are more encouraging: they compare our work with that of a well known author or two but then regret that some part of it (usually the ending) didn't live up to their expectations. The most frustrating letters are those in which the editors admit that they "almost accepted" our submission before deciding that it wasn't quite what they were "looking for" (which means they don't exactly know why they're turning it down – but they are). There is nothing to be gained by questioning such decisions. Editors, finally, must choose – but they don't have the final word ... beyond their own magazine. A rejection is a rejection. Nothing more.

– Bernard Kelly

Eleventh anniversary

(for B.K.)

Another year, another hurdle.
It's always about nerve
and limitation. One's pain
tolerance. One's threshold
for nothingness through which one slips
into God's arms. The door to the heart
wide open.

You get so alone at times that it just makes sense

— CHARLES BUKOWSKI

I have nothing to say that
I haven't said before.
Pardon the repetition, the ignorance,
the need. Pardon the echo
of my aloneness. When I wonder
if love might catch me
off guard, tackle me
in a mall or field,
wrestle me in the darkness
of my mind, I know
it won't find me.
Pardon this wall, a shield,
my willpower. Strong once
in a previous life, I searched
for the impossible. Finally,
I gave up. Last to go
was hope. Wounds became
scars; geography
on a different plane, stars
in a private sky.

— Robert Boates

Walking behind

the thing is your hands are half the size of mine
I could crunch your soft fist in my long fingers
I could hold your wrists together with one hand free

instead
I drew the outline of my left hand
on a love letter

which you sent back thinking no doubt
how my hands are twice the size of yours

with a jackknife I cut the back of that hand
stick figures
relief map
and sent you pure
blood on a love letter

which you sent back in pieces
riddled with guilt

I think constantly if only I could connect with you
you would admit the rightness of my habit
of walking behind you in all moods and weathers

and when it's cold
rubbing these hands together

—K.I. Press

Patience in Movement

“SAY HELLO, remain, closer to me than you are right now.” But David noticed that the bus was turning, and the song faded away from the window. Ten minutes later, as the traffic cruised and the thoughts evaporated on the concrete stage of the city, the bus stopped for him and put him on the sidewalk. He started away right then, up to the first building on the right, the one which had trees growing lavishly from the lawns up to the windows which they would never reach because dear men did dear things like pruning.

A darkness was already creeping into December. The nights felt cooler to David even though the days were mysteriously warm with spring heat. There was no snow, no hint of it to come. David walked to the front door of the building, turned a key, went into complete warmth and forgot that things were not as they should have been. He was robotic for the next few minutes, because elevators and doors and circuits were guided by the same electricity which was flowing automatically through him.

He reached his office on the fifth floor and turned on the lights within. They glowed out through the window onto the lawns far down below, where any high authority figure could look up and ponder and wonder and question and query that the boy was back at work, this late at night, this terribly late at night. David sat on his desk and attempted to be noble, because that's what it was to be alone at night with no one around you, with just your thoughts and the consequences of them.

He stared at the blackboard. He had never put anything productive on it. He went over and scribbled a few aimless words without thinking about them. Instead of erasing them, he went to his computer and checked his messages. There they were, the inscriptions of his friends and the kind words of his acquaintances and the meanderings of those people who were lurking in corridors between the two. He tried to rationalize. He tried to understand.

One message he read three times. He read it three times before he could understand the words properly like he should have been able to with his massive storehouse of education. “Not again,” he whispered, although nothing had ever happened to him before to warrant it happening again. But he stroked the keys of the board and tried to compose a reply, and he wanted to be civil, but he also wanted to put more words on the chalkboard.

He didn't get up.

He kept typing until he realized that nothing good was coming of his efforts. Then he erased everything he had inscribed, and purged the memory of it completely. His fingers flicked over the keys for a few seconds more, and then the computer was shut down and he was standing up by the window so that everyone outside could see his unshrouded form through the unshrouded glass.

There were big specks of stars taking turns with his attention up there to keep him busy. He crossed his arms and thought about apparitions at extreme heights, where water boiled because of pressure and blood burned because of extremity. The fifth floor was not so high up. But it was still a long way down.

David shrugged and went to the telephone. He punched a key to dial out of the building. He put in a phone number, lingering on the last digit long enough to fear a telephone-warning-noise. Eight. He pushed down and held the phone close, close to his ear, and listened, listened for the sound of a single voice to clear it all up and make static sound like the stage.

"Hi Meg." And so it started.

"How are you? Just thought that I'd call."

"I got your message. I just read it."

"I don't know what to think. I don't understand any of this."

"I'm trying to be reasonable. It's not that easy."

"Why exactly do things turn out this way? I thought things would be better between us. I thought we had a chance."

"No, I have never seen *Patience in Movement*. I don't know what that is. It's a movie? No, I haven't seen it. Meg ..."

"Is it because I never saw *Patience in Movement*?"

"Is that it?"

"That's the only reason? What kind of reason is that? I know ... I hear that it means a lot to you. But it's only a movie. Isn't it? Does that mean more to you than ..."

"Of course it does."

"I don't know what I'm thinking right now."

The line went dead. David put down the phone gradually, so that he wouldn't feel the coolness of movement on his skin. But the phone was eventually resting once again on the desk, and the office was quiet again. David thought about moving to the window once more. He thought about drawing on the board, until he was a supreme artist and the next visitor to the office would have their heart pinched and sundered by what he put up there. But all the hours in the world were conspiring against him, for they had never given him the talent of expression he needed to be great, to be loved.

David hummed a part of a song. Then he left the office, because he was numb and there was nothing but numbness waiting on the black empty pages of his deeper musings. He was walking, it felt mechanical again, more than ever, and he was emotion cracked up and wretched until there was nothing but the metal-on-metal sound of his joints coming in rapid unhurtful contact with each other.

He was going to the lab, which also had a door and a deluxe lighting system and a state-of-the-art ventilation apparatus that kept things blissfully clean. David put on his lab coat, since that was policy. He also put on some gloves and then went to the storage cabinet, from which he extracted three chemical bottles. He put them all into a fumehood and then went for the new syringes.

They were packed away on the far side of the room, and they were brand new. David handled them carefully, all two-hundred of them, and went back to the fumehood.

Carefully, he began to unwrap them.

A YOUNG LADY out in the December cold was thinking about how delicate it was when the weather did not respond to the season at hand, and how terrible an effect a temporary lull in the freezing could have on the poor animals who didn't understand things the way humans did. She was standing on a street corner, waiting to cross the road, and she didn't want to wait much longer. She was late.

She had to go. She had to keep moving.

The light changed, and she was off. The cars all were stopped for her, but it didn't bring a smile to her face. She kept walking right back onto the sidewalk and turned to her left down the main strip of the city.

There were lights everywhere, and many were the multi-coloured hue of Christmas; otherwise, they had to be some perverted version of Halloween. She passed a few shops which had expressly reused the fluff of late October haze to make early December snowflakes. Meg shook her head. She didn't know what to make of it.

The walk continued, and it was getting shorter and shorter, and she didn't want to go too fast because that would imply that she was late: and she didn't want to think that she was late.

Ahead of her, she didn't see the accident coming. But she heard the first screeching of tires. She could even catch a hint of something maniacal in the air, perhaps a scent of ozone from brakes being pressed hard into the ground of cars. A moment later, she heard the impact; and following that, she looked up to see two cars intertwined with each other at an intersection that had been calm and cool and pleasantly festive a few moments ago. A long string of Christmas lights from a nearby pole had been stripped down along with the wood of the structure, which was now leaning against one of the cars.

Everything became very quiet. Meg stood at the southwest-northwest-eastforever corner of the intersection and looked at what had happened in front of her. When people's eyes finally adjusted to the misplaced Christmas lights and the way in which they hung limply in the cold destitute breeze, they started running towards the cars.

Meg was closest, but didn't move. She just kept watching.

Someone went to a nearby payphone and started to scream at an operator that they needed an ambulance.

For Meg, it was too dark to see inside the cars. She could not make out the figures inside. She swallowed hard and kept to herself and felt the wind of people, good people and lovely samaritans, running by her because there was no real sense in standing still.

They were screaming for help and they were so worried and so concerned and they didn't really seem to care that

perhaps those cars would suddenly find a puncture/needle hole in their gasoline tanks and give it all up in a flare that would split the intersection into fifteen separate avenues, some of them through rock and mortar as well. They didn't care, not like she did, and they went right past her as though she weren't there, and then they were at the car trying to break glass and yell inside to see what was happening that they couldn't see from the outside. All Meg could do was look at her watch.

She was late.

She crossed the road where it was still clear and passed into the shadows for a moment where she could make her escape. Then she was beyond, and the ringing in her ears was fading and the nausea in her guts was passively curing itself. She investigated her hands, which were useful and strong, and they were shaking, and they didn't seem as though they could so much as clasp themselves without being shown explicitly how to do so.

Far up ahead, she could see a layer of lights arcing out into the street from the building where they came from. It was her destination.

Ten-million destitute people were between her and the goal. She pushed her way through them. A man, one solitary soulful man was singing a happy song on a street corner over there, where she was pointing with her shaking shaking finger: but she kept walking. And even when the stars started to burn in place with a fire which they had never possessed, and the light came down and shone through a person who passed her by and left her behind, she barely stirred.

A native thought occurred to her, one of the distractions of her consequential birth, right in the place where a void had been eaten through her delicate, lovely soul. But she paid it no heed, did not recall it or save it for further deliberation, did not question its merit or its potential, did not choose to honour it by making it hers.

Five minutes later, she was standing under the lights, and paying her money so that she could go in. Some lady in a booth gave her change. Inside, she found a seat completely by herself, away from any edges, away from any circles, some place where she could be by herself.

The lights dimmed.

DAVID PUT THE needle into the rubber stopper over the bottle, pulled back on the syringe, extracted the needle from the rubber, and aimed the needle at a little sample dish. It was a chemical, too long in name to remember, but one with properties of particular interest to several simultaneous industries across the world. He could not smell it with his head outside the fumehood, although he had once leaned down and under so that he could appreciate its sweet sickness. It was also colourless, even though its liquid might hold enough

energy to burn him from top to bottom if ever it found its way inside of him.

For the 117th time that night, David aimed the needle at the intended destination and squeezed down on the plunger. He injected just a microamount of the chemical into a sample dish which contained a microbial population, and then fancied that he could hear the little creatures screaming in protest or joy, all depending on what their clinical response would be to such a visitor. It was either a party or a death knell, with David there to analyze the results and attend either in the appropriate dress.

It was his short-term life's work, and it was the robot in him which liked it so preciously much. Once again, he extracted some chemical from a bottle. Once again, he put it in a sample dish. His eyes blurred between his actions, because he was tired and, even though it was not yet eleven o'clock, he had been up for a long, long time.

And in fact, this was the one time when loneliness was forbidden to him. He found that ironic as he poisoned the next culture. It was against policy to work in the lab alone, although he really wanted to ask the great hard authorities in charge just who would be foolish enough to stay with him at such an hour. His exile was self-imposed. It broke all the rules.

At sample number 129, David felt a wave of enchantment sweep over him. It was the heat of continued living, the hope of getting better very soon and getting on with life very well indeed. He detected an image of something glorious and wonderful around him, like a haze or aura that promised better things and more rational conclusions to his realtime dilemmas. David smiled broadly, because he did not think that he had it in him to smile at all. The effort was apocalypse. The results were even worse.

David looked down, and the spiked needle was sticking very gently into his hand. The thumb of his other hand was on the plunger. What his thoughts were, he could not disentangle, and he did not quite remember how long he had been standing there in that position.

A shot of glory went through him again; but it was followed up with a less tasty and excitable dish. David let something like air out of his mouth. His eyes closed for a tired moment and opened up to see again what he had done. Then he pushed the plunger.

He didn't feel the liquid enter his body. But he could hear a hundred-million microbes in the sample dishes clapping as though he were their brother, just bigger and older and so much more evolved.

David took the needle out of his hand and set it on the fumehood. He waited. His robot brain started to shake slowly, and a heat developed in his body that he had never known before. He dared not rub his forehead with his gloves, even though the sweat was becoming profuse already. "Two

microlitres,” he repeated to himself. “That’s all, two microlitres.”

A rough calculation went through his head. He tried to base it on his internal fluids, and the poison limit of the chemical whose name he was firmly committing to his mind. But it was no good, and there was no calculator in the world big enough for him work properly in his condition. He walked slowly to the far side of the room, where there was a telephone pasted with every emergency number for every emergency that could ever happen; and there was even one for little bugs that crawled like snakes through the jungles of a partyland. As he dialled the call number, he knew, he could hear, he could understand and suddenly complete all the critical portions of his research: they loved it. The bugs were back in the fumehood, and they were having a great marvellous party because their older smashing brother had given them liquor to strip away all their inhibitions. David assigned a probability, something like a statistic, to his findings, and wished he had a pen so that he could commit it firmly the way it needed to be.

There was a voice on the phone.

“I don’t mind at all. It’s okay. I guess this is the way it happens sometimes.” He was talking as loud as he could, leaning on the wall, hoping that he wouldn’t fall over. He was getting more numb by the moment. “Two microlitres of difference. Two lousy drops to take it all away.” He told them his name. “You better get here fast.” He gave them the address of the building and the room number of the lab. “Try not to worry about me too much.” He explained the entry wound, small as it was. “But those bugs: they’re loving it. Who would have believed that they could be so different from us?” He told them about his mother and father, who he had seen just three weeks ago at a restaurant meant for close-knit families and intendeds. It had been a marvellous time.

“Don’t remember what I had to eat,” he said, slumping closer to the wall, cradling the phone under his fallen head so that it would not fall away from him. He talked about overdrive on uphill slopes, and unnavigable paths which no one had ever told him about. And he talked about microbiology and the consequences of chemicals in the earth or sky, about how one was the other, and about how he was neither of the above.

Finally, David slipped to the floor and the phone was lost. He was still trying to do the poison calculation in his head. “It’s all right. Forgive. It’s all right, but how do two microlitres make such a difference between us? I know, I never had any Patience either.” He closed his eyes, because he knew it was all going to be all right, even though he wasn’t sure of that at all.

WHEN THE FINAL credit was gone, when the final hint of music evaporated into shade, Meg lifted herself up with the

light and uncrossed her arms. She was close to tears for what she had seen, for the messages imparted to her once again. She looked around her at the others, all of whom had stayed to sample the easy moments after the ordeal was over and it was time to savour the crescendo as it roared away into memory.

Meg wanted to hug everyone. She felt warmer and calmer than ever, and her hands were not shaking anymore. She had forgotten every old part of her life already, even that a distant thunderous clap of disaster had nearly riven her from her attention.

“That was terrific,” said a man to a woman next to him. She looked at him with pearls in place of eyes and nodded. Meg leaned towards them a little bit, even though they were three rows back. “I wouldn’t have missed that for anything. I’ve seen it over thirty times now.”

They both smiled at her. Meg walked out of the theatre into a cold night. She began her walk home. Though the world around her spun on a hurtling axis of event and expense, though friends and lovers passed in passing and continued on into private unsullied dawns, Meg was there and the world was not in her.

Meg was there, but the world was everywhere.

AN AMBULANCE CREW was strapping David in and talking to him gently. He was giving responses clearly. The worst was over. As a result, the paramedics were not working at the extreme lightning-speed of immediacy; rather, they were working with the expediency of relief. “The boy’s fine,” said one, as the ambulance pulled away.

“Just a little chemical in his system, nothing it can’t absorb.”

“He’s still crazy,” said the other one. “Injecting himself with that crap. Pretty stupid thing to do.”

In the back, David was looking up at the top of the ambulance.

It bumped and heaved as he walked on through his fading nausea. The night was becoming clearer to him again, but not without considerable effort on his part. He seemed to remember dancing like a pagan in the rich sands of a creamy broth, trying to hide his savage desire to be a cannibal. The dance had ended in greed and envy, and he had succumbed to both. He tried to remember the name of the particular vice that had tempted him into such a cataclysm; but it could not be recalled, not by him.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, the ambulance reached the hospital. As the paramedics pulled him out the back doors, he looked up at an empty blackness above him.

There were stars up there, burning everywhere.

I knew then

I was born to a philosopher and a lion hunter – an odd assortment of conversation and filling of time. They would bathe me in liquid words (always testing the water first with a gentle wrist, a thickened elbow) and dried me with soft skins; binding me in generous furs, feeding me fruits of absurdity.

My mother wore a ring on her long, bony middle finger; a thick band of metallic weight (I used to believe it joined her finger to her hand). My father used to call out the names of birds in his sleep: “cardinal”, “red winged black bird”, “pileated woodpecker” – so often in fact that my mother and I would waken (just barely of course) and absorb these winged spectacles into the scent of our own lucid dreams. Memories of my childhood are infused with apparitions of flying creatures, hollow bones and hearts the size of my baby fingernail.

The window in our front hall had a shard of golden glass – golden, the shade of a lioness’ underbelly. Just one triangular fragment of stained glass abandoned in the corner, like someone had forgotten to finish the intricacies of glass and molten lead and instead had filled the gaping hole with a vacantly pale trapezoid. Colourless, it spoke in empty space. If I was up early enough, I’d sit on the stair, fourth from the bottom, the one with the slightly raised nail, the one that would spitefully catch your sock or play vindictively with a worn back pocket like a hungry, resentful tantrum. I would recount the passage of last night’s dreams between my tiny fingers. Weaving and melding a string of nightly visions into one fabric, I would carve these cumulative of such enormous – infinite even – possibility. I would wait for the lengthened rays of quiet sun to strike, first the gray stone, then the peeling frame and finally the minute of gold – the geometry of the morning light, gentle as my father’s ringless hand, definitive as my mother’s untamed eyes. We didn’t have clocks in the house when I was younger, no watches either, and my first reference to calculated time became the space of gold light on the fourth stair from the bottom with half woven wonderings of orioles and thick grasses trailing from my fingertips; a singular space of here and gone, completely independent of any human will or intervention. (It was then that I realized that the world was a sphere, the stair an angle of a larger place and the subtle importance of witnessing this moment of inconsequential consequence.) The golden light would come and go and come and go. I would too – just like me.

The shadows in our house were bookshelf deep, an infinite cross hatching of dark on darker, enormously black and tightly woven. It was inside these pools of non-light that I discovered words: my parents, other people’s, sometimes even my own. Words like “impossibility” and “through” and “feverish” – coating my mouth like fresh cream, staining it a deeper red. I rolled their consistencies, the inherent will of their fragmented strength against my tongue, against the back of my teeth. I would emerge from these thickened caves, after hours on hours of wandering, with syllables dripping like oil from my chin, a resolution of sorts matted into my hair.

I knew then, that words would sustain me.

– *lindsay zier-vogel*

This is not: a poem

This is not a violent poem
This poem will not kill
It will not injure or maim
It will not pull a trigger
It will not take off the top of your head

This is not a powerful poem
This poem will not move you
It will not enlighten you
It will not convert you
It will not crack the frozen seas within you

This is not a cathartic poem
This poem will not make you or your friend cry
It will not astound the audiences
It will not purge you with pity and fear

This is not that kind of poem
That does those kinds of things
(I never said it was
I never said it would)

This is not the kind of poem that burns bright
That is hard
That is written in madness
That is written for the mad
That is written for the dead
Or made out of lead
That has rhymes
Or consistent time

This is not a poem written for a beloved
A lost love
Unrequited love
Perverted love
Or needed love
This is not that kind of poem

Nor is it the kind of poem dedicated to a friend
This poem will not mention lost soldiers
It will not remember fallen young men
It will not eulogize
Or sing the sorrows of drowned girls

This is not a poem written to mortally wound
This is not a poem written to immortalise the poet
This is not a poem written to celebrate beauty
Rout out evil
Right wrong
Change the present
Preserve the past
Or avoid the future

This is not a poem that men will beat drums to
This poem will not be accompanied by guitar
It will not be sung in a bar
It will not be played on the radio
Or whistled in the park

You can be sure that this poem will not be quoted in essays
Intoned in churches
Recited by children
Stolen by the enemy
Or delivered at presidential inaugurations

This is not an urgent poem
This poem will not be whispered in darkness by nimble lips
It will not be devoured in the shadows by hungry ears
It will not be translated into twelve languages
Tapped into Morse code
Sent across the galaxy
It will not appear in the newspaper or on the nightly news

This is not a precious poem
It is not written by a genius for distant generations
This is not an Aristotelian poem
It has no beginning, middle, or end
This poem is not private property
It does not belong
This poem will not be a poem
It will never say everything it is not

– *Thomas Abray*

how many spines shall i

how many spines shall i
wear on my dress today?
how long should they be?
how sharp? a woodrat
is trying to climb into the
branches of an acacia
through the canopy of silent
leaves past the yellow
and the dead flowers. for
what are you foraging friend

rodent? my sap (incense
and glue) tastes damaged.

to imagine a world peopled with poems

for thomas lehmann

information comes to us on stone, paper
and homeless screens. you can select a smile
in a dozen alphabets, a teddy bear as an icon
for friendship or loss, colours that burn
an elliptical path through history.

and if the ancient egyptians worshipped
ra with and without other gods and goddesses,
the yellow blob at the top of my pencil
could be sunrise over a lead temple
or a thought congealed in the computers
of the new library at alexandria.

next time you come i said

for sonja matheson

next time you come i said
say “cheer up anne” and watch
the wrinkles around my mouth

fill with mauve sand. why
do we bend our spines
backward until they burn?
it is the winter and the titmice
cannot find her grave.

– Anne Blonstein

Gods and their machines

The car was no more complex a machine
than the minds that made it –
a Leviathan with the delicate guts of cables and wires
it takes a smaller sort of god to heal.

When it tricked another such machine into its path,
and into the fates of the body cribbed inside,
the event seemed no less
than if a larger God had turned away from a pile of
wind-up dolls

a sec
to yawn sneeze burp curse
and, unattended,
Creation reversed itself quite naturally.

Now, on the first day after the rebellion,
that body has become something new;
she is the tubes plugged through her nose,
spiked in her arm, hooked in her side,
is the fat purse hung above her head,
the pulse and shudder of lights junkyard-mad in our eyes;

and is, of course, the trigger wrapped around her wrist,
like a peasant gift to let her escape,
briefly, with a sermon of dreams and dope,
the horror of how machines can unbecome.

– Chris Yurkoski

Behind it all

Behind a lamp on the table and behind a candle
Behind the reality of a dream
Behind a point in space where two parallels
Cross each other to infinity
Behind interstellar matter and terrible spectrum
Behind an atom where electrons circle like angels
Behind a peculiar moment called copulation
Behind irreversibility of facts
Behind the truth of science and logic of religion
Behind a whimper of thermometer against the window
Behind all that what is not a song sings by a wall clock
Before a cuckoo that will lay the egg of the last hour

There in our immortal house our parents
Are just drinking their afternoon tea

– *Barbara Aleksandrowicz*

Duty

Eighty-four now, he needs to sit with me
now and then, so
doing my duty driving to the farm
away from the sick roar of the city.
Never before did I notice how quickly summer
leaves go crazy in crashes of red-gold
along the road.
Good just to sit and watch from the stoop,
the homely look of tractors
by the workshop,
overhearing chickens gossiping
about the rooster,
pumping iron-cold water
crystal tables below.
Sleeping sweetly this night to moon-silence,
Monday morning returning to the computer's
merciless blink.

– *Peter Duncan*

One

I am the dark sand
resting in silent wait.
You are the ocean swell ...
ebbing and flowing,
pulled by a distant force.

The summer's lethargy
beckons the sun-baked hordes,
drawing them into our world
where they idle away the heat filled hours, entombing
their bodies
in the depths of my warmth,
then feeling your cool caresses
washing over their skin
in evening's twilight.

We watch the colours languish,
returning our playmates to their homes
Until nightfall scatters
both moonbeams and star shine.
This is our time, when day has elapsed ...
your waters stroke and soothe me,
reaching up to engulf me in your tenderness, seeping into
my cooled surface.

I become part of you
as I feel your life
unite with mine,
We are as we long to be ...
One

– *Laura Fleury*

ELLEN FREMEDON

St. Patrick's Day

SHE HEARD THE mail slot click, and the soft thudding of the day's, or perhaps the top o' the mornin's, greetings on the carpet. She scurried from the kitchen to pick it up. On other days, she usually strolled. Two or three times a week she actually finished the dishes before checking it out, but she always lit up when she heard that friendly sound. On her birthday, she scurried; and on her anniversary, because there was always something cute from Jerry; and on St. Patrick's Day.

But there wasn't much this time. The usual card from her sister, who knew that the day was special, and the phone bill, and the current copy of *Saturday Night*, and a letter from her daughter at school, but that was it. She never expected anything from Jerry, not because he didn't know her peculiar fondness for the day but because he was of Swedish extraction and thought the day was best reserved for those who were born and bred to it. Not that her sister and her daughter were small potatoes (no, she thought, that's a little bit too hokey Irish: say just *unimportant*) – they were both dear to her. It's just that there was nothing from Patty this time.

"Patty" wasn't the real name, of course. She had never known anyone called Patty except her aunt, who was long gone. Patty was just the name she had made up for the mysterious ghost of St. Patrick who had been in touch every year for the last seven, until just last year. Nothing was ever signed, so she had to make up *someone*, and try to imagine who it was. She had never been very successful, beyond making up the name.

It had started with a simple Hallmark bookmark, the kind that prints a name at the top and then offers a charming little account of where it came from and what it means and who some of the famous ones were. EILEEN, it said at the top, and went on to quote a couple of lines from the Irish song "Eileen Aroon" and gave some background, most of which she had known anyway. The note enclosed said simply, "This has always been my favourite name," but it wasn't signed, and the note was typed, as was the envelope. Eileen had gone about the rest of that day, seven years ago, with a bit of a glow over this unexpected and indecipherable attention; but there was no hint of what it was about, or who was remembering her in this touching way, and there was no followthrough.

That is, no followthrough until the following St. Patrick's Day, when the mail brought a little pressed shamrock and another typewritten note saying, "Truth is a shining star, Eileen Aroon." She had saved the bookmark, along with the note and envelope, from the year before. This line was not quoted on the bookmark, but Eileen knew it from the song, which her mother had sung to her as a lullaby and occasionally ever after. She replayed it in her memory as she reread the note a few times, hearing it in her mother's voice as it had been in the last months near her end, quavering and faint but still full of feeling. She joined it with a harmony as the song in her head was concluding, but stopped short as she noticed the way the E's in "Eileen" were raised a little above the rest of the letters – just the way they were on the note and envelope from the year before.

That was six years ago. Thereafter, there was something similar every St. Patrick's

Day. There had never been a return address, and no clue in the postmarks: the bookmark had been sent from Dublin, and the shamrock from Vancouver. A year after the shamrock, there was an envelope postmarked Toronto, and within was a commercial postcard with a lovely swan, and on the reverse side no address, no stamp, just another typed note reading "... drift on the still water, Mysterious, beautiful ...". The E's were slightly out of line. There was nothing else to connect it with the previous missives except the coincidence of the day and the mysterious elusiveness. Or was it allusiveness? Eileen couldn't place the quotation, but felt sure she'd read it before. She left the rest of the mail unopened and went to the livingroom, where she pulled out her old anthology-textbook from second-year English and started paging through. And finally, there it was: W. B. Yeats, "The Wild Swans at Coole." She was more mystified than ever.

She had wanted to talk to Jerry about this, but thought better of it. He was a wonderfully gentle and understanding man, but there were two things about him that made her hesitate. One was that he was not much for mysteries. For Jerry, there were puzzles but not mysteries. He would have set to working on identifying the unknown sender. There would have been a lot of questions, lots of hypothesizing, testing out guesses, that sort of thing, and Eileen was inclined to be much more romantic about everything and didn't want this engaging mystery to be demoted to the status of a puzzle. The other problem was that Jerry was awfully protective. Well, to come right down to it, even a bit on the jealous side. And from the start, whoever "Patty" was, there was just enough of the romantic to this to make him a trifle uneasy, and when Jerry got uneasy about such things Eileen wound up even easier. Best to wait and let it sort itself out.

BUT OF COURSE it wasn't sorting itself out. It was deepening, both as a mysterious happening and as a touch of heartflutter. Certainly not the sort of thing to bring Jerry in on, harmless though it was. It seemed silly to be as taken with it as she was becoming – a few words annually on St. Patrick's Day from some unknown person who was hardly asking her to reciprocate whatever was on his or her mind and heart. But privacy was the best policy. Jerry had questioned her the previous Christmas about how well she had been getting on with Jack Dunnigan at the office party, the two of them in conversation apart for quite a while, it seemed to him. It had meant nothing to Eileen, nor, as far as she could tell, to Jack – just congenial chat, mainly about their respective memories of visits to the British Isles in time past. But Jerry still seemed mildly uneasy after her reassurances, and admitted that he would feel more comfortable if she would agree to leave it at that

and pursue the relationship no further.

Part of it had to do with that Irish mystique. Being very un-Irish himself, Jerry didn't quite know what to make of the peculiarities of Irish sentimentality. She would tease him occasionally about it: "There's sentimentalism," she told him, "especially in the songs – the Irish love to feel that they're being feeling, whether it be artificial nostalgia about a Galway Bay they've never seen or a Mother Machree whom they never really liked all that much. And then there's sentiment: sometimes as cold and bleak as Yeats's self-chosen epitaph, 'Cast a cold eye on life, on death: horseman, pass by.' That's really carved on his gravestone at Drumcliff, you remember? Not unfeeling, but a feeling too deep for the maudlin songs to reach. You can count on the sentiment. The sentimentality is like the froth on a Guinness."

So she had assured him that she and Jack had been exchanging sentimentalities about where they'd been, but no sentiment for one another.

That had settled the matter for the while, but she knew that Jerry wouldn't quite be able to grasp the distinction: for him, feeling was like hot and cold running water, with temperature being the only difference. What he called *hot* didn't mean *passion*, but something more like intense comfort, the sweaty part of a genuine sauna after you've been rolling in the snow. Or is it the other way around in a sauna? That's Finnish anyway, not Swedish. Between her and Jerry, it was always embracingly hot in that sense, soothingly and exquisitely hot like the Japanese *ofuro* bath they'd shared in their trip to Kyoto, so reassuringly and relaxingly hot that you just loll there and move as little as possible in the wombiness of it: they'd eventually installed one at home.

Jerry was somewhat suspicious of passion-hot. He had needed a lot of reassuring when she broke off with Tim Casey shortly after she and Jerry had begun dating. "No," she had said, "if you hadn't come along, it's possible that in time I could have felt something more than affection for him, but when you arrived there wasn't a chance. It never got more than lukewarm, and when I stopped seeing him altogether I never looked back – never had so much as two minutes' conversation with him ever again. No real sentiment."

This was true, but it wasn't the whole truth about her even though it was pretty much everything about her and Tim. Eileen had always loved to flirt, and enjoyed catching the attention of boys, and later of men, even those she didn't care very much about. She liked raising the temperature a little, turning politeness into something with a tease of feeling in it. Now and again there would be someone she felt more strongly for. There were two of them during her last year in high school, then they both got more involved

than she did and one was halfway to broken-hearted when she broke it off because he was getting too serious and she wanted to be freer than he would have her be. And then two in her two years at university. Bob Callahan was the nearest she'd come to falling in love at that point, but after her first year he had gone off to law school and within a few months they had both cooled down what had never been more than pleasantly warm, and they both stopped writing. Jerry knew about him; not the whole story, but enough to tell him the basic truth of it. The other was even briefer. She had met Eddie Reilly at a party after she had started going with Jerry but before it had become really steady. She and Eddie had dated two or three times, and she was warming up to him in a promising way – and it seemed clear that he was taking to her too. But then they had gone out with two other couples, and Eileen was annoyed by his flirting with one of the other young women and turned him down after that, three or four times, before he left her alone. She had settled into regular dating with Jerry by then; Eddie took a job in Boston after he graduated the following spring and hadn't been heard from since. She never mentioned him to Jerry, partly because her vanity was a bit ruffled by Eddie's rude flirtation and partly because Jerry wouldn't have taken kindly to her having been interested in Eddie after she had already started up with Jerry.

She had cooled down her own flirtatious ways after that. Her sister had scolded her once, early in her engagement to Jerry, about how uncomfortable it obviously made him to see her having eyes for other men, even if eyes was all it was. To the best of her remembering, she had never been scoldable about that again. The worst she had ever done was to send Eddie Reilly a coy postcard, unsigned, when she and Jerry had made a trip to Ireland two years after their marriage – a last exorcism of her wounded pride, or something like that, and it seemed to work, for she hardly ever even thought about him again, and when she did it was without either resentment or the least trace of that old what-might-have-been wistfulness that still crept into her rememberings of Bob Callahan (though she always brushed it off as soon as it appeared, and felt none the worse for its having been there).

There were bigger tests after that, of course, but she had passed them all. Their neighbour Tom Donovan had taken quite a fancy to her when they lived on Orchard Park, and had dropped in for coffee a couple of times, bearing muffins, one week when Jerry was on a business trip. She hadn't mentioned that to Jerry either, but Jerry had watched how he looked at her at a party a couple of months later and warned her that he was up to no good and had a little reputation as a womanizer. A few months later, Tom had come by on her birthday with a little book of Irish

songs, but she had declined to accept it – Jerry would know, she had said, that it wasn't something she'd buy for herself, and it would be too awkward. He wasn't quite so forward after that, but seemed to stay interested until they moved to a bigger house at the other end of town. Then a few years later there was a man she'd met at the library in the travel section. Eileen was going to accompany Jerry to a meeting in Madrid, and Dave Dixon had spent the better part of a year there: he took her to lunch and talked about Spain though he looked at her about something very different. She had given him her phone number before she realized it was a mistake, and had talked with him once briefly after that. Jerry had told her firmly that they could figure out what to do in Madrid all by themselves. Eileen had apologized, assuring him truthfully that she had just been trying to find out something fun for them to do that everyone else wouldn't be doing. Then there was Jim Callero, her tennis instructor, who made a couple of moves but that was both corny and uncomfortable, and she decided not to pursue tennis any further, or to be pursued.

NOTHING HAD troubled her waters since then. She had learned how to be open and friendly without seeming to be inviting, and was always the one who put the party together when she and Jerry went travelling, either on his business trips or alone for holidays. Jerry never had cause to be concerned about her again, and merely basked in her continuing attractiveness and social warmth, untroubled. The temperature stayed very pleasantly hot, in Jerry's terms, between them. And there were no secrets if you don't count Patty.

Patty had written again four years before: the same displaced E's on the envelope and on the enclosed note, which read "in the quiet corners of the day, I think of you." The postmark was Los Angeles, and the text had a slightly haunting familiarity to it, but she couldn't track it down in her anthology. She could feel a blush starting each time she reread the note, and a definitely sentimental curiosity.

The following year was a bit different. The same typewriting identified the envelope immediately – the postmark this time was Venice but the envelope contained only a photocopied sheet with a blown-up quotation in handwriting. She didn't recognize the hand, but caught the quotation right away. It was W.B. Yeats again, the closing lines of "The Fairy Child," gracefully written out in a sort of italic script. She put it in her writing-desk after admiring it for a while, tucking it safely in a drawer under some paid bills and receipts, along with the other Patty-pieces. Over the next several weeks, she pulled it out again from time to time, savouring both the poem and the calligraphy and wondering what this was all about. Sometimes wondering what *she* was about.

It wasn't until sometime in June that it suddenly struck

her, as she was perusing it once again: the hand that penned that quotation was her own! It was a fancy script that she had experimented with for a while over twenty years before, when she had undertaken to write thank-yous for wedding gifts, and then had abandoned not long after – abandoned so thoroughly that it had taken at least a dozen readings before she twigged. When she did, she could feel the blush even in her ears.

She had to talk about this with someone. But who? Certainly not Jerry. Nor her sister, who would not approve in the least of her having something this romantic going on even anonymously and only once a year. Not her daughter. Not ... not *anyone*, when it came right down to practical reality. She'd have to keep it to herself, even if the mystery was never resolved. It was rather nice, in fact, to have it unresolved: there was a sort of glow about it that could vanish if it turned out to be nothing but somebody's teasing prank.

Then two years ago had come, again promptly on St. Patrick's Day, the same typewritten envelope (postmarked New York) with an even simpler, more enigmatic, and unsettling note: "I'll be in touch." The E was raised slightly out of line. This time she wasn't quite sure what it was she was feeling.

Last year, she had been fairly breathless on the crucial morning. She was on the mail almost as soon as it hit the carpet – but there was nothing that could possibly have come from Patty. Her sister's usual card, a letter from an old schoolmate, a couple of bills, but nothing more mysterious than a wedding invitation from her nephew, which she had been expecting for a week. It was apparently game over, a pleasant whimsy that Patty had now outgrown. She missed it. She was disappointed. She chided herself for caring, but there it was. St. Patrick's Day was back to being St. Patrick's Day, period.

SO TODAY, the continuing silence confirmed by what the postman had *not* brought, she went about tidying up the kitchen and hummed "Eileen Aroon," trying to think exclusively of her mother but occasionally letting her attention wander back to that bookmark, now seven years old and resting peacefully in the drawer of her writing-desk, and the note that had come with the shamrock a year later with a verse from the same song. She finished the kitchen and went to the drawer, thumbing slowly through the Patty collection. It had been great fun, after all. It would have been nice to know who was behind it, but some mysteries simply remain mysterious; and just accepting that might, in its own way, be more fun than the frustration of having to wonder. Most people have pleasant little memory-keepers like that – a quick moment of elation at hearing a sweet voice in an unknown language as you pass along the

street, a special meeting of eyes in a strange city, just for a second, with a stranger you know you'll never see again.

The phone rang. It was her sister. They exchanged season's greetings and update-chat, and Eileen then returned to her desk and put her little souvenirs away. Then she sat in her favourite chair with a cup of tea, and thought about a random scrapbook of memories. How she had been as a girl, learning to be charming; her crush on Bob Callahan and the sentiment – no, more likely sentimentalism – of their parting; deciding to be with Jerry forever; a kaleidoscope of snapshots of their life together with all the early settling-in and the later wonderful trips and their delightful daughter, their ...

The phone rang again. The dentist's office, reminder of tomorrow's appointment. *See you then.*

Back to her tea and her reveries: the trips with Jerry, then trips with Jerry and Erin once Erin was old enough for such adventures – especially the one to Mexico City year before last, when Erin had played such a trick on her with the plastic skeleton in the bathroom during the Feast of the Dead, the little minx. It would be just like *her* to have put on this annual St. Patrick's Day spoof, she thought, smiling, just her style. For a moment she wondered if ... but no, she had been too young when it started, seven years back, and getting the pieces mailed from all over would be too hard, and she wouldn't have quit early, not Erin - what *would* be like her is having her dutiful weekly letter-from-school arrive, as it did this morning, at the same time as another Patty-piece, just to tease even better in a joke that Erin alone could appreciate.

But Jerry!

Why hadn't she thought of it before? He had business-friends all over the place, and the postmarks would be no problem. *He could easily manage the whole thing. The bookmark, the postcard, the cryptic notes, quotations from what he knows is my favourite stuff – no problem. He could have saved a poem I copied out way back then, waiting to do something with it to surprise me. Do I have anything salted away that he wrote on that old Underwood portable he used to have? Is the typewriter itself still around, maybe in the attic?*

She put down the rest of her tea and rose, just as the phone rang.

"Hi, Sweetie! Erin go braw, or whatever you say, if you don't mind my using our daughter's name in vain."

"Oh, my secret lover!" Eileen gushed.

"It's hardly a secret any more," said Jerry. "Want to break Swedish ethnic tradition with dinner at O'Donnell's pub?"

Eileen wasn't quite sure whether this was an admission or a dodge, and decided to let him play it out as he would. "Sure!" she said. "What time?"

"I'll be out of a meeting around six," he said. "A little finishing-up for maybe half an hour. Say, seven prompt?"

"I'll be there, full of Blarney."

"That goes without saying," said Jerry. "I'll have you full of Guinness in no time. Until then ..."

"I love you, Jerry," she bubbled.

"Good! More about that later. Bye."

Some mysteries, she decided, are better resolved. That doesn't take any of the fun out of it. What's he going to have up his sleeve now?

She remembered the typewriter, and was halfway up the stairs when the phone rang again.

"Is this Eileen?" asked the voice.

"Yes, it is," she said brightly. "And you are ...?"

"Not exactly Christmas Past, but a voice from pretty long ago. An old friend, calling to invite you to lunch."

"Who, then?"

"Please let me make it a surprise," he said. "Just as a favour. What's your favourite restaurant?"

"Wait, wait," said Eileen. "I need better credentials."

"You'll have them at lunchtime, I promise," he said. "I know this is a little impudent, but I have kind and good intentions, and a gift. Just for a lark. I'm sorry about the secrecy, but you'll understand once we get together. I'm totally safe, and we'll have some things to reminisce about for an hour or two. Please. Just name the place and time."

"I don't think so," she said. "I have a few things to do and a dinner engagement later. It's St. Patrick's Day, you know."

"Oh, is it?" said the voice. "Then we can celebrate St. Patrick's Day into the bargain. Please say yes. You won't regret it, and you'll probably have a good time even if you're in an orange mood. Please."

A little mystery that gets resolved quickly with lunch and a present, she thought. A bit irregular, but one can be a little irregular on St. Patrick's Day. Besides, Jerry had put her in a very green mood.

"I'm not sure ..."

"Please." The voice was more earnest now. "I haven't seen you for years, and it will be a nice get-together. Just say where and when."

He sounds pleasant enough, she thought. It could be fun.

"Okay," she said after a pause. "One o'clock at Derry's restaurant. Do you know where that is?"

"I'm from out of town, but I'm sure I can find it. Lovely. Thanks. I'll be wearing a brown tweed jacket and a green carnation. And if that's not distinctive enough, I have lots of grey hair – and I'll be carrying a conspicuous small package."

"I'll be in ..."

He cut her off. "I'm sure I'll recognize you. Thanks very much. This means a lot to me. Bye for now."

"Goodbye."

Well, she thought, best postpone the typewriter search until between Derry's and O'Donnell's.

She got herself ready, drove downtown, and entered Derry's almost exactly at one. A distinguished-looking white-haired man in a tweed jacket rose from the nearby lounge and approached her.

"Eileen!" he said, holding out his hand and pressing hers firmly. "Do you recognize me?"

"I'm sorry, but not quite," she said, looking his face over intently.

"Eddie Reilly," he said. "I came to apologize. Let's sit down; I have a table over there by the window."

The headwaiter guided them over, seated them, and took their order for drinks. Eileen ordered a Smithwick, and Eddie said he'd have the same. The headwaiter bowed away, leaving two menus.

"So, Eddy Reilly," she said, looking him over again. "It's been many moons. And to what do I owe this sumptuous form of apology?"

"Something that's bothered me for many years," he said. "I was not on my best behaviour the last time I took you out, and I want to make up for it."

"What did you do?" she asked, smiling. "Dance on the table and sing bawdy songs?"

"Worse," he said, suddenly sounding as if he felt slightly awkward. "I flirted. With you somewhat, of course, but I don't apologize for that. It was with one of the other women – I actually don't remember her name. We were three couples, and she and her date were friends of yours. Oh, it wasn't gross or anything, but it was definitely rude and thoughtless to escort such a dignified and beautiful woman and pay too much attention to chatting up her friend. I was really much more interested in attending to you, and she was just a sort of coverup for a fit of shyness that had hit me, but that's no excuse. Very sorry."

"Well," said Eileen, "I actually do remember. Both you and the occasion. And I admit that I was rather miffed."

"Yes, that showed," admitted Eddie, "but by the time I realized, the damage was done. I was very embarrassed. I tried to apologize at the time, and again when I phoned the next day, but I guess I was pretty clumsy at it. I decided I'd blown it with you, and regretted that much more than the social gaffe. But there it was, and that was that."

"Water under the bridge – or should I say over the damn?" said Eileen wryly. Their drinks arrived, and she lifted hers: "To bygones."

He returned the toast. The waiter asked politely if they were ready to order.

"Not just yet, thanks," said Eddie. "We'll give you a nod when it's time." The waiter retired

“And where have you been in the meantime?” asked Eileen.

“Oh, all over. A good job for a restless bachelor – lots of travel, and a fair amount of money. It hasn’t brought me back here until now, so I wanted to be sure to take advantage of the occasion. I almost made it exactly a year ago, but that deal got called off at the last minute. Otherwise it’s been good to me, but it’s not really interesting enough to dwell on. I picked up something for you by way of celebrating and reconciling.”

Eddie reached down and picked up the package. “I brought you this as thank-you for old times, and as an apologetic peace-offering. Hope you’ll like it.”

He handed it to her, and she slowly unwrapped it. It was a book, she could tell by the feel, and when the last of the wrapper was off, she held the collected poems of W. B. Yeats.

“My very favourite poet,” she said, with a lovely smile. “And I’ve never owned the whole thing, just pieces in an anthology. I’ve taken it out of the library a couple of times, but never got around to buying it. Thanks so much.”

“See if you can find your favourite poem,” said Eddie gently.

Eileen turned the edge up and pulled gently at the covers. The book fell open at a page where there was a bookmark, a page that began “The Fairy Child.”

The bookmark fell out on the table – but it was not really a bookmark, actually a postcard, with a picture of a swan. She turned it over. There, in her old semi-elegant italic script, were copied the final lines of the same poem: this was the original of the photocopy enlargement of three years ago. She looked up.

“Patty,” she said.

“Pardon?” said Eddie, looking intensely at her eyes

“It was you. St. Patrick’s Day. For six years, every St. Patrick’s Day. From all over the place, a bookmark, little mysterious notes, a postcard just like this except without this poem. It was you. I never guessed.”

Eddie reached out and briefly touched her hand, then withdrew his.

“I guessed, and even hoped, but I was never sure until now.”

“Guessed what?” She reached for her napkin.

“That it was you who sent me that card. Unsigned, and not in a hand I’d known. I’ve wondered for twenty years if it had really been you.”

“And how did you figure it out? How did you know to call me today?”

“I didn’t know when I called you today,” said Eddie quietly. “I called you to find out at last. I didn’t know until you turned that card over, and I saw your eyes grow tears.”

Some mysteries, she thought, as she dabbed her eyes, become even more mysterious when unlocked. And suddenly she wasn’t so sure about distinguishing sentiment from sentimentalism, or how much she cared to do so. Maybe Jerry could remind her more about that tonight, if not at O’Donnell’s, perhaps later in the calm strong coziness of the *ofuro*. Or is that just another sentimentality?

Eddie’s head was thoughtfully turned as she put down her napkin and shook her red hair down over her reddening ears. He was glancing at the menu when she finally looked up.

“Anything you’d especially recommend?” he asked softly. She couldn’t think of an answer.

lobster complex

lying on the brown leather couch
i recount my wet dream
about an exploding digital clock
amidst cacti

i complain about corporate libidos
god and my fear of lobster
at the crack of their claws
my testicles shrivel

– Suzanne Fortin

Cicada at her little feet

She asked about cicadas.
She remembered from last year,
when in September the noise was loud,
but in October after bedtime, before she fell asleep, she'd
listen out the window only to rustling leaves and heard not
one shrill cicada note.
She asked about the cicada on the sidewalk almost grovelling
at her feet in yet another October.
She asked if it was going to sleep or die.
Die, I said, utterly honest.
She asked if it was lonely
with no one to sing to, or no songs to be heard.
"Probably not," I said.
Then she asked if each cicada had its own song, like the
seals she learned about in school, where each mother knew her
own pup's call, or were the cicadas' songs all the same so
no one song mattered,
and only the big noise was important.
I said, "Probably the big noise,
now and every summer."
"All the same song," she said,
"like the school chorus where all the singers wear
uniforms." I saw a meanness grow in her eyes.
She stamped her foot,
and I heard the shell crack.

– *Richard Fein*

Autumn mobile

The hum of traffic in the distance, how I wish it wasn't there, incessant sound of autos,
O, Autumnal Equinox,
why don't machines obey the seasons,
call in sick, or oversleep once in awhile, feet outstretched upon an ottoman
empire of inhuman – ho-hum – desire.

– *John G. Gregory, Jr.*

The eater cannot restrain himself. He would like to eat his back, his beefy buttocks if he could. He knows they're fat-swirled like a rib eye. He eats a red Volkswagen at the traffic light. He eats a towing rig. He eats a loaf at a time with mayonnaise. Starting at the big toe toenail he ate his teenage son up to his silly chartreuse hair. He would eat his mother if she weren't rancid. (He knows because eating her his father died.) He uses the pages of books for napkins. He eats his own used toilet paper. See the eater loitering before the video store. Should he enter he will give himself a gut ache. He eats self pity like a Whitman's Sampler on Valentine's Day. (Nougats are his favourite.) Notice his left hand ring finger, eaten to a stub, that luscious cylinder: three hoops dolphins jumped through. He ate their tongues. When he's enraged – dirty psychopath – he blows out his lungs till his balls twitter, then prodigiously sucks in lamps, chairs, umbrellas, plants, yo-yos, carved amulets and carpet tacks in one vacuuming siren-breath like a hurricane. When he's pleased he nibbles things like a rat. God gave him three independent processing plants (esophagi and duodenum plunged into stomachs) for animal, mineral, and vegetable each. Three fat sacks. He eats bolts like gum drops. But his favorite snack is love. Here, high in the corners of its whole crab back he gouges onto a butter knife its lumpy bitter orange fat and scarfs it down, then eats the knife.

After binging on Dreyer's butter pecan in a period of weight gain I went upstairs and almost forced myself to throw up. I gazed into the toilet like Narcissus. I imagined slamming two fingers down my throat till a Vesuvius roared. I felt the weeping of my stomach, and my accusatory belt. I wanted to kill the monster in me, the cowardice, the unceasing executloner. Downstairs I heard the John Wayne movie: the charging bugles, the beating of horse hooves, the swirling commotion of rifle fire and expiration, all muted by a series of walls and corners, and in my soft cube, wondered. I knew that finally I was tortured not enough to perforate the tissue of my gut, that I was still a bit of an hibiscus, that I would rejoin unpunctured my partner in the film. This brief lavatory interlude was brought to you by Glamour Magazine, self hatred, pitiful parenting, powerlessness, and a rare form of male bulimia.

– Gordon E. Massman

Dun Aengus

Standing by the great fort of Dun Aengus
 Atlantic gales whip, snap and dissemble time.
 Modernity is stripped away.
 No speed-boats or airplanes back to the mainland:
 The world is a small island!
 Gnarled neighbours who seek blood
 Seals, whales, dolphins, gulls
 Legendary swallow holes.
 The infinite Atlantic
 Yearning to the sky.
 Vicious matings in secret rock-pools
 Shrouded thoughts of insane chieftains
 Chiseled in limestone,
 Smoothed by apocalyptic winds
 Engraving their message eternally.
 With primal urgency the Sun god
 Speaks the ancient tongue
 And an old man on a tractor makes an unknown recollection,
 As if he's just been born.

– Gerry McLoughlin

David

spurts up the path,
bookbag dragging
behind. Can't be bothered
by hi how you doing
but cuts right to the heart
of things: Any mail
for me? Yes, the Pope
wrote, asked you
to dinner but I said
you had homework.

When he leaves I count
time, until five, when I can pull
the afternoon into my lungs
and walk down the drive
to the box that breaks
the cloister of my solitude.

I sort through bills looking
for anything of you
but find only junk
mail, second class
love letters with errors
in the spelling
of my name.

I spread them
on the table like dinner
napkins for favourite guests,
read each impassioned
circular addressed
to occupant, and duck
back below the surface
to the middle of alone.

The ensemble

We got married in May
of '58 to the strains
of the Georgia
National Guard performing
maneuvers on the courthouse
steps. That's the way it was
back then, whenever black
riffs tried to marry
white keys, the jazz
forbidden by God

and the Governor himself.
Thirty-five years is a hell
of a long time to have
to sing to each other
alone, straining and pulling
against a world tone
deaf to everything
but hue. But all
that time we held
our ground, started

a family, expanded
the band, played
melodies heard by folks
who finally figured
out how to hum
the tune. Only
now, as our blacks
and whites have shifted
to greys, are we forced
to walk slower,

take more time
between measures.
The children, those Junior
players, insist on separate
songs, a repertoire
of only the blackest
tunes, moving away
from their white mother
keys, content to live
on the sharps alone.

– Richard Luftig

At the motel

(Red Roof Motel – just west of Detroit)

Four in the morning the door next to mine slams tight, the room having the wind knocked out of it.

Then an old car nearly starts,
and after three tries finally turns over, drives over the gravel parking-lot
until the engine's noise is lost
to the dripping faucet.
My room is hot and dark,
I've kicked all the covers to the floor save one white sheet
and I sit up, walk to the window.

The man who drove away
is a house-painter with a curled grey
mustache. Yesterday, when I arrived
he was sitting on the ledge of his open door drinking from a bottle of beer.
He said he hoped the door wouldn't wake me when he left at four.

I said it didn't matter
and now, looking up at the full white moon, it doesn't.

One more

(Midmorning Sunday, same motel)

We're all alone.

A woman from a second floor room
walks by my open door. Her hair
is the colour of exposed brick.
She slips her smooth suitcase into the back seat of her car and drives away.

A small boy and his father move slowly
along the sidewalk. The boy stops to watch a sparrow in the grass.
His father watches the sky,
moves his hands slowly across his arms.
They don't say a word.

The tired wheels of a laundry-cart
on concrete.

Wind through a lone evergreen:

I'm alive. I'm alive.

– *suzanne hancock*

Conjunction junction

TIM CONLEY on the
parasitical muse

the tapeworm foundry

DARREN WERSHLER-HENRY

Anansi

unpaginated, \$14.95

DARREN Wershler-Henry has plenty of ideas for poems and similar adventures, but ultimately too many for him to bother proceeding with their complete enactments. The subtitle “andor the dangerous prevalence of imagination” serves as a caveat to those who approach *the tapeworm foundry*, though perhaps not a full one. To it might be added, for example, “The Anxiety of Inspiration” and “Abandon all closure ye who enter here.”

Reviewing a book like *the tapeworm foundry* is an unusually frustrating task, not least because a reviewer can’t help making note of that very difficulty within the review. (Insert sound of gnashing teeth.) As in many works written since Gertrude Stein – and this name is not randomly chosen here – the language seems ready-made for parody and one could, I suppose, produce a rambling list of possible surreal (or ‘pataphysical, or ”pataphysical if you prefer) techniques for assessing this book, or any book, or books which have not been written. Fair enough. Or maybe not. Perhaps criticism has or is a different subterfuge than poetry. Perhaps I should get back to *the tapeworm foundry*, that mechanical bull – or that

metaphor of a mechanical bull of a metaphor – which seeks to buck me.

Quotation may tighten my grip on the reins, since I can at least to some extent confidently circumscribe the context – though incidentally it is interesting to note how one does not feel one is “quoting” this work so much as “sampling” from it, just as the poem itself seems a rhythmic collage of samples, mnemotechnic bytes – but even a short quotation demonstrates the slipperiness of the text:

impregnate key words with lsd and
dmso andor whip it andor whip it good
andor clog up subway cars during rush
hour with cumbersome objects such as
bass cellos or packing crates or long
poles or maybe bearing placards bear-
ing fragments from your poems like
advertisements andor scrawl graffiti all
over someone elses liberal utopia andor
encode it in a helix of dna andor want
to destroy passersby andor taperecord
your readings and then mail them to
the address where you are supposed to
be performing so that you can stay
home and watch reruns of the simpsons
and leafs games but if anyone com-
plains plead agoraphobia

A reviewer’s offering an excerpt like this often implies a gesture of “you get the idea.” In this case, the excerpt is representative of the whole – the repeated “andor” conjunction junction, the slings and arrows of pop culture references, the fixation on performance – but the whole is only parts or less than parts, an inversion of William Carlos Williams’ dictum, “no ideas but in things.” (A quibble about the above: DNA manifests as a *double-helix*.)

Fun for the whole verb family. And yet.

There’s something ungenerous, I think, in locating one’s muse within, as the phrase “tapeworm foundry” may suggest: this feeding off some digestive system is the theory of inside to what Robin Blaser has called “the

practice of outside.” Parasitism as a poetic statement is, certainly, disarming in its frankness, but it might be a little like the lover who announces before kneeling to the nuptials, “I think you should know that I’m incapable of having a relationship” – it seems like a defensive gesture, a preparation for a loophole through which to later slip. It will sound like a rather conservative complaint, I know, but *the tapeworm foundry* effectively constitutes a rejection of commitment. Its “andor” propositions are not cumulative – unlike, say, the interlocking epigrams Oscar Wilde uses to introduce *Dorian Gray*, or even the series of maddening questions that make up Ron Silliman’s “Sunset Debris” – but are brief, often witty but never lasting flirtations with the possible. Wershler-Henry tosses up into the air a lot of literary quotations, academic keywords, and other signifiers of cultural capital like confetti, but I’m not sure there’s any occasion or celebration other than the joy of throwing the stuff. And it was this delight in the rituals of gesture, removed from the passions they maybe only allegedly salute, that began to bother me in the course of my first jaunt through the foundry.

andor write a book of portmanteaus about an embalmed irishman in which the last sentence ending in midphrase so that the book completes a cycle with itself restarting with word riverrun past eve and adams but leaving in their wake all of the fragments of a language yet to be combined like so much flotsam and
And then I began again, for the book begins again at “jetsam,” and I thought again. Maybe, just maybe, the structural subroutine (borrowed, with a merry embalmer’s nod, from *Finnegans Wake*) that keeps the words in perpetual motion and, at least theoretically, the reader in locked participation, itself represents a kind of commitment on the part of the poem – if

only to itself. Darren Wershler-Henry's autonomous notebook is chastely but devotedly in love with possibilities. And I may be jealous. ●

Half lifelike

L. ERIN VOLLICK on “a mishmash of themes and bodies”

Half Known Lives

JOAN GIVNER

New Star Press

242 pages, \$20.00

NEW STAR Press describes this recent release as a *femme fatale* version of bio-tech fantasy: “Would an ardent right-to-lifer change his tune if he found out he was pregnant?” Attempting to explain *Half Known Lives* to friends, however, I could only repeat, “It’s not what you think.” Hailed as a dystopic vision of “skewering sacred beef, feminist and reactionary alike,” *Half Known Lives* fails to live up to its hype. Author Givner certainly attempts to throw into the novel some rather thread-worn feminist politics – indeed, the event described on the back cover does occur within the pages of *Half Known Lives* – but I repeat: “It’s not what you think.”

Narratively, the novel challenges all attempts at genre classification. It is not a clear socio-political analysis, or even satire, despite delving into the right-to-life arguments, lesbianism, and women in the academy. These issues are never really examined at length within the novel, and any discussion of them is rather shallow and unoriginal. But neither does the novel serve as an investigation into the relationships of women. It is primarily

narrated by university professor Lucy Heathcote in an unnamed Canadian prairie town; the supporting cast of Julia, Simone, Monica, and Lena are constructed more as half-known shadows than characters; they seem to die as easily as they once breathed.

At the start, the narrator relates, “‘Lucy, you’re too fond of your own voice,’ they used to say,” and this is certainly true. Towards the end of the book the reader learns that this narrator, central to the understanding of all events and characters, is far more unreliable than anyone could predict. To the others Lucy is often the object of a certain derision: “She isn’t a real person she’s so soaked in all those books she’s become a character in one of them. But which one? She has no voice of her own.” Hers is a character who has lost happiness in the form of a family and, having thrown herself into the male-dominated institutions of higher learning, finds that it is no substitute for what she has given up. But each of the characters in *Half Known Lives* is the object of some sort of derision or other. Lena is the bullish, angry one. Simone is the secretive, backstabbing woman. Julia is perceived as the slut, the one who gives in too easily to men. And Monica, the jaded, abandoned wife, is drawn as the self-destructive one. Always in discrepancy – and I’m not sure I disapprove of this tactic – are the outer and inner worlds of the characters. The way they view themselves is obviously much different than the way they view each other.

Nonetheless, the real problem with *Half Known Lives* is not its characters but its narrative. Exceedingly quick time ellipses and narrative shifts aside, Givner’s tale doesn’t seem to be comfortable with any of the genres it takes up – or perhaps it takes on too many. By the end of Givner’s narrative the reader is almost forced to reconsider the central symbolism of Mary

Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and not just because the novel becomes a mishmash of themes and bodies. None of the characters appear to find any real happiness in their lives; the experiment from which the child is born serves mainly as a metaphor for the women’s various aborted desires in life. The crisis of the kidnapped, impregnated male is constructed as an almost incidental affair. Narratively, this central event occurs well past the beginning of the novel, and ends shortly thereafter. Moreover, there seem to be no ramifications for the women’s actions, and Max Hoffman, the victim, is always kept at a distance and is quickly stripped of his importance in the narrative.

The dissemination of information and details in the book, like depth of character, occurs in a circuitous manner. Found diary entries after Monica’s death, for instance, reveal the fascinating self-awareness of a rather numbly drawn character:

I am the invisible one that no one sees. I glide in and out of rooms as I wish and no one notices. I lie down and close my eyes and hear everything. Once Lucy sat down at the table and looked at me, looked right into my eyes and said Oh Monica what are we going to do? I thought she was seeing me but I was still invisible and she was talking to herself. When did I become invisible? It was long before Suzy went away, long before I married Sam.

The “Suzy” mentioned in this passage is Monica’s daughter. Frustratingly, a hundred pages later the reader is given to realize that this daughter has been missing for quite some time. The title of the novel is fitting in this regard, in that the characters are only partially realized individuals until their deaths. That this could be an actual strategy of the author is slightly shocking. The disorientation and distance experienced while reading between the lines keeps one too far removed from the

characters to develop any sympathy.

Despite the patchwork structure, however, the prose is excellent – Givner has a gift for the style and voice of her characters. It's possible that Givner's good prose is responsible for infusing the narrator with more self-reflection than the narrative:

I hadn't done a single thing to make the world a safer place for Jinny. I might even have pushed her into danger, into death. I armed the students with information and ideas that only made them reckless and vulnerable. I sent them out to expose themselves, like those old generals of the First World War who stay behind the lines but ordered the young men into the trenches as cannon fodder. I was one of the General Haigs of the feminist movement ...

The quick narrative shifts of the last half of the novel, though sometimes jarring, are well-wrought, if not well-understood. Shifting between Monica's journal entries, Lucy, and the child of the experiment, the characters stand as distinct individuals, with their own nuances of voice and personality.

I could not help thinking of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* by the book's conclusion. Hagar is a suitable parallel to Lucy, certainly in terms of the cold, self-inflicted misery of the two women. But there is another reason: by the end of Laurence's novel, Hagar realizes that life was about joy, something she had never allowed herself to fully experience. The narrator of *Half Known Lives*, and indeed most if not all of its characters, seem doomed to repeat Hagar's miserable quest. There is no relief. The novel ends without any self-awareness, no reward for the narrator herself. Instead, Givner attempts to unravel all of the women's secrets slowly, arriving at the conclusion – not for Lucy, but for the reader – that they needed to embrace joy and freedom. The characters, and

especially the narrator, need to know themselves. That they were seen as incapable (because I'm still not certain whether it's the case or whether it's just Lucy who feels this way) of finding and holding on to happiness is a darkness that Givner is warning the reader to never, ever repeat. ●

Surviving the data

TIM CONLEY on the sublime boxed in four walls

Plowing the Dark

RICHARD POWERS

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

415 pages, \$39.95

IT'S A TRICKY business to write about Virtual Reality (hereafter VR) and few writers manage to do so without seeming irritatingly gimmicky or, perhaps worse, self-enthralled. The trouble is understandable, not because of a fumbling necessity for technological savvy or even associated jargon but due to the nature of VR as an enterprise. That is, in VR fiction and drama (perhaps even prose in general) find a potentially devastating competitor in the profession of restructuring the world with metaphor. "No one could say why," writes Richard Powers, "after thirty years of research in obscure labs across the Northern hemisphere, VR overnight became 1990's cover girl." This line from *Plowing the Dark*, Powers's most recent book, makes plain that the only confusing thing about the widespread fascination with the new concept of programmable worlds is the timing. Nevertheless, the meaning of this fascination is what

drives the plough in this novel.

Experience with the previous work of Richard Powers – idea-loaded novels like *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985) and *Gain* (1998) – readily lends readers a dependable expectation when faced with a new novel; an expectation not only of intelligence but of intelligent analysis of intelligence itself. The shining example I produce here is *Galatea 2.2* (1995), an amazing synthesis of high phenomenological narrative (in the attempt to produce and test an artificial intelligence, characters ponder the distinctions of human consciousness), literary concerns (the test for the computer is based on an understanding of "major" literary works – in other words, Shakespeare and company – prompting questions of their meaning and value), and, somehow most implausibly, a story of a broken heart. "Richard Powers" is the name of the narrator drawn into the creation of Helen, a cybernetic entity upon whom he baldly projects more of his feelings than he would like. Both very smart and startlingly humane, this novel is a wonder, worth comparison with the more virtuoso feats of metafictional self-portraiture of Philip Roth.

Although it may sound pompous, humanity, the dubious essence of ourselves, is Powers's favourite subject, and he traces its shadows again in *Plowing the Dark*, though, I think, less rewardingly than in *Galatea 2.2*. The novel features two parallel stories. In one, Adie Klarpol is a commercial artist who at one time may have believed in some power, some humanistic value, in the painting for which she began to enjoy brief celebrity among the gallery-going pundits. She receives an unexpected call from Stevie Spiegel, an old schoolmate who, though he has given up trying to be the reincarnation of William Butler Yeats, has not himself abandoned his hopes for redemption in

art. He convinces her to bring her abilities to the Cavern, a large-scale VR experiment maintained by a somewhat predictably motley group of thinkers and programmers. Conspicuously like the novelist “Richard” at the Center for the Study of Advanced Sciences, Adie assumes the role of the Artist among Scientists, picking up the ideas, lingo, and history of each of her fellow oddballs-cum-visionaries as she goes along. The sublime is boxed in four walls:

Near and far are as nothing. Scale is no issue. The Economics Room can zoom from the neighborhood fruit stand all the way up through the G7 annual deficits. Its simulation means to render mystery visible. To turn the market’s enigmatic piano rolls into freewheeling rags.

To borrow and tweak a phrase, it seems fair to describe (the novelist, not the character) Powers’ own project as one of making mystery legible. However, contemplation of the ethical costs such a project incurs is what splits the novel.

Alongside the story of the Cavern unfolds another, one told with a surprisingly effective use of the second person narrator. “You” are both the reader and Taimur Martin, an American teaching English in Beirut by way of escaping from a collapsed romance back home. “You” are, literally then, a stranger in a strange land, a desperate situation escalated by Martin’s being taken as a hostage by an unknown group of Islamic extremists. The story of Taimur Martin is one of dread, hurt, and deprivation, and it offers a counterpoint to the exploratory adventures of the computer programmers. Where Adie’s story is of aesthetics freely seeking to fill up the wide Cavern of simulation, Taimur is forced to resist the closing walls of his confinement by filling the space with memories and imaginings. *Plowing the Dark* is the story of these two rooms and both the promise and the

threat they hold to those who seek to inhabit and arrange their spaces. “In imagination’s room,” Powers writes, “all things work out.”

Altogether too neat a phrase, I think, but there is a contentedness in form that usurps the struggle with the moral questions otherwise unflinchingly posed to the imagination. The room or Cavern or (as Maurice Blanchot called it) the space of literature is recognized as a privilege but held on no other critical charges. There is, I should like to think, some irony behind this description of the Cavern (or is it the maddening cell of Taimur Martin?):

This is the soul’s balanced window box, the domain of finished poems.

This is the heaven of last imagination. The paradise of detachment. The room of no consequence in the least. Of making no difference in the whole known world.

Auden’s well-known line “Poetry makes nothing happen” from his eulogy for Yeats echoes here (Powers uses it as an epigraph). Does what goes on in the room really make “no difference”? Powers is uncertain about this, and though a finely drawn moral is the last thing I would ask of him or any writer, his novel, an artistic form with an established tradition, surely comes with its own ethical baggage. It is for its demurring nods to literary conventions that *Plowing the Dark* can be criticized for its own shaky position on this question. Does *Plowing the Dark* make anything happen?

Near the novel’s end Adie and Stevie watch the television broadcasts of Operation Desert Storm and discuss the connections between the digitalized abstract bursts of distant carnage and the work they are doing in the Cavern:

The military? The Air Force invented virtual reality half a century ago. Mission trainers, flight simulators. The Army made the first computer, back when the game was still about beating the Nazis.

They’ve been hip-deep into VR from the beginning. ARPA built the Net. They ordered the first microprocessor. You sow the Whirlwind, you reap SAGE. He went on, numbly dull. On automatic pilot. If you want to know the truth, we’re stealing their code. The whole runaway century, living off military spin-offs.

She got out from under the covers and shut off the signal. *I’m sorry. I can’t watch anymore.*

These “spin-offs” are what poetry makes happen. Unfortunately, Powers himself goes on “automatic pilot” at times. As some of the passages I’ve quoted above demonstrate, a tendency to recast and rephrase each expression, to supplement with more and more metaphor, is not checked nearly enough. Tics of style aside, the problem of art’s culpability in atrocity is dealt with cleanly in the “virtual” world of these characters: to spoil the plot – you may want to stop reading here – Adie breaks away from the project, Taimur’s captivity concurrently ends, and only slightly muted notes of hope are played.

In rough summary, this book is very good but could have taken more risks than it does (less syntactic elaboration, for one, might be in order). Powers surveys the deluge of information that overruns us and counsels, “Data survive all hope of learning. But hope must learn to survive the data.” The means and to some extent even the wherefore of such survival aren’t so clearly expressed in *Plowing the Dark* – though they are to be found in another memorial poem Auden wrote in the same year as the one for Yeats: “be enthusiastic over the night, / not only for the sense of wonder / it alone has to offer, but also // because it needs our love.” ●

Contributors

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