

# paperplates

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Vol. 5, No. 3

Poetry, fiction, reviews



# Vol. 5, No 3

8

ADELE MEGANN

## *Triptych: what I learned from my cat*

—  
His muscles vibrated with readiness, his  
body stiff, as he aligned his triangle ears  
with the banging and swearing that issued  
from the kitchen.

TIM CONLEY

## *The Tip*

—  
There must be any number of wrong ways  
in which to tell this pathetic little story,  
and this is only one of them. Most of it is  
true, and some of it is relevant, which all in  
all is not a bad mixture.

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PAMELA MACISAAC

## *Notes on Number 65*

—  
It was William's idea to set the artificial  
Christmas tree on the balcony, in the centre  
of the beautiful drifts. Winnifred makes a  
point of giving in to small, inexpensive  
whims.

SHERYL L. NELMS

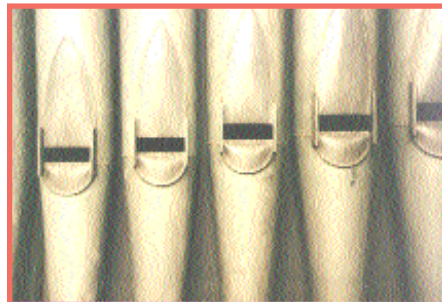
## *Quiet night*

—  
the May moon is  
a cool  
neon glow

sitting here in  
the rhubarb  
patch

I see shadows ...

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# Die Schlafenden

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**E**S FRIERT. It's freezing. Where, now, are those optimists who predicted a mild winter? Vacationing in another hemisphere, no doubt. *Es schneit*. It's snowing, has snowed so often and to such a depth this month that the lowest layer of it is frozen to the sidewalk and will yield to the blade of a shovel (when propelled by a teenage arm) only after several hours of softening sunshine. *Es scheint*. Fortunately, there has been sunshine. It angles along one side of the streetcar. The lower the temperature (my own or the air's), the more likely it is that I will sit within the brightness, studying, once again, my German grammar, during the therapeutic daily commute.

*Es dämmert*. It's growing dark. By dinnertime, it is no longer day. The shortcut to the convenience store feels too smooth, too icy. I walk as if I had several centres of gravity, toes spread nervously wide within my boots. *Abendessen*. The evening meal becomes a consolation of sorts, bringing with it all the light, colour, and warmth we're being deprived of. Or is that merely the image on the microwaveable packet? *Mach dir keine Sorgen*. Don't worry, sleep will come, as usual, at the same time as ever. Only, the house creaks a little more than usual; there is the inevitable two-note thud in the joist downstairs as the bed, the floor, and the wall adjust themselves to my turning weight. *Weck die Schlafenden nicht auf*. Don't wake those who are sleeping. If it is not last summer I dream about, it is surely next spring.



Our poetry editor, Suzanne Hancock, whose choices will mark several more issues still, has relinquished her role, to have more time to pursue an MFA in creative writing. We thank her for helping us with the difficult task of choosing among the many poems submitted and for doing it so well. Succeeding her is Colleen Flood, a published poet (*Bonding with Gravity*) and a longstanding supporter of *paperplates*.

– Bernard Kelly

## Beijing: opting for off-season

**C**HRISTMAS EVE: My friend Anna and I stand in line at Beijing's airport waiting to exchange yen for yuan. It's almost 11:30 and the place is deserted. By price default, China's low season has "virtually" picked us, although, in truth, we are fleeing our adopted homeland, Japan, whose embrace of Santa is nothing short of a stranglehold.

We are both tired. Silent. My pack hangs like a child grown too old for piggyback rides, worn straps biting into bones, waistband and metal frame conspiring to cut off my breath. I fiddle with the straps for a while, adjusting and tinkering. A familiar routine that suddenly feels like a part of someone else's past. I realize my pack isn't ever going to fit right. I feel too old for the pack. I share my revelation with Anna. A nod is all I get for agreement, although her bag looks more like a purse in comparison.

Mulling over my problem, which only a mini suitcase with wheels can fix, we hop aboard a local bus. We pull away from the airport and wobble along, standing centre aisle, perusing our map through flashes of overhead streetlight. The seated passengers fill an otherwise silent bus with grumbles of protest as we use their heads for our paper rest and luggage rack. With the two of us, there seems like little need, or inclination, to make much of a plan. Navigating as mute illiterates has become part of the fun.

By the time the bus reaches its terminus, we have proudly determined

that Beijing is a perfect system of interlocking grids, although our map, peppered with small Chinese characters, will be of little use to us, even with appropriate lighting.

### Night-Time Navigation

Beijing is a howling dust bowl in December. Strong, cold winds blow fine desert sand, ready to lash into exposed flesh. The streets are unimaginably wide, the blocks unforgivably long and oddly deserted. We turtle our heads and necks into our jackets and stumble along, eventually finding room at the inn, a Mongolian General's Palace, conveniently recycled for budget travelers. The friendly receptionist, sporting Tang wear and a little Santa toque, is most welcoming. As we make our way to our room, we can see a lovely open courtyard with swaying lanterns and a room for travellers, sitting on what appear to be thrones, doing a late night e-mail check.

The next morning we wake to the sound of a mutual friend's voice. By chance, he is staying next door. Merry Christmas to us. Mohammed makes a delightful travelling companion.

### The Summer Palace

After breakfast – an odd mix of East meets undercooked West – we squeeze into a cab together. Three days our senior, Mohammed is put in charge of the cabby dealings. The driver rocks his car back and forth a few times to get it going, and we roar off to spend Christmas day at the Summer Palace. The roads are thick with traffic, although no one seems to be demanding space – merely asking. There is a remarkably fluid relationship between cars and the road. Still, the steady stream of antiquated two- and three-wheel bikes warrants its own lane. As the cab rolls along, I let morning-light Beijing press into my cerebral map. The city is a backdrop of skyscrapers and corporate wealth

for men pedaling long carts stacked with coal. While some are catapulting forward, clearly just as many are being left behind.

We arrive at the palace to find it empty of any other tourists. As with most historic places in China, there isn't one story to be told but layers of them. Endless palaces, galleries, and pavilions dot the grounds, each a delicate weave of gold, blue, and green designs against imperial-red supporting structures. Small paintings of flowers and landscape are laced throughout the ceilings – ornate elegance rules. Obedient Chinese dragons sit single file on the curled rooftop corners. Their number indicates the importance of each building. There is a stillness to all of this and a strong sense of things left undone; the secrets of apathetic royalty never told. All the windows and doors are shut; I want to peel one open, if only to imagine who or what was once inside.

The man-made Kunming Lake covers three-quarters of the Summer Palace grounds. My companions cautiously creep onto it. Frozen, the glass floor snaps and spiders beneath their feet; our brochures show the water scalloped with gentle green ripples. We stroll around more solid sections of the grounds, stopping for hot drinks where we can. It is difficult to imagine the splendor of an imperial garden with frozen toes crunching over patches of snow.

### Yong He Gong: Lama Temple

From the subway station in old Beijing, we can see the intricate architecture of the temple rooftops. The Yong He Gong is the only Buddhist temple in Beijing and is an officially protected historic relic. Once a palatial residence, the converted Lamasery bears a strong resemblance to the Summer Palace and is housed in what appears to be a compound, complete with curled barbed

wire fencing. The Chinese have destroyed all but eight of over 6,000 monasteries and nunneries during their 50-year occupation in Tibet proper. Their zealous protection of this one seems at odds.

We pass through the rotating theme park gate and quietly drift in opposite directions. I stroll through the grounds, amused by the monks policing the vacant grounds for photographing tourists. The buildings hold various treasures: once colourful Tibetan costumes, a fading mandala, and the largest Buddha crafted from the trunk of a single sandalwood tree. I sit on a bench and watch a couple photographing statues of Chinese dragons. On the way out, I snap a sign that reads: *WARNING: Please be careful of your personal effects and protect them from losing.* We leave the grounds enlightened.

### **Temple of Heaven: Tian Tan**

Beijing sightseeing involves the endless walking of sprawling grounds, which all slowly gets worked down to an equation. What if we walk this far and it just isn't worth it? If there were stairs involved (and there often were), it turned into calculus.

The temple of heaven poses a special problem, as it is located on a 273-hectare lot and has a geometry that revolves around multiples of the odd and heavenly number 9. With only so many frozen fingers and toes to count on, we consider this mystic formula a disaster.

We work the equation out by putting the map away and placing one foot in front of the other; decidedly, our lowest common denominator. Mohammed reminds me that this is sacred ground and I should stop complaining. I tell him he is responsible if this gig is a let-down. It isn't.

Each direction and temple had significance in terms of prayer, North for earth, East for sun, South for heaven,

and West for moon. The structures were built on the premise of round heaven, square earth, although this would only be obvious from a bird's eye view.

Once through the gates to the Temple of Good Harvest, we marvel at the tall cylindrical base, crafted from marble. Three tiers of umbrella-like ceiling structures weigh heavily stacked on top of one another, all built without a single nail. One of the many marvels of Ming architecture, inspiring in its simplicity.

### **The Great Wall: Simatai**

At Dongzhimen station, a *miandi* driver stalks over, scrolls out her fee on a small piece of paper, and flashes it defiantly. We cross out her price, scratch down ours, and flash it back. The price is decided all too quickly (never a good sign). We clamber into the small white van anyway. I can feel each groove of the washboard road rippling through my seat. I huddle next to the window and use my jacket sleeve to clear a small circle in the fog, creating my own private theatre. The scenery is a blur of rolling hills and people tending to their makeshift roadside stands. We arrive at Simatai. The wall, built largely by political prisoners, is spectacular. It snakes off into the distance, curling over the mountains for hundreds of miles, scarring the landscape with the work of its slave labor – 26,000 hands built this.

Aside from us, there are no travellers going up, just a few trickling down, offering words of encouragement for the steep climb ahead. Two village women accompany us to the top, making for an unexpected double date. Mine speaks “small English” (*inga-LISH*) as I make the climb, counting down stations and reaching to hold my hand where the wall crumbles. There will be a price for this exchange as they later try to sell us their wall ware – books and postcards. For

the moment, the synchronicity of our small echoing steps and the constant flash of her warm smile charm me. There is endless quiet at the twelfth and final station. Anna had to bribe me with dinner to go all the way, coupled with her infamous “Won't you ALWAYS wonder what was on the other side?” Now, I am content to sit and chill. The view offers a blanket of brown jagged mountains with a tiny village tucked between shadowy folds. The village women watch us looking. The wall, “only as strong as those who defend it”, as Genghis Khan once said, is absolutely besieged by armies of tourists in the peak summer months. Beneath the thick wool scarf I have wrapped around my face I'm filled with the warmth sometimes only an absence can bring.

– *Jill Sexsmith*

# Milton's Cottage, Chalfont-St.Giles

It has to do with leaning into things  
Those particular phrases that suggest

Themselves from somewhere that appears  
Closer to a subject than time itself, that

Enters the heart's count and noncount, its  
Pulp and meaning alike rummaging together

Maybe the way he thought more and more  
About angels, trying to speak like them

Even on days he didn't wish to hear them  
Those were the most important, when trumpets

Kept him awake and they spoke Aramaic, Greek, Latin  
Those angelic monkeys on his brain, yelping and singing

Sweet recurrent songs and handing him lines echoing  
So he woke up his wife, Elizabeth to dictate

To her more of his paradisaical hell as she listens without sleep  
In her eyes he is blind as the south wall, windowless

Plagued without sight though he articulates some  
Ancient angel's scroll of insightful words and words

Keep coming from what he is hearing  
In blessed vocation into early morning as the republican yells

Break over the hill on his land  
Beyond the garden, warring millipedes

With lances and breech-loaders firing off as pearly  
Smoke rises from their muzzles and still transfixed he  
continues

To belt out the words to his scribe as she by now could hear  
inside

That what she scribbles down in his meters are the cries  
amplified

As outside, a war's mechanics, satanic yells of death,  
pumped with  
Clattering blows and good god only knows what else, she  
thought, his

Blindness was miraculously devising.

# Poem

Starless steel faucet of a sink  
Pouring out its clear oxygenated heart  
Into an overflowing glass, water getting  
So cold it glistens  
And elbowed back in thirsty gulps  
Nearly quenches an entire thirst  
And then the back of you  
Humming to yourself and a blind wall  
Standing in a cool shade  
Peeling a potato, its brown-eyed skin  
Flicked onto an arborite counter  
Like shadows  
Some with their white underbellies  
Scraped from a white sun  
Caught on your blue apron

# St. Cloud

(after a photograph by Eugene Atget)

Never been there but it seems not to matter  
Since if you were present you'd notice your absence  
More than ever and how  
The rock still pond in the park in the photograph  
Mirrors a perfectly still world, empty and invaluable  
And though there are statues, what is missing is an  
"I" climbing a ladder to nowhere, evanescent as some  
Soluble throwaway, noticing only the statues that  
Implicates a crowd of frozen life though perfectly still  
Intuits gestures toward eternity, a footstep, a cloud  
About to rain, a zephyr that unhitches some motion  
of any sort  
An eddy, and then reiterates and removes a pristine sense  
Of nothing from the very notion of St. Cloud, the very  
World itself, and you are totally out of the picture  
Nowhere to be found.

– Matt Santateresa

ADELE MEGANN

# *Triptych: what I learned from my cat*

I

**H**IS MOUTH IS SO RED, she thinks. Nestor paces from one very end of the balcony to the other, and back, mouth staring at her like blood. His head pivots, persistently zeroed on her.

“Charlie!” calls Agnes.

“What?” he responds from the basement.

“Come here!”

“Why?”

Nestor’s eyes spin out of his head. “Just come here.”

“What is it?” Charlie’s footsteps trudge across the basement floor.

“Come HERE.”

“What’s wrong?” He’s standing at the foot of the stairs now.

“COME HERE.”

He does. “The cat is green,” he says.

“Thank goodness,” she says.

“What?” says Charlie.

“That you see it too.” Nestor keeps pacing, rhythmic but rapid, his bright mouth focused on them. *Left left left left left swivel right right right right right swivel.* “He’s terrified,” says Agnes.

“Look at those silent meows,” says Charlie.

“What do we do?” she asks.

“Must be paint or something,” he says. “Poor little guy.”

“Christ,” she says. “The carpet. We can’t get paint on it. We rent.”

“The parts of him that are white, anyway. I wonder if it’s on the black parts, too.”

*Left left left left left swivel right right ...*

Agnes thinks towards the window: I told myself I loved you, Nestor. You know that, don’t you? She says: “I wish I knew what it was.”

“It can’t be very wet,” says Charlie. “Look how nice and fluffy his fur still is.”

“Some fluffy,” says Agnes. “Fluffy and green. Do you think he knows?”

The cat strains his mouth taut. “I think he knows,” says Charlie.

Nestor’s round eyes fix on Agnes, her face the stake to which he is tethered. Love and fear are transparent between them. The silent meows breach audibility. *Left left left left ...*

“They’re complementary colours,” says Agnes.

“Huh?” says Charlie.

“Red and green. That’s why his mouth looks so red. It was the first thing I noticed. The green shows it off.”

“His mouth is always red,” replies Charlie. “Especially when it’s open.”

“But don’t you think it’s redder than usual?”



*Left left left left left swivel right right right right right swivel left left . . .*

"I'll get a towel," says Charlie.

## II

COOKBOOKS SURROUNDED me as I sat in the middle of the living room floor. Seeking diabetic trifle. Best-beloved wanted trifle for Easter dinner dessert because his mother always made trifle for Easter dinner dessert. Her recipe wouldn't do now that he was diabetic, so sitting in the middle of the living room floor was I, researching the components of diabetic trifle: sugarless custard, jam, whipped cream and such stuff.

Charlie was on the phone gossiping with Lynne, an ex-colleague working in Winnipeg, him absolutely *oooozing* oh-it's-been-such-a-long-time-tell-me-everything-tell-me-twice. Good thing I'm not the jealous type. Besides, she's lesbian, with a partner even, an accountant who does Charlie's taxes. Not that it matters, of course.

Charlie was seated at the table next to the balcony door. We're on the ground floor, so our balcony is not very high. The sky was bright, not sunny, just bright, like it is in Alberta even when it's cloudy, so Charlie was a tall, thin shadow burbling over with affection and nostalgia. The door was open.

Through which came Nestor, our cat, into the living room. I glanced up to greet him. His silhouette zoomed at me. He was making this funny noise. *Beep. Beep. Beep.* I had never heard a cat go "beep". Then I realized he couldn't be making the noise, not with his mouth anyway, because his mouth was occupied, being closed around the thing that actually made the noise, the still-emitting sound — *beep beep beep* — soft and regular like a heart monitor, and Charlie said, "Gotta go, Lynne. The cat just brought something into the house," and he hung up, and I shouted:

"IT'S ALIVE!"

"It's a what?" said Charlie.

"It's alive! It's alive! It's NOT dead. It's alive." I abandoned my cookbooks and bolted for the kitchen, but Nestor darted past me with the alive thing.

"It's still alive," I cried.

"It's a bird," said Charlie.

"It's in our house."

"GO to the balcony, please," said Charlie. "You're not being helpful."

We stared down at Nestor and he craned his neck up at us, looking puzzled — as puzzled as he could look with a bird in his mouth. His whiskers twitched, and his long black hair seemed to twitch, too. Likely he didn't know

Walking home plumes of vapour drifting from my nostrils  
jumping on pools of white ice fascinated by the  
destruction because I am not supposed to want  
to break glass  
and Orion stretches across the sky rampant  
the only constellation I can find every time and the air is  
cold it etches tea roses into my cheeks  
small and scentless

— Ariel Gordon

what to do next. He was only a year old, and this was our first bird.

Not his first collar, though. He'd successfully detained a couple of mice and he knew what to do with them: play catch. Not with them, but WITH them.

So he tossed the bird up. His poor stunned eyes grew ever wider as the bird fluttered away from him and made a beeline for the kitchen window. Nestor soared after the fleeing prey, straight into the sink. He straddled the faucet with his hind legs, pawing at the frenzy of feathers. The bird was, at this point, whacking itself into the pane, flailing back, then smashing into it again. Playing bongo drums with his head on our kitchen window.

"That window's closed, you idiot!" I shouted helpfully. "Go out the way you came."

Charlie snatched Nestor by the scruff of the neck and hurled him into the living room. I scooped him up and ran for the balcony. He made no attempt to return to the scene of the crime. His muscles vibrated with readiness, his body stiff, as he aligned his triangle ears with the banging and swearing that issued from the kitchen.

Charlie soon emerged with the bird cupped in his hands. "It's a robin," he said. Nestor quivered, eyes like loonies, his whiskers strutting forward.

"A robin?" I said. "How could dumb-dumb here catch a robin? He hasn't even figured out wings." I rubbed the back of his head. "You know, Nestor, those appendages that make them hard to catch? They're also the reason you shouldn't let go." I massaged his electrified fur. He was not quickly calming down.

"Must have been a fluke," said Charlie. "Nestor was hunkered down on the balcony rail, just quietly guarding the street. Maybe the robin landed on the rail without noticing him and he grabbed it. Nestor was probably as surprised as Robin Red-Breast was."

"Is it hurt?" We held an enemy each, the bird burying itself into Charlie's palm, Nestor perched firmly in my arms, peering at his lost prize.

"I don't think so," said Charlie. "I'll set it on this

branch." He leaned towards the spruce tree that brushes our balcony. "Give it a chance to rest before it moves on."

The bird was taking no chances. The three of us gazed on as it instantly made like an arrow and disappeared into the vapour.

Then Charlie turned to me. "It's *alive*?"

"Well, it was."

"That was the best thing you could think of to say?"

"At the time." I shivered inside. Sayings from childhood returned to me. Omens. *A bird in the house means a death in the family. Outdoors does not come in or there's hell to pay.* Charlie would laugh, I thought, if I told him. But maybe bad luck follows only if the bird flies in, not if your cat dragged it in.

"You like your birds dead, huh?" Charlie is smiling now, winding down.

"You should call Lynne back," I say.

He laughs. "I was a little abrupt. She's probably wondering what happened."

"I found a recipe for sugarless custard."

"He was heading for you, you know."

"The bird?"

"Nestor. When he carried the bird in. To show you. To show off. To you. He shot right past me. It was for you."

"Ah," I said. "Do you think I traumatized him by refusing his gift?"

Charlie raised his eyebrows. "Refusing it? You screamed at it."

"I think he's forgiven me." Nestor trembled against my chest, as if he was the victim in need of comfort.

Among the many many many grey feathers I found throughout the house in the following days were two tinged with orange. I kept them, slipped them into an old plastic name tag. My cat caught a robin. I can prove it.

### III

THE MOST GRACEFUL movement was the one she didn't see. Nestor had brought home a live mouse. Belligerently — because by then he knew his humans did not appreciate them. At one time, Agnes had eked out: "Good cat, good cat" when Nestor lugged in his victims, so as to acknowledge what's only natural and not damage his self-esteem. But not any more. She had even given up standing on chairs.

This time he led them on a game of *cat and mouse and human* in the living room. The expanse of carpet was a perfect arena. Charlie hovered over the battle scene with a yoghurt container, which he more than once landed with a hiss "Yesss!" on a spot just vacated by the mouse. Again and again Nestor released the prisoner, who made one short dash,

then froze. The humans yelled, "Now! Now!" and the mouse scooted away. Nestor cast barely a glance at the fugitive; he didn't even bother to run after it. Nevertheless, within a minute, the rodent was nestled again between his paws. Agnes followed everyone and provided advice.

She didn't see the most graceful movement because she was on the other side of the dining table at the time. So when the mouse came vaulting towards her, smack landing in the middle of the table, she said to Charlie, "How did it do that? Mice can't fly."

"Nestor threw him," said Charlie. The mouse scuttled off the table and vanished.

Eventually Charlie trapped the mouse under the yoghurt container and then said: "Now what? If I pick up the container, the mouse will run away."

"Duh," said Agnes.

"The problem is, he doesn't know that we're on his side."

"We don't know that." Agnes marched over. She raised her hand, pinching her thumb and forefinger like tweezers. "Remove the container."

Charlie did, and the mouse wavered on the spot. Agnes leaned over and snapped her fingers around the mouse's tail. She lifted the creature up, its wee limbs wiggling.

"What are you doing?" asked Charlie.

"If you twirl them gently, they can't turn and bite you," said Agnes.

"How do you know that?"

"Read it somewhere."

Nestor gazed up at the revolving mouse. "Come on, buster," she said to him. "Let's get this over with."

Nestor shadowing her, Agnes deposited the mouse on the balcony, then briskly stepped back inside and shut the door.

Charlie stood in the living room, hands on his hips, staring at her. "You've come a long way, baby," he said.

"Someone had to," said Agnes. She started to strip the table.

"Bet we're not eating off that tablecloth again," said Charlie, grinning.

"They have germs," said Agnes, not grinning.

She carried the tablecloth to the basement. While walking down the stairs, throwing the cloth in the washer, pouring in soap, setting the dials, she was picturing the most graceful movement; she was dreaming of a rotating arc, of Nestor's neck, of a tide flowing through the slinky muscles, slithering the black furskin, undulating from the tip of the feathery tail, surging to the tip of each long and purposeful hair. The neck gliding the head into release, the tail the spine the neck the mouth the teeth the mouse one wave one curved line

## Best of strangers

Stillness fills the space  
Beyond this plate glass separating me  
From my other identity,  
That stowaway Doppelgänger,  
Who's waiting for the perfect chance to escape,  
Fly my psyche's coop of roosting demons,  
Take to the sky without me.

I can almost see him soaring free  
Above the motionless trees,  
Through the rain-laden haze,  
Toward a vanishing point  
In the stained-glass apse of my imagination,  
Disappearing like a shaft of sunlight  
Retracting into the solar corona.

Strange, how I've pondered this epiphany  
Waking and asleep, inebriated, sober,  
Without ever plumbing its deeper implications.  
After all, permanent separation  
Might devastate our hearts, souls,  
Cause us, though apart all our life,  
To die from loneliness.

– *Louis Daniel Brodsky*

---

## Looking at the window

I looked at the window for some reason,  
but didn't see it. I looked at the window  
and saw, for some reason, the street outside.  
A moment later I washed my hands  
and realized:  
we don't really wash our hands,  
our hands wash themselves, our hands wash us.

– *Jason Heroux*

## Essential rituals

The setting is familiar.  
These hotel halls  
Are interchangeable.

The speeches are aural clones  
Constantly repeated in  
An endless loop  
Started the week before.

The introductions are  
Always "short" (in geologic terms);  
The unchanging anecdotes,  
Always fatuous.

Reference to history: Mandatory;  
Vision of the future: A must;  
Vague insults: A sacred litany;

The chant is so predictable:  
Canada, Quebec, the West;  
English, French, the rest –  
The rules are respected.

Stylized, compartmentalized, vapid  
The song of national politics  
(Regional counterpoint)

Pardon,  
Our Man has arrived.  
Have to go.

– *Paul Karan*

TIM CONLEY

# The Tip

**I** WAS NOT A POET. The confirmation was exact, and timed with the arrival of our disinterested server, a thin girl with a fat pouting bottom lip, with our fourths on a tray. We were very much ensconced in a booth decorated with photos of dead jazz musicians, both of us pinkfaced and for the moment silent, but each for his own reasons. Aspern offered to the girl his slightest smile as he took the pints in hand, but as I had already noticed with no warmth, she did not know a poet from a fencepost. Although Aspern conveyed no sense of any slight, I was indignant for the both of us.

No clean route of return was left to the conversation: after the bombshell, only a crater to circumnavigate. I toyed with my drink – meaning my hands were never away from it, as opposed to the sheaf of papers and notebook likewise clutched before then, and I took large, regular gulps – while Aspern spoke in a voice not unkind about the inadequacy of the idea of *vocation*. He declared *vocation* a mystic’s archaic and emptyheaded word. Infrequent but very uncustomary uses of hard expletives suggested that by now even he felt the effects of the drink.

Although it may be to no purpose, and I probably lack the ability to express it with any justice, it ought to be recorded that Aspern drank like a poet. I don’t mean anything grotesque, such as that he slurped back gross quantities; though certainly he could hold his own. Style! On previous occasions, usually when there were more than just the two of us around just such a table, I could quietly and unreservedly admire the manner in which he held his glass, or even how he set it down. The shaping of his lips to the rim had a delicacy and also a sly hint of the insincere which the most gorgeous movie stars and figures in paintings could not match with their whispers and kisses.

*Vocation!* His mouth screwed up. Emptyheaded word. As bad, nearly, as *talent* or *inspiration* – though at least those things exist, after a fashion, but not in the fashion of those words. Cash and breath, that’s what they mean. Indispensables. Shoot for those.

Let me make my point, he said, with a story.

THERE MUST BE any number of wrong ways in which to tell this pathetic little story, and this is only one of them. Most of it is true, and some of it is relevant, which all in all is not a bad mixture.

I know of a poet, or I used to know about one, living near my miserable little hometown, which barely kissed the main roads between cities before it prissily moved back into rustic obscurity. This man, this poet I’m talking about, had a large and remote house in which, rumours said, he lived all by his lonesome. Not that he was never seen. He was one of those old bachelors who like to take long country walks, and the two unmarried librarians in the town, sisters who poured scorn on anybody who dared even to bother them at their paper-shuffling posts, competed for his attention during his regular visits there. It wasn’t that he was handsome, or even an exceptionally snappy dresser. Those jaded sisters smelled culture on him, something they’d not sniffed since getting stuck in this backwoods, and the first time he came into the library and gently asked, please, did they happen to have a copy of *Fêtes*

---

for Dean J. Irvine

*galantes* he could borrow – well, that was that – *nous aimions ce jeu de dupes*. Apparently, he read just about everything, and the idea that he might be rich surely was no impediment to romantic fancies.

Might be rich, I said. Obviously he was a man of means, if that phrase still has any clean use in it, for the fact of that huge place of his. And then there was the semi-mystery of his professional past, as it became known he was once a physician who had fairly recently given up his practice. He was not old enough to have retired, but there was no perceptible cloud of shame hovering anywhere about him: it must have been the effect of a weariness, or detected unsuitability, within himself, that explained the surrender. For a while local people liked to speculate on the question.

The giddy librarians were among the most indulgent in this diversion, egging each other on probably both for sheer delirium and in secret hopes of observing the other slip in her necessary balance between devotion and decorum. Gradually the competition grew fiercer, until the day of the younger sister's coup: the discovery (after the unmentioned fact of several weeks of private research) of a slim, green-covered volume of poems authored by none other than the gentleman doctor. By the time of her modest announcement of this happy accident she had, she blushed to demonstrate to the small crowd of the Friends of the Library gathered around her, found some idle moments in which to memorize some of the verses.

Of course, the morning after the unusually celebratory evening's meeting, a garotte of cool silence was tightening around the library. The two sisters had little to say to one another, and the due dates stamped by the elder sister in books borrowed that day were more indelible than ever before. The nose out of joint abruptly straightened with a vengeance one autumn day when there came the supremely casual counter-announcement: the Friends were all invited to a *soirée de poésie* later that month which the good doctor would attend (sensation) and perhaps might be convinced to give a reading (greater sensation). Apparently the elder sister had been in postal communication with the gentleman. One septuagenarian Friend gave an encouraging leer and wink, smooth work, my dear, which action released unexpected acids into the younger sister's digestive system. She sought release that evening, shut in her room in their shared house, with a bottle of red wine she'd been saving for a happier occasion. It was, if not the absolute beginning, the decisive turn of a fatal alcoholism.

Energies sprang up in both sisters to focus on the approaching date of the *soirée*. Neither of them could speak to a person without mentioning it – oh, perhaps some cheese and wine with grapes, nothing too extravagant, but all the same quite marvellous, I don't mind telling you

## Bruised rock

there was a time  
when I didn't trust the heavens.  
when the vagaries of light and rain  
tricked the sky into injury.

the bruise rose up  
in conviction of pain.  
the sky began to favour itself;  
avoiding mountains.

It was not winter,  
but a season of flesh and green  
I slept only  
when you returned,  
only when  
I could forget the long strides of night  
that stepped carefully,  
soundlessly  
over serrated mountains  
winning from the fresh bruise of sharp sky.

– Vivian Hansen

we're very excited – and at least the sleep of the elder librarian was sometimes troubled by the thought of a last-minute cancellation from the guest of honour.

There were some grounds for worry. What the doctor had accepted was a vague invitation to a literary evening, nothing that explicitly called for any contribution of performance on his part. And, finally, on the evening of the *soirée* (black rain, I remember, straight down most of the night), the first thing the librarians noticed of the doctor's shyly punctual appearance was the lack of a briefcase, folder, satchel, or anything which might carry verses. One sister gave a searching look to the other, who pretended not to notice. There was still the green-covered volume on hand should the need (more need than occasion here) arise. And the wine was opened.

Almost immediately the doctor began to feel uncomfortable, pawed as he was by cooing Friends, each of whom seemed to use strange and stranger innuendo when speaking to him. Yes, he admitted, he did enjoy poetry, and when he admitted it another would more than enjoy poetry right back; when he uttered the name of a poet, with a profession of admiration, the name was echoed back to him couched in deeper and inevitably longer professions of feeling surpassing admiration. But at the same time there was always a gesture of deference to his authority. One or another librarian reached over to fill his glass and exchange a smile. Nothing he said

went unattended, or indeed without some fairly enthusiastic reaction. Warmth spread through his little ears: the wine was creeping up on him fast, he was not used to it. Then there was a hand on his shoulder, rather near the neck. It was the younger librarian, herself not untouched by the wine, asking him directly whether he felt ready to offer some of his work. The hand remained on his shoulder.

His work? He flushed and shook. He looked around him at the eager stares. His work? No, no. Impossible, he was shaking his head and putting down his glass on the most immediate surface. The citric smell of the younger librarian's perfume crept into his nostrils as she was naming the title of his little collection; he then shook his head even more violently, and moved to where his coat was hanging. No, he stammered only part of an explanation, those words dissatisfied him more than they could know; he was sorry; he was not prepared; he was very sorry. And then he was out the door. It was still fairly early, one of the Friends observed sourly.

Miserable, the retired doctor walked through the night and rain without the umbrella he had forgotten at the library but which he correctly assumed he would never recover. (I once heard that, years later, the elder librarian kept it as a cherished object, and in her lonely senior years never went out in any weather without it.) His lips were this moment drawn tight, the next quivering with half-words muttered to himself. By the time (over an hour and a half later) he reached his door and tremblingly pushed and turned the key his approbations were nearly audible. What a fool!

Once inside he strode directly to the bathroom and dried his head with a towel. What a fool! Again and again. He could still smell the librarian's perfume. The mirror dutifully showed his vanity's incongruence with his pitiful drenched appearance. Briskly switching off the light, he stepped into the hallway and towards the staircase. He halted at its base and slowly stooped to see the carpet soiled there by a muddy boot's imprint.

All of his thoughts were rerouted by this discovery. No sound. His eyes flashed in the hall as he thought of the pistol he kept in his office, which was not far. Still no sound. He crept like a man unaccustomed to creeping to the office, and stepped inside its darkness, reaching for the lamp.

It sparked alive before he could reach it.

OUR FIFTHS. Aspern grinned at me as he gestured for me to hurry up with my unfinished glass. That from him was pretty much all I completely understood at this point. Actually, I experienced an unknown tinge of resentment: though slight, it was altogether new. He quaffed the better part of his drink before he continued:

WHICH HE APPREHENDED first the doctor probably would not have been able to tell: the presence of the stranger comfortable in the chair holding that sought-after pistol, or the disarray that surrounded the two men. As for the first, a closer inspection revealed a much younger man than himself, an insouciant face, but one with telltale signs of surprise that belied his show of armed and seated ease. The mess of the room, meanwhile, was certainly the effect of a thorough ransacking.

The doctor was ordered, with an accompanying wave of the pistol probably learned from gangster films, to sit down, on the floor. For some reason the burglar, when he began to speak, often addressed the other man as "sir," though without irony. But he was straight to the point: where did the gentleman store his money? Was there a safe in the house? No, the doctor admitted, ashamed by the vulgarity of discussing money, no safe. What hiding place, then? (For it was clear the thief had been in the house for some time, searching, opening, loosing, breaking, without any other result than frustration.) No hiding place, beyond the drawers already lying upturned on the floor – which the thief promptly seized and scanned for false bottoms, whereupon the doctor told him they had none. The amount found in those drawers ("sir") was negligible. The thief wasn't to be taken for a fool. A man of the doctor's class and esteem had to have more valuables: what about jewellery, trinkets, collectibles? He waved the gun again, but it was even more clear then that he had never held such a thing before. The doctor watched the tremors of the wrist, and wondered about this youth: he was not from the town, but very likely from a neighbouring area. After a moment he answered that he had no collateral that would interest the thief. All that he had was the house; he was not a rich man.

Sitting further back in the chair, the thief scratched his head and exhaled slowly. He took his eyes from the doctor for the first time and silently looked around him a moment. Not a rich man, he repeated, and pointed the pistol at a much-dented metal box sitting in a far corner of the room, asking, then what do you keep such a thing like that for? It had taken forever to open! And what was in it? Papers – not stocks or credit notices or anything – just scribbles! With this growl the thief bounded over to the box and lifted out a sheaf of papers. Why should they be locked up in such a box, hidden beneath other papers in a cabinet? Throwing the papers down before the doctor: were these valuable?

These, the doctor admitted, were poems. He was very private about his literary work, and did not like to show it to anyone until he was certain – well, he finished lamely.

The thief sat down again. Poems, he reflected. He had known, of course, about the *soirée* at the library, widely spoken about; how the gentleman was almost certainly going

to give a reading of good duration; how he was a poet; though it was the fact of a rich man's absence from his house that had primarily held the thief's attention. Sure, he had had some acquaintance with literature, back in school; some of it was all right. Poems, he said, looking down at the floor. Lots of them, judging from the quantity of pages.

Unexpected by either of them, especially the doctor, came the note of pride in his answer: a life's work. He had hopes of recognition as a major poet. When? Well, the doctor hesitated, and the thief interrupted by asking to hear a poem. Strangely the unpleasant forces crushing him at the library seemed so much more awful than this, to have a stranger with a weapon before him. A command performance, if you will. The doctor smiled.

He read a poem, and then another, and then ("go on, sir") another, without once picking himself up from the floor or, indeed, growing any less pleased about the bizarre circumstances which allowed him to redeem his evening's poor showing. After a dozen verses, the thief set down the pistol beside him, and after three or four more he barked with approval at the wit, at the grace of them. One of them reminded him of his mother's death, of the ever-freshness of that wound; another articulated his own curiosity about the meaning of dreams. Together they flashed excited glances, and like conspirators finally huddled together on the floor surrounded by the pages, a newly opened bottle of wine between them. Their hearts glowed. Those were almost definitely the happiest hours of the good doctor's life.

ASPERN FINISHED his drink, and admitted that he had to go. Any more, he said, and he'd need a wheelbarrow and a stronger fellow than me to drive it. He gave a rude laugh and tapped my notebook as he stood up and stretched. I looked down to see there the bill and, confused with more than drink, pulled out my wallet. Aspern was already lumbering towards the door, and I caught up with him before we had to part ways on the street, to breathe a half-question:

And the doctor – ?

If Aspern heard me, he did not reply, as he ambled down the street and stopped on the corner before turning out of sight, whereupon he pointed his forefinger and cocked his thumb at me with a grin. The feeling of my hand against the door barely registered as I held it standing there at the threshold, watching him go, and my first intake of night air went unappreciated. Over my shoulder I caught sight of the lightly waving hand of our server, who had probably just discovered the generous tip I had left.

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# Harvest

This is straw: the earth coughs.  
When her throat clears, fields  
hollow out the remains of her wares.

Stalks of this cold air freeze,  
like the pant legs of some darling boys,  
hovering on Queen and Main

and other urban lawns, who know  
of no jokes; freezes,  
until the sun cracks out

the refrigerated howl, and bleeds  
cool water to the earth. I know  
so little of last season's share.

# One squirrel falling

To experience weightlessness in the deciduous canopy.  
To be born, and find yourself indolently flying.

We have never seen one fall. It is dexterity: when the body  
dropping forms an x, catches a branch on an arm, or limb,

reaches out to make the connection, relying at last  
on the balance of its symmetry.

And though this one will make the trek  
to see the ends of a thousand and more alleyways,

we wished it fall, if only so that we could also be like angels  
and raise the body again to that one chance miracle.

# The rain schedule

The cumulus reach an evening high, reflect the strange  
mint pallor above the foundry stone.

Beside the river, red houses pale, burn in amnesty  
of their aging anathema. Bedside, a jagged mirror fields the view.

It is Wednesday. The doors of the building's hallways  
crawl to a close, exciting the curtains to the wind their dance.

And though shutters rattle into their own indecision,  
we are control. Open your hand. Compare this day

to the now breaking sky; hold your hand to the wood  
at the axle of your waist, and begin the timing of each weather break.

You will cause no pain. You will never sleep  
in this time-pieced quality, in the schedule of rain.

– *Michael deBeyer*



# *Invisible Woman*

I USED TO HAVE people to dinner and discuss movies and books. We weren't intellectual, just interested. Mike was good natured about it but such things did not interest him as much as running his business, or figuring out how much he needed to invest to make possible an early retirement. I let him take care of that end of things and, for my part, tried to raise the cultural level of his mind. We had a good thing going.

No one knows this now, but inside I am wiry and strong, with a swan neck and Arabian eyes. My hair is a cloud of curly darkness; my lips, while not thick, at least are shapely. This is how my soul looks when manifesting in the physical world. Yet to others I now appear as a jelly-armed, puffy old woman. Well, not old exactly, but in the late fifties.

The fifties are when the flesh runs down like candle wax. When the neck turns to crepe and the breasts are no longer capable of high rising even with an industrial strength bra. I am not mourning my forties or even my young adult years; rather lamenting the fact that no one seems to see me now.

Since I had the ministroke and that temporary breakdown, my daughter and son-in-law insisted that I live with them. They are quite comfortable and have a "mother-in-law apartment" over the garage. Brendan runs a consulting business, something to do with computers, which he knows basically everything about. He set me up with an iMac because, he said, they're better for computer idiots. And then he laughed. I laughed too, just to shut him up. He means well.

Melanie does the books for him and leads a social life. Not like the one I used to have but a colder, more formal one. She belongs to the Junior Women's League, the Association for University Women, and the county businesswomen's association. I want you to picture her – hair streaked blond in a Hilary Clinton do, square-shouldered anchorwoman suits, heels clicking, eyes steely and looking ahead about fifteen feet even if she is sitting across from you at the breakfast table. Her jewellery consists of small gold things. If you drugged her and made her wake up with turquoise and silver on, she'd go into convulsions. I enjoy imagining her wearing crotchless panties and a red leather bra and that she has this compulsion to engage in degrading sex with her church's minister, but it's hard to hold that thought. If you did a cross-section of my daughter, the material would be the same all the way through. Her hairdo is what each cell of her is made of, like each piece of a hologram, containing the whole. Perhaps I used to be like her back when I believed the form of things mattered? No, I was never like her.

I TAKE THE NUMBER four bus, the one that usually hauls senior citizens and sullen teenagers to the mall, but I ask to be let off at St. Anthony's church. The driver, smiling in his fantasy that I am goodhearted, devout, and churchgoing, swings the door open for me. I smile piously and descend the steps, listen to the whine of the doors closing up, then the shifting of gears as the bus drives away. There is a Snicker's Bar in my purse that I stole from Brendon's desk and I rip it open. It is utterly delicious, and I chew it to a pulp while walking along.

The person I want is sitting on the curb. It's a woman who, for all practical purposes, is a lunatic. Every hour or so she lets loose and screams a religious diatribe at anyone passing by. It seems to build up inside of her for fifty minutes or so, then explodes outward, a stream of viciousness, of impotent rage. Rarely does it make sense, at least not to me. I pick up drifts here and there: "mucking sons of monsters, abominations against nature, plots to use my mental juice, my essence, they call themselves Democrats, they call themselves Holy but it's only a cover" and on and on.

She is tall and very thin but does not look unhealthy apart from her destroyed teeth and dry, flyaway grey hair that was once black, you can tell. For some odd reason, I can picture her making pies and cannot imagine why. I asked her once if she'd ever done that, but instead of answering, she told me that the Pope had already taken over the world.

Between the outbursts, I enjoy being with her. I sit down on the curb beside her, open my bag, and pull out of it food that I swipe from Melanie's kitchen when she is busy with her clubs. When she has the clubs in, she cooks fantastic lunches with assorted quiches and salmon and cold soups, and I pilfer a more gourmet assortment for my friends.

"What's going on?" I ask the woman now, handing her a ham salad on wheat and a shiny Macintosh. She claims that she has no name.

She looks at me with bright, beady eyes as she bites into the sandwich and, after she swallows, says, "The priest here has a thing going with a black woman. She comes to him for help with her marriage and son. They've kissed and I think they probably do it sometimes." She goes on chewing, eyeing me.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"Heard them talking there, by the bushes. Saw them." She had the food half gone. "He looks like he wants to eat her."

"Anything else?" I prod.

"The mayor is friends with the Mafia."

"What?"

"He meets with them in their car on the side street there. He comes in a Ford Focus. It's probably his kid's or something."

"How do you know they're friends? Maybe they've got something on him?"

"I hear them laughing. They're friends," she says. "You got any cookies?"

I do and dig them out. Lemon with icing. They were smashed in the bag, but Crazy Woman doesn't care; she scarfs them. "The librarian with the red hair – she has cancer. It's colon. She's going to be taking off and go live with her brother's family."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I say.

"Oh, cock-suck!!" she suddenly shouts and I realize our time is up unless I want to wait out the fit. But I have places

to go and so gather my things and stand up. "Till next time," I tell her, but she is past knowing me and already rising to run into the traffic. We part and move in opposite directions.

I CROSS THE STREET and head down an alley that cuts through to Fourth Street. A semi is parked at the end, blocking the sunlight and unloading. Once around it, I come out into the light and turn right. Just one more block and I'll see him, Rory Katz himself, the man I lust for. Is that a joke? Can a fifty-eight year old woman desire a homeless man in his thirties? One who is an addict and lives in a van? What would Mike say if he were still alive? Can Mike see me, watch me, even now?

Well, you shouldn't have left, Mike, you shouldn't have kicked off like that, all of a sudden without any consideration for me. There I was going about my business, teaching my fifth grade class, planning the Halloween party and what treats to ask certain mothers to contribute when the intercom crackled on. "Mrs. Rider, please come to the office right away," it said. "We're sending someone down to watch your room." And I knew right then, at that exact moment, that you'd gone and died, you bastard. It was a sure knowing in the centre of my head. Where was the big retirement? The trip to France and Spain? That Spanish class we were going to take? Where, Mike? You left me here at the mercy of everything, stuck with Melanie and you know how she is. I'd rather go off to India with our son, but you know how he is, too. Why would Jeff want his old mother slowing him down, keeping him from his gurus, his ashes, his Ganges? How could a person in my condition face India anyway? I love you, Mike. But fuck you, fuck you. – The van is parked behind a Mom & Pop store called Vanderini's. I don't think the Vanderinis are going to be in business much longer; their shelves are thinning out and the cans and boxes thick with dust. I think the Vanderinis are just sticking it out until they die because they can't think up anything new to do.

I walk down the alley to the cracked cement space behind the store and there he is. The door is open on the side of the van and Rory's white hairy leg is sticking out of it, pant leg rolled up like he is Huck Finn on a raft. My heart jumps. Like always, I hesitate but then go on towards the van. "Hey," I say. "Hey, you in there? Hungry?"

A groan issues from the dark depths. That tells me he has gotten some stuff, whatever it is he uses other than booze, and my hopes sink. What have I been anticipating? Hard to say – an intense look, a hand on my shoulder, on a good day a head in my lap? Something, anything to make me feel that dropping out in the bottom of my stomach like an elevator suddenly plunging. The good-bad feeling you think is over once you pass the line from sexual being to invisible woman.

Is passion an illusion we cook up in order to pretend we're alive? A head works its wobbly way to the van opening and our eyes meet. I suppose he sees a woman who could be his mother and feels nothing more than faint warmth that will vanish as soon as something more interesting turns up. I, on the other hand, see a Scottish prince squinting his eyes in the northern light.

He is only half Scotch and the other half Jewish. "I ran away from the ritual crap when I was sixteen, my love," he's told me before. "Then I fled from the expectations when I was twenty-nine. My sister is a pediatrician, my brother a medical research scientist, my mother a school principal, and my father is dead. He knew where he'd have to go to get some peace." And then Rory would laugh till he choked.

"Here," I tell him. "I brought caviar like you were craving. And stone-ground wheat crackers. Oh, a bottle of hot sauce. I have to take these things slowly, you know. Melanie noticed the missing artichoke hearts last time."

"Cheese?" he asks.

"Of course." I draw from my bottomless pit a nice slab of smoked cheddar.

"Whoa!" he says, sitting up straight and hopping out of the van, mighty spry for a drug bum. "Excellent stuff! Would you like a sliver, old girl?"

"No thank you," I say, stepping back. He doesn't smell too fresh. Yet his dirty maleness excites me. "Rory, you need a shower," I tell him. I feel I have the right.

He blazes me with his clear blue eyes, and I feel slightly off balance. "I'll visit the YMCA tonight, Elaine. I respect your nose." And he bows with a flourish.

I wonder about life as I watch him. Are we supposed to keep going through all the motions until we kick? Even when we've forgotten the reason for the dance? On the other hand, are we expected to stop dancing and kissing because people over a certain age look ridiculous doing so? Ridiculous to whom – the young? But why should I allow those who are half developed to dictate to me how I should behave? Is this not akin to a black woman permitting white society to tell her what are the rules of beautiful?

"Rory," I suddenly blurt. "You need some deodorant and you just ate some cheese, but you're a seductive man. If you don't mind, would you kiss me?"

I will always love him because he does not, even for a split-second, hesitate. "Come here," he says, holding out his skinny arms and I go to him.

I am not an idiot in spite of what my daughter may imagine; I carry condoms in that bag with the food. He really doesn't smell good, but I lose consciousness in his smooth skinned heat. It is the first time I've been with a man since Mike left me, and I say "left me," not died, because he chose to smoke, he chose to abuse his health, to indulge in those

no more birds fly up within me  
batter the walls for release  
feathered corpses litter the floor  
broken beaks and dislocated wings fill  
the defeated peace of the dovecote  
the reek of decomposing fledglings  
pants through cracks too narrow  
for bodies filled with flutter and lift

– A. Mary Murphy

temper tantrums of his. He didn't have the guts to stick it out to the end. But I lie back soothed and let this young blood pump me and I feel a part of Everything again.

When we are finished, I hike up my pants and offer him a Whitman's chocolate cream ball. He takes it; he seems to take anything offered, and pops it happily into the mouth that I have just ravished. It moves about in there like an eyeball under a lid.

"I'd better get going," I tell him. "One more stop to make today."

He doesn't protest but brushes my arm with his long fingered hand.

"You're not a bad fuck," he says, eyes twinkling.

"Thank you," I say demurely and get out of the van.

THE SUN IS BEATING down on my tousled hair. It's a thrill to have messy hair from sex in a vehicle. I pass kids on the street just let out of school and am filled with pleasure because my body is loosey-goosey from sex. Smirking boys of fifteen or sixteen, shoepolish-black-haired girls with silver rings rimming their ears knock against me with disdain. But I am the one who just now made love.

My last stop is to see the junkyard man. This is a place for dead cars piled high, where sea gulls alight and frenzied rats multiply. You can see their tails disappearing into metal caverns, hear their sniffing and scratching. They need a big mean dog here, but they have instead one indolent cat. Neil Krause is not fond of dogs.

I'm excited at the thought of seeing him, but plummet in disappointment to find his skinny, tricky son slouched in Neil's old wooden swivel chair, a cigarette hanging out of his lipless mouth. "Where's Neil?" I ask with a hollow in my stomach.

The son looks right through me and says, "What? Oh, he's in the hospital. Got bad again last night."

Neil has lung cancer. They took out half of one lung and a bit off the other. "What hospital?"

"Westmoreland."

I don't bother to reply and head out of the junkyard. The hospital is a little under a mile away, but I make it in half an hour. No problem finding his room and there he is alone in there with the high-up TV on. Canned laughter is one of the most dismal sounds in the world.

"Old Fart," I address him.

He takes a look. "You look rosy. Just get some action or something?"

The man is psychic. "Yeah, as a matter of fact."

"Congratulations," he says sincerely. And then I see he is the colour of celery mixed with ashes. "What happened, Neil?"

"Had a bad night, a lot of pain. Felt like I had to force the air in."

"Were you alone? Your son –"

"He don't live with me. The neighbour found me."

I sit down on the bed next to him. "You could've called." But what was I saying? He didn't have my number and Melanie and Brendan would ask questions. They don't know what I do during the day.

He flicks the channel and stares up at Oprah who is discussing binge eating and I can't help glancing at Neil's stick arms with their bit of flab hanging at the top. Binge eating, the last thing on his mind; he probably has no idea what she is talking about. Suddenly he hits me with the intensity of his gaze and I have to brace myself not to look away.

"I want to show you," he says.

"Show me what?" But he's already got his hands under the sheet fiddling with something and I see he is trying to pull his gown up on one side

"What are you doing?" I ask, growing uncomfortable. He is slowly turning himself onto his side so that he faces away from me.

"Put that light on there," he commands, nodding towards the metal lamp on his nightstand and I obey. He reaches around and points to his back. "Look there somewhere. Do you see them?"

"See what?" I ask. I'm embarrassed. I who just had sex with a homeless man in the back of a van, I'm embarrassed by this.

"The blue dots. Do you see them? Shine the light on 'em."

I do as he says, tilting the lamp, and finally see them. Four little blue dots on his side and back. "What are they?" I ask, still uneasy.

He carefully pulls his robe down and rolls back over. "They're marks they put on so they know where to aim the radiation. They won't come off."

"Never?" I say, incredulous. "They have their nerve, don't they? I mean, what if you don't want permanent

marks on your body?" And then I realize it probably won't matter and that Neil knows that.

I change the subject abruptly. "So, Neil, what's been happening at the junkyard?" I'm remembering the first time I wandered in there in the spring on one of my beginning walkabouts. How Neil had taken to me right away and let me in on what he thought was out there in the yard in some of those car trunks.

"But wouldn't bodies be stinking pretty badly if what you suspect is true?" I'd asked him and then we laughed and from then on I put him on my regular route.

He flicks off the TV, sending Oprah into oblivion, and eyes me sharply. "No nighttime mobster visits if that's what you're after. But something better!" He holds off to build suspense and then begins. "I stayed late to go over some figures and I had this feeling that somebody was watching me. So I turn out the desk light and go to the window to look out and what do you think I see?"

"Teenagers?" I ask, like a little kid in the middle of a bedtime story.

"No-o-o-o," he says, slowly moving his head side to side. "It was a flying saucer, a UFO, and a big one! Had blue, red, and pinkish lights all around the bottom going off and on, round and round and they hypnotized me. They put me into a trance and after that I don't know what happened."

I hesitate, then say, "Come on."

"I kid you not. I am telling the truth."

Suddenly my eyes fill with tears. "Maybe they cured you, Neil. Maybe that's why you got worse later. Sometimes that happens first."

"Maybe they did," he says, without his usual jokiness.

I stand up. "Well, I'll look for you at the junkyard next time. Maybe in a couple of days?"

He nods. "I'll show you which window I saw it out of."

I lean down and kiss him on his whiskery cheek and leave. Nobody sees me as I get on and off the elevator and walk out onto the street. Nobody looks my way as I find the bus stop and catch the 5:10 number eight back to Melanie's. There is a note on her kitchen table about some leftover orange chicken in the refrigerator and a can of green beans set out on the counter.

It crosses my mind that I do not know if I am well or sick. I do not know my place in the scheme of things.

Then it comes to me that I can do as I please.

# dust (part II)

circling the earth in the orbital spaceship  
i marvelled at the beauty of our planet  
– yuri gagarin

i feel the brown touch of earth  
twigs rise become nests

i breathe in the shadowy cool sunset afternoon  
the world yellowing  
leaving the balcony

during intermission  
it is quiet outside

spring rain spitting  
growing to a shadow  
i think of animals

living in the canopy  
of trees generations

never touching the ground  
the storm ends it is tomorrow  
the sun streaking

through dark  
basement windows

and muddy america with all its livestock  
rain dissolves the brittle winter  
time taking us all forward

to a flying-car future envisioned by  
science fiction authors and madmen

as we stand out here  
let me speak for a moment  
words that shine in your eyes

time journeys me  
i am a teenager again

holding a book read with interest  
i am the pages welling  
cardinals feast on wet worms

the certainty of endings  
the world so small from orbit

large countries merge under cloud  
a cop waves traffic along at an intersection  
the red lights blink

in every direction  
nature is found under every rock

damp grass  
the bottom of my wet jeans  
my shoes and socks needing a wringing out

fingers transcend the soil  
the symmetry of distant chaos

light comes through a thousand branches  
a million shades of green  
as darkness and bright cancel each other out

– *David Livingstone Clink*

# excerpts from a book of words

the raindrops bounced off each other  
on the passenger side of the car,  
that miserable trip last summer  
wishing our exit would present itself quickly.

my little black book of words,  
to which I had stuck an ART CANADA stamp  
lay motionless between me and you,

I remember the last time it rained,  
caught outside with my watercolours,  
my image of the lake and our boat  
bled together on the page.

you crept up behind me  
and took my photograph,  
fascinated at the indifference in my gaze, you took me to  
    your favourite world:  
an endless field of wildflowers  
and as the rain let up  
we counted the drops on all the petals.

walking back to the lake,  
I traced all the paths in my book;

sun of the late afternoon  
gently pulled away all the drops we'd counted.

I walked barefoot beside you,  
red fingernail polish on my toes  
will chip away, rubbed against the sand, an attempt to trace  
    their patterns into my book left an intricate design  
    that didn't match up.

forget dinner and wait for dark.  
the humidity was almost unbearable  
glued together on the dock,  
eyes fixated on the stars and their constellations,

in the boat, sat beside you on the bench and took an oar  
we were not coordinated and didn't move anywhere except  
    in circles  
come inside  
it looked as though we'd been swimming, covered by the  
    morning dew

early, in the morning  
just after the sun had risen,  
we took our old bicycles back to that field; I set up my easel  
    in the far corner of your world: in an attempt of  
    painting sense  
the smell of turpentine never left  
the living room after that day  
but the yellow paint I had used for  
daisies eventually faded from my shorts.

back home  
I copied every moment  
of that last little while on the wall  
in the bathroom  
you tried to cover it up  
but I poured your paint on the floor  
before your brush touched the wall  
never cleaned it up  
and my words are slowly fading on the wall.

I followed the map  
away from the lake.  
left my completed book of words  
on the dashboard of your unlocked car  
just before I started walking home to the city.

you found me  
I climbed in beside you and my book of words and watched  
    the scenery blend into one  
beginning that miserable trip last summer.

– Kristina Lupp

# Notes on Number 65

## APARTMENT #1



WINNIFRED AND WILLIAM White have experienced a disaster.

This year, the railing of their street-level balcony has been obscured by waves of snow, so bright it hurt their eyes to look at it. After the first snowfalls, they stood just inside the open door to the balcony, marvelling at the purity of the snow, protected as it was from the exhaust and sprayed slush of passing cars. It was William's idea to set the artificial Christmas tree on the balcony, in the centre of the beautiful drifts. Winnifred makes a point of giving in to small, inexpensive whims. So, even though it was only November 5th, they hauled their disintegrating tree out of the storage locker. They hung delicate silver balls and last year's tinsel. They ran the cord from the lights under the door and into the living room socket. Winnifred had to admit it was a pretty sight, twinkling through the windows in the dark night.

The Christmas tree vanished on Wednesday night. Winnifred woke up early the following morning to get dressed for her Thursday job cleaning Mrs. Stanley's house. Most days, Winnifred is practical, wears an old t-shirt and men's work pants with reinforced knees. But when she goes to Mrs. Stanley's, she likes to wear her women's clothes and feel that she still cuts a figure. People like Mrs. Stanley can do that to you.

William likes her Mrs. Stanley days. If he had his way, Winnifred would be decked out in pink satin with a mink stole every time she goes out. Most mornings, he gets off the sofa bed in the living room, and waits by the bedroom door. If she emerges in pants and a flannel shirt, he gets back in his bed and pulls the blanket over his face. Winnifred has a dress the colour of the sun, a flaming orange-red number. This dress, which she wears with cream patent leather pumps, causes a tremor of happiness to cross William's face. He puts his fingers in front of his eyes and does a jig in the tiny hallway. Even if Winnifred didn't want to pull this dress out of the closet and have it close to her body every once in a while, she would do it anyway, just to watch how it warms his beloved face.

Because of the orange dress and the patent leather pumps, they did not immediately notice that the tree was missing. Winnifred was in the kitchen getting William's meals together for the day when she heard him begin to whine and cry in the living room. When she went to see what on earth was the matter, he was leaning with his head against the glass of the door, moaning and hitting at the wood with one hand. As soon as she saw him, Winnifred knew what had happened.

And to tell the truth, she is heartsick herself. The tree itself might have been decrepit, the lights a hazard, but some of the ornaments were beautiful. A few they had had since their childhood. Every New Year's Day, Winnifred carefully packed them away, shrouding the little glass birds and bells in layers of paper towels to prevent breakage and keep the dust off. There's no replacing those, even if they had the money to buy new.

It took Winnifred half an hour to calm William enough so that she felt safe leaving him. She extracted a promise from him that he would try to stop crying and stay inside the apartment, out of harm's way, then she hurried to catch the bus to Mrs. Stanley's house. During the bus ride, she tried to re-budget in her head, knowing that even if she could pay for a new tree, they could never afford to decorate it.

When she arrived at the big stone house, she found herself explaining about the tree to Mrs. Stanley. Ordinarily, Winnifred tries to avoid personal talk with the women whose houses she cleans. But Mrs. Stanley's response was sympathetic. She told Winnifred not to worry about being late. She smiled her long-toothed smile at Winnifred and patted her on her bright orange back. She was generous. Winnifred could make it up at the end of the day.

Mrs. Stanley lives alone. Her house hardly needs cleaning once a week, but she has exacting standards. Winnifred often finds herself poking into dark holes, and scrubbing inaccessible corners and undersides in this house. Cleaning for Mrs. Stanley is more exhausting than cleaning for Mrs. Rowntree, who has five children and a drooling, hairy Newfoundland dog. The day of the tree theft, Mrs. Stanley had a special request: she desired to have all of the furnace grates removed, washed thoroughly, and polished. By the time this was finished, Winnifred's fingers were sore and swollen, covered in Brasso and grit. She tried her best to wash it off, and then walked tiredly to the closet by the back door to collect her coat and boots.

"Winnifred!" Mrs. Stanley called. "I've got a surprise for you!"

The surprise was a small artificial tree and boxes of expensive glass ornaments, red, green, silver, and gold. Mrs. Stanley gave Winnifred lights and bows. She gave Winnifred a multi-coloured star for the top of the tree. There was no tinsel because Mrs. Stanley despised tinsel. There were so many boxes that Mrs. Stanley insisted on calling a taxi for Winnifred, and thoughtfully paid her extra to cover the cost. She stood at the door of her imposing house, and waved good-bye to Winnifred. "Merry Christmas!" Mrs. Stanley cried, proudly, as Winnifred's taxi pulled away.

That night, Winnifred and William set the tree on a small table just inside their front window. They hung the beautiful balls and tied the luxurious ribbons on the ends of the silky branches. The tree sat in the front window for three days before Winnifred picked it up and tossed it, balls and ribbons still attached, into the bin behind their building.

PAUL PAROBEC loves his work. He loves the comfortable uniform he dons every morning and the short ride on the streetcar. He loves the view as he emerges from the subway, the way the handsome brick buildings rise with him as he climbs the stairs. He loves the wave he exchanges with the fine young people on the front desk and the small but always tidy change room where he straightens his tie and combs the hair that's left on his head.

Paul does not love the children who visit the museum with their parents or in large groups, herded by harassed and shouting teachers. The other security guards also hate school groups and only grudgingly tolerate families and individual children. They grumble in the change room about museum policy and the unmanageability of kids today. They would like to get in a few swift kicks; that would teach some of these brats to behave. Paul himself believes that a little corporal punishment might do some good and probably no harm; he was smacked regularly with a belt as a child, and it hasn't hurt him any. He wouldn't be where he is today if his father hadn't taught him how to endure pain.

Paul knows that these beliefs are unacceptable to the administration at the museum. Some of the other guards are not so smart. They complain to the higher-ups about mouthy kids and do-nothing parents. They exhort teachers to control their students. Several years ago, a guard picked up a particularly loathsome six-year-old by the collar, and carried the boy out of the earth sciences gallery and into the lobby. The guard was fired the next day. The other guards sent a delegation to the office of the Vice-President of Human Resources, to provide support and protest this fring. Paul was asked to join them but refused. He keeps his own counsel when it comes to controversial issues.

Instead, he's quietly developing a theory. The idea is embryonic. When he has time, he'll think it through, grow it out of its current vagueness. He feels that there should be some kind of qualifications required on the part of people who wish to visit the museum. They should take a test of worthiness. The test should not be based on education or status or income, since he himself would likely fail on all three counts. Instead, the museum should use more esoteric criteria to judge people at the door, and allow in only those adults who will not talk loudly about creationism in the evolution exhibit or children who will walk quietly and respectfully through the Discovery Room. It would be good, he thinks, if there were some kind of machine, a respect detector like the one he passed through at airport security on his trip to Hawaii four years ago. But until such a machine exists, he will have to tolerate riff-raff in this sacred space.



Once a month, Paul is rotated to the night shift. For a week, he sleeps through the day, and spends his nights making periodic rounds through one of the museum's floors. He doesn't just make a cursory inspection. If he's in One Below, he makes sure that the Museum's Toy Shop and the café are safely locked up, their goods stowed below the counters. He tries the doors to the Canadiana exhibits. Once, the Indigenous People's Gallery was left unlocked, and Paul had the intense pleasure of righting this wrong, using his master key to enclose and protect prehistory. At the Street and Third Levels, his flashlight slides over bright statues, coins, and suits of armour. He marvels at the brightness reflected in his beam. In the Chinese Gallery, there are stone warriors who once guarded the precious contents of some bigwig's tomb. Paul poses in front of one of the statues and folds his hand on the top of an imaginary sword. He arranges his face to mimic the warrior's fierce expression. He stands as straight and still as he can.

If he were an outsider, the taxidermy on the Second Floor would be the most interesting to him. He'd like to have seen some of those animals when they were alive. On his rounds, he allows himself to pat the head of the allosaurus, very occasionally, mindful of the damage his ungloved hands can cause. The Fourth Floor is nothing but locked offices, labs, and some fancy restaurant. Occasionally, he sees a person in one of the offices or labs, working late on an important project. Some of them, those who have been around for years, greet him by name and ask him how he's doing. Others, the younger ones, just out of college most of them, pretend he isn't there, or acknowledge him briefly with a nod.

After ten years, going home in the morning is still an odd experience, taking the subway against a wave of well-rested people on their way to work, with their fresh clothes and faces already preoccupied with the day ahead. He is groggy, but pleased with his night's work, ready to hand over the museum to other capable hands, and sleep a satisfied sleep. He picks up a doughnut and an orange juice at the Tim Horton's on the corner, and unlocks the front door of the old brick building. In his apartment, he drinks his juice and eats his maple glaze or apple fritter, then climbs into bed with the curtain drawn to block the dangerous properties of sunlight.

### APARTMENT #3

THE RENT HASN'T been paid on #3 in almost four months. The building's owner, Mike Ghazouli, is well aware of this but cannot bring himself to take any action against Irma Prowse. She's had troubles. The last time rent day came and went without a cheque from Irma, he actually knocked

on her door. Hugely relieved when she didn't answer, he put a note in her mailbox, reminding Irma of their rental agreement and suggesting that they meet to talk over a payment schedule. So far, he has had no response. Luckily, he can cover the mortgage, but there's not much left over for maintenance or his own salary. He's feeling the squeeze.

Irma is often out these days. She decided, five months ago, that Sam was not getting enough fresh air. He was locked up in the apartment all day. On her bookkeeper's salary, she could not afford to hire a sitter for Sam or send him to daycare. So he stayed, by himself, staring out the window and waiting for her return.

It became increasingly difficult for Irma to leave for work in the morning. It was clear to Irma that Sam was experiencing separation anxiety. She could tell by the noises he made and the way he rolled his eyes upward toward her. He was suffering at their parting. And she can understand that. She feels the same way. Irma had become increasingly distracted in her work, worrying about Sam and wondering what he was doing. She pictured him scraping at the balcony door, leaving wounds in the wood, or pushing his cool black nose against the hallway door, whining for a passer-by to take pity and release him from his indoor misery. Irma made sure that Sam had a good walk immediately before she left each morning; nevertheless, his poor bladder must have been distended by the time she reached home and let him out again.

Her guilt increased in the summer. The warmth, the green grass of the small lawn in front of their building, and the rustling leaves of the poplar outside their back window made the apartment seem even more like a prison. Sam deserved better from her.

Irma did not choose Sam or he her. She did not adopt Sam from the Humane Society or buy him from a puppy farm. She inherited him. Sam used to belong to Myrna who died in Apartment #5 two years ago. Her son, a dour, fat-faced chef, came to collect Myrna's belongings. When questioned by Irma, the chef had indicated that he planned to take the dog to the Humane Society or perhaps shoot it himself. It was obvious that he enjoyed discussing the latter prospect. Irma decided, on the spot, that she would take Sam in, although no such idea had occurred to her prior to this conversation.

Consequently, Irma has a special obligation. She owes it to Myrna to ensure that Sam is as clean, well fed, and affectionately cared for as he was in Myrna's day. This is a high standard. Luckily, Sam is a calm and well-behaved Shitzu, who does not urinate in the apartment, snap his teeth at people, roll in foul substances, or chew shoes. He did make claw marks in the woodwork, but Irma did not consider this to be his fault. It was her fault, Irma's, for abandoning him.

When Irma told the manager of the bakery that she would be leaving at the end of May, he was perplexed. He asked if she had found a new job. Irma replied that she hadn't. He asked if she had been unhappy in her work or had found the conditions difficult for any reason. Irma reassured him that this was not the case. He advised Irma that honest bookkeeping jobs in a stable, family-run business did not grow on trees and suggested she might want to take some time to reconsider her decision. Irma told him that she could not do this. Other responsibilities were of greater importance at this juncture in her life. The owner shook his head and stared at Irma. He asked if she would like to talk with someone about things. Irma asked him, What things? He did not reply.

So from the beginning of June until now, Irma has been able to take proper care of Sam. She walks him in the morning, after lunch, and then again before dinner, for at least thirty minutes each time. They take long walks through the neighbourhood or to special, dog-friendly places together. If Sam gets tired, Irma puts him in her shopping bag and carries him, his eager little face poking between the straps. On rainy or cold days, they stay home and watch Oprah and Sally. Sam barks at the television when the screaming gets too loud.

And now Irma is happy because Sam is happy. She no longer has to listen to him whine as she hurriedly scrabbles her key in the lock at the end of the long day. She doesn't have to worry about what he's doing, alone in a stuffy apartment. She has enjoyed the beautiful summer weather, for once. Money, of course, is a little tight. Her savings ran out quickly, and welfare for a single woman with an unacknowledged dependent does not pay as well as bookkeeping. Not much is left over after she makes her small purchases at the grocery store and lays in a supply of the special food that Sam needs. Then there are the vet bills. Luckily, their landlord is a kind man. He did not say a word about the rent for four months. Last month, he put a note in Irma's mailbox while she was out walking Sam, but it was conciliatory in tone. Irma knows that Mike will understand and forgive.

Sam won't live forever, and Irma wants to make the best of their time together. She has her whole life ahead of her in which to work and only a few more years to spend with Sam. A person has to keep her priorities straight.

#### APARTMENT #4

JANET MCKEEN is supporting her husband Tim. When they are talking to their parents, and to each other, they do not describe the arrangement in this way. They explain, calmly and helpfully, that they are in year three of a five-

year plan. The plan will culminate in the submission of Tim's thesis and his graduation as a Doctor of Philosophy. When their current five-year plan concludes, they will have another in place. In the second five-year plan, Tim will swiftly acquire a tenure-track job, and Janet will quit whatever lowly position she has attained by that time. Babies, several of them, and the acquisition of a modest house figure in the shadowy latter half of the second five-year plan. Home schooling has been mentioned. Thrift, happiness, and adherence to liberal values are the unspoken ideals.

In the meantime, Janet works. Contrary to her parents' anxious belief, she willingly joined the labour force after finishing her M.A. She and Tim, who had been married mid-way through her first year of graduate school, agreed that only one of them could pursue a Ph.D. The other should work, meaning Janet. Tim had several persuasive arguments to support the plan. It was unlikely, Tim pointed out, that Janet would obtain an SSHRC. Her grades were not high enough. Unlike him, she had no publishing record, no conference papers under her belt. It was impractical to have two academics in one family, particularly two academics in a similar field. The likelihood that they could find tenure-track jobs in the same university or even area of the country was small. Janet agreed readily with this plan, because it was rational. She was proud of herself for abandoning her ego and following a well thought-out and unselfish path. She was unlike her friends and her sister in this regard, and she pitied their endless agonizing, their focus on work. Work would be where she made money. Her real, objective life was with Tim, her goal their shared future.

As she adapted herself to the five-year plan, Janet became more and more excited about finding a proper job, one with telephones, filing, and a regular schedule. This excitement gave her the necessary impetus to wind up her thesis, defend it, and remove herself from the academic system. She did not tell her supervisor of her plans, having an idea that such an avowal would undermine her credibility during her defence. And she did not want help with her job search. She did not want to teach. She did not want to lead tours around a historic site, or be a research assistant. She could type quickly, though not always accurately, and she was smart. She could learn things. Most importantly, she would aim low, avoiding ambition. She could hardly be expected to fail, then.

The search for a job turned out to be more difficult than she had anticipated. At the temp agencies, they reassured her that someone with her education, who could type, read, and do math, would have a job, but only one of them sent her to a posting after she completed their tests. For six weeks, she worked behind the scenes at a major retail operation,

inputting meaningless numbers into a computerized ordering system she did not understand.

Then she worked for two weeks at a law firm, filing contracts and affidavits and occasionally answering a complicated telephone at the reception desk. The lawyers wore expensive suits and carried soft leather briefcases. Janet fought down her feelings of inferiority when she entered their offices or put files on their desks. On the Friday of Janet's second week, the only female lawyer took a flattering interest in her and sat with her at lunch. Janet was unable to stop herself from telling the woman about her M.A. in history, straight off, and her husband, the doctoral candidate. The lawyer made an astonished, pitying face. "What are you doing temping, Janet?" Janet's sense of shame was so intense that she had to drop her sandwich and excuse herself.

Janet called the temp agency that afternoon and told them that she would be unable to continue with the job. She left without saying good-bye to the female lawyer. The following week, she found a job as a Customer Service Representative with a company that contracted 1-800 services, absorbing, for a fee, the bile of irritated customers. Janet was hired 15 minutes into her interview. Her painfully acquired French would come in handy, the Group Leader told her; she could earn more on the bilingual lines. Tim was ecstatic. Although it was not well paid, the job was permanent, with benefits. She could move up in the hierarchy. Their plan was working.

Janet has done well in her job. She likes to talk to people, and can stay sweet and helpful when they are angry or demanding. At first, she sat in the maze of cubicles, with a different headset and computer each day. The Group Leader listened in on her calls, chastising her when she strayed from the scripted answers and congratulating her for staying calm and focused when subjected to angry tirades. Once, he corrected Janet's pronunciation of "coagulated", urging her to enunciate the third syllable more clearly.

After six months, Janet replaced that Group Leader, who became a Project Manager elsewhere, which Janet also hopes to do in the near future. Janet's upward trajectory was literal; her permanent desk is set on a raised platform. From this vantage point, she can see the reps clearly, monitor their demeanour as they handle complaints and questions and endure abuse. Because she is required to, Janet also eavesdrops on her reps. Like the Group Leader before her, she counsels the reps when they lose their focus or get upset. Unlike him, Janet does not correct their grammar or their pronunciation, no matter how atrocious. She does not make angry sounds in the background, distracting her reps. She listens, quietly, to their conversations, serene in her elevated chair.

FOR THE PAST six months, Doreen Lavender has been scouting. During the week, she tries to go to the local Goodwill every day. This is the best way, she explains, to get the deals. On weekends, she travels further afield, sometimes to other towns, searching all day for the right thing. She doesn't know what that is, until she sees it. But if she doesn't come home with a pair of flocked velvet curtains, a chrome dinette set, or teapot and mugs in the shape of pineapples, she's miserable until the next expedition.

Once she's acquired her treasures, she has to create the right setting. The chrome table and chairs fit neatly into a corner of the kitchen, combining beautifully with the battered but authentic porcelain sink and nickel fixtures. But their appearance in the kitchen meant new paint and a set of cretonne curtains, preferably with a fruit theme. It took Doreen three weeks to decide on a paint colour, but she thinks she got it right, in the end. Her vintage appliances shine, lined up atop the wooden cupboards. The formica of the dinette set gleams, set off perfectly by the frigid glow of robin's egg blue paint.

The living room has been more difficult. Doreen wants this room to be warm. She wants the walls to enclose and protect her, the furniture to engulf and hold her. Right now, the living room contains a boring three-seat sofa and matching armchair, covered in the kind of bland, mattress-style striped canvas that Doreen despises. Doreen has covered the sofa and chairs with throws, shawls, and pillows in the richest, most intense colours she can find. A cream rug with deep pile softens the floor. She has painted the walls pale yellow, which works well with the hardwood. But the colour troubles her. It has become too common. It has become a shade chosen by timid people, who wish not to offend.

The striped sofa and armchair were bought at Ikea. Avril chose them. She and Doreen faced off in the upholstered furniture section of the store, talking in hisses while families and young couples parted like a body of water around them. In the end, they bought the set, because it was Avril's money. Generally speaking, Doreen does not like Ikea. It is too sterile, too modern. There are too many drawers and cubbyholes and not enough clutter. Avril declares that Ikea is one of the core institutions of a democratic culture, wherein ordinary people like themselves can purchase well-designed, innovative, and attractive furniture without incurring massive debt. According to Avril, Ikea is the people's store. She calls Doreen's thrift store habits snobbish and accuses Doreen of stylistic elitism in her relentless search for the unique and irreplaceable. When Avril walks through the living room, she often removes the shawls and throws from the sofa and chair. She scowls. She does not like to see these purchases mistreated.

The bedroom and the bathroom of their apartment need even more work than the living room. Neither has been painted since they moved in. Both rooms have walls painted a dirty beige that sickens and disgusts Doreen. Painting the bedroom and bathroom is on her list of household tasks, but she wants, as always, to do the thing properly; no rushed decisions this time, no predictable colours. She has taken four paint strips, in shades of orange and mauve, and tacked them to the wall by the window in each room. She sits at the desk or in the bathtub and stares at these for a half hour at a time, ruminating.

In the bedroom, their futon still lies on the floor, without a frame. Doreen has visions of a splendid, down-comforted and pillowed sleigh bed, but this happy plan will have to wait until she finds work again. She hopes every day that she will find a sleigh bed for an unbelievably low price, the bargain of her life, but this has not yet happened. At the moment, she is not ready to settle for substitutes, but this may change, eventually.

In general, she's very pleased with the apartment and the building, a 1930s or 40s brick six-plex, with wood floors and beautiful, dark wooden mouldings. The building has been owned by a series of cash-poor slumlords without the money or the inclination to replace the claw-footed tubs with shower surrounds or the slightly sagging wooden balconies with fibreglass shelters. Doreen thanks her stars for this kind of neglect, since it means that the apartments still have such features as a carved wooden mantle over an elaborate, albeit non-functioning, metal grate.

At bedtime, Doreen stares at the dingy wall beside the futon and makes mental lists. She reminds herself to buy some wood filler to plug up the nail holes in the mouldings or new covers for the electrical outlets. One night, she has a thought, then realizes that this thought has been edging into her consciousness for weeks, perhaps even months. All this frenetic activity has kept her from acknowledging and exploring a particular idea, but it has arrived now, more or less unbidden. She turns over and puts her hand on Avril's shoulder. She pushes Avril's bangs off her face.

"Avril," she whispers, "You sleeping?"

Avril groans. "Not really." Doreen waits. "What is it?" Avril says, slightly more alert. Doreen presses her lips together. "I think I want to have a baby."

Avril sits up in bed, throwing the covers off. "I knew it! All this domestic shit, all the crappy interior decorating magazines." She flops back down in the bed, and curls up on her side, as far away from Doreen as she can get. Her voice comes out of the pillows, muffled and angry. "You've been nesting." Doreen tries to come up with an answer to this accusation, and thinks instead of a beautiful Moses basket, with green gingham lining, and a tiny, spotless white pillow.

APARTMENT #6 was vacant for a month before Mike Ghazouli moved into it. He knows he should find a tenant. He needs the rent on this unit, given the arrears on #3, but the lure of the empty, silent space was too much for him.

The previous tenant, a so-called musician, had done some serious damage to the apartment. Since his departure, Mike has spent more and more time around the building, working, not too quickly, on repairing #6 and performing small jobs for the other tenants. He even went so far as to sand and varnish the floors of the vacant apartment. He is neglecting his other two properties.

One night, toward the end of the month, he stayed late, finishing a tricky section of sanding in one corner of the living room. He decided to sleep on the floor, with a painting sheet over him, rather than drive all the way out to the suburbs, just to return in the morning. He did not call his wife because there is no telephone in the apartment. He slept deeply on the floor and woke with a rare feeling of well-being. The following morning, when he knew his wife and children would be out, he drove to his house in Lakewood and packed a couple of small bags of clothes. He took a pot, a frying pan, a plate, a mug, some utensils from the kitchen, an ashtray, two folding metal chairs, and a couple of towels and a dishcloth. He wrestled the mattress out of the spare room in the basement and dragged it to the garage. He made sure he had the extra master keys to his building. He threw everything in the back of his van and drove away. He felt so furtive, so excited, that he did not leave a note.

His wife figured out where he was anyway. She's not stupid, he'll give her that much. On his second night there, she pounded on the door of #6, ordering then begging him to talk to her. He sat on the mattress in the bedroom, flipping through the day's newspaper, willing himself not to answer. "I know you're in there, Mike!" she shouted. "I can smell your disgusting cigar!" Quietly, he stubbed out his Montecristo. After an hour, she went away. He tried to stop himself from worrying about her driving back home, hysterical.

At home in Lakewood, Mike smoked his cigars outside, far away from the back door and windows of the house. At #6, he started smoking inside with the heat turned up, luxuriating. After a few days of this, he noticed that the room smelled awful in the mornings. He started opening the balcony door to air the room while he smoked. Then he moved one of the chairs out to the balcony and now smokes there, often drinking a rapidly cooling instant coffee. Sometimes he stays out there for a couple of hours, hoping to catch a glimpse of his tenants coming and going. He breathes deeply, raising his arms. He feels an expansive affection toward the members of this little community.

He has begun to picture himself as a sort of constitutional monarch, with small but significant powers and responsibilities within his tiny kingdom. He looks down upon the doings of his subjects with benevolent interest, makes sure that they are warm and dry, that they have fuel to cook their dinners and securely locked doors to keep them safe. He calls out to them as they enter and exit the building, leaning over the precarious railing of the balcony to exchange a few words about the weather, the beauty of the snow and sky. He waves to them as they walk down the street, a genial patriarch.

When Winnifred emerges, Mike asks after the health of her brother William, who had a bad bout of pleurisy last year but appears to be fine this winter, knock wood. Irma, of course, avoids Mike, tries to duck from sight as she walks by with Sam on his leash. Mike wants to tell her she needn't worry, that he'd never evict her, but cannot find words that will not humiliate and embarrass Irma. He watches Paul return from his night shift and requests information with regard to current shows at the museum, although Mike knows he will never visit. He tries to start up a conversation about history with Tim and Janet, who appear to regard his questions as startling and intrusive. He reverts to asking after the radiators in their apartment. Is it too warm, too cold? Is everything okay in their place? They nod, uncomfortably, and scurry away. He sighs over the manners of young people.

Of greater interest to him is Doreen, who lives across the hall with Avril Hirsch. Mike finds their arrangement odd, cannot understand how two grown women could co-exist in a small, one-bedroom apartment. He is glad that they are there,

however, because he likes to talk to Doreen. In fact, Mike admits to himself, he'd like to do more than talk with Doreen. Her bright hair, her long, strong legs attract him. He watches her carefully as she goes in and out of the building to her car, often carrying large bulky packages. She smiles at him, frequently. He contemplates coupling with her, a morganatic relationship of sorts. Once, he was in the hallway as she and Avril came in, laughing together. He joined in the laugh, without knowing the joke, and took both their hands in greeting. He held onto Doreen's warm hand for an extra moment and shook his head. "What I can't understand," he said with mock amazement, "is why two gorgeous women like yourselves aren't married. It's time to find husbands, ladies, before the clock runs out!" He made a ticking noise with his tongue and winked at them. Doreen laughed, surprisingly but gratifyingly loudly. The other, Avril, gave him a withering look. She walked up the stairs heavily, making a noise like a man in her hiking boots.

After he has been in the apartment for two weeks, Mike's wife returns to the door of #6, after midnight. He can tell from her voice that she's been drinking. The floors in the hallway creak under her weight as she leans her head against the door. She wants to understand, she says, how a man can leave his wife and his children, abandon his home. What kind of person does such a thing, after 17 years of marriage? Her disembodied voice is making Mike lonely, so he gets up from the living room floor and goes over to the door. He puts his mouth against the wood of the door and says, "Please go away. I'm very happy here."

## paperbytes

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## Night abstraction #1

I am sitting on a chair  
looking out at the Biscayne  
bay, toward the city of exile,

as all Cubans call Miami –  
I catch my own reflection  
on the glass door leading

to the balcony, the eight storey  
precipice ending down  
at the pool where girls swim,

whisper boys' names in each  
other's ears, pleasure giggles  
rising in their throats the way

my own mortality surfaces  
in mine, ebbs there long enough  
to embitter my tongue,

these wicked thoughts of life  
spent in dusk's shallows,  
my eyes flitting off the glass

like two shimmering orbs,  
UFOs captured on grainy video,  
a cartoon's bear-in-the-dark-cave

eyes, fireflies in my youth, jarred  
and placed on my night stand,  
in that distant paradise from which

I've been vanished. We've all been.  
What name do we give such glow?

## Poem built from *Japanese Poems of Love and Longing*

Once my bitterness becomes  
the moon in my house  
of endless Autumn nights  
in snow-heavy country

wrapped in my memories  
this thatched hut  
hearing cicadas plunder  
cherry blossoms off branches

to each thing its own demise  
that's what the rain whispers  
black hair of tangled riddles  
my head needs a soft pillow

we met by sheer chance  
and what might I leave you  
but this memory of river grass  
tendrils of our love's passing

you hold out for hope  
I walk among stones or sit  
through this night's deep song  
then comes a hushing of crickets

– Virgil Suárez

# The transmutation of a purple finch

Los cien enamorados  
duermen para siempre  
bajo la tierra seca.

– Federico García Lorca  
from “De Profundis”

My student and I are sitting out on the deck of my house  
in Tallahassee, the machinery of spring in full  
stride, wisteria lavender choking the chain link  
fence, azaleas crowning oak trees, when a bird

flies up onto the Post Office-shaped bird feeder,  
a red-throated sparrow Laura informs me later  
isn't a sparrow at all but a purple finch. (She looks  
it up and sends me its description from the North

American Field Guide to Birds where it says  
it's an easy misnomer made by amateur birders.)  
One can tell because the purple finch looks “dipped  
in raspberry juice.” The image stays with me days

after Laura sends me an email. I look out beyond  
the deck at the feeders, looking for and yearning  
for that purple finch to reappear so that I can see  
the striations of purple wisped on its feathers . . .

I think of the man who took his son to the hillside  
whorehouse, how a rosewater-scented woman, skin  
whiter than moonglow, unbuttoned the boy's belt,  
lowered his pants, all along whispering some tune

in Spanish from long ago days, a *bolero* about lost  
love, and she cuddles with the boy in bed, feeling  
the soft, warm skin of his belly and loins. The boy's nerves  
prevent him from speaking, but for some reason feels

safe in her bosom, that place where he can see traces  
of talcum powder mixed in with glitter, tiny specks  
of it catching the light just so. Heaven's wink. In minutes  
he is dressed and out in the lobby waiting for his father

to finish. The boy looks outside a window and there:  
a row of hummingbird feeders, the plastic red kind  
with yellow flowers to fool the birds into thinking  
of real flowers. But the empty feeders sway in a breeze.

The boy hears his father coming down the stairs.  
The boy thinks of the woman who held him, her face.  
The boy speaks the name of a red-throated sparrow  
better known as a purple finch, the kind that sings once

right before he dies, maybe, or the kind that flutters  
about before the last kiss, the last blink, the last breath.

– Virgil Suárez

## e. e. cummings

iron

[b (orn)

all

p (inned)

in

(to scuff the hammer  
driving nails)

f (orged)

all

in

g (rammer)

(i can't see the poem  
through the ink)

silent

ly (ing)

(i like ink better anyway)]

y?

– David Rodgers

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## in his dreams

(based on Ondaatje's poem "Biography")

The man rubs his belly in passing,  
soft, drop suits at cleaners, next,  
pay off VISA, Hydro, easy.  
And breathing – falls,  
dragged under words all day,  
roads go through, here,  
daddy he is called  
come and find me;  
unaware that he  
tore hearts open, parted  
legs of sitters,  
tasted brain.

– Rick Taylor

## Quiet night

the May moon is  
a cool  
neon glow

sitting here in  
the rhubarb  
patch

I see shadows

of hackberry trees  
curled spinach leaves  
and winter  
onions

leaning Sioux-like

ear  
to the ground

I hear night  
crawlers

eating holes  
in the  
dirt

– Sheryl L. Nelms



## Doughnut Sonnet No. 53

You. I glazed your jelly doughnut once,  
You worthless lump of doughnut-eating lard.  
Just look at you, you pastry-loving dunce,  
Digging for your frequent-buyer card.  
What'll it be, you pudgy jelly roll?  
A crème-filled doughnut, extra chocolate glaze?  
An unpretentious powdered doughnut hole?  
I wish that I could get someone to gaze  
At me the way you eye those jelly-filled  
Éclairs, so flaky, oozing chocolate creme.  
How many men have often dropped or spilled  
Their coffee, staring, as if in a dream  
While I stand back here in a negligée  
And not a single stare is tossed my way.

## Doughnut Sonnet No. 57

I hurried to the best place on the square—  
The Pastry Hut— and asked the clerk, Cemore,  
For my usual tuna-crème éclair,  
And sombrely he said, “We have no more.”  
I grabbed him by his collar, which was hard  
Because he weighed four-hundred pounds and asked  
Him, “Why, oh, why, you worthless tub of lard?  
Why no éclairs? Oh, why, oh, why? I ask!  
Aren't there some lying in the bargain bin?  
Some overlooked or stale or mouldy ones?”  
But laughing he said, “Sorry, try again.  
We have some scrumptious hamster honey-buns.”  
I asked why no éclairs. His grim reply:  
“Because tuna-crème éclairs are gross, that's why.”

– *stephanie scarborough*

## Lost poem

poem fled on passing tail-lights  
like someone else's experience  
told and forgotten over a stained table  
against the click of pool balls

a story that used to be there  
melted like cigarette smoke  
amongst broken rafters

a something not seized  
event not attended  
words not carried to the graveyard

## Dedicate

I dedicate today  
to the spew of words  
let myself swim  
in Keats Eliot Rogers  
lie awash in heat of language

feel letters spray and fall  
wash hair and skin  
in a flow  
whose current moves  
my body in strange conceptions  
draws my hand out  
to make poetry of water –  
the world a literature  
afloat in truth as beauty

– *Joanna M. Weston*

## Yorkfill

GORDON DUECK on a satirical treatment of the legend of Gram Parsons

### *Moody Food*

RAY ROBERTSON  
Doubleday Canada  
344 pages, \$29.95

When someone asks me what *Moody Food* is about, I usually say it is “a kind of *Great Gatsby* of the 60s, with lots of sex, drugs, and rock and roll.”

— Ray Robertson

THAT’S NICE AND neat, as descriptions go. But it doesn’t explain why Robertson wears a cowboy hat. He’s a Torontonion, for cryin’ out loud, originally from Chatham. Here are some facts that may shed light on the matter. Fact: he claims to disdain sartorial, to say nothing of literary, fashion. Fact: his first novel, *Home Movies* (1997), was inspired by the writings of Thomas McGuane, the dude who made cowboy prose cool again. Fact: *Moody Food*, his third novel, was inspired by the music of Gram Parsons, the dude who made country music cool again. Fact: he claims to disdain facts.

“This is a work of fiction, and therefore of truth,” writes Robertson in his acknowledgments. “Certain facts have been modified towards this end.” *Moody Food*’s plot revolves around a bit of counterfactual history. What if, Robertson speculates, Gram Parsons (or someone like him – the character’s name is Thomas Graham

and he’s on the run from a tour in Vietnam) hit his musical stride in Toronto’s Yorkville? This allows for an examination of the 1960s counter-cultural scene as it played out in Canada. Now a chi-chi shopping district, Yorkville was clusterfuck central for home-grown hippies and American draft-dodgers, a staging area for musicians and artists – including Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, and The Lovin’ Spoonful – on their way to the big time. Even though Gram Parsons never set foot in Yorkville, Robertson’s scenario is not implausible.

And it’s a hoot, for a while anyway, especially for Parson fans. A Can-Lit iconoclast – imagine a bald Stephen Henighan in a Stetson – Robertson thinks fun, not to mention humour, plot, action, and energy, are elements all too often absent from Canadian writing. Our novelists, he insists, don’t know how to write stories that work organically; too often, the ideas are better realized than the characters. He describes himself as a “philosophical novelist” and he did study philosophy at the University of Toronto: his undergraduate thesis was entitled “The Possibility of Religious Affirmation after Kant.” He’s not against exploring Big Ideas. He simply prefers Dostoevsky, the pot-boiling metaphysician, to the precious likes of Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro.

That said, does Robertson’s novel live up the standards he holds up to others? *The Great Gatsby* is usually described as a satirical savaging of the American Dream. *Moody Food* takes aim at the idealism of the 1960s. Yet while the *Globe and Mail* review described Robertson as a satirist, working “in the Midwestern tradition of Mark Twain,” and *Moody Food* as “falling down funny,” there’s not a lot of hilarity in this novel. Substance-abuse is not laughable in and of itself; and Robertson, readable though he is, is not an especially gifted comic

writer. As for ideas: what, philosophically, can be said about pill-popping alcoholics that F. Scott Fitzgerald didn’t already say?

Like Parsons, Thomas Graham is sitting on a Southern fortune, the scion of a Faulknerian family saddled with a history of drunkenness and depression. Not only the details of Gram Parsons’ biography but the lyrics of his songs are woven into the speech and reminiscences of Thomas Graham. Read the phrase “Brass Buttons” and you know that his manic mother has finally succeeded in drinking herself to death. Other parallels are less morbid. The song “Hickory Wind” is rendered as “Dream of Pines.” Where Parsons tried to create a hybrid musical form he called “Cosmic American Music,” Robertson’s protagonist comes up with “Interstellar North American Music.”

Does one need to be an expert in Parsonianism in order to appreciate *Moody Food*? It doesn’t hurt, but it doesn’t necessarily help. A friend of mine, an aficionado, returned the book only partly read. “Too much about the drugs,” she said, “and not enough about the music.” It’s difficult to write a book about music. But Canadian novelists have done it before, done it well, and have had those books adapted to film – and movies have soundtracks. When Paul Quarrington converted his novel *Whale Music* (1990) into a screenplay, he invited The Rheostatics to score it. (The Barenaked Ladies, thankfully, were still busking in the subway.) Quarrington’s book – and this is why I mention the Ladies – was loosely based on the life of Brian Wilson. And now Robertson has taken on the life of Parsons. Whatever the reason, there seems to be something about misunderstood musical geniuses that attracts Canadian artists.

Unlike Wilson, Parsons was unable to survive himself. Still, before his death at the age of 27, Parsons had

accomplished a few things. For starters, he had turned the Byrds, Emmy Lou Harris, the Rolling Stones, and of course the folks who listened to them, onto the sounds of country gospel. In an era when jukebox choices were shibboleths, he muddled up the distinctions between “Negro” and “Redneck” music. To say, as is often done, that he invented country-rock is to insinuate that he’s to blame for the rise of The Eagles. Anyone who has listened to “Return of the Grievous Angel” or “Drug-Store Truck-Drivin’ Man” knows this is not the case. Parsons died in 1973, under mysterious circumstances, in the Joshua Tree desert. Although there is no evidence to support my theory, I blame Don Henley.

If you want to know what happens to Thomas Graham, read *Moody Food*. The only hint I’ll give you is this: it’s what you wish would’ve happened to Paul McCartney years and years ago. If you want to know what happens to *Moody Food*, here’s my wager: either Bruce MacDonald (*Hardcore Logo*) or Richard J. Lewis (*Whale Music*) will direct the movie. And I’ll go see it – because it’s not about the drugs, it’s about the music. ●

## Sistergood

SONNET L’ABBÉ on the gothic tale of a “silent bride”

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*The Divine Economy of Salvation*

PRISCILA UPPAL

Doubleday

410 pages, \$32.95

IF IT’S POSSIBLE, I like the intentions of Priscila Uppal’s *The Divine Economy of Salvation* far more than the story itself. Uppal is grappling with the heavy weight of the Catholic faith’s symbolic order and trying to subvert it, trying to underscore its original wisdom by choosing a nun, the church’s silent bride, as the speaking tour guide of the faith’s enclosed feminine: the interior of a convent, what is hidden by, or born and nurtured within, its womblike walls.

Set up in the tradition of the gothic Bildungsroman, *Divine Economy* echoes, perhaps a little too loudly, Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (both text and writer Mother Superiors of “women’s literature”). Angela’s mother is terminally ill, the family moves to Ottawa and she is sent to board. Now suitably pseudo-orphaned, Angela must navigate the dark stone hallways of St. X School for Girls without a parent’s loving guidance; as she must alone discover the dark passageways of the woman’s body and the moral obscurities around enacting a female sexuality, as Jane once navigated the perils of Gateshead and Mr. Rochester’s house. For wisdom, Angela can only turn to other girls on their own journeys, themselves struggling to find their own paths to womanhood, as susceptible to being misled as she is.

Uppal spins out two main threads:

the first takes place in the present day, beginning as Angela receives an anonymously sent package containing a candleholder, which we are immediately told is evidence of a grave sin in Angela’s past that she is now being called, by someone, to face. As Angela obsesses over who might have sent the package, a pregnant teen named Kim shows up on the convent doorstep, having been disowned by her family. Angela is thus forced by circumstance to become a parental figure to Kim, offering security and gentle but firm guidance as the girl draws nearer and nearer to her due date.

The second thread brings us back to Angela’s days as a student at St. X School for Girls. Unable to go home for the weekend, Angela falls in with a group of boarders who call themselves the Sisterhood, led by the charismatic Rachel. The girls are at the age when any sexual experience or inside knowledge of the adult world is a commodity traded for popularity and power within the group – Angela hasn’t even had her first period when Rachel invites the others to watch her have sex with a local boy. As the girls interact, Rachel is revealed to be the attention-starved daughter of a lonely rich man, whose popularity owes much to her father’s support of the school and the indulgences his money can provide. All the money or sexual experience in the world, however, will not bless Rachel or Angela with the divinely-given voice that earns fellow classmate Bella the praise of all the nuns and parents. Bella becomes the perfect target for the girls’ frustrations with themselves and the world, and what begins as a bad joke with simple humiliation as its aim ends with Bella’s severe harm. It is at this point that we understand the exact role of the candleholder in Angela’s guilt.

One reads with the early understanding that Uppal is holding back

disclosure of the event that now haunts Angela so fully. This writerly choice is obvious and frustrating, as Angela, who has little restraint in providing any other explanations, opinions, and asides as she relates the events of her life, has no real reason not to tell us what's haunting her from the moment the candleholder arrives. In exchange for my readerly patience, then, I want something worth waiting for, and for the reason behind Angela's reticence to become clear; but ultimately the event we are finally brought to witness is so calculated to shock, so symbolically overlaid, that the story that has been at the edge of gothic cheesiness goes right over the top into the realm of a V.C. Andrews teen thriller. Not to vilify V.C. Andrews – it's just that *The Divine Economy of Salvation* has high literary ambitions, so I was prepared to ignore Halloween-ish lines (“the smell made me see blood, blood spilling over the glass counters like fountain water, blood on my hands, my habit, my shoes, on the holiday decorations ...”) for the promise of a subtle, deeply affecting insight. Instead, I was caught in Uppal's authorial struggle between instructing and entertaining until the whole exercise ended in an impasse, retreating from the tension rather than pushing it toward a cataclysm of events and a subsequent rising from the ashes.

Without revealing too much, I will say that the ending disappoints not as a fully realized, yet tragic, demise or an unhappy close might disappoint, but in the bait-and-switch manner of a story that refuses to satisfy its own yearnings, that sets up a longing for an answer to one question but instead offers you another question. This frustration of narrative expectation and literary representation of a politics that defies absolutism may be intellectually comprehensible to an undergraduate theorist, but it is an emotional cop-out: the

protagonists must live events that bring *the reader* to the conclusions the cunning writer wishes to elicit; to follow Angela through the length of the book only to be rewarded by her narration of her epiphanies is about as much fun as struggling to the brink of solving a brain-teaser only to have someone tell you the answer.

All this said, Uppal is clearly working with the highest of intentions. I appreciated her insistence on the similarities between the socialist aims of the political left and the humanitarian activities of the church – radically shifting the poles that lined up right-wing politics and religious conviction on one side and Marxism and atheism on the other, reminding us that there can be “those who take vows out of optimism rather than shame. A social brand of nun, who want to save the whales and protect the ecosystem.”

If read as an extended parable, an allegorical tale, then Angela's obsession over who has reminded her of her sin is a Catholic understanding of the individual's relationship to the universal: God as constant surveyor, as punishing authority figure, and human as “not worthy to receive Him.” Uppal applies a Foucauldian awareness of the mechanics of power (“the school looked like a jail”) to portray a character shaped by institutions, motivated by guilt and shame, yet longing for absolution. The authority figures in Uppal's *Economy* are in positions of influence, affecting Angela's life, but they are no saviours: Mr. M has a weakness for the school maid; Mrs. M is alcoholic; Angela's mother is sick and her father can barely pay her medical bills; Mother Superior and Father B. do what they can but are themselves caught by the very structures that give them their titles. What power, then, this book asks, offers redemption, if not a parental one? To whom do we turn in our longing to be absolved of the

errors of the past? Unfortunately, Uppal does not trust the story alone to pose these questions and suggest thought-provoking answers, but rather puts them directly in the mouth of her narrator. Nonetheless, the interrogation of the Catholic order from within, from a position of faith, where it is not faith itself that is questioned but its structures and habits, is useful, timely, and worthy of our attention. ●

## *peter principle*

STEPHEN CAIN on a unique *vishyun* in Canadian poetry

*peter among th trowing boxes/ text bites*

BILL BISSETT

Talonbooks

160 pages, \$17.95

SINCE HE ABANDONED self-publishing via his own *blewointment* press in the early 1980s, the appearance of a bill bissett title from Talonbooks has become a near-annual occurrence. This rapidity of publication has also, perhaps unfortunately, resulted in the production of nearly indistinguishable collections – as Darren Wershler-Henry has commented: “the format and content of [bissett's] texts have slowly stabilized. The drawings, paintings, and type-writer concrete poems still appear, but have a sanitized feel within the perfect-bound, desktop published, properly literary digest-size confines of Talon's editions.” This is especially true of the run of books from *Seagull on Yonge Street* (1983) to *hard 2 belev* (1990) and, although the utilization of computer-generated concrete poetry

and imaging began to appear with *inkorrekct thots* (1992) and *th influenza uv logik* (1995), the four books bissett has released since *lovingwithoutbeingvulnrabul* (1997) have returned to typical form.

Yet Robert Sherrin has argued that this gesture is largely intentional: “while others change and adapt, compromise and take on new public personae, bill bissett only seems to emerge as more and more of what he was before, as though perfecting and protecting an original image of himself. His program has never changed.” As I concur with this observation, in assessing bissett’s most recent book, *peter among th trowing boxes/ text bites*, the problem is not so much one of evaluating aesthetic success, but of determining which elements of the bissett’s “one man civilization” are being intensified or foregrounded in this collection.

To generalize, *peter* is less vitriolic than some of bissett’s early 1990s publications, with such issues as AIDS, environmental malaise, and economic injustice receding in favour of more interpersonal explorations. Yet, the collection also lacks much of bissett’s humorous poetry of understatement and irony, poems which are often the lead poems in previous releases: “I was driving in 2 hundrid mile hous in th karibu northern bc,” “watching broadcast nus,” or “whats in a name.” Rather, *peter* is more of a meditative collection, focusing on interpersonal relationships with the keyword in bissett’s lexicon this time around being “kodependez.” There are, however, still many moments of ecstatic joy expressed through relationships, as in “voyajuuur”:

cant wait 2 get my hand in2 yu  
subways goin fastr n fastr all th  
brite flows n spices xplode in my hed in  
my brain paprika nutneg roses cori  
andr rhodadendra oregano gingr daiseez  
gingr daiseez

Similarly, bissett continues to pleasurablely engage with the pure materiality of language through sound effect, typographic excess, and repetition, seeming to fully manifest Roland Barthes’ notion of *jouissance*:

sub th teeses uv th text the eez uv th text th  
tautolojee uv th text th loosness it lostness yes  
kon text ex t t see u a l  
th x t uv th text textual vishyun vishyn xpanding  
(from “text bites”)

Considering gestures such as these, it is clear that bissett has not renounced his belief that one does not need correct spelling, grammar, or syntax to signify – and that following standardized composition actually restricts expression. While Stephen Scobie has suggested that “one soon becomes accustomed to bissett’s spelling, which quickly built up its own, loosely phonetic conventions,” in *peter* bissett seems to take up this challenge and has produced a work which is much more radical than previous collections in terms of its disjunction and use of language. For example, spelling is much more unconventional, often not even phonetic but adding extra syllables and numerals, and odd word breaks occur throughout. Consider this stanza from “life”:

stars comingul in our  
heds they play ther xciting  
our transmitttrs n we ar  
nevr big alwayze small

Is “comingul” “coming all” or “comingle”? Is “ther” a plural or demonstrative pronoun? “Xciting” modifies what noun? Why are there two “r”s in transmitter, and why the extra “e” in “alwayze” when concluding with a single “z” would result in the same phonetic sound?

It is moments like these, which appear throughout *peter among th*

*trowing boxes*, that make bissett still worth reading even after (approximately) 60 previous publications of similarly constructed poetry. bissett’s newest book certainly does not break any new ground, but what small gestures he makes in the refinement and exploration of his idiolect are always worth observing. ●

## Line dancer

TIM CONLEY finds some belligerence in *belles-lettres*

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**Step Across This Line:**  
**Collected Nonfiction 1992-2002**  
SALMAN RUSHDIE  
Alfred A. Knopf  
402 pages, \$37.95

IN NOVEMBER 1997 a brief but highly enjoyable *bataille des lettres* flared in the pages of the British daily *The Guardian*. John le Carré, the bestselling but very pale imitation of Graham Greene, got in a tussle with Salman Rushdie over questions of freedom of expression. Le Carré’s indignation at being called an anti-semite by *The New York Times Book Review*, which he expressed in a speech reprinted in the newspaper, won ironic comment from Rushdie, who pointed out that le Carré had shown him little enough support – quite the opposite, in fact – when the notorious *fatwa* was declared against him in 1989. The barbed responses began, but it was clear whose rapier had the more palpable hits. Le Carré denied that he had condoned the *fatwa*, adding that he was “more concerned about the girl at Penguin books who might get her hands blown

off in the mailroom than I was about Rushdie's royalties." Rushdie countered: "it is precisely these people, my novel's publishers in some thirty countries, together with the staff of bookshops, who have most passionately supported and defended my right to publish. It is ignoble of le Carré to use them as an argument for censorship when they have so courageously stood up for freedom." "Rushdie sneers at my language," next complained le Carré, "and trashes a thoughtful and well-received speech I made to the Anglo-Israel Association, and which *The Guardian* saw fit to reprint." Parry and thrust from Rushdie: "Le Carré's habit of giving himself good reviews ('my thoughtful and well-received speech') was no doubt developed because, well, somebody has to write them. He accuses me of not having done the same for myself."

All good fun – yet what does shine through in this *contretemps* is how aware Rushdie is of himself as a public personality. This new collection of essays and articles underlines this striking quality: included are confessions of having always wanted to be an actor, accounts of the author's bedazzlement with movie stars, soccer greats, and U2 (with whom he once, he tells us more than once, shared a stage), and an essay called "On Being Photographed," which features Richard Avedon's glam-shot of the novelist (originally published, I stoop to note, in a magazine called *Egoïste*). Most of the essays have autobiographical anecdotes and digressions, and in a 1996 keynote address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Rushdie admits to having once given "eleven radio interviews before eight o'clock [in the morning]: a personal best." When he's not writing novels, Rushdie apparently enjoys writing and talking about himself.

Luckily for us, this carefully manicured public personality is often

delightful to watch in action. As he showed in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Rushdie the essayist has a punchy, deft style – he is never afraid of a fight: after the *fatwa*, what's a little verbal pillorying? – and his jokes are never repeated, always germane. What's changed, besides this need for dialogue with Fame and Celebrity, is the focus of "homelands": Rushdie appears to have become accustomed to migratory existence and, as the title *Step Across This Line* immediately suggests, he is fiercely attracted to the notion of crossing borders, of transit, of "frontiers."

To establish this theme, Rushdie opens the collection by wondering why Dorothy should ever want to go back to dreary old Kansas after she's seen the technicolor miracles of Oz. A very good question. "Out of Kansas" is a reproduction of Rushdie's splendid essay on *The Wizard of Oz* for the British Film Institute monograph series, but it lacks the movie stills that the cute BFI volume had and so gives up its snappier status as a photo-essay. Kansas gets rumbled again in a later article in which Rushdie remarks upon how the decision by the Kansas Board of Education "to delete evolution from the state's recommended curriculum" may be seen as "powerful evidence against the veracity of Charles Darwin's great theory. If Darwin were able to visit Kansas in 1999, he would find living proof that natural selection doesn't always work." Actually, if Darwin were able to visit Kansas in 1999, he would be living proof that many widely held scientific theories had serious problems – but this is just a quibbling example of how Rushdie's rhetoric can, on occasion, get the better of him.

Writing about India, Rushdie manages to be both the fabulist (he who wrote *Midnight's Children*) and a skeptic (he who can't help making note of Gandhi's "brahmacharya

experiments" and trust in "vital fluids" when assessing this political and religious icon). "A Dream of Glorious Return" is a diary of a trip Rushdie took with his son Zafar in the spring of 2000. It offers a picture of a father-son relationship at the same time as it reveals a nation full of energy and obstruction:

The new age is here all right. Zafar, if you could read Hindi you'd see the new age's new words being phonetically transliterated into that language's Devanagiri script: Millennium Tires. Oasis Cellular. Modern's Chinese "Fastfood." . . . Behold, Zafar, the incomprehensible acronyms of India. What is a WAKF board? What is an HSIDC? But one acronym reveals a genuine shift in reality. You see it everywhere now, every hundred yards or so: STD-ISD-PCO. PCO is personal call office, and now anyone can pop into one of those little booths, make calls to anywhere in India or, indeed, the world, and pay on the way out. This is the genuine communications revolution of India. Nobody need be isolated anymore.

O Brave New World – sort of. There is a farcical scene between reporters, police, and a well-meaning restaurateur caught in the middle, part of the larger muddle that is the author's security-managed life. Rushdie's India is at times strangely closer to E. M. Forster's than to V. S. Naipaul's, but his is just as controversial. Rushdie notes that his 1997 assertion that the most interesting contemporary Indian prose is written in English "caused howls of protest and condemnation." But, he adds, that "doesn't necessarily mean it's wrong."

The ensuing discussions of writers like R. K. Narayan and G. V. Desani are entirely delightful, as are all of Rushdie's deliberations on the diverse range of writers he admires and enjoys (Angela Carter, Arundhati Roy,

William Faulkner, Suetonius, Edward Said, etc.), with perhaps one exception. J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* is recognized as a great novel – or at least a novel that aspires to be a great novel – but Rushdie expresses disappointment at its “cold detachment.” He concludes: “When a writer’s created beings lack understanding, it becomes the writer’s task to provide the reader with the insight lacked by the characters. If he does not, his work will not shine a light upon darkness but merely become a part of the darkness it describes.” I remain unconvinced by this pious-sounding summary of “the writer’s task” and cannot see why a lack or absence of insight cannot itself be an insight. Rushdie should perhaps consider the noteworthy differences between the words (and novels) *Shame* and *Disgrace*.

Rushdie is, without question, a most dedicated defender of freedom and a spirited enemy of fundamentalism, censorship, hatred, and ignorance. This fact makes it all the more difficult to digest Rushdie’s support for the bombing of Kosovo – what Vaclav Havel, to the amazement of many who thought him too a sensible man, called a “just war” – or a statement like “America did, in Afghanistan, what had to be done, and did it well.” The tone, locution, and that ever-officious phrase “what had to be done” might sound natural coming from the mouths of Pentagon spokespersons, but from Salman Rushdie ... ? The Northern Alliance, the group put into power by U.S. support, looks to be a discomfitingly familiar bunch of barbarians. And then, from my own Canadian perspective, there are the murders of Nathan Smith, Ricky Green, Marc Leger, and Ainsworth Dyer – four young men killed by so-called “friendly fire” when a U.S. pilot decided to drop a bomb on them – was that obscenity part of “what had to be

done” and did those who perpetrated it do it “well?” That *the devil you know is better than the one you don’t* is a fable used to justify resignation and complicity is something I thought the otherwise uncompromising Rushdie understood.

As a reader I often feel thankful to live in the time of this author, and to see how he again and again demonstrates the necessary risk of literature, the importance of that literature, and a quixotic will to fight the wrongs of the world around him. You don’t get a more “engaged” writer than Salman Rushdie – though at times I wish he did not know it himself. ●

## *Lola by Night*

A novel by

**Norman Ravin**

“Where has Frida Bellavista gone?” laments Barcelona’s richest publisher, speaking of his bestselling author. “And why does she insist on her silence?”

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**DAVID CLINK** was born in Medicine Hat and grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut, and Toronto. A descendant of the explorer David Livingstone, he is the webmaster of poetrymachine.com, a resource for poets. He is the author of the chapbook "His name was Gord, and he used to run with the bulls" (Junction Books). His poetry has appeared in *Analog*, *Cicada*, *The Comstock Review*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *The Harpweaver*, *Midwest Poetry Review*, and *The Prairie Journal*.

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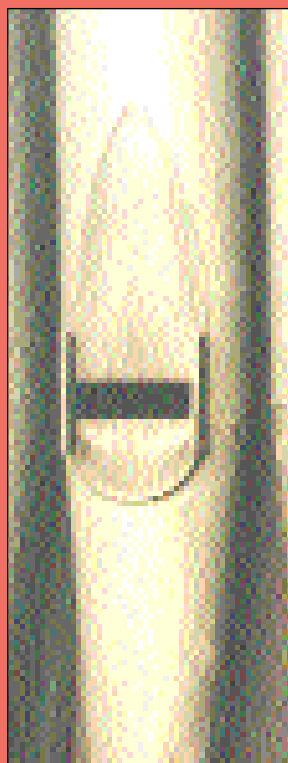
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