

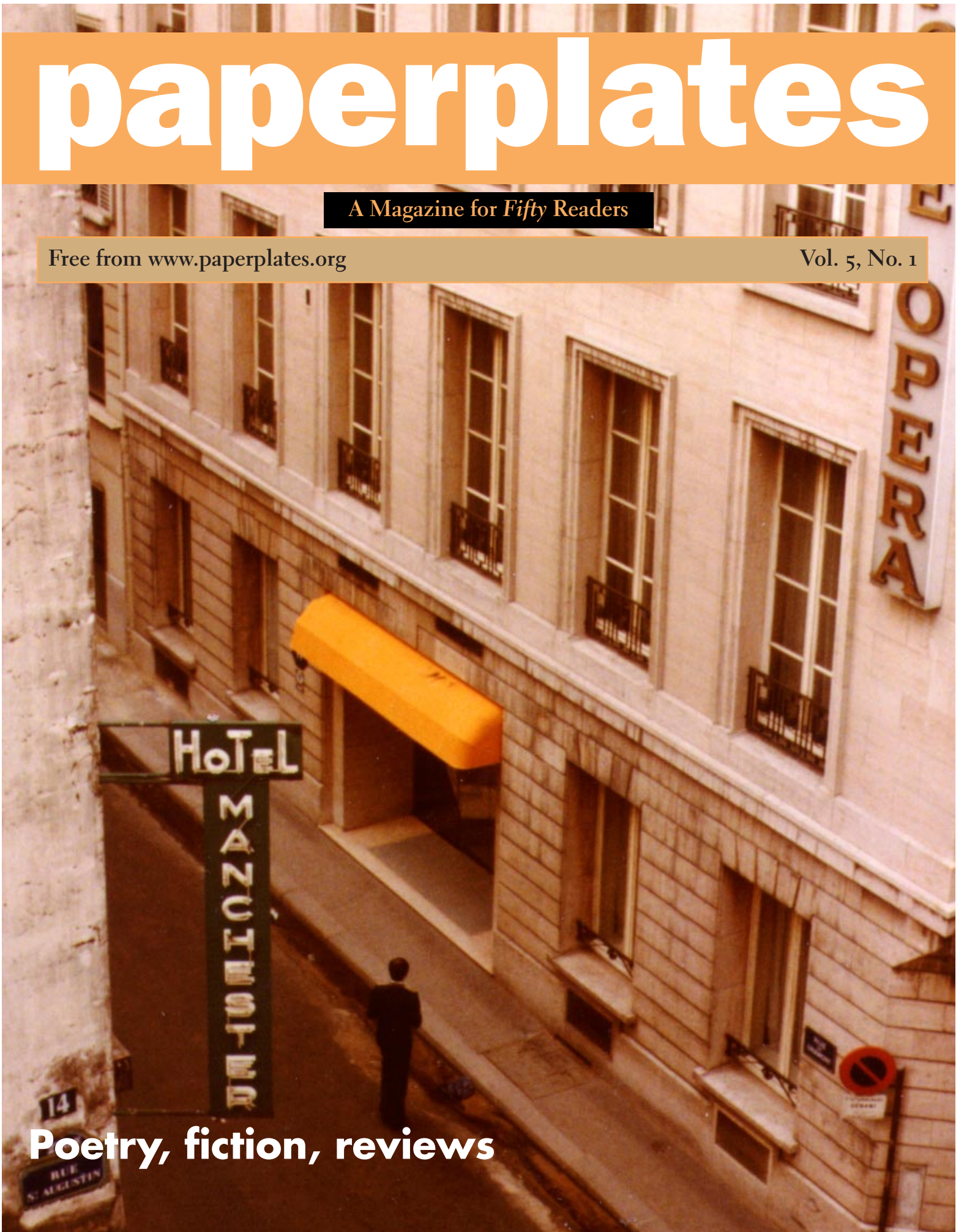
paperplates

A Magazine for *Fifty* Readers

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Vol. 5, No. 1

Poetry, fiction, reviews



Vol. 5, No 1

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Resurrection

—
*Deep down, I knew Italy would demand
that I face the truth about my deteriorating
marriage; it was no longer just a hunch.*

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Generations

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*Once upon a time there was a wren
Who built a special house
High up in a tower of Chartres.*

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*There, directly ahead, stood a kid in a
yellow windbreaker, half the size of his own
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coriander, and
marveled at the grassy mound
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slab stood upright in the middle
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the day they found the first coffin in
Faughart Graveyard ...*



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How to contribute

THE BEGINNING OF a toothsome new year is a good time, I think, to review some of our guidelines – and perhaps discourage the mispending of effort on either side (though, in a sense, we’re all on the same side, I hope).

Contributors: We make no distinction between veterans and beginners. Some of our contributors have published several books; some have never before published a single line.

Payment: Nothing, unfortunately. There is no money in this for any of us: the magazine is not supported by advertising revenue or subsidies.

Content: Like most magazines, *paperplates* has a front, a middle, and a back section. In the front section (“homeplate”) we put short personal essays, memoirs, and travel accounts. The tone expected is that of an informal letter, although the subject itself need not be light. The average length is 2,500 words. In the middle section we put short stories, poems short and long, extended travel pieces, formal essays, interviews, and reminiscences. (These categories are not exclusive.) The maximum length for the prose works is 4,500 words, for the poems 1,500 words (give or take a few couplets). In the back section we put reviews: theatre, film, and books. The average length is 2,500 words.

How to submit: On paper, preferably, with a stamped* self-addressed envelope (if you want the submission returned; if you don’t, just give us an e-mail address to reply to). Once we accept your submission, we’ll ask you to save your document in a text-only version and send it to us on a diskette or by e-mail (minimal formatting, spaces rather than tabs, no double-spacing). The work you submit should not have already been published or optioned by another publisher. We will accept simultaneous submissions but only if they are clearly marked as such.

*US submitters should include Canadian (not US) postage or an International Reply Coupon (IRC).

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Questions? Write to us.

— Bernard Kelly



Crossing borders

THE TOWN OF Pančevo, Yugoslavia, lies about half an hour train ride east of Belgrade. Right behind the train station you can find the huge market that Pančevo is best known for. Most of the market consists of rows of simple kiosks – tables covered with awnings – selling all sorts of cheap and low-quality goods: clothes, shoes, plastics, electronics. This place is a sort of wholesale market – owners of small shops from all over Yugoslavia come here to buy in bulk. On the fringes of the kiosks are parked cars; the owners selling their wares spread out on the hoods, or from the trunks. On the outskirts and among the cars you find the Romanians. They have placed their pieces of cardboard over their spots in the mud and are displaying their collections of items for sale – margarine was predominant, and of course cigarettes. Some cooking pots, dish towels, underwear. The profit isn't great – these items are cheaper in Romania but not much. And to get them to Yugoslavia involves some effort and some money – for transportation and for bribes. Behind the Romanian vendors is the row of buses from Romania, beat-up, old, all sorts and sizes. This is how I got to Pančevo, through the back door.

I TRAVEL TO Romania by train, leaving Belgrade in the evening. It is beginning to get dark as the train pulls out of the station. It isn't late when we reach the border – just 9:00 P.M. – but it feels late. It always feels late at eastern borders in the dark. I am alone in the compartment by this time, and I settle

down to wait for the officials. Yugoslav ticket inspections, Yugoslav customs officer. No problems there, no questions. Then the Romanian customs official. In Romanian: “Good evening.” – “Good evening.” – “Passport?” I hand it over. “Do you speak Romanian?” – “No.” – “You need visa.” – “Yes.” And off he goes with my passport. A few minutes later a man in a long grey coat comes. He looks around the compartment. With a heavy accent: “Where is your luggage?” I point to my bag. “Where are you from?” – “Canada.” “You have marijuana or cocaina?” – “Excuse me?” – “You have marijuana or cocaina?” – “No.” “A gun, you have one?” – “No.” “And you have very many American dollars?” – “No, not even that.” He leaves. Then the customs officer comes back. He looks at my passport sadly. “You don't have a Yugoslav passport, no other passport?” He really does not want to go to the trouble to give me a visa. He puts a stamp in my passport and writes me a receipt. “In Timișoara you go to the *Banca Națională* and pay for visa.” This was Friday night, and I tell him I am planning to return on Monday early morning: the banks will not be open. He shrugs, laughs. “No cashier here, what can I do?” Finally, the Romanian ticket inspector comes and the train starts to move again ... and I sigh – I have made it across one more border.

THE TRAIN PULLS into Timișoara, in western Romania, and Val is waiting for me by the tracks. As we enter the well-lit station, I look around in amazement. There is a digital display of arrivals and departures. I step out onto the street and, again, feel amazed. The streets are clean. A fairly new-looking tram passes. The buildings seem recently repaired and painted. Of course, it is dark, and that hides some of the dirt. But everything is relative – and to someone coming from Yugoslavia, Romania looks good.

Definitely there has been progress since I was last here, about five years ago. Val reminds me that this area, close to the Yugoslav border, is one of the wealthier areas of Romania.

WE SPEND THE weekend mainly in Caransebeș, a small town about an hour south of Timișoara. It is – used to be – a perfect example of a multicultural Romanian town. Along with the Romanians, it had large German, Hungarian, and Serb populations – and a lot of Roma or Gypsies. Val grew up here; he remembers the good relations between the different groups. He always had friends of all nationalities. Now the Serbs and Germans have gone, returned to their home countries after the revolution. Their families had, in some cases, lived in Romania for centuries. Val shows me the street where the Germans and Serbs used to live. He is sad – the houses look shabby and dusty now; he says they used to be kept perfectly. We go to the main square and the market – it is Saturday morning and everyone is out, shopping, or just meeting and talking. People seem very relaxed, compared to Yugoslavia. They walk slowly, gesture more gently, smile more ...

The houses in all of the villages in this area are beautiful – they are one-storey and usually lie with their long side towards the road, the door being on the smaller side. They are painted different colours – ochre-yellow, mint-green, rust-red. Sometimes the outside walls are covered in bright multi-coloured tiles, arranged in patterns. Each house has a metal gate, usually painted in a different colour from the house, and ornamented in yet another colour. The houses and gates form a continuous row against the road, when you pass through a village. Usually there are chickens in the grass in front and, often, old people sitting on benches outside their homes.

ON SUNDAY we drive to Herculaneum, a spa town in the mountains to the southeast – very close to the Yugoslav border. It has one of the few thermal springs in Romania. Val says it used to be one of the top resorts in eastern Europe, 100 years ago. We stop at the ornate train station – it looks Austro-Hungarian with an oriental touch. The main street of the town is beautiful, lined with imposing hotels, most of them about 150 years old. The facades are intact, but the paint is peeling. They are abandoned, have not been used for years. We climb through a window – most of them don't have glass – and walk down the hall past the series of identical rooms, now empty, with peeling wallpaper, garbage-strewn floors. But the spa is still working. The communists built a new hotel just up the road, a cement block. The place still has a spa town atmosphere – old people slowly wandering through the streets, carrying cups to fill with hot mineral water from the fountains.

A little way up the road, on the river, we find a small rough outdoor pool made of cement and filled with hot mineral water. We stop and soak our feet for a while and watch the fat old men. Val tells me that they are miners. They are discussing the size of the rats they have seen in the mines, and how tame the rats get – they work with the miners. In exchange for food, they provide an early warning system – they know when there is danger ahead. They never bite the miners.

THE BUS IS supposed to leave Timișoara at 11:00 p.m. The woman in charge of the bus, Geta, thinks I need a bit of extra attention and sits me near the front, although about ten people are already standing in the aisle. Val has asked her to look after me, too. The bus is tightly packed with large bags stuffed into every possible corner. I hold my little backpack on my lap the whole way. At about midnight

we leave the bus station ... and five minutes later pull up outside an apartment block. More bags are brought on ... and after half an hour we finally start driving down the highway towards the border – about 50 kilometres away. The bus is heavy and old, we move very slowly. At the first gas station we stop again; passports are handed over, with some money inside. After another half hour they are returned, each with a slip of paper – some sort of permit to leave the country? Finally, we make it to the border. Here the waiting seems to go on forever. The Romanian customs officers collect the passports. I haven't paid for my visa yet – the *Banca Națională*, as well as every other bank we tried, denied all knowledge of this procedure. After ten minutes they call me over. The officer asks if I am planning to return to Romania after visiting Yugoslavia. I say no, not for a while. Then he says very seriously, “You should pay 150 Deutschmarks” (about \$75 US). I smile and shake my head: “No, I should pay 33 dollars.” Fortunately, I know the correct price. He thinks for a few minutes and says “Okay, just give me 20 dollars and we finish.”

Back on the bus, after everyone finally gets their passports back, we move into the inter-border area – populated by duty-free shops, and even by some duty-free individuals, selling cigarettes from boxes outside the shops. The woman beside me asks, in German, if I can carry some cigarettes across the border for her. It takes me a while to figure out what she wants – although it should have been quite clear. She only asks me to take the legal amount of two cartons, so I agree. Another collection of money is made, cigarettes are bought in bulk, and distributed. Everyone on the bus starts stuffing boxes of cigarettes into their sleeves and pockets. The woman who asked me to carry cigarettes tells me, “I have very many

cigarettes, maybe I will not make it across the border.” She shows me who to give the cigarettes I am carrying to, if she doesn't make it. My mobile phone rings – and I am the centre of attention. It is probably the only phone on the bus.

We move towards the next step of the border – Yugoslav customs. Here, it's quick for me – my multiple entry visa is not questioned, and crossing Yugoslav borders has become easier for westerners since my first visit in the summer of 2000, before the fall of Milošević's regime. After the passport check, we all get off the bus, with all of our luggage, and after waiting about an hour, file one by one past the customs officers, who quickly check each bag. They are not strict, and everyone makes it past. Right on the other side, all the cigarettes re-emerge; we wait for another hour as the bus is searched and is finally allowed to cross the border. Now, I think, we can go. But something more has to be done, perhaps pay some kind of taxes, in a small building nearby. Another hour. I pull a wool hat out of my bag – I am cold after standing outside for so long. The sun rises. Various people approach me and speak to me, in English, German, Romanian, Serbian, Hungarian. The woman in charge of the bus tells me, in a combination of Hungarian and Serbian, about her daughter, who is studying philosophy at the university in Timișoara. I feel exhausted.

We finally leave the border six and a half hours after we arrive, and slowly progress towards Pančevo. The train, which left Timișoara at 5:00 A.M., passes us before we get to Pančevo. When we reach the market the driver looks for a place to park. Several people jump off the bus and run to reserve their spots – we are late, and the best time for selling, early morning, has passed.

– Hannah Slavik

Resurrection

I TRULY BELIEVE that we are drawn to places that reflect, perhaps even force us to confess, our innermost turmoil and fantasies of retribution. Deep down, I knew Italy would demand that I face the truth about my deteriorating marriage; it was no longer just a hunch. Hindsight teaches me that when already laid low by immense sadness and abject frustration, one should, at all costs, avoid cities that boast such grievous monuments as the Bridge of Sighs. Still, I found reason enough to go, pretended that all was well with my little world, and ran away into the north of Italy.

Compared to the languid, tumble-down south with its breast-like hills and olive trees wide and welcoming like an Italian mother's arms, the Veneto spurned me. Her brazen neglect made my aching heart feel right at home, and I entered a foreign yet familiar region crammed with things prickly, unfriendly, and despondent: gardens perfect and untouchable behind exquisitely wrought but invariably locked iron gates, icy marble villas equally repellent and enticing, café owners aloof and haughty at my efforts to pretend it was still warm enough to sit outdoors in October, and a castle once inhabited by a bored 14-year-old queen whose life was so devoid of activity that it spurred a lettered cardinal to encapsulate her arrant idleness by inventing an Italian verb just for her.

A slow barge along the Brenta Canal, once towed from its banks by weary workhorses, would dreamily take me to Venice, I thought. I needed a lull after four nights in Padua at a railway station hotel, the surrounding streets of which were efficiently covered by loud, and sometimes scary, working girls. There's nothing quite like a pre-dawn Italian catfight. At one point I

decided that I would die in Padua, so sure was I that either my next-door and forever shrieking neighbours would knife me in my sleep or I would die of starvation from the panic attacks that prevented me from venturing outside to buy food. I imagined they would find me perched on the edge of my bed, as stiff as the city's myriad statues, a dusty coat evidence of my numerous attempts to make it down the 27 steps and out the revolving front door. I imaginatively rehearsed the mere minutes' walk to the bus scheduled to take me to the waiting boat but in my paranoid reveries the boat had sailed long before, without me. I had, it seemed, lost my travelling nerve.

I DID LIVE to see the town of Stra and arrived under a crisp, big sky. We would spend the day languidly floating, sometimes dropping in at a handful of the many decaying villas, homes that once allowed the aristocracy to squirm from the suffocating and sweaty summer arms of La Serenissima. I, too, was suffocating but I submitted as the promise of Venice bit into me with a smile on her face, holding me fast in her deathly friendship. Knowing full well that it was much too cold to be on a boat, I nevertheless stepped aboard *Il Burchiello*. SELF-TORTURE 101 was compulsory, and misery, after all, demands company. My darkest fantasies entertained a mysterious disappearance in the murky canal waters, with rumours reaching Canada of my never having made it to Venice alive.

Throughout the Veneto it was the villas, those spectacular behemoths, that disheartened above all else. I recall barn-sized rooms and tiny beds, dwarfed and swathed in mouldy velvet bedspreads that, if sniffed, would surely still hold the night sweat odours of Napoleon, who apparently slept here on the night he took Venice. And tiny doorways, too – even my meagre five-foot stature barely passed through

them. Tintoretto must have bonked his head every time he arrived to paint yet another ceiling of annoyingly predictable allegorical figures. *Prudence* and *temperance* are of no use to someone on the brink of insanity. My neck ached from looking up at fervent mouths agape and fingers pointing to emblems of necessary virtues. Still, I gravely welcomed the flaking walls, choosing their silence over the truth of separation; over having to admit that I was powerless to counter the will of someone who, in his heart, had already left me.

SO, ACROSS THE frigid villa floors I shuffled, shivering and vexing my guide, who expected gasps of delight at Palladio's so-called exquisite harmony of interior spaces. *Palladio-schmelladio* – his spacious and overwhelming creations exhausted me. I couldn't find any of his renowned clarity and order because not a lick of either existed within me. The exterior motifs were too dramatic, the arched windows too high, and the grandiose vistas too big to look at. It was all too much, too much. His unembraceable structures rendered me insignificant, dwarfing me like the beds, and I will forever associate his projecting cursed porticologgia themes with the endless parade of poor, wretched souls depicted on the frescoed walls. From one barren room to the next I sidled by tourists caught up in the woeful stories, each painted figure's grief clawing at my guts as if, at any moment, I would be swallowed up, then belched out to blend into the narrative walls. One image of forbidden lovers, trying in vain to find each other in the dark through secret passageways, stung particularly sharp. Studying it, I knew all at once that life, as I had known it for a very long time, would never return. As their groping, searching, forever disconnected outlines swirled about me, my own questing and muddled soul fled wildly back to the barge.

IF EVERYTHING WAS ugly and tainted with impermanence and endings, and the bleached frescoes and furniture shiny with age only magnified my own faded trust in the power of love, what might have possessed me to enter the doomed *La Malcontenta*? I knew the answer immediately when another of the region's hostages met me at the door. It was the villa's namesake ghost, an imprisoned wife whose deathly tarnish mirrored my own secret longing for a different kind of life beyond windows I, too, had deemed inescapable. Although we had clung hard to security and habitude, havens and prisons alike, we both discovered that not trying means death, not life. The Signora might have been saved from dying under a stew of brocaded drapery and cloth with some fresh air and a different viewpoint, so perhaps a new perspective could still save me. An inaugural seed of possibility had dropped.

Sailing into the city at dusk triggered someone once into saying to me that Venice allows you to love her only the second time around. At first, she will shun you and make you hate her. I was already down, but I felt the tip of Venice's boot slice between my ribs as a freakish cold front solidified my melancholia and the city's appetite for lost souls made a feast of me. I closed my eyes and cursed. My legs were heavy as anvils, and yet the city demanded that I walk. Plodding along, now darkly soothed by her atmosphere of lingering malaise, I'm unsure as to what grew heaviest first, heart or suitcase, and I groaned under a mass of tangible and metaphoric baggage.

The storm raged for days. Even as impatience niggled, Venice beckoned and I obeyed. A bitter wind was her hand planted firmly between my shoulder blades pushing me onward, coaxing me to her every gravestone and art-laden wall of every sinking shrine along the Grand Canal. The sheer volume of objects to look at depleted me, every

structure contained a bulk of history too thick to ingest at the top of steps too high to climb and, in the end, nothing seemed worth the effort.

The canals lamented and sloshed about my feet, threatening to overflow. My ears ached as I waded through the gaudy, now flooded, Piazza San Marco. And a \$15 cappuccino in the massive square provided no refuge – the going price to drink to a live orchestra trying too hard to please with catchy American tunes. The musicians resembled those wind-up skeletons sold on Mexico's Day of the Dead, rattling and laughing into the certain and abiding face of death. As the wind whipped around the piazza I looked over my shoulder to see that the spectre of *Malcontenta* had accompanied me onto the mainland, acting as deathly monitor while Venice gusted about us giddily, but I was invisible to the beautiful Venetians who bumped me as they passed in wolf coats and Prada boots, gleefully chatting on their cellphones about the change in the weather.

DAYS LATER I would turn the proverbial corner while winding my way through a maze of alleyways. A blast of air hit me hard; its sting smug with certainty. Blinking and regaining my composure, I stood tall and stared down the city that had bullied me to join the ranks of her forlorn. I decided then and there to deny her the pleasure. The sorrowful past of Venice wanted me to delight in the dying, and a city of unhappy ghosts hoped I would kneel to the might of despair, surrendering any possibility of resurrection. All at once, I found the rain and the wind and my own obsession with death incredibly tiresome, and peevishly shrugged them off.

I am still unsure which won out in the end, my fierce passion for living or a low threshold for the incessantly dismal – maybe both – but at that precise moment something changed, and it no longer made sense to stay. I had

come to Venice ready to succumb to the call of the Underworld. Instead, I was ready to leave more alive, more accepting than ever. As I tossed the death mask she had placed over me into the canal, I looked to see that my companion ghost had vanished, and beneath the stormy swells around my feet, I heard a defeated Venice distinctly snarl.

In the still dark, dawn hours, in an exorbitantly priced airport *vaporetto*, threading our way along ebony-tinted canals, still feeling the drag of Venice's grief beneath me, I knew there would be swampy recesses of my own to visit before I could truly start again. For now, I would face the day bravely and alone.

And I remember thinking that one day I should come back. Maybe I'll fall in love with Venice next time. Maybe. Doubtful, but maybe.

– Lisa M. Phipps

Perspective

I am smaller now,
ravaged by too many Springs,
merged with their tiny happenings
and diminished sounds,
hearing finches squabble for seeds
and violet declaim itself
in a voluptuous syllable of color.

In a glade I am in scale.
The roots know me as their own.
Willows loom like crutches for the sky, but I am only the
size of this moment,
this quotidian.

Shorter too from the
grinds of cartilage
and the porous bone sewn within my skin curved to the
flow
like arched scullers, blades still over spent waters
catching their breath
in the slow honey
of elapsed rush.

In such perspective
hands cannot hold
what is larger than they are,
like the wistful remembering
by my outgrown lap
too small now for my children,
yielding,
as if the tree falls away
from its dropping fruit.

– *Michael Zack*

Summer cottage

Shadows remind us
of sleepy dusk, as
dad's echoing call confronts
an evening chill

shouting, like a mosquito
seeking one last bite before
calling it a day.

Hurry. Lifejackets off, paddles
away, secure the canoe
mother's accompanying call
impatient.

Our clumping sounds parade
across the dock, supper's
hot and waiting –

Coming. We're coming.

– *Richard Provencher*

Sorting

Death, even yours,
is a room filled
with small things.
Inside I sit on the floor
and sort your socks, nesting them
in boxes. Look, here is the pair
you wore to bed.
The scratch of that red wool
on my bare legs—

– *Erin Noteboom*

LISA A. SMITH

Dr. Gustaven's Revisable List of *Lamentable Things*

THERE ARE MANY lamentable things in life, but I've narrowed it down to two: being a doctor in a small town where everyone knows my business, and being sued by my aging Aunt Winnie, who was prescribed a male hormone and now has the voice of a tenor. The lawsuit was the beginning of my unravelling, the defining moment when I realized I no longer wanted to be a doctor. This was a fact obvious to my secretary and my patients, but most importantly, it was obvious to the always over-bearing Feena Smart, the coffee lady.

"Doctor Gustaven?" my secretary, Emma Yakes, said.

"If it's my two-thirty he can wait," I said, giving the newspaper a shake to straighten out the wrinkles. Classifieds. Employment Opportunities. *Canine Couture looking for professional pet groomer. Must not be afraid to put oneself in life-altering situations.*

"He's been out here an hour," Emma said.

"Tell him it's normal to experience some post-operative tumefactive symptomatology."

She stood perfectly still, giving me the look.

"He needs to treat the area with a warm compression, alternating with prolonged soaks in a prepared solution," I said.

Again, the look.

"For God's sake Emma, tell him to soak his ass in a sitz bath. The stinging will go away in a couple of days," I said. She brought the door to a near close, held it for a moment, and then slammed it shut. I grunted and turned the page.

"You really should see the man," Feena said from behind my chair.

"Aiyyyy!" I hollered. "How did you get in here?"

"You didn't see me come in?" she asked. I scratched my head.

"Dr. Gustaven?" Emma again. "Mr. Frackensplat is getting impatient." I tried to wave her away but could tell within the blurry boundaries of my peripheral vision that she was still there.

"Ask him to wait just a few more minutes," Feena said. "Dr. Gustaven will be with him shortly."

"Thank you," Emma said.

"You don't give orders," I said. "You can't come in here and" I stood, hoping to intimidate, but my bare legs (my summer attire consisted of shorts, shirt and a tie) stuck to the leather and made a SCRUNCH sound, defeating the whole purpose. Feena smiled. I narrowed my eyes. Feena sighed. I shot her a look of arrogant indifference. She stung me with a look of pity.

“Do you think this is really what I do for a living?” she asked. “It isn’t.”

“Whatever you do, I think you should do it someplace else,” I said.

“Here,” she said, “Read this pamphlet. It’ll explain everything. Give me a call when you’re ready.” She set down the box of coffee with a THUMP on my desk.

“Here’s your invoice,” she said. “You should have enough coffee now to last you the next two months. But something tells me I’ll be seeing you before then.” And then she was gone, not vaporized out of thin air like a science fiction goddess, but through the door and into the outer office, where she stubbed her foot on Emma’s desk, swore, knocked some medical journals onto the floor, ripped her pantyhose on the corner of the filing cabinet, and then was gone.

The pamphlet was in my hand.

GOVERNMENT OF CANADA
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RECOURSE
in liaison with the Minister of Pretense

In an effort to assist individuals seeking refuge from Paltry Continuance (that being described in Section I-B, page 101, in the Order of Defining Rights, as a “miserable existence”), the Government of Canada is offering the resale of various personalities for a price (subject to review and including all applicable taxes).

Persons interested in pursuing a new identity or in becoming an Identity Placement Officer are invited to pick up applications at a Tim Horton’s franchise in your area. For a list of Placement Officers nearest you, phone 1-800-WHOAMI.

Feena’s business card was paper-clipped to the top left-hand corner.

“Dr. Gustaven?” Emma opened the door and stuck her head into my office. “He’s threatening to write a letter to the Medical Board.”

“Send him in.”

Sometime around four o’clock. Those were Feena’s instructions. I was to meet her in the Canada Post lobby where they occupied an office on the second floor. Not really an office, she’d said, more like a cubicle – a cubicle which is shared by the resident Santa Claus and the rehabilitation guy from the Department of Health who stops by once in a while to “check on things”.

I WAITED IN front of the *Employment Opportunities* bulletin board. A single job listing was pinned in the middle.

“Mr. Gustaven?” I heard the voice first, then the clang of

stilettos against metal steps. “Doctor,” I corrected.

“Oh, you’re no doctor,” she said, winking. “I’ve seen you work.”

Her office/cubicle was cluttered with multi-coloured paperclips, stick-it notes all over the beige partition and four half-empty cups of coffee – one of them sporting a thick coat of mould.

“The process is very simple, Mr. Gustaven,” she said, sliding a piece of paper across the desk. Her head bobbed while her jawed worked, the pink bow in her hair rising and falling as if on a teeter-totter.

“I’m going to ask you to fill out this questionnaire. The information goes into our central database and from there we help you match the personality which best suits your needs. Of course,” she said, “there will be legal and processing fees involved.”

Legal fees sound familiar, I thought. Must be okay.

“How long does this take?” I asked.

“Let’s just say that when you leave this office you’ll be a new man,” she said.

I chose the identity of Glaston Freebert, a shoe repair specialist with a penchant for hard candy and a keen ability to yodel the Canadian anthem.

“Here’s the key to your new place,” Feena said.

“It’s okay,” she said, sensing my hesitation. “We’ll take care of the rest for you.”

“What do you mean, ‘take care of the rest?’” I asked.

“You see, by taking the identity of Glaston Freebert, you’re freeing up yourself for resale.” My hand dropped to my side. Feena withdrew the cardigan, fingering the collar with her thumb and forefinger.

“Are you saying that someone can come in here right off the street and buy ME?” I asked.

“Not you. Just your personality. See,” she said. “It’s right here, in fine print. But don’t worry. There’s a grace period. If after four weeks you’re not happy with yourself, you can revert back to your old personality.” When she smiled her Barbie-doll pink lipstick bled into the corners of her mouth.

“And of course,” she continued, “you’ve already signed the papers. Now, you’ll want to write this down. Fourteen hundred eighty ...,” she began.

I searched my pockets for a pen.

“Wescott Street West. Just on the outskirts of town,” she said.

No pen.

“You’ll see a sign on the door. Cobbler. That’s you.” Feena passed me a dry-erase marker. Green.

I had no paper.

“You’ll be living upstairs, over the shop. Your appearance is totally up to you,” she said.

I wrote the address on my hand.

"I can give you photos of the previous owner," she offered. I shook my head.

"What about my things? I should go and pick them up," I said. Feena tilted her head sympathetically.

"I don't think you understand," she said. "You're giving up everything. Whatever you need now you'll find at your new house."

"I'll need to take that," she said, pointing to my pager. "And your keys."

"Anything else?" I asked.

"No," she said. "Guess I have everything in order." I hesitated a moment, shuffled my feet, and turned for the door.

"Congratulations, Mr. Freebert," she said.

I drove my assigned car – an oil-leaking, two-door Ford pick-up – to my new home, an apartment, nestled over the top of a musty cobbler shop. I opened the fridge and cupboards, and rummaged through the closets, feeling like an intruder. The hardwood floors creaked when I walked. Radio worked. Television worked. I turned the faucets on and let the water run. Rust came first, then clear water. I was disoriented in my new surroundings. There was nothing left to do, no letters to dictate, no charts or prescriptions to write.

Gradually, I developed a routine. Sleep came easier after the first two weeks. I ate breakfast every day, a routine I'd never slowed down long enough to enjoy before. Then, I made my way downstairs where I flipped the light switch and twisted the *Closed* sign to *Open*. I repaired the shoes on my own, without instruction, as if I'd had the knowledge all my life. The tools were like the instruments of my medical profession, small and precise, sharp and dangerous. I liked the slow, tedious work. It required patience but little thought, craftsmanship without fear of mistake. Customers came and went, some gave me odd looks, but no one questioned the fact that I wasn't the man they'd left their shoes with.

I saw my customers more as people, and less as patients. In the beginning, I saw only red eyes, runny noses, jaundiced skin. There were the swollen, aged legs of hypertension, the protruding eyes of hyperthyroidism, and the scaly skin of psoriasis. But I said nothing. It wasn't my place anymore.

"You look as if you're about to catch a cold," I heard one day. She was probably somewhere in her seventies, small, and ugly in a puckered-scowl-face kind of way.

"You taking care of yourself?" she asked. I nodded. Of course I was. Tea and biscuits every morning, a nice pot of soup for dinner, and no more worries.

"You got white rings around your eyes. That's a sure sign you're coming down with something," she said, rising on the balls of her feet. With thumbs and index fingers splayed, she stretched the skin around my eyes until they bugged out of my head. She held them that way until the

dryness got to them and I had to blink once, hard, to ease the discomfort.

"Yup, that's what you're getting," she confirmed. "A cold."

The next day my nose was plugged tighter than a wad-filled toilet, forcing me to breathe through my mouth, causing my lips to dry out and crack. I worked slower, stopping every once in a while to hold my face over a hot cup of coffee, the steam gently unplugging my nasal passages. By noon I'd decided to close for the day and rest. I'd drive over to the drugstore and pick up a decongestant and the latest issue of *Contented Cobbler's Digest*.

"Oh, looks like I've come just in time! Closing for the day?" Feena asked. My shoulders visibly sagged at the sight of her.

"What's the matter? You look like hell," she said, pressing her hand to my forehead. "You need to see a doctor, you're burning up."

How ironic, I thought.

"I know a great one, too. Dr. Rosenbowl. Just started a few weeks ago. You'll like him. Fix you right up," she said, pressing a business card into my hand. "Call him," she ordered.

I said that, yes, I would, hoping to pacify her with my compliance, hoping she'd leave.

She didn't.

"Call him," she urged, pushing me to the phone. I dialed the number.

"So how you making out?" she asked. The phone rang, once, twice.

"Nod Bab," I said. "Id's easier than I ... than I ... than ... AAACCKCHEWWW ... thod id wod be," I said, resting my head against the wall. Finally an answer. I made an appointment for that afternoon and hung up.

"There," Feena said. "Good stuff." She glanced around the shop before settling her eyes on me.

"Well, if there's anything you need, you just let me know. You've got two weeks left, remember. You can still change your mind." And then she was gone, out the door, onto the sidewalk where she bent to pick something up, banged her head on the mailbox, swore, tripped over her own feet, and disappeared down the street.

I followed the directions to the doctor's office easily, noticing a distinct familiarity with each passing street. I stopped at the steps to my old building, my old practice. Fifteen Twenty Sandlebar Lane. I stood face-to-face with the same heavy wooden door I'd greeted on a daily basis through my fifteen-year practice. I hadn't recognized the address. Knowing the address hadn't been my job. Emma had always seen to the correspondence.

I took hold of the doorknob, hesitated, then entered. Emma looked relaxed, she was laughing on the telephone when I approached the desk, the phone cradled in the

crook of her neck. "Just a minute," she mouthed, waving me away. I sat down just as she got off the phone.

"Mr ... err ... Freebert?" she asked, glancing at her appointment book. I stood again, smiling, and approached the desk.

"How've you been, Emma?" I asked.

"Good as can be," she answered. She was professionally polite but guarded. She hadn't recognized me. I stood staring at her, my hand fingering the rough stubble across my chin. My appearance, in more respects than I'd realized, had changed.

"It's me. Dr. Gustaven."

"Dr. Gustaven?" she asked, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"Miss me?"

"I thought you'd moved half-way across the country. Got a letter from the government after you left. Didn't say much. Just that there'd be a replacement for you shortly. That was pretty much it."

"I've bought a new identity," I said. "I'm Glaston Freebert now."

"I knew you'd do something to get out of that lawsuit. Your aunt misses you, you know. Figures you deserted her."

"She hates me," I said.

"Says she misses you. Wants you back so she can kick your ... " The phone rang.

I retreated to my seat.

A child sat by her mother, clutching her right ear. She was irritable and lethargic. Her cheeks were flushed and she shined with a glistening pallor.

"I don't want to go to the doctor," she whined. Her mother stroked her hair.

"The doctor won't hurt you," her mother said.

"Have you given her something for the fever?" I asked. The mother shot me a suspicious look and pulled her daughter closer. Then I remembered, this wasn't my office anymore. I wasn't the doctor.

"Mr. Freebert?" Emma said, a sly grin forming on her lips. "Your turn."

I expected Dr. Rosenbowl to look something like me, not the black-haired, burly, street-talking man who greeted me. He was taping a picture of a vulva to Twiggy, the skeleton I'd received as a pre-med gift.

"What do you think?" he asked, his left arm draped around the rotator cuffs.

"Uhhh. Nice," I answered.

"So what brings you here today?" he asked, fumbling through the mass of jumbled papers on his desk.

"Well, I've developed a fever, swollen glands, general malaise accompanied with ... "

"You'll have to give it to me straight. I'm new here. Not

"Dial wrong number for assistance"

That cramped phone booth
where you do your quick clothes-switch
reeks of steroids ...
and then who would entrust you
to precision flying & decisive fistfights
when your chest-tight "S" suit
is so gravy & catsup stained ...
enough to impress
only down-home chicks with that
Kryptonite accent ... but to see you sneaking
behind your proverbial kiosk
to take half a joint
and then slip back into some
Halloween party inobtrusively is too much
of a de-heroizing letdown
for me to stomach

Signed,
Lois' mother

– Jim DeWitt

used to this crazy medical talk," he said.

"I, uh, well, I've been having a bout of ... "

"Give it to me straight," he said.

"I guess I've developed some mild ... "

"Straight," he said.

"A cold," I said.

"You've got a cold?" he said. I was embarrassed, remembering the patients I'd chastised for wasting my time when they could be snorting a strong dose of Dristan nasal decongestant and watching Oprah or listening to CBC Radio, or whatever it was people did with themselves when they caught a cold.

"Yes," I said. Dr. Rosenbowl leaned to the right and pulled open the bottom drawer where I'd kept my pharmaceutical samples.

"Here you go, then," he said, tossing the blister pack onto the table. "Take these for a few days. Give me a call if you really start to feel like a kitten in a plastic bag on a busy highway."

I took the package from his hand, recognizing the tiny, diamond-shaped, blue pills as sleeping pills.

"How many of these do you think I should take?" I asked.

bull's-eye

who could have
known
that the words of your
mouth would be
gilded with
bittersweet
barbs, aimed precise and
true so as to
stab me (ever gently) where it
hurts

see how they
wander
like so many tadpoles through
reason and wonder and
pride,
colonizing swift-like in the
(lovely) of the
point of No Return

hit me again, with the
ouch of your trembling

love

– Marla Landers

“Two at a time, three times a day,” he answered, popping a cigarette into his mouth.

“Got a light?” he asked.

“Are you trying to kill me?” I asked, rising. The cigarette fell from his lower lip onto the desk.

“Hey, if you’re allergic you just have to say so,” he said, stuffing the cigarette back into the package.

“You don’t have a clue what you’re doing!” I said. “THESE ARE SLEEPING PILLS!” I shouted. “YOU’RE GOING TO KILL SOMEONE!”

“Look,” he said. “You got a problem, you call the government. I bought this personality with cash. Straight sale.” Frustrated, I walked to the door.

“If you bought this personality, why aren’t you Dr. Gustaven?” I asked.

“I am, technically. Just changed the name. Didn’t like it.”

FEENA WAS IN her office when I dropped by that afternoon. She cupped her left hand around a mug of coffee (a new addition to the desk) while her right hand held a pack of ice over her forehead.

“You’re not looking any better,” she said. “Thought you were going to see that doctor.”

“I did. That’s why I’m here,” I said. “I want my personality back.”

Feena sat back in contemplation. She lowered the ice pack to reveal a pulsating purple lump the size of an arthritic ankle.

“Can’t do it.”

“What do you mean, you can’t do it?” I asked.

“Got to wait for Dr. Rosenbowl’s probationary period to be up. It’s only fair.”

“ONLY FAIR!” I answered. Feena shot me a look of warning: Keep it down.

“That’s right,” she said.

“Look, I’m a doctor. He’s not. He’s gonna kill somebody,” I said.

“It’s really not your concern now,” she said.

“So you’re telling me I can’t have my identity back?”

“Let’s just wait and see. There’s a clause in Section 2.1 page 10 of the ...”

“Stuff your clause,” I said.

“Mr. Freebert, I’m sorry.”

“Doctor Freebert,” I said.

AT FIRST, people thought the sign over my door was a joke: DR. FREEBERT/COBBLER.

“Are you a foot doctor?” some asked.

“You some kind of a quack?” others inquired.

“I’m a general practitioner who happens to fix shoes,” I said. And then I’d follow with questions about their health.

At first they told me to mind my own business. Some, I discovered, were on birth control pills for osteoarthritis (prescribed by Dr. Rosenbowl), others on antidepressants for yeast infections (prescribed by the same man). They came in daily, carrying their soft leather moccasins, bowling shoes, winter boots – any footwear needing fixing. Some left the shoes, others left a list of symptoms; some took my advice, others didn’t. I waited for the consequences to catch up to me – I was practising without a license. The months went by and business grew. Word spread around town and people sought me out. I surprised myself, putting faces to names, something I’d never done before. I enjoyed the work, both jobs, but didn’t realize how much until Feena Ballsmacker-Smart dropped by.

“You got time to fix these for me?” she asked.

“Pretty backed up,” I said. “Gonna be about three weeks.”

“I need them before that,” she said. “I’m going on a cruise next week.”

“Lucky you, been before?”

“No. Doctor says I need to relax. Haven’t been sleeping.

You know how it is," she shrugged. "Stress."

"How's your appetite?"

"Fair," she said.

"Your skin's pale. Here," I said, taking her right arm. She watched me curiously while I took her pulse.

"You're having some palpitations," I said.

"What are you doing, Glaston?" she asked. I stopped and stepped back.

"You can't practise medicine anymore. I heard this is what you were up to. Look, I know you want to go back but it's gonna take some ..."

"I don't think I want to go back," I said.

"Then you can't practise medicine."

"Are you going to report me?" I asked. She didn't answer.

"Look," she said. "This is what you wanted."

The bells above the door jangled and an elderly man, probably in his eighties, stepped inside.

"Can you fix my boots?" he asked. "Only boots I got."

"Sure thing."

"What about my lungs," he said, untucking his shirt.

"Can't breathe just right."

"Sure."

"You can't do that," Feena warned. "I've got a legal obligation to report this."

"And I got trouble peeing," the old man said. "Can't stop once I get started."

"Look," Feena said. "I'll try to get your old identity back in two weeks. Just promise me you won't practise medicine any more until then."

"Okay," I said. "Deal."

"Good stuff," she said, pumping my hand.

"You gonna help me or what?" the old man asked.

"Of course," I said. "What's your name?"

"Frackensplat," he said. "Joel Frackensplat." From my old practice.

"Hope yer better than the other doctor I had," he said. "Told me to soak my ass in a sitz bath."

I didn't know what to say until I caught the glint of recognition shining in the old man's eyes. He'd known who I was all along. I looked out the window in time to see Feena crossing the street. The wind took her skirt and lifted it to her waist just as a passing dog bit her on the ankle.

In two weeks, she'd promised, I'd have my old identity back. The thought made me nervous, as if meeting an important person for the first time, and I couldn't help wondering whether the new Dr. Gustaven would be any better than the old one.

Languor ... linger

The heat of the day

and the excitement of finding cool
... and hearing breeze.

*Closeness . . . oppressive feeling of dampness from cool air,
... even.*

There is a sweetness to this languor

*It is not yet hot enough – it is morning and I am in the
basement – for me not to say*

Let it linger.

Lingeringness

Oh that this happy thought could linger.

To relax – to feel my face relaxing – mild eyes –

*a CD of opera hilights playing –
I don't know the words – just music bathing me – gentle,
flowing – it is not an opera I know – I need not fear Mimi
dying*

it is not Puccini.

\ \ \

yet linger, liquid languor longly on my leeching tongue –

admit. Forswear.

letters litter:

a cascading alphabet

– Cathy Cuffy

Blue train rant

You can tell all those people who go around singing
love train
peace train
people get ready there's a train a'comin',
you can tell all those people
when you catch them between verses
that anyone who sees train as metaphor
for anything less shattering than Hydrogen Bomb
has never lived a block and three quarters
away from the railroad tracks.
They never slept close enough to hear that damn horn
blast three rows of nipples off a dog in heat,
blast six years of dust off a green velvet couch
and then blast it back again,
now dirtier dust,
more irritable somehow.
There's a kind of religious optimism
you can only entertain in a semi-conscious state.
It only happened once,
it was four o'clock in the morning
and that drone,
it snuck up on me,
still far enough away
to be a pipe organ or even a harmonium,
one of those resonant instruments they used to call God.
Now this type of thing makes you think
maybe your life is about to turn around,
no, maybe ... maybe it already has.
But then it gets closer and closer and louder and louder.
It blasts all the used tissues off of your bed.
It blasts all wonder off the memory
of your first wet kiss,
leaving only the excess saliva behind.
It blows to pieces the second childhood
you were saving as a haven
for your last chilly days on a small, drafty planet.
And you think
this is the kind of spiritual experience I deserve;
this is an epiphany tailor-made for a person
who would smear Vaseline on the lens of her life,
who would shoot each experience in ultra-soft focus
air-brushing out any startling realities.
So this is what poetic justice is for:

that you should wind up living
not only a block and three quarters away from the railroad
tracks,
but also directly across the street from the courthouse clock
that bangs out up to twelve bongs an hour,
precise as the pre-verbal hoof of Francis the Talking Mule,
and caddy corner from this Lutheran church
that chimes out
arbitrary hymns at arbitrary times
all week long, both day and night.
You get to hear *Ave Maria* sometimes,
but you also have to listen to *Bringing in the Sheaves*.
But it's the train, the train
that keeps you four feet to the left of your body.
And it's not like you never got moonstruck over this young
Italian tourist
less than five minutes after Amtrakking out of the San
Diego station.
It's not like you never hopefully peered out the window
past that dusty depot in Albuquerque,
just in case your last long-haired, hang-gliding,
scuba-diving lover
might be leaving university to ride the rails awhile.
And it's not even like you're not aching in your bones
to roll away somewhere,
like you're not waiting for the curtains to blow open
and some strong-winged agent
swoops in like a bird of prey,
snatching you off to the land of endless freeways.
And if he's only happy with blood in his mouth, fine,
at least it will be *your* blood this time, *your* deal.
It's not even that you didn't weep for joy
when the little engine that could
huffed and puffed all those toys
to the peak of glory mountain.
No, it's not the idea,
it's the X-rated decibels,
designed, perhaps, to scare cows off the tracks,
but serving, instead, only to make the deaf deafer.
Yes, now when that Motown bass starts playing
how long has that evening train been gone
you say not long enough, my friend,
not nearly long enough.

Trinity School: the final countdown

Every morning at eight o'clock
Charles Brooks floated onto that long yellow bus
radiant with new ways
to freak out the white girls.

In sixth grade
they thought they could still
keep us out of trouble
with the famous boy/girl/boy/girl seating plan.
Guess they hadn't figured on Charles Brooks
sidling up to the neighboring seats
left *and* right
to delicately hiss "*Do you wanna fuck?*"
in the middle of each documentary
about Brazilian exports
or even the manned space program.

In 1967,
nice girls were supposed to be easily shocked,
and I felt pretty bad
about not carrying my share of the burden.
But I *liked* things that rhymed,
especially in dialect,
and it must have disappointed Charles Brooks
when I asked him to sing
all his nastiest songs
over and over and over again.

Libby Kelly
ran crying to Miss Farinella,
this considered a more appropriate response.
Miss Farinella appeared genuinely appalled,
and I guess that attitude *worked* for her,
because that summer she married an Italian Count,
and actually went to live in a castle.

Before she was lifted away in his jet,
leaving the rest of us to lurch and pitch
into the lurid oil slick of junior high,
Miss Farinella told my mother I had a quiet beauty.
I spent the next 22 years
trying to turn up the volume.

This had to be balanced with other important work,
like practicing magnificently demure expressions
every evening
in front of the mirror.

Charles Brooks took advantage
of his miraculous smile
and that natural talent
for sexual harassment.
He went into either soft porn or politics;
nobody's sure which one.

Libby Kelly,
who can still blush better than anybody,
is day and night protected
by a tall, blue-eyed plumber
who remembers to say excuse me
every time he swears.

– Nancy Berg

DAN VOLLARO

Gifts of the Spirit

HOLLIS BUCK WOKE from the world beneath his street again, dressed in his jeans and yellow Houston Astrodome T-shirt, and strolled out the front door of his mother's house on Richard Street headed downtown. He leapfrogged along the broken, heaving slate sidewalk that runs along West Main Street, his legs remembering the dance from long ago, when he walked this way to school each day. He kept his head down and his hands in his pockets.

When he finally reached the riverbank, Hollis began to howl down at the lily pads like a mournful dog. He also howled up at the sad willow fronds, which hung down in his face like leafy life-lines, and across the river at the young Wilkerson family, who stood in a neat cluster on the opposite shore tossing stale bread crusts at the mallard ducks. They all stared across the river at Hollis, who looked a lot like John Brown standing there with his tousled Grizzly Adams beard and his long grey hair hanging around his shoulders. Little four-year-old Tracy Wilkerson grabbed her father's hand and faded into his thigh, but eight-year-old Peter leaped forward to stand with his sneakers at the river's edge and leaned over the water to get a better look. Francis Wilkerson remembered crazy old John Brown from his history class long ago so he wasn't taking any chances. He removed the cell phone from his jacket pocket and dialed 911. He cupped his hand over the tiny phone and turned away like Judas to whisper into the receiver, as if his neighbor could hear him from across the river.

The police cruiser arrived almost immediately, gliding over the bridge with the speed of an electronic transaction, the way police cars do in towns with Brady kids to protect and a new Starbucks on the corner of Main and Lee Streets. The cop stepped out into the steamy air and stood still for a long time, staring down the grassy slope at the deranged man. Hollis Buck stood under the lightning-split willow tree still squawking down at the muddy river bank.

By this time, a crowd had begun to gather on the bridge to watch. They stood at the iron railing, which offered a front-row view of the town park where Hollis Buck was currently losing his mind. They clustered together in a kind of instant community – neighbours and strangers and neighbours who are strangers – and began to exchange information with whispers of knowing conspiracy.

"I hear he was in Vietnam." Dale Richardson tossed his silk tie over one shoulder so it wouldn't rub up against the grimy rail.

Tom Lazcowski tugged at the thready brim of his black and yellow John Deere hat and said, "I heard the older brother killed himself by swallowing Drano."

"It was Hollis who almost died," said Francis Wilkerson, who had arrived on the bridge with Peter in tow, hoping to get a closer look. "His brother found him in a

coma on the kitchen floor a week after their mother died. He was dehydrated from the grief. I live across the street.”

“The mother barely left the house when she was alive,” Mrs. Giuliani added.

Francis’s neighbours Annie Taggart and Eileen Swanson ceased their brisk power walk through town to watch from the bridge also.

“Hey, Francis, remember how he used to pace around the back yard?” Annie wiped her t-shirt sleeve across her slick forehead. “Back and forth like a dog.”

Eileen complained: “His mother let her flowers die in front of the house.”

Someone observed that *Hollis* sounds like a southern name.

Someone else remarked they had never seen the guy before.

“I hear he’s a junkie,” Brittany Socks said.

Eileen said he was probably the pervert who had been peeking in windows all summer.

Brittany said: “Yeah, it was him.”

To Hollis Buck, it was as if the entire town were now standing on the bridge, shouting down at him.

A second cop, younger, edgier, arrived in another car. He sprinted across the grass to where the first one was now standing.

The first cop was not fat or thin. He wore a moustache that clung to his top lip like a brown leech; he walked with a kind of puffed-up gait, as if he were forever waiting to exhale; and on that very warm August day, his dragon tattoo was half visible under his short-sleeve uniform shirt. As he come closer, Hollis could see the dragon writhing around under his white skin like a big caged snake.

HOLLIS BUCK SAW the world in levels, stratum sandwiched in stratum. Not so simple as heaven and hell, but the great spectrum of order. A series of illusions, one piled on top of the next.

Municipal jail was dry and sad, and the cot sagged underneath him, nearly scraping the floor; since he was a boy living in town, he had always wondered what the jail looked like inside. His head still throbbed from the beating, but the pain was beginning to fade out. Hollis let his head loll over the cot and stared sideways at the wall. It made more sense that way.

The cops had calmed down after they managed to muscle Hollis into the car. The tattoo cop wouldn’t speak to the younger one, the one who had used his club and screamed, “Pig-fucker!” down at him, completely out of control. What does that mean, he wondered, *pig-fucker*? From somewhere down the hallway, he could hear his caseworker arguing with the chief of police.

“Brute force.” Her voice resounded, deep and black – a foreign sound in Cornerstone. “Did you even charge him with anything?”

His arm was still smarting from the needle prick. They had drawn blood; he knew why, but they would not find what they were looking for, because it wasn’t like that any more. He was arrow straight now – straight with the Lord – and that was why he could see under the street so clearly. God had given him the vision – a great gift of the Holy Spirit – to peer down through the pavement to the veins and capillary tunnels that pulsed hotly underfoot. They thought they knew what was down there – a sewer drain and electrical cables – but Hollis Buck knew better; he had seen what else as clearly as the light of day. He could slip down under that tight black skin and find the warm arterial flow beneath. He had followed the long passages, which ran on forever, occasionally opening into vaulting caverns with great cathedral ceilings, then narrowing again into tunnels that wound endlessly through the fetid, dead-quiet world. Hollis had gone down alone often to search for a familiar face. Down where the sparkle faded, to where the glass streaked and cracked and the trash rotted for eons. Down, sliding gradually down, to where the walls sagged, where nothing was new, where the buses wouldn’t run after dark; where night fell in a steel curtain pulled down over the storefronts and the pay phones were all dead. Where the lights winked out. Hollis would always find his way back to the Great Hall, to stand and remember under the highest ceiling he had ever seen. The Great Hall always seemed on the verge of collapse. Plaster drooped from the rotting walls in great slabs all around him. The floor heaved with bulging ancient black trash bags – some of them split open to reveal their calcified innards – and splinters of old lumber ripped from the walls and ceiling jutted out like protruding broken bones held fast by a single nail or bent screw. Bottles lay everywhere, whole and smashed, the pieces sprinkled with even more delicate porcelain shards of broken lightbulbs peppering the ground like the first snowflakes of winter. Looking up, Hollis could still make out the round plaster mandala from which a chandelier certainly once hung, and the nearby mezzanine, where the loan department once haughtily surveyed the line of workers from the Campbell Soup plant, all waiting to cash their Thursday afternoon paycheques. Hollis would come here to breathe the fetid air and remember ...

... There, against the wall with “cassius” spray-painted bold black, he had once sat with his back against the dry-rot plaster listening to Wade, who was seated beside him, paint a picture of the place so real he thought he could make out the voices of customers echoing on marble.

“There were great big hanging plants over there.” Wade

would wave his big sloppy arm. “And the wood was all that shiny red shit.”

If Hollis Buck squeezed his eyes shut, he could ride the bass baritone gentility of Wade Steven’s voice down deeper still, to the days of civilized life here, before the riots in 71, before madness and greed and masochism destroyed this place. He could close his eyes and open himself up to the Spirit, and if he was faithful enough – praise Jesus – the Spirit would allow him to see everything.

There had been weeks and months in the Great Hall before the Spirit arrived, but now Hollis can’t piece the timeline together. He remembers it all as one long day. He remembers the feeling more than anything else, he and Wade like real brothers, drifting around the streets, but always landing back in their favourite spot – Wade, like the older brother he never had – and then, without warning, Wade dragging him out of the hole, up to the basement of a Baptist Church with stained mauve carpeting that smelled like Comet cleanser.

“I’m tired,” he complained. “You’re tired too. We gotta turn things around.”

Three times a week, they would sit in that basement, trapped in a ring of men and women, and talk about their lives with a kind of random mania, gushing words out into the circle, where they were then mopped back up into the nodding solemnity of brothers and sisters.

For weeks, Hollis kept his mouth shut, but Wade started talking right away. He knew what to say, what to do. He told the group: “It’s high time I got out.” He also insisted he was a good Christian, despite everything he’d done, and good Christian people helped each other out of the darkness.

Hollis observed. He watched everyone watching him. He stared at the gold Movado watch on Ricardo Candelario’s brown wrist for two weeks straight until it disappeared one day, and the next, Ricardo was gone too, and that day, Reverend Eustice asked everyone to join hands and pray for him. Everyone knew where brother Ricardo had gone. Hollis watched Wade and the others pray with their hands in the air and their eyes raised up to the low grey ceiling tiles, as if fixed on an unseen pair of eyes up there. He felt thin and sad and pale in that room, the only white face in a sea of brown. The “amens” and “glories” made him ashamed for his own lack of faith.

Twice, Wade had dragged him back down underground to the Great Hall again, but first, they smashed a few car windows and pawed around under the seats for loose change. That was a low time, but it felt good to be back down there. The hits were much stronger after a period of denial. They made the wall at his back feel like a cushioned chair, plush and beautiful. He and Wade talked about how much money had drifted through here over the years, billions and billions

discovery of cow skull at the edge of farmyard lawn

kick at clump
of leaves fly
scatter uncover bovine
skull dried flesh
still clings
to crevices of
bone at edge
of manicured lawn
kicking in dried
leaves uncover old
cow skull dried
meat still clinging
to cracks

– Gilbert A. Bouchard

of dollars. It was unimaginable as they sat around in garbage. Simply unimaginable.

Then, one day at the meeting, Hollis Buck began to speak. He opened his mouth, and something broke free inside him.

“The town where I lived was trying to be something it wasn’t,” he said.

There were nods around the room. Murmurs of affirmation and encouragement.

“My father hated the sight of me. Thought I should have been an engineer like him. But I wanted to write songs. I was good at writing songs.”

The words gathered force, sweeping out of him now.

“They make you take a test to get a driver’s license,” he said. “But they let any asshole have children.”

It was bigger than the words – titanic and awful and seismic – but the sounds at his teeth helped pull it up out of him. And the others helped too. When the words ran out, when the sobs were clutching at his throat, the others pushed him gently to his knees and stood around him, their dry palms pressed around his head and shoulders. Their voices rose, one spurring on the next, louder and louder. Words and phrases broke apart in the air above him, pierced by shouts of “glory” and “praise God” and “Jesus, Lord Jesus”, then reassembled into rhythmic chains of worship that wound serpentine paths through the low-slung room. The babble of tongues, too fast, too foreign to follow. Hollis could feel the electricity in him, pulsing, gathering in his throat. He raised his head and hands

Generations

Once upon a time there was a wren
Who built a special house
High up in a tower of Chartres.
I saw it once when I was there
With Jean who thinks a little
Like a Chartres' spire.

Oddly the nest was in the shorter tower,
Older and simpler and less ornate
More romanesque than gothic,
Solid, an anchor for the fragile trekker
Who travels to Africa each winter
And back again in spring.

I'm a little like that wren.
Coming back to anchor in
A home, staunch as romanesque abbey
Where I take root,
Buttressed by kitchen, oaks
And a fortress of books.

Jean's another generation,
Nomadic, yes, but looking to roost
And live happily ever after.
She'll choose the higher tower,
More gothic than romanesque,
Soaring, eagle woven with wren.

– *Mary Caskey*

through theirs and opened his lips, letting the thing tear itself free at last. The force of it leaving him raised Hollis to his tip-toes, and he could see them standing around him, their lips moving, eyes closed, hands swaying in the air, but all sound had momentarily seized in the air. Hollis felt the last of the thing flutter up out of him and began to fall backwards, feeling their hands around him lowering him to the floor, gently, with voices far away.

In that moment, while he lay there with the carpet burning at the back of his head, Hollis could see the folly of man's sinfulness for the first time, layers upon layers. He could see through the superstructure now to the very skeleton of the thing.

Since that day, Hollis had been able to wander underground for days, losing himself in the capillary web of tunnels, climbing from one smashed, abandoned room to the next. After a while, he would lose the sense he was underground at

all. The sun would shine in the sky. He walked past familiar street corners and abandoned buildings. Lots mounded with garbage. It was the city he remembered from his addict days, the city a congressman once said resembled Dresden after the war – or was it a governor? – he could not recall.

He could wander around down there for days. But occasionally, he would look up through all the layers, to the top-most layer. He could see that far up, even from the blackest pit. He could see people wandering through his town, in and out of the shops, over the bridge. They fed the ducks at the riverbank. They drove smiling through the car wash. They mostly forgot about Dresden and John Brown and all the unpleasant things they'd read or learned about, and they tried not to look down through the streets, or behind them, for fear of what they might see. They had no idea that, in a world of layers, one thing rests upon another.

FRANCIS WILKERSON was sure he should talk to his son about what they had both witnessed from the bridge, but he was not so sure where to begin, or what to say. Peter sat at the kitchen table chewing on the corner of a pop tart, eyes wide and shiny, waiting for his father to say something.

"Peter, the man we saw today was very sick, you know that."
"Uh-huh."

"He was probably on drugs. Drugs are really bad. You remember, we talked about that."

"Did he kill someone?"

"I don't think so, Peter. Where did you hear that?"

"Nadia's father said he was in Vietnam and killed lots of gooks over there. That's why he's so messed up."

"Peter, we don't use words like that in this house. Do you know what that word means?"

"No."

"It's a bad word for an Asian person. Anyway, that's not true about Vietnam. He's not old enough to have served in Vietnam."

"Oh! Why didn't the cop take his gun out, Daddy?"

"He didn't have to, Peter. The police are trained to only use necessary force. That means you don't have to shoot someone all the time. You can use other ways to . . . get the job done."

"Did he split that man's skull open with the club. I couldn't see anything from the bridge."

"Peter, he only used necessary force. He wasn't trying to hurt the man."

Peter took a big bite from the pop tart.

"Are they gonna give him the chair, Dad?"

"No, I said he's not a criminal. He's a guy with problems, that's all. They're going to help him."

"The cops came right when you called." He smiled up at his father. "That was really cool."

A crowded café and

a book on a table, a book
on a table by a lamp, a book
on a table by a dying candle, or
a book on a table in sunlight, and
a book on a table in an empty
room she mouthing silent bruises
across the crooked table and her
elbow resting hard on the book, her
elbow at impossible angles, her
body at angles more imagined
than real, she mouths impossible
injury into the air, and he also
in an empty room, he also by a table
and by a dying candle, he also
impossible, and he reaches for her
by the book on the table, he reaches
for her by the dying candle, he
holds her chin in his hand,
in the wavering darkness, or in the sunlight
of an aired-out room, he holds
her face in his hands, and with
his stunned vocabulary, with his
diminished world of angles, lines
and edges, with her impossible
elbow sure on the book, with the empty
room bending toward him, cannot
ask why? or please? or how?

– Sean Johnston

Wonderland

Arlene threw up on the Round-Up.
Her babies return to yellowed tabletops
with brown specks on faces
and wind-tied hair knots.
Her handstamp reads “FARTY.”
Loogies plummet
from skyline wires,
landing on umbrellas
under which she sits
listening to festival tunes.

“I told you not to ride it.”
Grandmother stands
perusing heavy-water pockets
for Lucky Strikes. Bumper
cars buzz in the background.
“Would a soda calm your stomach?”

Arlene motions away. Her children
glare at wet-bodied teens
dressed in white, roll their eyes
with clubhouse laughter,
and beg to ride the Giant Log.
She consents and watches
them board dirt-brown floaties
across the pavement.

Grandma puffs and puffs
with short-breathed grunts.
Tobacco spirals around her nostrils.
“I hope you don’t lose
your appetite. We’re still
going out for pizza.”
Arlene rolls her eyes,
reflecting on Tilt-a-Whirl
days when sickness
was for old people.

Her children wave
as they splash
through ceramic tubes
and plummet like a turd
into pee-stained waters.

– Dustin Hathaway

Beyond the pale

We spring-loaded the prongs for the rough at heart,
a subject of unease among regular folk, like
the leech-thronged pond out back
or the fat man next door performing
calisthenics on his lawn, in his briefs.
But my motto's simple: live and let live.

The house is askew.
We're in the suburbs of a large city.
The bulb inside the refrigerator
burned out months ago.

Let's dim the other lights
and find out what the prongs are really for.

Costume da bagno

What spoils the harmony
of the bright clean day?
What carves and shapes the being
displaced by splashing swimmers?

The sunlight exerts its influence
even when the clouds encroach.

Bellowing ahead, a vast glittering arrival
triggers a complex chain of events.
Figures in the open dwindle away,
only inflated balloons hold their shape.

And then the beauty of the system:
the crashing blue light of your eyes.

– *Sam Difalco*

seven deer

seven deer step soft
geese flurry lift rise away
dusted white autumn

– *A. Mary Murphy*

Considerations

Even monkeys
sometimes fall from trees
tickling morning clouds fleeing west.
A solitary crow
silently struggles east,
as if life depends on it.
Pelicans abandon
shadows to a cement wall.
A twilight breeze stirs the pages of a book.
Spanish moss and oak leaves wiggle.

– *Ken Smith*

At home

I have seen pictures of the way it was,
photographs slightly yellowed
with Grandma's spider-crab ink gone brown on the backs.

There were croquet parties then,
but not like the ones Grandma knew
when she was still Louise.
These were the seventies,
and Vivian trimmed blouses with rick-rack,
and Alice dodged protesters at college,
and when everyone was at home,
there were croquet parties, the likes of which
have never been seen again.

The grass on the front lawn burned short and dry
under the summer sun,
except beneath the trees, where Alice wrestled
her share of the wickets into the ground.
Everyone went barefoot anyway.
Vivian's daughters sat on the coldstone porch with ice
cream,
giggling at jokes they didn't understand.
The mallets and balls were divided with deadly seriousness:
always blue for Alice,
red for Louise, who was Mother then.
Sometimes Vivian felt like orange, sometimes black, but
these days
it was green.

The sun rose high, and the ice cream melted.
Alice clutched her black hair out of her eyes, shrieking,
bending double with laughter
as Mother prepared to send the green ball
off the edge of the hill.
Vivian raised her beautiful face to Heaven,
praying for Mother's soul,
loudly, dramatically, but in vain –
Mother, with a whoop, brought her mallet down
and sent it.

The girls jumped up and ran loops
around the white wickets,
their long long hair flying.
Vivian flung her mallet across the scorched lawn
and threw open her arms, smiling,
and the girls ran into them so hard
they knocked her over.
Alice fell down beside them,
still laughing;
Mother dropped to her knees to hug
two generations of her own blood,
and because Father came in from the garden at that
moment,
this is a picture I have
slightly yellowed
brown on the back.

Now Father is gone, and so is Mother.
Only Grandma is left,
and Auntie Vi and the cousins,
who live far away,
and my mother,
who lives here with Dad and James and me.
She still laughs, though her hair is shot with silver;
Grandma still whoops, through her knitting needles;
and Auntie Vi often writes to say
that the colour these days
is sage.

– *Rebecca Bayreuther*

Rudman

AFTER RUDMAN LET his son off at Omar Elementary, he drove straight down First Street.

He slowed at the intersection of First and Elementary Drive. Then he headed south on First toward the Omar Public Library, where he worked part-time. He approached the brow of the small hill. He took a sip of coffee from the tall styrofoam cup and replaced it in the cup holder.

He looked up at the road in front of him.

There, directly ahead, stood a kid in a yellow windbreaker, half the size of his own boy, stooping over to inspect something on the grey pavement. Rudman hit the brake hard, felt the tire rubber grabbing at the uneven surface.

Sliding. Skidding.

He caught, with the suddenness of a camera flash, a look of recognition on the boy's trembling lips, the dull white of the boy's eyes, like a peeled egg. A sense of something terribly important passed between them, Rudman and him linked together in it.

Rudman helplessly bore down on him.

AT THE COURT house, he sat facing the sheriff at his desk, trying to explain. The deputy, standing to Rudman's left, handed him a one-page, legal-size form, a photocopy, slightly askew, with general information called for at the top, the narrative report in the centre, and lines for his signature and date at the bottom.

Rudman filled out the top portion. The blue ballpoint the deputy had given him leaked, and his name and address ran in tiny blue veins. Rudman asked for another pen. The lanky sheriff, in a heavy oak chair, adjusted his silver-framed glasses on his hawk nose, leaned forward, and pulled open his desk drawer. The fat deputy urged him to recall all the necessary details. Where the boy was. How much into the road on Rudman's side. What he had done to avoid him. The key things, the deputy cautioned. Don't add. Don't imagine stuff. Just what really happened.

He tried to write it all out. The kid in the yellow windbreaker. Right there in his lane, in a blind place, due to the brow of the hill. How hard he had braked. How, then, the car wouldn't stop and he'd run straight over the boy. How there'd been no time to turn sharply to the right, toward the ditch. Still, now that he thought more about it, that seemed an option. He could see how, if he'd only thought of it, he might have turned sharply to the right. There'd been a moment when he could have. Maybe a full second or more. Time enough to look at the red oil-change service sticker on the windshield and note the date. Time enough to see a clot of white creamer in his coffee in the cup holder and note that it needed more stirring. He didn't do those two things, but there might have been time to. And time to make that sharp right. It was the issue of time, a small frame of time, that kept him imagining what he might have done. But, of course, he might have spun around, too, lost control of the car, hit the kid anyway. Even ended up on the sidewalk. Hit someone there.

But Rudman didn't write all that down. Nor did he mention taking the sip of coffee just prior to noticing the kid. He recounted only the actual details of the encounter, the

car's failure to stop, its being carried over the body of the child. He didn't mention his attempt to dislodge the mangled body in the ripped and blackened windbreaker from under the transverse bar about a foot in from the front bumper. He mentioned yelling at the woman standing in her yard to call the ambulance.

Once Rudman had written out the narrative, the sheriff held up a black ballpoint marked *Sheriff's Office*. He shrugged, offered a half-smile. If you want to recopy that —. The deputy, toothpick working between his teeth, waved it away, said, Naw, he don't need to sweat ink smears. He handed the report to the sheriff. The sheriff did not see anything incorrect about it.

The deputy gave Rudman a ride home.

RUDMAN SAT at the kitchen phone, attempting to call his wife.

She worked out at the nursing home. She'd know about it by now. The deputy's wife worked there too, and Rudman knew the deputy would have called his own wife. He dreaded facing the mother of the dead boy. He didn't know her, some woman named Mary Batts. The boy's name was Duane Batts. Kindergartener, the deputy told him. The mother worked out at the chicken-processing factory, a couple miles east of Omar. The deputy told Rudman they'd told her the boy's body was being delivered to the funeral home. It wouldn't of been good, said the deputy, to have her there at that accident scene. That don't play too well, the deputy said, tapping a pack of Camels against his wrist, as he dropped Rudman off.

He made himself some coffee. He didn't want to call in to the public library just now. He'd gotten on there after he'd been laid off at his office job down at the radiator plant in Wrenfield. He needed the work. He liked the library. He was definitely doing good work there, responsible for several new book arrivals, listed just recently in the paper.

Rudman stirred in creamer, thinking. The phone rang. Rudman hesitated to pick it up. His car was in the back of the Omar Court House, in that narrow little lot where the deputy, the sheriff, and the prosecuting attorney all parked their cars. They'd be looking over his car by now. Looking up under it, at that transverse member that protected the oil pan from foreign objects in the road or eruptions in the pavement. There'd be more reports to fill out, more processing of details. Pretty soon Rudman should call his wife, or that could even be her ringing now.

Recitative of a moment's fugue

AFTER HART CRANE

In Havana the old street vendors
sell their coconut death masks,
fiber-wigged, a kiss of crimson lips
by the barbershops and news-stands,
cluttered street corner trash,
a boy holds a cage of *azulejos*,
blue buntings captured in the distant
mountains where the royal palms sway,
another sells orchids
the color of love's breath (heaven's perhaps)
his eyes milked to so much regret,
of having cut the stem
from the flower, desire flung from the cathedral's
bell tower, shattered on the cobble stones,
this daily exchange of mortals
what is ravaged from this land, beyond the vendors,
birds, flowers, beyond anguish,
el desespero de cada día,
each day's despair, broken, swollen, a rock
thrown at memory's crystal veneer,
fractured light everywhere.

Predilection for peacocks

My father bartered two dozen rabbits
for a mated pair, brought them home
in a friend's truck, fed them corn
and rice, milk-sopped bread,
and when I saw them in our patio,
pecking at the crevices of the cemented
floor, I knew suddenly the meaning
of wholeness, apparitions in feather,
when the male fanned out its tail,
the world became dizzied with pleasure,
flies grew legs, loaned their eyes
to the blind, sparrows rose skyward
to become clouds, the plantain
burst forth ripened fruit, yellow
hands of resurrection, this dying
in order to live, peacock alchemy,
a significance, like the phoenix,
of rising not from ashes, but gems,
a cauldron filled with sapphires,
zirconium, diamonds, emeralds,
when the birds flew away, my father
dreamt of my birth, of his dying,
both a charmed falling of iridescent feathers.

– Virgil Suarez

Services

MRS. LOUISE RUSHES into the parish hall indignantly and attempts to throw away the poinsettias carefully arranged in the vestibule. “It’s Easter time; you mustn’t have any poinsettias around. Only lilies.”

Miss Marblehead, the parish secretary, is shocked that Mrs. Louise, the most generous matriarch in the parish, has the gall to throw away the Christmas poinsettias given by Mr. Grumble and family in memory of their great aunt Miss Marvellous Station, the former Miss Virginia, who dedicated the parish hall where they are sitting.

“I can’t for the life of me dispose of flowers.”

“Listen, Miss Marblehead. I once saw you with those bottles of ants and bees.”

“I told Father Queensberry the rules around here. But you know I can’t kill an ant or a bee.”

“Did you do the church bulletin, Miss Marblehead?”

“I must confess I’m late.”

“Save that excuse for Father Queensberry. I’m off on my Audubon walk. I’m determined to catch a glimpse of the cardinal.”

“Are you going alone?”

“I do everything alone and I mean everything. I can’t trust anyone with anything, especially since I lost my son in the antique store.”

“Whatever happened to Delmore?”

“I suspected the proprietor of sweeping the boy off to Fiji. I’ve never been the same. He lived with me until he was eighteen. We even knit together. I schooled him, gave him Reginald, his private tutor, whom I imported from Oxford, who told him everything

“I remember Reginald at daily mass, always meticulously scruffed and dressed.”

“We adored him, with his Byronic look, but one day he had a platonic vision of the stones of the Parthenon and went off to Greece with a group of sailors. What a loss to the parish, I might add.”

“I remember him teaching the altar boys how to sing in falsetto.”

“Reginald sometimes sends me postcards from Mykonos. He was an authentic aesthete, an original.”

“I think, Mrs. Louise, you had a crush on him.”

“I confess ...”

“Save that for Father, too.”

“I’m off to the birds. What would I do without my feathered companions?”

“I can’t imagine, dear.”

Mrs. Louise puts on her large hat. She wears a new one each Sunday and then keeps it for a week, when she gives it away to the Salvation Army so no one in the parish can copy hers. The hat is a violent orange resembling a black and tan.

She closes the door with a flourish.

A homeless man, a recurrent visitor, Mr. Grapes the Fourth, once a prosperous oil prospector who chose to give away his wealth in the biblical sense until he realized

he was without a soul, comes to the church for shelter.

“Oh, Mr. Grapes, do have some tea.”

“I can’t remember if my stocks are up or down or where I am going. So I chose to come in and have a word with you and God, not in that order.”

“Make yourself at home.”

“This is my home now, Miss Marblehead. If it weren’t for your kindness ...”

“Oh, it’s you who are most kind. You were the one who bought me my summer cottage up in Maine.”

“That’s when I was filthy rich.”

“Oh, you are rich in faith.”

“Yes, and without the filthy lucre. I wanted to be lucky without lucre.”

“Do you regret parting with your millions?”

“Not if it has made others happy, but it is cold out. I do love the scarf you made me. It does help on these icy New England days.”

“The wind chill is below eighteen. We put some bread out for the birds. If I forgot, Mrs. Louise would crucify me. She attempted to dump my poinsettias.”

“Do you have a muffin?”

“Yes, they’re corn and whole wheat.”

“Thank you. May I go into the church and pray?”

“Yes.”

“And may I have the key to the bathroom?”

“Of course.”

“I love to sit in my own pew.”

“It’s always yours, named for your late mother.”

“God be praised. How I miss her. I miss my wife, too, even though she left me for the animal trainer.”

“How could she do that?”

“She said he had animal magnetism. Thanks for the key.”

“If you go into the church you may see Mr. March. He told me he’s looking for the keys to the Kingdom. Here’s the key to the bathroom.”

“What happened to him? Wasn’t he a professor of Latin at the college?”

“Yes, alas he was jilted by one of his graduate students.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“So is he, and to think the student is featured in *Playmates*’ February issue. Poor Mr. March. One knows what comes after Valentine’s Day. Then he was engaged and with the ring and he on his knees and then she goes to New York with the wedding money. I never liked her, I must confess.”

“Wasn’t she blonde?”

“Dirty blonde.”

“What was her name?”

“I can’t recall. She calls herself Miss Chick now. Mr.

March comes in every day and prays for her return. He is ready for the prodigal bride to return, but it says in *Variety* she has had it with men.”

“I can relate. All my business partners cheated me and my wife cheated on me and my relatives. But I don’t want any sort of bitterness, as Father Queensberry preached. I get so guilty I can’t put anything in the collection plate.”

“Well, have a plate of these fresh muffins. It will help to keep up your strength, Mr. Grapes, and here’s a stress Vitamin B.”

“Thank you, Miss Marblehead. I wish I could give you a kiss.”

“Wait till Sunday when we have the kiss of peace.”

“I wait for that kiss all week.”

MISS MARBLEHEAD hears a gun go off in the church. Father Queensberry enters, carrying a relic, the molar tooth of St. Veronica.

“Oh, my goodness.”

“Oh, it’s only Mr. March. You know he uses only blanks.”

“Oh, thank goodness. I’d hate to have my quiet time interrupted with his shenanigans. I found copies of *Playmates* near the altar where the altar boys come in on Thursdays to rehearse for Sunday. That’s the most important time of the week I look forward to.”

“We all do.”

“I love youth and its enthusiasm for worship. I adore innocence.”

“You’re a saint, Father Queensberry.”

“Not yet, Miss Marblehead. Give me time. Remember Saint Innocence became Pope.”

“Is that your wish?”

“I’m a humble parish priest. But today life is so much more complicated and ecumenical. Last week, for instance, I met with the Los Angeles Buddhist monk, the Muslim Iman, the Reform Rabbi, and the Hindu student guru from Dartmouth who set up our computer network.”

“I know your schedule by heart.”

“Miss Marblehead, I appreciate you, but how you endure some of the congregation remains a mystery of faith to me.”

“I must confess that we almost lost our Christmas poinsettias, but I managed to save them from the arms of Mrs. Louise. I sometimes think she is so full of herself, but now I realize, Father, it’s a change of life. Have a muffin. I saved you a bran.”

“I had a talk with the young acolyte Danny Noose. He was deciding whether to go to the Marines, to become an archaeologist in the Holy Land, or to become a priest. I must confess, not for the first time in my life, mind you, I

discouraged him from the latter.”

“Is it because of your experience here at St. Peter and Paul’s?”

“Well, we have the liberals who want women as priests and don’t care about the consecration of the host and the conservatives who demand I put a *Right to Life* sign on my new car and endorse only their candidates for high office. It’s become all politics here.”

“It’s everywhere. If you are politically correct, they make more demands, and if you are politically incorrect they ... oh, my, it’s Mr. March ... all bloodied ...”

“It worked ... the gun, that is ... I’m sorry about the new church carpets but I don’t want my intended bride of Christ in *Playmates*’ centrefold. I told God that if I killed off my old self with my old shotgun, surely he would restore her to grace and would give her all the graces.”

Mr. March collapses. The police are called. Father Queensberry retreats to his study and only returns when the body is removed.

Rushing in from the church sacristy, Miss Marblehead weeps out: “Oh, Father, you should see the condition of the carpet paid for by Mr. Grapes when he was rich. But he is trying to clean it up.”

“Couldn’t you call up the President to return a favour?”

“You mean the former Arkansas governor who came here to seek respectability? He was at the lawn party but before we could entertain, he ate all the cookies the Sodality Committee had baked.”

“Well, we’ve got to get a new rug somehow before Sunday mass.”

“Perhaps you could call the Orthodox priest. Isn’t his brother in the rug business?”

“You have a point.”

“And perhaps you could call in all the ecumenical family and they could lay it at an ecumenical service.”

“A brilliant move, Miss Marblehead.”

MR. GRAPES comes out of the sanctuary.

“I’ve done my best to clean the rug. But it’s impossible to get all the red out. It’s like my sins.”

“Would you like to see the Father for confession?”

“Yes, I shot Mr. March to take him out of his misery. He begged me. He felt his intended bride wouldn’t ever come back.”

“I’m sworn to secrecy.”

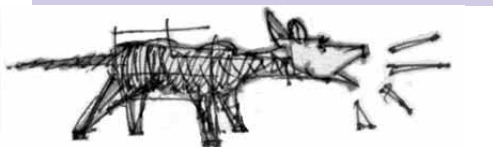
“On my way up to the chancellery I saw a Negro epileptic preacher speaking in some strange tongue and holding a sign saying Jesus was coming back. I told him maybe he doesn’t want to, maybe we don’t deserve him. He told me it was up to God. Then I put the last plastic spoon in my pocket in his mouth and he shut up. I carried the black epileptic on my back. Then I went with him to a pawnshop where it said on a plaque in the window, “Everything is Redeemable.” I wanted to offer my services to the preacher by offering to sell my gold watch, but they refused to talk to me or to the black epileptic who had turned white. I left him on the steps. Then I came in here. It’s been quite a morning, Father. I think I’ll be on my way.”

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Christian burial

We drove to the herb grower's garden for coriander, and
marvelled at the grassy mound
behind the house where the flat sandstone slab stood upright
in the middle
with a cross engraved on it,
the day they found the first coffin in Faughart Graveyard,

and as we walked between the beds of fennel and thyme Maria
told us about the bones she found when planting flowers on
the edge of the mound, small bones of children and adults,
scaphoid, lunate, an elbow,
seven different people in all,
and a large flat piece,
the top of someone's skull,
it was the same day they found the remains of Eamon Molloy
in the new coffin
under the bushes at Faughart,

and as I crushed a piece of mint
between my finger and thumb under my nose and waited for the scent to come
she described the smooth edge of bone,
not worn but cut perhaps with an axe
or a sword in anger, or maybe
some sort of early Christian ritual for these bones were
identified as early Christian by an archaeologist,

and as we walked on between foxglove and parsley past the St. John's wort,
we found the coriander she was looking for
which she picked and bunched in small plastic trays, telling
us how the archaeologist had brought back the bones after
examining and dating them, and said "Here, take them, they're
yours, they belong to you, you can do whatever you want with
them," but suggested they were real people,
so Maria buried the early Christians in the burial mound
in her back garden,

and we paid four pounds for the coriander the day the I.R.A. started
to return the bodies of the "disappeared" at Faughart churchyard.

– *Kevin Black*

Seepage & leakage

TIM CONLEY on the dimly foreseen

Torontology

STEPHEN CAIN

ECW

108 pages, \$15.95

IF YOU LISTEN very carefully to the end of “I am the Walrus” you can make out muted fragments of dialogue: “I know thee well. A serviceable villain ...” “What, is he dead?” “Sit you down, father; rest you.” Edgar has just slain Oswald, coo-coo-cachoo. My question is this: how did Shakespeare foresee the Beatles? No, the question is not fatuous, and it is more than simply amusing. What Raymond Queneau and his ever-dis-simulating gang of pataphysicians termed “anticipatory plagiarism” is at work all around us, and what Stephen Cain’s new book of poetry assures is that the perpetrators tend not to be very good.

Or put another way, the past sometimes mishears the present. Reading sentences like “Settles on a het sack frau” and “No IUDs but in flings,” one feels less an ostentatious gesture of allusion for cultural capital (look upon my quotes, ye flighty, and revere) than a plucking at the worn strings of an instrument held captive as a museum piece. *Torontology* concurs with the notion of poet as prophet, with some important and interesting qualifications. One of these, I think, is that any poet is only as good as the

next one. As talented as he may have been, Shakespeare was never the Walrus, though the Walrus encompassed Shakespeare and more. Ezra Pound in the metro station or William Carlos Williams in Paterson, New Jersey, only dimly foresees Stephen Cain at the I. V. Lounge or on the College streetcar.

Another condition to the prophetic poet, which (surprisingly) logically follows the first, is that the poet only prophesies him- or herself. That is, the poet anticipates the poem in the poem; every poem is a rough formulation of a poem further on, a supreme fiction, ultimately inexpressible. Only the next poet will express what the prophetic poet reaches towards. For all of his language games, seemingly arbitrary technical constraints, and fondness for the abstract, Cain is a remarkably autobiographical poet. In this book and *dyslexicon* (1998), his previous collection, Cain marks and annotates the cultural events, moments, and artifacts that have affected – and ultimately effected – him: poetry, friends, bars, streets, pop music, television, advertising, and movies. In so doing, he is gradually drawing an outline of himself. (Biography must ever look on poets with envy for this, the earnest documentation of creative mental associations.) He is exploring the furthest limits of his individual identity, looking for those points of seepage and leakage between himself and a popular consciousness.

Torontology is an arrangement of various experimental sequences. The most enterprising of these sequences, “Pscyles” relies upon anadiplosis, the rhetorical scheme of beginning each new line with the last word of the preceding line. The device here mimics the turning of film reels – or spools of videotape, I suppose – and helps to

solidify my impression of Cain the poet as more a jockey of both the disc and the video variety, spinning, scratching, and sampling, than an “originating” composer drawing melodies out of the ether. The free-wheeling, association-rich lines of “Pscyles” are laid out over specific films as a kind of minute-by-minute dubbed monologue. “1982: Blade Runner (Ridley Scott): 118 min.” is, appropriately, 118 lines long:

Experience always preferred consumer astonishment
Astonishment reconciled with late humanism
Humanism a thousand monkeys typing away
Away and far and a similar drum beat
Beat box baby on a Saturday night
Night in the bathroom setting chain reactions
Reactions to the actions set in motion
Motion an oceanic perspective I find lacking
Lacking motivation the race is certainly on

“Pscyles” is the best part of *Torontology*, although “The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Cookbook” is pretty tasty (“Heat the mastery in a large garrison. Add blasphemy, half the tokenism, continuance and scars. Add (or don’t add) foresight”) and might have been successfully longer than it is. “The Variety of Efflorescence” is something of a revisit to the hilarious sequence, “dix mots pour rien,” which appeared in *dyslexicon*. Both feature duologues between cultural icons: in “Variety” they are literary characters, like Daisy and Gatsby, while in “dix mots” they are recognizable historical pairs (usually writers), like Gertrude and Alice or Yoko and John. (Wouldn’t Gertrude and Yoko have a good word or two to exchange?) But at what point do the usual suspects stop providing alibis?

The slick but conventional packaging of this new book seems inappropriate and likely to help it get lost in the crammed store shelves. Whereas *dyslexicon* has its attractive notebook feel with ring binding and off-white pages, *Torontology* has a depressingly generic size, shape, layout, and type-

face. This is especially strange because the book respectively begins and ends with “5 × 4” and “4 × 5”: these poems are composed with such factors in mind, and were originally published as a two-volume treasure in these exact dimensions (in inches) by the shifty Toronto small press Book Thug. And then there’s the title, which for me tastes like postmodern vanilla. Sure, there’s the doff of the cap to bpNichol (though Cain is not to be muddled with those mere imitators, the wooden nickels), and at least there are no hyphens or slashes identifying the potential pun sites. *Torontology* is likely an appetizer, or a somewhat light and lean second course, at the greater feast of Stephen, and this game-gluttonous reviewer for one is licking his chops. *Garçon!* Bring on the next infinite jest around the corner, another lark of Cain. ●

Franklin not found

ERIKA BEHRISCH on a far-fetched explanation

The Franklin Conspiracy: Cover-up, Betrayal, and the Astonishing Secret Behind the Lost Arctic Expedition

JEFFREY BLAIR LATTA
Hounslow Press
320 pages, \$22.99

LIKE THE devastatingly embarrassing Oh-god-please-don’t-tell-anyone-you-saw-me-at-the-theatre *Blair Witch Project*, Jeffrey Blair Latta’s *The Franklin Conspiracy: Cover-up, Betrayal, and the Astonishing Secret Behind the Lost Arctic Expedition* is an invaluable lesson in the dangers of

judging a book by its cover. Latta’s text claims, from the title to the back copy, to offer a new reading of the lost Franklin Expedition, and indeed the entire 19th c. British search for the Northwest Passage. Latta overtly distances himself from convention on the subject: even the book’s cover art – a simple sketch of two ships looking hunted by sharp and crystalline icebergs – deviates from the more traditional use of 19th c. illustrations to portray this 19th c. subject. The title of Latta’s book suggests to readers that an answer to the 150-year-old question “what happened to Franklin?” rests inside, while Latta himself stares capably from the back cover, encased in a parka and apparently ready to head north.

For those readers unfamiliar with the lost Franklin Expedition, let me provide a brief overview: in 1845, 129 British officers and crew aboard two ships bound for the Northwest Passage entered the far north west of Greenland, and were never seen by Europeans alive again. Relatively few human remains from the expedition have been recovered over the last 150 years in spite of near-continuous interest, and only two written documents from the expedition have been located, neither of which contains enough information for searchers or historians to understand fully what happened. The “provokingly laconic” documents (as Victorian searcher Leopold McClintock put it), rife with chronological and geographical errors, have almost single-handedly fueled the continuing interest in the subject. Unsurprisingly, these documents are one of the focuses of Latta’s book.

In fact, Latta’s most detailed as well as most interesting revision of the Franklin “conspiracy” comes in his rereading of the Point Victory record, the sole record discovered by searchers that offered information about the expedition’s movements and its possible

future plans (the other document found was a copy of this one). Latta’s rereading is intriguing and not totally unbelievable: without giving anything away, I can tell you that Latta finds reasons for all of the seeming inconsistencies in the document, from “improper” dates to incomplete sentences, and suggests a much different interpretation of the heretofore fractured message of the record. Though it doesn’t offer definitive answers, Latta’s interpretation appears to clear up the many awkward contradictions between the report and the expedition’s physical remains. The main problem with Latta’s rereading of the record, in fact, lies in his method of analysis: he draws his interesting conclusion after studying the handwritings and inks of the Point Victory record, but gives no proof of his actually having *seen* the record first-hand. After glancing at Latta’s distressingly thin bibliography – which contains only three explorers’ journals (one of which was written 25 years *before* Franklin disappeared) and no primary archival research (i.e., there is no evidence that he has examined the Victory Point record himself) – one wonders at the extent to which Latta can feel comfortable in making the conclusions he does.

AND – WOW – some of the conclusions Latta does feel comfortable with are really out there. Never having been an enthusiastic conspiracy theorist myself, I find *all* of Latta’s suggestions at best unprovable and at worst flagrantly ridiculous: there was a gigantic Admiralty-wide century-spanning conspiracy about some “secret” in the central Arctic (unprovable); Franklin’s officers and men were unlucky victims of alien curiosity (flagrantly ridiculous); the expedition was slowly eliminated by a missing race of once-thought-extinct “giants with flying houses” who drill holes in the hapless explorers’ heads (again, flagrantly ridiculous).

Though most of the literature on the lost Franklin expedition is more popular than academic – and *The Franklin Conspiracy* certainly plays to its audience – other recent texts published on the subject are infinitely more satisfying because they’re based on competent and thorough primary research: the writers actually know whereof they speak. Latta’s suggestions are entertaining in their outlandishness but ultimately contribute nothing to the stock of knowledge about the lost Franklin expedition, because they’re built on the foundations of other peoples’ conclusions. Indeed, Latta’s “proofs” are often casual editorialisms from other writers. Admittedly, the material Latta dissects is readily available through other books, but Latta neglects to admit anywhere in his argument that everything he works with has already been filtered through other sources, and primarily creative, not academic ones (Pierre Berton, Roderic Owen, Farley Mowat, and others). Significantly, Latta chooses not to engage with David C. Woodman (the capable and cautious interpreter of Inuit oral testimony regarding the lost Franklin expedition recorded in nineteenth-century explorers’ journals), who in his thoughtful and well-researched book *Unravelling the Franklin Expedition: Inuit Testimony* offers realistic interpretations of, though not answers to, the questions surrounding the Franklin Expedition’s disappearance. Very occasionally Latta does cite Woodman to support his argument, but when his own interpretation deviates from Woodman’s (and boy, does it ever!), Woodman’s text doesn’t appear to exist for Latta at all.

WHILE *The Franklin Conspiracy* offers no answers and reveals no “astonishing secret” about the Franklin Expedition, what it shows about the workings of Latta’s imaginative faculty is certainly cause for wonder. I feel drawn to the book by its unrepentant brazenness

and sheer imaginative chutzpah, even as my critical faculties revolt at its existence. The text is stuffed to the gunwales with “unsettling” rhetorical questions (“What was going through [Commodore] Belcher’s head? Why the sudden hurry?” “Why indeed?”), designed-to-chill chapter endings (“We may be excused for wondering not who autopsied John Hartnell, but what”), and clichéd literary flourishes (“Around them was scattered evidence of a prolonged stay on this barren heap of wave-washed rubble”).

IT IS IMPRESSIVE, indeed, that Latta can (a) construct an argument so wonderfully outlandish from secondary and creative evidence; (b) get his work published and expect to find an audience; and (c) imagine that he can speak with authority of such a difficult episode in Canadian and British history simply by reading a few historical surveys. The dearth of information on the lost Franklin Expedition seems, in fact, to be the episode’s critical downfall: with no definitive voice on the subject, everyone may consider himself an expert. This, of course, is also part of the subject’s charm. Bravo to Blair Latta for carving out his own unique niche in an already well-populated corner of Canadian history. ●

After the perfect lines

ROB MCLENNAN on a unique anthology

The New Long Poem Anthology

SHARON THESEN, ED.

Talonbooks, 2001

496 pages, \$29.95

IN HER second edition of *The New Long Poem Anthology*, Sharon Thesen collects the work of 25 Canadian poets working in the long poem, nine more than in the previous one (1992), including Louis Dudek, Anne Carson, Steve McCaffery, Don McKay, George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch, and Yolande Villemaire. It’s interesting to see more recent work by the old standards, updated as their concerns evolve, and not just the same poems every time, making this more like a companion to previous volumes, rather than a simple replacement. Thesen has a good editorial eye, adding newer voices and newer works by the familiar, e.g., Carson, Mouré, Robertson, and Derksen, each with a statement of poetics at the end. As Kiyooka writes in his: “Doesn’t any poet write a single work all his live-long life? Break it up into measurable units, call each unit a lyric – a stroke of magic, or, if you wish, a telltale paragraph.” What makes the volume impressive is its range, sweeping from modernist long poems (Dudek) to pieces that break down not just the form but the language as well (Derksen, Robertson, McCaffery), as many of the contributors play with the notion of “a poem as long as a life.” Long poems have been appearing in ever greater numbers since the 1960s lit explosion, but they are hardly ever seen in context, usually published as

excerpts in magazines or as part of a collection. Some, like George Bowering's "Do Sink" and Barry McKinnon's "Arrhythmia" (winners of the bpNichol chapbook Award in 1992 and 1994, respectively) first saw light as a whole in limited edition chapbooks. Others, such as Dionne Brand's "No Language Is Neutral," Lisa Robertson's "Episode: Nurses", and David McFadden's "Gypsy Guitar 1-18" are excerpts from book-length wholes.

THESE DAYS, there seem to be nearly as many pieces written on the long poem as long poems themselves, including Smaro Kamboureli's *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem* (1991), and an issue of *Open Letter* (Summer-Fall 1985) devoted to the proceedings of a conference at York University. There was another long poem symposium at the University of Ottawa in June of 1996, but I don't know if the papers have yet been collected. Robert Kroetsch, in a 1989 essay referenced by Thesen in her introduction, writes:

In love-making, in writing the long poem, delay is both technique and content. Narrative has an elaborate grammar of delay. The poets of the twentieth century, in moving away from narrative, abandoned (some willingly, some reluctantly) their inherited grammar. Poets, like lovers, were driven back to the moment of creation. The question, then: not how to end, but how to begin. Not the quest for ending, but the dwelling at end in the beginning itself.

IN MAKING such a thing out of the prairies, Daniel Lenoski wrote in the introduction to his *along prairie lines: An Anthology of Long Prairie Poems* (1989) that the "long poem was clearly an appropriate literary form not only because it encompassed lyric experience on the frontier, but also, like the

sprawling geography, it propagated the oral tradition of telling ... " Sweeping judgements and generalizations on the form are difficult to make, since there are as many different languages as there are voices to speak. It will be interesting to see what happens after another dozen years: what kinds of poems have been written and collected in other ways. To get a sense of the long poem in Canada one must read them all. Ondaatje, in his introduction to the first long poem anthology, says it simply: "After the perfect lines about the frog or cricket or eclipse we turn around and have to come to terms with the vastness of our place or our vast unspoken history." He places the long poem in a country's maturity: when all the high school lyrics are finished, this is what we become. ●

What was once alive

ANTJE M. RAUWERDA on a
tale of dislocation

Song of Ascent

GABRIELLA GOLIGER

Raincoast

177 pages, \$18.95

GOLIGER'S TITLE refers to the German hiking songs sung by Hannah on her walks with the Zionist Blau-Weiss youth group in 1933. Unexpectedly (even refreshingly in an era that spectacularises the holocaust in films like this year's *Anne Frank: The Whole Story*), Goliger focuses on Hannah and her family as they reconcile themselves with having left Germany safely. The narrative thus starts in Germany, alludes to how

Hannah (remarkably easily, it seems) hikes away from the Nazis, and then picks up a generation later, giving us the recollections of Hannah's daughter, Rachel. From Rachel, we learn how Hannah and her mysteriously acquired husband Ernst (Goliger probably doesn't intend this to be a mystery, but the reader is left without explanation) went to Israel, and from there wound up in "Borscht Alley" in Montreal with their children (the aforementioned Rachel and her brother, Avi).

The strength of Goliger's writing lies in her use of judicious details. The characters become interesting, but not through the narratives of escape, their relations with each other, or their efforts to grapple with alienation and the guilt incumbent on having left other family members in Germany. Instead, they become interesting as they unravel. Goliger is most perspicacious when noting the individual, bodily, and psychological betrayals that are symptomatic of the trauma of dislocation. For Gerda (Hannah's childhood friend – re-introduced somewhat awkwardly and lengthily as an adult midway through the novel), for example, the optimistic songs of the 1930s are lost to "Maladies of the Inner Ear." Gerda reflects on tinnitus:

Each one hears something different. Mr Sommerville ... hears the distant but persistent drone of an airplane. Lucy hears crickets and sometimes, on a very bad day, the sound of smashing china. Bob hears the cackle of radio static, as if his head were caught between channels. "I keep wanting to adjust the dial," he says with a wry grin as his fingers twitch.

Gerda switches on the bedside table lamp and attempts to read more of her novel, but the words swim on the page and the clamor worsens. Learn to live with it, they say in her group. Learn to relax and accept the rushing, roaring wind in the cave as if it were as normal and natural as the ticking of a clock.

The noise in her head is a constant reminder of the people she has left behind. It is persistent, infuriating, and, crucially, as irrefutable as the holocaust itself. In Chapter Three, “Air and Earth”, Rachel describes another malady, Hannah’s insanity, frustrated by how it exposes the impotence, poverty and foreignness of the family in Montreal. On the walk home from grocery shopping Hannah stoops to watch a butterfly: “but there is too much of something in Hannah’s face. And the grocery bags shouldn’t be lying like that, limp and exposed so that anyone passing by could see their things – the dented tins for five cents off, the Javex Hannah uses for scrubbing the toilet.” The flaccid, gaping bags suggest how Hannah herself is over-exposed and vulnerable.

Hannah’s own “ascent” occurs in the chapter that, presumably, is intended to anchor the novel. In “Song of Ascent” Hannah climbs to the roof, apparently to commit suicide and, though Ernst pleads at the bottom of the fire-escape stairs, is brought down only by the sound of Rachel crying (again, sound is key): “I continued to howl, louder and angrier ... Most likely I wanted to run to them, but I was afraid of the pool of darkness around me, the stillness.” The odd thing about images like this one is that Rachel asserts both detailed memory of the “pool of darkness” and an ill-remembered understanding of her motives (“most likely I wanted to run to them”). This illustrates the book’s main stylistic contradiction quite well: specific detail is combined with strangely imposed distance/vagueness.

This image also made me notice that “Song of Ascent” is the only chapter written in the first person. This may seem a relatively trivial observation, but Goliger’s choice of narrative voices produces an odd, and

not entirely harmonious, effect in the novel as a whole. The rest of the book is written from an omniscient perspective. While we are invited into Rachel’s head in “Song of Ascent”, elsewhere we are kept out. Why? Perhaps the narrative choices have to do with how the book came together from Goliger’s other publications. Of the eleven chapters, seven were previously published as stories. Goliger’s effort to bring all of them together in her first novel is, unsurprisingly, troubled by apparent discontinuities. Though discontinuities can be used to great effect, here the shifts in tone and time and narrative beg for a stronger rationale – and perhaps more judicious editing. The chapter on Gerda’s tinnitus, for instance, is very rich in image and effect, but why is it here? If it must be here, why do we not find out more about Gerda? Why is she so randomly (though perhaps conveniently) inserted? This line of questioning makes me, perhaps churlishly, critical of Goliger. I begin to wonder whether the only thread that connects the stories, the various “songs” of the lost nation, is the author’s investigation of her own history.

THE CONCLUDING chapters of the novel question the representation of holocaust history. Rachel tends the aged, dying Ernst and imagines him as a younger man cleaning shoes. The details are as meticulous as the shoes themselves:

Sunday mornings, before breakfast, he stood in the doorway of the back fire escape, the family’s footwear in a neat row. He slipped a shoe over his left hand, examined the week’s damage and began the reparations. With an old sock on his right hand, he daubed polish over the surface of the leather, rubbed firmly into every seam and crack, let the shoe stand to dry, then buffed with a brush ... He scolded her when he caught her cramming her feet into her

shoes without untying the laces. “Show some respect for what was once alive. That is the skin of an animal.”

The shoes become metonymic of the holocaust victims. Goliger juxtaposes the image above with a description of an exhibit at the Holocaust Museum in Washington:

[Rachel] remembers a mountain of shoes ... Men’s, women’s, children’s. Boots, sandals, loafers, ordinary walking shoes. Thrown pell-mell into the heap, not a pair to be seen, all singles. Mashed down, crushed, battered, all a dull, uniform mud colour. A museum exhibit.

Goliger suggests that people, like the shoes, have become museum exhibits. She implies that the “respect for what was once alive” is lacking. She concludes that the “interesting explanations and displays” in museums are inadequate, even dehumanising. For Goliger, a *Song of Ascent*, a transcendence of or reckoning with holocaust history, must deal with what went on beyond the camps and must be personal. And yet, perhaps because of the magnitude of the trauma she invokes, she seems reluctant to fully occupy the people she creates here. ●

Capricious & elusive guide

TIM CONLEY on an unworldly view of literature

Literature and the Gods

ROBERTO CALASSO

Translated by Tim Parks

Alfred A. Knopf

212 pages, \$33.00

THOTH, LOOKING down his ibis's beak or gibbon's nose at a writer such as Roberto Calasso, must be mischievously amused. Amused though perhaps not pleased, which might be too much to expect from the god of the moon and letters and the attendant who scribbles down the spirit's weight when it is soberly placed in the scales for judgement in the afterlife. Here, remarks Thoth, who along with all the other deities is widely rumoured to be dead, is a fellow who may give the game away.

Calasso's books *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (1993) and *Ka* (1998) have established him as a deft historian of myth (not a paradox). Although *Literature and the Gods* is Calasso's shortest book and is based on a series of lectures given at Oxford in 2000, it is also his most hermetic work. It begins with the daunting statement, "The gods are fugitive guests of literature." Abrupt and good; resounding even; but not particularly helpful. What, exactly, is a fugitive guest? Is it the refugee seeking asylum, the dark mysterious stranger in from the elements to join us at table, or the reluctant invitee squirming to get away from an onerous reception? Calasso has a gift for being direct in his manner while his matter is anything but. Here is the full opening paragraph:

The gods are fugitive guests of literature. They cross it with the trail of their names and are soon gone. Every time the writer sets down a word, he must fight to win them back. The mercurial quality that heralds their appearance is token also of their evanescence. It wasn't always thus. At least not so long as we had a liturgy. That weave of word and gesture, that aura of controlled destruction, that use of certain materials rather than others: this gratified the gods, so long as men chose to turn to them. After which, like wind-blown scraps in an abandoned encampment, all that was left were the stories that every ritual gesture implied. Uprooted from their soil and exposed, in the vibration of the word, to the harsh light of day, they frequently seemed idle and impudent. Everything ends up as history of literature.

Yes, it must be admitted, this man knows a thing or two about stylish prose. Gliding past the brief sigh for lost traditions to that lapidary last sentence, Calasso in this paragraph exemplifies what he manages to do in the book as a whole: avoid the torpors of critical elegy while articulating an Orphic sort of yearning. On the other hand, though, my eye fixes upon "that use of certain materials rather than others" and I plan a route of skepticism that takes me farther than it should. But I'll map it out after a few more comments on form.

Literature and the Gods is in many respects a demanding read, and it is hard to imagine even the most attentive Oxford lecture audience not wanting to reach for a rewind button at certain points. Just as many of Calasso's associative leaps are stupefying and a reader is hard-pressed to keep up, so too the more engaging insights are intermittent and the prose is frequently enigmatic. When in a chapter entitled "*Incipit parodia*" Calasso observes that "Hölderlin and Nietzsche didn't write about the

Greeks; rather, from time to time they could themselves become Greeks," there is a perceptible sense of longing on the author's part for some similar chameleon ability. And there is some blinking to be done when faced with a sentence such as this one: "So Mallarmé's sonnet 'in ix,' which the author himself said was 'allegorical of itself,' turns out to be a sharpened splinter of light gleaming back into the past so far as to shine on that collection of hymns thought to be primordial and 'nonhuman,' *apauruseya*: the Rgveda."

One has to have had a fortifying dose of some pretty rich stuff before such pronouncements can be digested. In fact, one requires an education and that is very much an affair of this world. Even if the heralds from Olympus commune with the writer and fill the writer's head with visions, words, and snappy title ideas, the communion has to take place somewhere. For a room of one's own, the rent must be paid. The world of print is one of certain luxury.

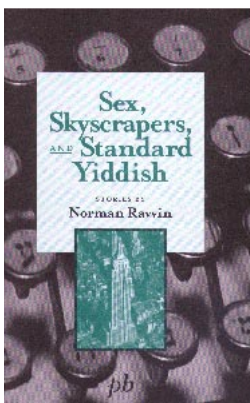
The materiality of literature (and might there be a materiality of the gods?) is paid no mind in this book apart from the vague nod at the "use of certain materials." Lautréamont, we are told, has to pay "an initial deposit of four hundred francs to the publisher Lacroix to have him print his *Chants de Maldoror*," which the publisher then refuses to distribute. What of it, though, if the avant-garde's origins are not to be explained "via some historical or sociological approach" but by a manifestation of the divine? What's four hundred francs? Calasso's "history of literature" is a strictly transcendental phenomenon. He argues for an "absolute literature", a shared breath and song – maybe a recovered liturgy? – among diverse writers. To follow "the chequered and tortuous history of absolute literature," Calasso says, is to depend not on mere historians and

critics but on the writers of “absolute literature”:

Capricious and elusive guides as they are, they are the only ones who know the territory well: when we read the essays of Baudelaire or Proust, of Hoffmannsthal or Benn, Valéry or Auden, Brodsky or Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetayeva or Karl Kraus, Yeats or Montale, Borges or Nabokov, Manganelli, Calvino, Canetti, Kundera, we immediately sense – even though each may have hated, or ignored, or even opposed the other – that they are all *talking about the same thing*. Which doesn’t mean they are eager to put a name to it.

Is it the necessary dissonance among critics – the *convulsive pulse* of criticism, and I think, too, literature – that excludes them from the divine order? (Oh, I can unravel tasty lists myself, and an entire alphabet is easily conjured: Auerbach, Benjamin, Cixous, Deleuze, Eco, Freud, Gilbert and Gubar) The division between criticism and literature is specious, as Borges, for one from the list above, would attest before reprimanding his publishers at Viking for printing his “fiction” and “non-fiction” as separate volumes. Thoth oversees both enterprises (and the sciences, too, which are disregarded in *Literature and the Gods*).

And so maybe he squints also over a poor reviewer’s shoulder. Poor, in that the world is too much with him and he answers too quickly to the notion of four hundred francs; poor, too, in his recognition that Roberto Calasso’s provocation to a numb secular outlook needs greater contemplation. ●



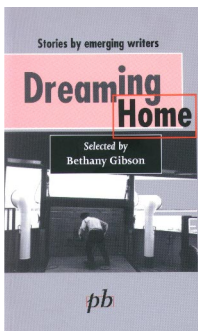
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