

# paperplates



A Magazine for *Fifty* Readers

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Vol. 5, No. 4

Poetry, fiction, reviews



# Vol. 5, No 4

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## paperplates

### *publisher & editor*

Bernard Kelly

### *layout & production*

Perkolator {Kommunikation}  
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### *reviews editor*

Tim Conley

### *fiction editor*

Bethany Gibson

### *poetry editor*

Colleen Flood

### *contributing editors*

Maja Bannerman, Gil Gauvreau,  
Michael Kelly, Dan Yashinsky

### *guiding light*

Alice Kane 1908 – 2003

### *coordinates*

*paperplates*  
19 KENWOOD AVE  
TORONTO, ONTARIO M6C 2R8  
Tel: 416-651-2551  
[magazine@paperplates.org](mailto:magazine@paperplates.org)  
[www.paperplates.org](http://www.paperplates.org)

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### *submissions*

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THE STORYTELLER Alice Kane died at the beginning of the summer. She and Joan Bodger, who died last year, were prime movers in the Canadian storytelling community, influencing several generations of tellers. Dan Yashinsky recalled his first meeting with Alice in his introduction to the issue of *paperplates* [2:4] we devoted to her:

The fall I met [Alice] she was the curator of The Marguerite Bagshaw Puppetry Collection, housed in the basement of Palmerston Library. I crawled up on the shore of this island like Odysseus after his last shipwreck. I had met and was in the process of losing the love of my twenty-three-year old life; I had discovered storytelling but was absolutely terrified of it (hated speaking in public, couldn't remember things, felt mortally embarrassed by the whole idea); I was a mess. So I used to hang out at the Bagshaw Collection, talking to Alice, and gradually confiding in her about what was going on *chez moi*. I remember one day talking about how my girl was probably going off with her first boyfriend (she eventually did marry him) and how I was sure she loved me more and how I was too scared of storytelling to get into it but I really loved it and and and... Then I noticed that around her neck Alice was wearing a magical amulet. It was the polished, golden cross-section of a peach pit. It glowed in the afternoon light that managed to get through a basement window. It was intricately inter-woven, like a Celtic design, and for some strange reason it was comforting to contemplate. My topsy-turvy life shone back at me from the necklace, and I felt that in the world of the woman who wore such a design there would be room for all stories, all destinies, however chaotic they seemed to the ones who inhabited them. This is still what I feel about Alice Kane. The stories interweave with the lives out of which they spring, and in this weaving some kind of sanctuary and sense may be found. But like the wondertales suggest, sometimes this wisdom can only be gathered when one is most lost and desperate. Just about then, the stories let you meet the wise woman in the woods, the one who knows how things connect, the one wearing a peach kernel around her neck.



There's a reason for clinging to paper, after all. A few months ago, the e-mail reader I was using balked at the size of my virtual in-tray and spilled its towering burden irrecoverably into the everlasting ether. Among the messages I'd failed to move to another folder in time sat, as I realized with chagrin, a dozen or so submissions. Call it carelessness if you will, but I hadn't even recorded who sent them, let alone what they were. *Poof*: only their authors can tell me now, and *that* only when their patience runs out. Obviously, some order needs to be introduced into a system that, despite the unarguable convenience of digital delivery, retains more than a little of the old analogical randomness. On this end, I can no longer assume that in-trays have the capacity of airport hangars. That's easy enough. But perhaps you should rid yourselves of a similar assumption. More plainly: to help us shorten the response time for submissions, which has always been unreasonably long, we're going to insist that henceforth all e-mailed *fiction* submissions take the form of a query containing the first 300 words or so. If we like what we read, we'll ask for the rest. And if you prefer not to submit a fragment, well, then, you have the option of surface mail. — Bernard Kelly

## An upside down yellow pail

I MOVED IN with Soða and her husband, Dušan, not long after I began to consider returning home to Canada. I was looking for a new place to live, somewhere closer to Bratislava's city centre, where I'd taken up a new teaching position at the British Council. I was growing weary of Slovakia, and I thought the change might do me good. Soða, I learned, had studied theology on an exchange program in Toronto, which enabled her to speak passable English. She was young and thin and might have been beautiful were it not for the black rings that perpetually underscored her eyes. Dušan looked like most Slovak men: short and pale with deep eye sockets and high cheekbones.

In the first week, we exchanged the initial formalities involved in getting to know one another. They made me the Slovak national dish for dinner, a hearty combination of gnocchi, goat cheese, and bacon fat called *bryndzové halušky*. I bought them a cactus. Like most roommates, we kept to ourselves after that, flipping brief courtesies in places where we couldn't avoid each other, like the kitchen and outside the washroom. We got to know each other better this way, perhaps, freeing ourselves from the verbal exhortations that deceive us into believing we're actually somebody other than who we really are. We shared our lives through the thin walls of the flat and our intersecting schedules; traces of things left behind, like telephone messages, dried bread crusts, and spent toilet paper

rolls. But within time even this arrangement became intolerable. Soða was clumsy and absent-minded and any distancing between us couldn't alleviate the consequences of that fact. She moved as though her body were a dispensable appendage always getting in the way, plodding throughout the flat, slamming doors and smashing plates and, in between her chorus of destruction, humming like a bird unruffled in a storm. She broke two of my teacups and dumped a full bottle of Advil down the sink. She's not of this earth, I sometimes thought to myself. She lost and misplaced things. Like my blue toothbrush. Not long after I'd just gotten over the disappearance of the slippers my mother had sent me, I found my toothbrush sitting on an upside down yellow pail on the floor of the bathroom.

The next day I had some trouble grocery shopping. "When you need only one onion you should take ours," she said softly, talking to my knees. Her husband, who couldn't speak a word of English, nevertheless instinctively knew what his wife would say in such a situation and was thus nodding his head and pointing under the sink where they kept the onions. He smiled and slowly blinked. "That's not the point Soða," I protested. "She was incorrigibly rude. Someone trying to run a respectable business needn't worry so much about why someone might want only one onion. I use a slice for my sandwich. How many onions can I possibly go through in a week?" I was referring to the old lady at the fruit and vegetable market. "Môžem dostať jedna cibula?" I had asked in my most polite voice from behind the bin of apples, pointing at the white onions. The old lady corrected me, "Jednu cibulu?" I nodded and apologized, embarrassed that I'd been so readily pegged as a foreigner. She looked to her daughter, who was trying to hide her giggles behind the watermelons, then snorted: "Na èo?"

— "For what?"

Despite our mutual agreement to keep to ourselves, more and more I'd been dragging Soða and Dušan into my personal frustrations. They were easy targets. The crowded buses, corrupt police officers, deep-fried food, inconsiderate shopkeepers: these were but a few examples of the many annoyances I'd complain about. Soða seemed puzzled by this, unsure about how she could help and perhaps unconcerned. She knotted her brow and scratched her shoulder. "What means 'incorrigibly?'"

MY ROOM WAS small and hot and had a cracked window that opened up onto a flower garden three stories below. My bed was no wider than a coffee table and might very well have been one that had been boarded on all sides to fit a small mattress. It wasn't very sturdy, trestled by its legs like a TV tray. When I first moved in, Soða warned me to sleep gently, for it might collapse. Then she handed me my linen.

I got up to use the washroom, but the bathroom door was closed. There was no lock, and light never escaped from the bottom crack; as a result, we were always walking in on each other. But I could hear Soða's humming, so I waited. My gums were sore. My students had assured me that Slovakia's water was safe but I wasn't so sure. I heard somewhere that it lacked fluoride. I needed to brush my teeth. Through the thin walls in the next room I heard Dušan clacking away at his computer. I ducked my head in to say hello. He was working on his thesis: An examination of early Greek Christian hymns. In addition to his mother tongue and Czech, Dušan spoke Hebrew, Greek, Russian, and German. But no English. In my stilted Slovak, I started a conversation about Slovak folk songs. I asked why all the Slovak songs I'd ever heard were nothing more than weak translations of

English songs. He offered an explanation I couldn't understand and then he smiled and slowly blinked, marking the end of our conversation. That's what he did; that's how I knew we were through.

I walked back to the bathroom. The door swung open and hit my big toe and out marched Soða. She looked at my knees – “Sorry” – then rushed off to her bedroom, tripping the lamp's chord from its socket on the way. I sat down on the lip of the tub and gingerly massaged my foot. Under the sink, I spotted my blue toothbrush resting once again on the upside down yellow pail. I got up, rinsed it off, squeezed out a generous amount of paste, and then began rigorously at my back molars. When I finished, I rinsed the toothbrush again, reached up to the shelf above the mirror and plunked it down firmly next to my deodorant, as if this was reaffirming its proper place in the bathroom and would somehow be passed on like a reprimanding note to Soða.

Then I went to bed and dreamt of home, of Canada.

THE NEXT NIGHT, Soða barged through the bathroom door as I was brushing my teeth. She looked upon me, bewildered at first, as if the blue toothbrush were a tampon sticking out of my face, then lowered her eyes to my knees and smiled. She was dressed in sweatpants and a dirty, oversized t-shirt. Her hair was in a ponytail and her eyes were circled by their prescriptive black rings. She was about to say something when I barked, “Do you mind?” – to which she reacted with a slight jump and retreated out the door.

The next morning my toothbrush was gone.

We were in the kitchen.

“It wasn't your ... um ... Ako sa povie?” She made as if brushing her teeth.

“Toothbrush,” I answered. “What

do you mean it wasn't my toothbrush? I bought it at Tesco.”

But she just stared at my knees. When she saw I wasn't going to let the discussion drop she slipped off to the bathroom and returned with a blue toothbrush in her hand. It was mine.

“Right,” I said. “There it is. That's my toothbrush.”

“Yes. It was in back of the ... shelf, near your perfume”

“Cologne,” I corrected. “Why did you move it?”

“Nyeeee,” she whined, impatiently. “I didn't move it. It was always in back of the shelf. You use mine toothbrush, that only looks as yours.” She slipped off again and returned with another blue toothbrush, this one with a red cone of rubber at its end. “This is mine toothbrush. You shouldn't use it.” She was right. It was the one I'd been using and the toothbrush I originally bought at Tesco hadn't had any red cone of rubber at its end. I remembered that now.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “But, your toothbrush is on the sink, next to Dušan's. I thought ... I just assumed this was mine. Why do you have two toothbrushes?”

“I'm not using it for mine teeth,” she said, slapping the original toothbrush in my hand and then leaving the room. I was confused. It wasn't yet 9:00 A.M. but already I had a headache.

I went to the bathroom to get washed up for my classes. I was late. I couldn't help wondering how my toothbrush had got lost behind my cologne. I hadn't used cologne for quite some time now. I reached up to see if anything else had snuck behind there. Nothing but dust and a little grime. As I was feeling around on the shelf I kicked something plastic on the floor, under the sink. It was the upside down yellow pail, sitting there as benign as a footstool. I backed up and sat on the lip of the tub, realizing that in all this time, I had never once considered exactly what that pail was for.

ON WEDNESDAYS, Soða and Dušan entertained a small gathering of churchgoers. Soða was particularly sunny on those days, humming around the flat, preparing snacks and brewing mint tea, occasionally smashing a plate or walking into a wall. She would arrange a circle of chairs in the living room and light candles dangerously close to the drapes. Dušan played a cursory role in the meetings. After some Bible readings and a brief roundtable discussion, he would play the guitar while the rest of the group sang Christian hymns and Slovak folk songs. One evening, after I returned home from class, he caught me trying to sneak a path to my room and invited me to sing along. I hesitantly accepted and with shameless tone-deafness broke into the English version of *Joy to the World*. Midway through the song, however, I forgot the lyrics and abruptly stopped. Dušan stopped, too, smiled and slowly blinked, then watched as I dashed off, embarrassed, to my room. After that, I decided Wednesdays would be better spent dawdling at a cafe with a cup of tea until they were through.

But on one particular Wednesday evening I decided to take up the invitation of a colleague to go to the Irish Pub. I don't drink much, probably for a good reason; I'm not myself after a few pints, which is to say, I get a little excitable. Normally, it's nothing more than some harmless squabbling with the poor chap who happens to be seated next to me, but on this occasion, I picked a fight with the burly Slovak bartender. He was chatting with another Canadian about how lazy Slovaks can sometimes be while the Canadian fellow volleyed back with claims of his own country's idleness, both of them winking and nodding, tossing playful jabs back and forth. That's when I butted in. I told the bartender that while Canadians spent years working to build a national railway bridging the

vast expanse between East and West, Slovaks have barely managed to muster enough gusto to keep their highways from falling apart. I thought I had said it constructively, as a point of truth to learn from. I didn't mean it offensively but, as a result, I was served a ringed fist squarely to my lower lip. I decided to walk home, alone, my colleague abandoning me long before the management forced me to clean my own blood off the bar's floor. I needed to collect my thoughts, consider the extremity of the situation I had just precipitated. I had offended – and was subsequently socked by – a man from another country while on his turf. This was much worse than any ordinary bar fight; this was cultural, nationalistic. Clearing the outskirts of the city centre, I felt as if I had crossed the perimeter of a battle zone. I was still drunk. I touched my lip. It was swollen and numb. I was without troops to mend my wounds, praise my efforts.

I thought a great deal about home: Mom's brilliant yellow apron hanging on the big stove, my cat Sneazy and all her useless toys, Saturday night hockey and the glorious solitude of the Canadian landscape, even outside my backyard. When at home, I detested these things as cultural clichés, but while abroad, I embraced them like medals of valour. I felt embarrassed. The horrible traits of being North American, of being human and thus arrogant, were magnified in my mind, with no one nearby to help manufacture the usual quips and smokescreens that usually excuse such behaviour. Travel offers a painful look at yourself, your country, from a sobering distance, as if you were floating in a hot air balloon, while others, floating beside you, gaze down upon their own cultures and, occasionally, stealing a glance in your direction, challenge you to spit. But you don't dare; not because you'll defile or betray your heritage, but because you're afraid that you'll expel

yourself with it — your definition, image, essence — and never get it back.

I THOUGHT SHE would already be asleep but she wasn't. I wanted to clean up my face and see if I couldn't slide a toothbrush over my fat lip. The bathroom door was closed, no light shone through from the bottom crack, and I couldn't hear any humming. But when I opened the bathroom door there she was, her foot resting on the yellow overturned pail, scrubbing away diligently at her toenails with the red-rubbered blue toothbrush. We were both equally startled, she by the plum growing out of the side of my face and I by the sight of such a profane use of a hygienic implement. I felt nauseated, but she was there blocking the toilet. I rushed to my room, flung open the cracked window and hurled four pints of beer and a plate of bryndzové halušky down three stories to the flowerbed below. Exhausted, I stumbled back and fell upon my bed, collapsing its legs from under it and crashing like a fallen tree to the hardwood floor. A wave of heat swept over me. It was foreign and new. I expected to feel tears, hear the rumbling of anger, taste blood, or smell burnt toast. But instead I laughed; I laughed so hard that within another minute I felt my sickness return and was lurching toward the window to pollute the flowerbed again.

I HAD SOME time and space to think. Sođa and Dušan went on a trip to the Tatra Mountains to visit relatives, and I took a week off work to recuperate. When they returned, I made them my special spaghetti sauce, which Sođa said tasted like North American chili. Sođa offered to do the dishes and broke a bowl. I helped her sweep up. We moved into the living room to huddle around lit candles and hum to the

strumming of Dušan's guitar. I asked them if they wouldn't mind renting me the room for a little while longer. They said, Sure.

– Jason Markowsky

## Wandering under the Southern Cross

NOBODY YELLED "Fire!" Instead, frantic cries were snuffed out by the crush of bodies swarming an exit. Smoke and panic spread across the stuffy theatre like a Napoleonic battlefield, while passing stampedes of legs and butts cast monstrous shadows on the movie screen. Then, orange, crackling flames began licking over the balcony. Should I sit and fry or jump up and be trampled? My hands claw-gripped the armrests as my feet nervously tap-tap-tapped, crunching spilled popcorn. Had I come halfway around the planet only to die watching a bad Sylvester Stallone flick? My mind drifted back a few months, to when this odyssey began.

MY JOURNEY commenced near Lake Victoria. I swung the machete violently. I panted like an animal. The sticky vines and steamy air playfully argued whether I should be strangled or suffocated. My blade's rhythmic thud feebly voiced my dissent. Trekking through Kenyan rainforest is more like gardening than hiking. Running down my back, red ants and perspiration were indistinguishable. If I swatted it, it was sweat. If I ignored it, it was alive. By noon, I'd surrendered my flesh to a wildlife habitat: a playground for all creatures so inclined.

My companions were Kipsigi hunters. They'd never had a friend as pale as elephant tusk; I'd never had a friend as black as tire rubber. We tried not to stare. Such awkwardness didn't diminish our bond. When climbing together, a leathery hand becomes a rope, a grimy shoulder becomes a step, and a tired grin becomes a pact. Instinct runs deep within a species. We six humans instinctively formed a clan against the wilderness.

We intersected a dry streambed. Strolling along its soft, reddish clay was a refreshing change. Above us, the forest canopy was dense. Rain from last week still dripped leaf to leaf, each crystal droplet choosing its intricate path to the jungle floor. We passed flowers ranging from the sublime to the grotesque, with colours ranging from sunny yellow to bloody purple, aromas from syrupy sweet to hypnotic spice.

Monkeys howled and screeched overhead. Swinging past us, they laughed. "Okay," I shouted, "Maybe our arms are too short for transportation." Glancing at my comrades, I saw the monkeys weren't alone in doubting my competence, so I shut up. Single-filing along, our strides melded into a cadence.

Suddenly, the front man stopped. The rest of us bumped in turn, like bad slapstick. Pointing at the ground, he hissed an unknown Swahili word. The others encircled the spot, tossing the word back and forth into a hissing symphony. Kipsigis point with their lips, so the group alternately puckered toward the ground, as if kissing invisible lovers. The hissing and kissing continued for some time. Finally, the leader gave me a trembling translation: "Fresh leopard feet! Leopard smell and track man. Leopard no fear fire. We go now!"

We continued toward the soon-expected village. First, at a brisk walk. Then, after a couple of UFNs (Unidentified Forest Noises), at a brisk run. We abruptly burst out of the dim

forest, into the middle of a blazing African day. Our eyes adjusted and blinked at an enchanted scene.

Out of the jungle flowed a river: a serpentine, meandering, chocolate-colored river, clouded with nutrient-rich, botanical sediment. Along the bank, crocodiles napped and hippos grazed. Across the wide valley of golden cornfields was another river: a swift, clear, boisterous river, tumbling out of the emerald green hills. It crossed an enormous slab of exposed, polished rock where it shattered into a thousand miniature waterfalls. Beneath the cascades, veiled by mist and framed by rainbows, was an ancient wooden house and waterwheel. Inside, a rotating stone ground corn into meal – apparently since the dawn of time.

Where the rivers met was a miracle: the combined waters flowed on neatly divided, half muddy, half clear. Further along, the spirits of the hills and forest resigned themselves into one. In the "V" of the merging rivers, spotted cattle chewed complacently on a grassy slope. The slope ascended a high bluff, surveying the whole panorama. Here sat a single hut, surrounded by sugar cane and fruit trees. No one spoke to break the spell, but we all simultaneously began the ascent to the obvious destination.

The occupant was a wrinkled, little man who walked with a stick. His earlobes, pierced with bulky wooden adornments, had stretched several inches. He raised corn. He had no idea how old he was. We tried to discern his age, using every mathematical system we could remember or invent. We decided he was real old.

We drank tea and talked. Walked to his son's house, drank tea, and talked. Walked to his relative's house, drank tea, and talked. Walked to his friend's house, drank tea, and talked. The impatience of my culture and mega doses of caffeine reached critical mass. I blurted out, "Why do we sit around

all day, drink tea, and talk?"

The old man responded innocently, "Can you make the corn grow faster?"

I could have "enlightened" him – after all, my technological civilization produces genetic hybrids that do just that – but it would've distracted from his profound truth: there are forces in life bigger than I. Perhaps that's why I wander: some instinctive spiritual quest. Do I travel to know a higher reality, the world, or just myself? I finished my tea.

A ROOSTER CROWED. I opened my eyes on thatched roof, inches above. The sun filtered through, warming the grass smell from my straw mattress. Bath day! I sprang from bed like a pouncing cheetah, out the door, past the goat, and down a steep hill. Trudging up the road was an old woman. Her grey head balanced the water bucket; her hunched back bore the firewood.

The distant riverbank was pink. Approaching revealed a horde of flamingoes, crowding the swampy edge. Posting two crocodile watchmen, I waded into the warm current, but relaxing proved impossible. My submerged head filled with visions of razor-sharp jaws. *Lather, rinse, repeat* became *lather, rinse, retreat*. I felt a little cleaner, sort of.

I lunched with the tribal elders. Each had two wives, who all cooked together. The menu never changed. We drank *chai*: black tea boiled with milk and sugar cane. We ate *ugali*: ground corn and millet pronounced, "Ooh golly". *Ugali* is eaten from a community pile with unwashed hands; this tends to darken the pile as the meal progresses. The grain paste is then used to scoop up beans or greens. "Greens" refers to any plant, found round the hut, that the goat missed or rejected.

Unfortunately, I was an honoured guest. A bowl of animal parts, suitable for teaching anatomy, was offered. I



couldn't refuse. The assortment was a feast for a poor village. Starting with meats I recognized most and feared least, I commenced chewing. Bites lingered forever. Some refused decomposition and defied swallowing, but delicacies dwindled to two: a chunk of cerebral matter and a large intestine. Custom allowed leaving one. I visualized the gut section being squeezed out like a tube of brown toothpaste. "Brains it is!" I decided.

A woman entered. She was lean and hard like a runner, with movements soft and deft like a dancer. High cheekbones cradled moist, glittering eyes. One silver and two wooden rings jangled around each wrist and ankle. She refilled our teacups. Instead of customarily exiting, she abruptly sat down. Tugging the straps from her arms, she let them fall away. Shoulders and breasts were exposed. I glanced furtively for the elders' reactions; they seemed oblivious. Now, handed her baby, she began nursing. I slurped my tea.

My culture doesn't program people to feel passion for goat guts and *passé* about breasts – quite the opposite. Different societies install different life-operating systems. As elders conversed, I pondered: to what extent can we choose to override or upgrade our own programming?

The finale was *merseek*: a sour, smoky drink of milk and charcoal fermented in a gourd. I quickly declined seconds. My hosts summoned me a *matatu*: a taxi/pick-up truck seemingly transporting up to 100 people and their livestock, at up to 100 miles per hour. After a thrill-packed ride to Kisumu, I boarded the night train to Nairobi.

My cabin was clean. My berth had fresh, cinnamon-scented, white linens. My sink oversaw the window. Brushing my teeth, I watched a fiery, red sun setting on savannah. Then, darkness fell on the long silhouettes of giraffe munching treetops. I migrated to the

brass and mahogany dining car. I shared a table with a member of parliament; we ate chicken curry topped with coconut, bananas, peppers, and mango chutney. The train's rolling motion lulled me; the politician's voice sedated me. I slept deeply.

IN NAIROBI, I slept with the Amish: Mennonites who ran a guesthouse: a secluded, garden oasis between a monastery and a spa. Bed, dresser, and bare walls with crucifix comprised a room. Rock floor, open sky, and flowering shrubs enclosed a shower. Each dawn, a clanging triangle roused us staggering to breakfast: oatmeal porridge, milk, and guava juice.

Surrounding the table were bleary-eyed adventurers, on a mutually bad hair day. The clinking of silverware and glasses gave way to the rising buzz of conversations. Blue napkins were encircled by hand-carved, animal figurines. Mine was a zebra. Guests were permanently assigned to beasts. Sitting by our randomly distributed statuettes, every mealtime brought new acquaintances. One day's destiny paired me with a grey-bearded man. I spoke first: "Jambo, habari?"

"I'm all right, but I don't speak Kiswahili."

"So what brings you here?"

"I'm a bush doctor. I deliver babies and antibiotics."

"That sounds interesting."

"Oh yeah, great! Villagers pay the shaman to stuff their wounds with leaves. Then, broke and dying, they come to me. Gave up a lucrative practice in New York. Told my wife I wanted to help people and the bitch divorced me."

"The guava is delicious. Don't you think?"

"Everyone's driving out to the national park today. Wanna come?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Seven people piled into a beige Land Rover. Doc drove. Stomping the

accelerator and scattering gravel, he took off like a kid for Disneyland. Multi-tasking as chauffeur and guide, he spun his head recklessly from windshield to back seat. Hours passed. Dusty roads wound endlessly through salt-bush and flat-topped acacia. Rounding a curve, we careened to a halt. Four stocky warthogs surrounded the business end of a long python. The meeting abruptly adjourned, waddling and slithering into the brush.

We crested a hill where a vast rift severed the landscape. Herds drifted lazily across the sea of stubble grass – massive wildebeest and delicate gazelles. We eagerly ploughed ahead, shifting gears and bouncing down a rock-studded hillside.

On the right, hyenas burrowed lustily into a pinkish-white carcass. On the left, a camouflage jeep passed by. Out of the window, fingers pointed and voices shouted, "Simba! Simba!" Adrenaline mounting, we approached the spot. There he was: flanked by two lionesses and lying under a tamarind tree, tufted tail and carpeted torso, rippling haunches and radiating mane. He yawned carelessly and stretched defiantly. I stared, open-mouthed, very aware we had parked too close. My car-pool mates furiously snapped photos, leaning out the windows, climbing on the roof. The lion looked annoyed. He stood, pawed the air, and snarled a warning. We headed home.

SOMBRE GREY SKIES set the mood for our drive. Storm clouds hung like sooty cotton balls as gentle thunder rumbled across the open range. Tall grasses rippled and bowed under the wind's unseen hand. We rode silently until roof-pattering rain filled the void. All was right until everything went wrong.

Our vehicle lunged downward and stopped cold. Cargo hurled forward. Left-side passengers flung right and introduced themselves. The engine shuddered, farted, and died. For a

frozen moment, no one moved or spoke. We eyeballed each other till a resident genius said, “Musta hit some-thin’!” Sure enough, our tire had hit a deep rut.

Jumping out, we fanned around the freshly entombed wheel. Like a committee of experts we rubbed our jaws and performed a visual auto autopsy. Tire and rim had been yanked apart, the latter bent, the former mangled. A bumper-mounted winch offered some hope. Hooking cable to a tree, we pulled the SUV clear – only then discovering a flat spare.

We were stranded, on a remote stretch with a bad reputation. If someone passed us (unlikely), and didn’t rob us (less likely), they couldn’t possibly transport us. Nothing to do but wait. We’d be found, either by Mennonites in a few hours or by archeologists in a few centuries.

Daylight faded out; insect noise faded in, as if Mother Nature simultaneously adjusted two knobs on her entertainment system. Long after dark, a distant car sound invaded the night. The guesthouse VW Bug appeared, beep-beeping a friendly “Hello”. Seven plus driver squeezed in eagerly, as if sitting on another guy’s lap, between an elbow and an armpit, was a rare treat.

A few head-bumping, bone-shaking kilometers later we stopped – some kind of checkpoint. Tire-puncturing spikes blocked half the road; more obstructions up ahead blocked the other half. We had to make a slow “S” maneuver. Two men in baggy green fatigues appeared from the brush. One fingered an AK-47; one shoulder-holstered a handgun. Both motioned us to halt.

“Handgun” looked us over, sneered, and spit on the ground. “AK-47” took a long puff, flicked the cigarette away, and challenged our driver: “You were speeding. Pay the fine!”

“I left home without any money.”

“Gimme some identification!”

“I forgot to bring that too.”

(Long pause.) “Your registration sticker’s expired. Get out of the car!”

They lined us up by a roadside ditch. My heart pounded with fear. They groped over our cameras and backpacks. My muscles tensed with readiness. They crossed the road, squabbling in tribal dialect. My mind raced with questions: Should I dash for the trees? Could I get everyone killed? Would the others bolt first?

Meanwhile, disagreement escalated. Their spat seemingly revolved around whether our gear merited the nuisance of shooting and burying us. I side-glanced accusingly at those who’d brought nicer wares. “AK-47” appeared to be on our side. (In other words, he thought our stuff was cheap.) I mentally cheered him on, but apparently “handgun” outranked him. I felt like a death row inmate discovering his lawyer’s a rookie.

Finally “AK-47” barked at us, “Get out of here!” “Handgun” threw down his weapon angrily. The silvery moon emerged from cloudbank, bathing us in milky light. A pee stain could be seen on Doc’s pants. Scrambling to the VW, we dove in and drove off. Neither legs flailing out the doors nor a deflated rear tire slowed us down. I was grateful both to be alive and not to be sitting on Doc’s lap.

The backseat was a jumble of people – not packed in like sardines, tossed in like salad. At first, personal space was established by self-conscious compression, but joints tired of assumed contortions; lungs rebelled against forced inhalations. Body parts sagged and settled, requiring counter-adjustments, and parts weren’t just parts. The difference between boys and girls loomed before me like a puberty refresher course. Accidental brushes inspired outward courtesy and inward electricity. During such tactile collisions, my arm hairs bristled or recoiled, micro-flagging sexual preference. Stuck in

this mobile game of twister, I retreated into my thoughts.

The roadblock incident bothered me. Being near death wasn’t the problem – after all, I’m always a heartbeat away – facing death was the problem. I thrive on the perpetual self-delusion that death is inevitable but not imminent; the grim reaper can stand just outside the door, as long as he doesn’t knock. Nevertheless, to be human is to be trapped between the monkeys and the gods: too philosophical to live in the moment, too weak to secure immortality. My culture solves this dilemma, by ignoring it. When that strategy fails, when reality is rubbed in my face, I freak out. Putting such heavy issues aside, I decided tomorrow I’d relax and escape by going to a movie.

SUNRISE FOUND ME on a dust-blown airstrip, with a battered Cessna suggesting more historical than aviatinal value. At take-off, we were flung skyward and somehow stayed there. Looking surprised, the pilot beamed. My mouth hung loose in disbelief; I’d paid cash-money for this aerial reenactment of “The Little Engine That Could”.

Riding air currents like surf, we sputtered to the crests and then careened down. My green face stared longingly below where an elephant herd made slower, steadier progress. The fuel gauge heralded our arrival. I took deep breaths and made allegiance to several world religions. We landed.

The coastal port of Mombasa teems with commerce: Arab traders, Indian restaurateurs, and African prostitutes. I checked into a hotel. By afternoon, I was perusing a coral reef, submerged in soundless solitude. I told the fish I was a refugee from the upper world; they granted me temporary asylum.

By evening, I was sipping soda at the cinema. The smell of something burning went almost unnoticed. Behind me was a balcony; above the

balcony was a ledge; on the ledge was a fan; with the fan was a cord; the cord emitted sparks; the sparks ignited a flame; the flame started a frenzy.

I stood up, to join the door-rushing throng. Suddenly, a theatre employee emerged on the ledge. Beating the fire to death with an old blanket, he disappeared. The movie resumed; the crowd sat down. Thirty minutes later, the whole scenario repeated: fire, hubbub, blanket, film. Everyone stayed to the movie's end. (There are places where human life, unlike Hollywood footage, isn't a precious commodity.)

I stumbled out into the night – so far from home even the stars were different. My eye fixed on a pulsating constellation. Some long-ago sailor, finding a familiar symbol in a foreign sky, named it “the Southern Cross.” My heart was comforted. Like the corn grower, I knew there were life forces bigger than I; like the sea wanderer, I decided that was good.

– Lyn Fox

## Boss

**W**HEN I WAS 17, I found myself working on a big beef farm in Alberta.

The family I was living and working with had lived in the area since the 1800s. They were Tory party activists, inveterate curlers, CFL enthusiasts, and conservative in every sense of the word. They mocked my hair, my punk-ass attitudes, my skinny arms, my trashy mouth, and my foolish tattoos. I immediately liked and admired them, and they were welcoming and kind in return.

Aside from the family, there were two of us working on the farm that spring and summer, and we stayed in a trailer about 50 yards away from the main house. Ellen and Pete had raised

five kids in the two-bedroom, five-room house that he had built himself. Before they had the house, they lived in the trailer, which was maybe 600 square feet in total. We all ate in the house, except during the two most intense weeks of harvest when we stayed in the fields day and night. Other than that time, though, Dingo and I slept in the trailer.

On the way to milking the cow every morning at 5:00, Pete would repeatedly smash the metal bucket on the outside of the trailer, maybe 6 inches away from my head and holler “Release your cocks and grab your socks boys, it's morning time.” He always threatened to come in after me if I wasn't up and ready in time for work, but I don't remember it ever coming to that.

I spent 7 months there, and overwhelmingly I drove in circles. Discing, seeding, fertilizing, threshing, baling: modern farming inscribed itself in my brain as driving big machines around and around. Haying and moving cattle were the major variations, but even that work meant plenty of driving. I regret none of it.

ONE MAY MORNING, a neighbour came hauling in early, during breakfast, to tell us that one of our bulls had busted through a fence and was wandering free. It was in Sector 17, down off the Old Mill Road. Pete half-smiled and half-grimaced as he thanked the neighbour. He got up to go deal with the situation, motioning for me to come with him: “Let's go, you scrawny little faggot. Let's see what you're made of.” That was his standard way of speaking to me, always with plenty of affection.

We hopped on a couple of four-wheelers, rumbling off down the road, through trails and across a couple of fields, with Pete doing everything he could to run me into ditches, splash mud on me, or cause me to lose control. The bull had gotten out of one of the most distant pastures on the farm,

and it was a long ride, maybe half an hour, even though we were driving fast.

We saw the hole in the fence first. The bull, maybe 2,500 pounds of mostly latent muscle, had either found or made a good-sized gap. The post was snapped off almost at the ground, and the wire was twisted and snarled in a pile around it. It would have been easy for him to step out to freedom.

Bulls, though, once they get out of a pen or field, almost always veer sharply and walk along the fence. They don't run away, they just chug along on the wrong side of line, heading straight. What you have to do is turn them right around, 180 degrees, and head them back where they came from and then, by stationing someone/thing on the far side of the hole, maneuver them back in. It's actually not all that hard: bulls are usually pliant, given the right level of authority and force. That, however, is the trick.

We passed the gap in the fence and drove on down the road maybe a mile, where we found the bull, plodding along, sticking to the fence on the far side of a small ditch. Pete's ATV matched the animal's pace, moving alongside the bull, maybe eight feet away. “Fuck, Hank. Dumb mother-fucker. Where the hell you going? There's no poon tang down that way.” Pete smiled as he bellowed at the beast. Hank didn't respond, except to keep walking. Didn't even turn his head.

“All right, you little pussy. Go get him. Turn him around.” Pete grinned at me.

Shit, I knew this was coming, I thought. “Whaddya mean, turn him around?”

“Turn him around! Go put your 95 pounds in his way and don't let him go forward anymore. Then push on his head until it's facing the way you want. Then kick him in the balls and get him moving back. I'll stand by the hole and push him back into the field.”

“You're kidding me.”

“No, I’m not, you little cocksucker. Get over there and turn him around. If he gets to the crossroad it’ll be a pain in the ass. Go get him!”

“Jeeesus.”

So I dragged my ass, incredibly reluctantly, across the ditch, and after a few tentative attempts (with much heckling from Pete) I stood gingerly a few feet in front of Hank. The bull did not acknowledge my existence, and walked straight into me. At the first touch of his flat, solid head I leaped out of the way.

Pete hooted a string of invective. I looked over and he was holding a piece of two-by-four, maybe four feet long. I don’t know where he got it. “Stay over there, you little princess. Try to come on this side of the ditch and I’ll give you a shot with this” (brandishing the wood).

I tried again. Same deal. The bull just walked into me. He weighed maybe 16 – 17 times what I did. There was no question whether or not I could stop him. I couldn’t.

I tried several more times, but my heart wasn’t in it. I really did try holding my ground, but only for an instant because Hank was just going to walk right over me.

Finally, Pete lost patience. “Christ.

Sonofabitch. Cunt. Get the fuck out of the way. Look, you have to show him who’s boss. If he doesn’t know you’re the boss there’s no reason for him to change what he’s doing. Fuck.”

Pete leapt over the ditch, clutching the two-by-four and stood by the fence waiting for the bull. When Hank got about three feet from him, Pete lifted the lumber above his head, and as if swinging an axe with the full force of his serious strength, brought it down on the bull’s skull. Right between the eyes on the flat of his forehead.

I couldn’t believe it. The wood made a sick thudding sound. I don’t know if Hank blinked, but he made this low groaning/bawling sound, like a bull imitating a dog growling. I thought that was the end of Pete. Surely the bull would just stomp him. But, instead, the beast just stopped moving and stood stock still. Pete regarded him again for a moment, and then stepped back half a pace, and with a baseball-bat swing smashed the bull on the cheek. It too made a dull, crashing noise, and this time Hank turned his head. Pete jabbed a few more times, and sure enough the animal was turned around. And with one swift kick, in the ass, not the balls, the bull was shambling back

whence he had come.

I could see little beads of sweat on Pete’s brow as he lifted his ball cap to push his hair back. He was grinning widely, showing plenty of gum, as he spread his arms wide. “See? Just gotta show him ...”

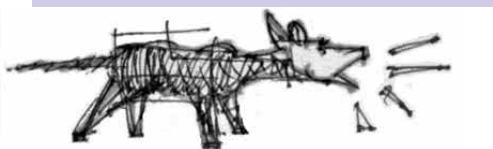
IT WAS THIS exact, almost photographic image of Pete: smiling and holding the two-by-four in his hand that flashed into my head a couple of years later, watching my father leap over a tennis net and threaten to kill one of his long-time friends.

We were playing doubles, Pa and I, against the same two guys we have played against for years. The matches are always tight, and they win far more than they lose. We are all good tennis players, fairly equal in level, my total lack of dedication and practice being mitigated by my relative youth and athletic ability. Our opponents however, are, in my father’s estimation, somewhat less than honourable about calling the lines.

If you’ve ever played much tennis you understand that line-calling has a certain, crucial place in recreational tennis. You rely on your opponent to call “in” or “out” fairly and truthfully, or else

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the game becomes very difficult. If it appears that your opponent is scamming you on line calls, it can be infinitely frustrating.

In general, my father had doubts about the rigorousness of these guys' line-calling. More specifically, he was certain on this day that they were fucking us over.

As the set slid away, Pa became more and more angry. Fury at his inability to serve well, the score, and our rivals came into sharp focus and concentrated itself intensely after one particularly questionable call.

"Out? Out? Did you call that out? Did you?" He advanced, snarling, toward the net. They had just called his second serve deep. He was losing it, and they realized it too late. "You fucking asshole. Listen, Dane. I've had it. You son of a bitch." And in one swift leap, my 57-year old father, who is still fairly physically imposing and in excellent shape, was over the net, his eyes wild. Dane backpedalled quickly, realizing he was way out of his depth. I was on the wrong side of the net to help: "Jesus, Dad, get back here. Dad ... Riley!" He wasn't listening to me. He was talking trash in a blur, letting Dane know just

exactly how many calls he'd cheated on, how many inches that last serve was in, and how he was going to lose his fucking head if he tried to pull that shit one more time. Dane had his back right against the fence, frantically searching for the door like a trapped animal when Pa finally relented. He turned back in a shower of profanity, fingerpointing, and recrimination. We finished the match quietly (the line calls were more than fair from then on, even generous). We all packed our bags and quickly got to our cars.

LATER, SITTING on our patio, I ventured to ask Pa what the hell that was all about. What did my good, sweet, gentle, patient father think he was doing?

He smiled benignly: "It's important that guys like that know you might snap at any time. Keeps them in line. Every once in a while you gotta pull something like that, or else they'll never stop. You have to let them know you won't be pushed around."

– Matt Hem

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## Balkan back trouble

This I know. Somewhere between when Tonia, Aleksandra, and Zarko drove me home from the party and the time I fell asleep my back got badly hurt. I've suffered ever since. I'm trying to figure out how it happened. I did take the dog around the block and he might have bodychecked me into a fence but poodles have seldom turned on their masters unless very hungry or offered more comfy quarters. This seems unlikely. I must regretfully conclude that Tonia, Aleksandra, and Zarko kicked me repeatedly in the back and ribs, probably Zarko holding me down in the snowbank while Tonia and Aleksandra laid on with their tiny pointy boots.

It was a Balkan party.

Tonia is Czech but actually Macedonian, Aleksandra and Zarko are Bosnian or Croat or Slovenian, possibly even Serb. But what did I do to deserve their retribution? What did I ever do to the people of the Balkans? I have made it my life's work to serve them in any way I can. I never bombed them. Instead, I got bombed at the party, drinking a lot of beer, slivovitz, and vodka, which accounts for the amnesia but not the agony. On my leaving it's reported that I objected to sharing the back seat with Zarko. But who wouldn't object with Tonia and Aleksandra also in the car? Tonia, the source of this report, claims that Zarko took very good care of me.

I bet he did!

From the party I can remember Zarko's wagging goatee and far too affable grin, Aleksandra's huge eyes set in her face's perfect triangle, Tonia's animated mask feigning interest in everything I said. It all fits, they were setting me up for the kill.

I have had it with the people of the Balkans!

From now on

no longer will I give them loans, supply useful tips, offer part-time employment, or feed them dinners. I will no more extend the helping hand. I will lie on my couch, carefully not moving. I will stare at the ceiling and be Canadian.

– *Fraser Sutherland*

## Leni R. at 100

What staying power,  
while all the gypsies  
suddenly, without a cue  
disappeared like extras  
from your movie

Isn't it funny  
how you know nothing  
of politics  
yet you had a meeting  
with Adolf at four

On your calendar  
and watch  
millions would march  
to the same tune  
and camera

Though others  
quietly, without a trace  
have disappeared  
you've gone on,  
a mystery, a life.

– *B.Z. Niditch*

---

## The catch

How much  
Further can

You get, Cape  
Breton from

Manhattan?  
Under the drag-

Net, plane-  
Torn sky,

Lobster boats  
Steering by

Satellite.

– *Sean Howard*

# Paul Goodman's night

And Paul Goodman,  
you found that guy  
at the bus stop  
20, but really younger  
in your eyes and even his own,  
with the pale white skin  
he was a runaway  
from life  
in a different way  
from you  
and he was youth  
your lost one  
the one you and he  
would never find again  
and you know  
if you don't talk  
or open up  
or open him up  
or pick a fight  
you will lose the night

The night  
you kissed every part  
of him and your life  
away, you wanted his secret  
he wouldn't give it away  
was it money he was after  
or drugs or daddy or you,

a sociologist of love  
just like the lost  
thrown-out-of  
yet beautiful to you  
used, abused even by you  
for love, for hurt, for justice  
but who can guess or care  
for the one  
with the pale skin  
and the shorts and sneakers,  
he knew he had something  
you wanted  
a whole lot of things  
youth, platonic beauty  
innocence, a mask  
of guilt for his own failings  
and in that night  
of the pale skin  
when everything came off  
you could sing  
you too could sing  
you were happy  
you were not alone  
even if the world  
condemned you.

– B.Z. Niditch

---

## The age of flight (collateral)

Everyone  
Travelling

The torn-  
Silk road,

Watching  
Worlds

Fall by the  
Wayside.

## Warning (the flag)

The Angel  
Stands in

The flight-  
Path, waving

A tattered  
Robe at

The plane.

– Sean Howard

MATTHEW J. TRAFFORD

## Love note



WHAT HAD SHE EVER done to indicate that she loved him?

Nothing, of course, and yet here he was, this wisp of manhood, this figure newly formed by adolescence, draining glass after glass while preparing for the chance to go and see her, believing that she would be there.

One swallow, then another, and yet another contraction of throaty muscles and the glass is all empty, no matter how optimistic you are; the mixture, more rye than coke, is gone.

Friends run in and out, all preparing to go to the same place, not knowing of his secret purpose, his secret hope, his only hope. Darting in and out in various stages of drunkenness, difficult to gauge because of his own, his friends are dressing, and each time they appear they're wearing some new accoutrement as they prepare to go to the happening, throbbing, strobing pub.

He is also dressing, not exceptionally well but as well as he can, what with being a student and rarely doing laundry and not making any money to buy new clothes, nor really wanting to. Most importantly, he thought that he looked really good, and he spiked up his hair to look more like a magazine model, and even borrowed blue glasses to look more like someone else, someone she might care for.

In borrowing the blue glasses he had had to reveal his secret. They were friends, but he would have preferred to keep his hopes hidden, so that he would not have to recount the rejection which deep inside him he felt was inevitable yet simultaneously hoped was a figment of his low self-esteem. Earlier, he had run over to his friends' apartment, in the rain, the sprinkling of increasingly acidic drops on the increasingly concrete world, and run up the narrow stair case and knocked on the door, not knowing if they were in.

When the door opened, relief washed over him, he would have the glasses, that extra little piece that would put him that much closer to her side over the next guy – the others to whom she doubtlessly made the same casual comment, that she might be there, yet who could not feel the same way about her, the same as this, this running through rain to get glasses that might please her more than his eyes without them.

“What's up?” his friend says, so calmly, so indifferently, without any of the burning, the urgency, the hope that wells up within him more with each passing second.

“I was wondering if I could borrow your blue glasses,” he says, horribly quickly, probably too quickly, but maybe just because he's out of breath and not because each atom fears the answer will be “no” and he'll have to face her without the protection of blue glasses.

“Yeah, sure,” his friend says, joined by another roommate. Now the two of them are looking at him with curiosity. “What do you need them for?” They asked this question while placing the glasses in his hands, and although he just wants to turn and run and get back into the acidic dropping rain, he knows courtesy and friendship and all those things that don't seem to matter at all right now demand that he stay.



"I'm going to the pub, for Homecoming," he says, knowing that his friends are the only people who care less about football than he does, that this answer will not be satisfactory to them, that their eyebrows are already curling with curiosity. And before he can stop himself he says "I'm sort of meeting Lara there."

In his mind thunder claps, a millstone around his neck is released for a fraction of a second and then replaced with a larger one, one full of other people's expectations as well as his own, and above his burdened neck his brain is overflowing with reacting chemicals trying to make him feel relieved and nervous and scared and excited and aroused and rejected and guarded and free all at the same time. All this before his eyes blink twice and the corners of his mouth condescend to create a small, nervous smile.

Looks of curiosity change to looks of admiration and know- ingness on the faces of his friends, the givers of the blue glasses, which now seem hardly worth the price of this confession.

"Have fun," says one.

"Fuck her brains out," says the other, shaking his hand, the hand not holding the blue glasses for which he had come here, the blue glasses for which he had had to hear four words that wouldn't leave his brain all night.

His body turned and walked towards the door but his mind was still stuck, still broken, still petrified by the imperative to "fuck her brains out." So crude, so rude, so presumptuous, so unfeeling and yet so true, so fundamental, so instinctual, so right, so indicative of what part of his confused brain wanted to do, these words spoken casually as a matter of passing.

"Thanks for the glasses," he said as he almost fell back down the narrow staircase, still shocked by the command to do what he barely thought of as in the realm of possibility, the command to do what he wasn't even sure he wanted to do, with the person he was sure he wanted to see every moment of every day.

Back in the rain, he tried to lose these thoughts and concentrate on running back to his room, so he could dress and do his hair and by God get some more booze into him before setting out for the spinning flashing beating sweating pub, the electric jungle of light and sound where he would hopefully find her.

Now, dressed, with the all too precious blue glasses and his hair spiked the way he hoped she liked it, the alcohol, the ethanol, that most intoxicating of legal substances, is his primary concern. He needs to drink enough that he'll have the balls to ask her out or try to kiss her (or fuck her brains out), and he needs to drink enough that he won't die from disappointment and shame and hurt if (when) she rejects him, like he knows she will but hopes she won't. He needs to drink enough that his head is spinning, and leaning against a wall is easier than standing up.

He is ready, but it's too early. He wants to get there, he wants to be there, at the throbbing pulsing flashing sweat- ing throbbing vibrating pub, he wants to see her. But social mores, those rules that govern how we eat and live and drink and dance (and fuck each other's brains out) say that it's not cool to be at the strobing perspiring pub before ten. He's ready but he can't leave, that would be even worse than showing up without blue glasses, so he's waiting with his friends, his friends who know nothing about his hopes for the evening, waiting until an appropriate time to go to that pub and see that girl he can't get his mind off of, not listening really to what any of them are saying now. Meanwhile, before anyone notices, one of his friends has emptied half a bottle of scotch. At first no one can believe it, they think this companion of theirs, this drinking buddy, must have poured it somewhere, done something with it, certainly he couldn't have swallowed it. But after a few moments it's obvious he did drink the scotch, the half bot- tle of expensive alcohol-laden scotch, but everyone is drunk enough that it's funny instead of worrying. Soon it hits him, and while he's reeling the only thing his friend in the blue glasses can think of is that he needs several more ounces of rye and a few drops of coke before attending to his drunk friend, his friend who had more scotch than was good for him, his friend who normally doesn't drink, his friend who is now gesturing wildly and shouting about something. With the scotch pounding through his blood, he's wild that he should go out looking pretty, and in 10 minutes he's wearing a Hawaiian women's shirt, and his hair is in little clumps done up in green elastics, and his hair and face and neck are covered in grapefruit-scented body glitter. He looks like a pixie on crack, but it took the time needed because now it's time to go, to go and see her, if she's there.

Then he is walking, one drunken foot in front of the other, with the crack-pixie leaning on his shoulder for dear life, and soon they are in the loud screaming singing pub for the first time, and he is seeing everyone indifferently through blue lenses, not caring anything for other people's pain or lust or hopes or dreams or dances

All he cared for was her, and he couldn't find her any- where. Within minutes he had separated from the crack pixie and his other friends, on his own looking for the only person that he and the rye cared about any more, the only person it seemed he had ever cared about or ever could, the only person who wasn't there.

The blue glasses for nothing, the rye for nothing? How could she not be there when she said she would be? The comment that she might see him there had seemed (a little) casual, but how could it be when he felt so strongly about it? Something must have detained her, but there was no reason to stay there if she wasn't.

It was incredible, her not being there. It was catastrophic, utterly horrible, and it had the potential to destroy him, to make him shrivel up into a little ball of self-hatred and low self-esteem until nothing could get him out. He was being rejected before being allowed to ask the question, the question he had been thinking about for weeks that he probably couldn't have asked anyway, the question that some other guy might be asking right now. But almost as soon as all of this worry and shock started, it passed, for he realized that the answer was simple: he should just call her and see if she was coming after all. Maybe she was just late, or getting blue glasses of her own because of her hopes to please him (or someone else), maybe drinking her own brand of alcohol to dull her emotions and potential traumas. All this could be learned from one simple phone call.

Of course, that required a phone. And drunk and in a loud, noisy, pulsing, beating, strobing environment, there was no phone. He would have to leave, to go outside to a payphone, and yes, there was one nearby, he remembered.

He wasn't sure of anything right now, but he was pretty sure that there was a phone booth down at the corner at the KwikMart that he might get to in just a few minutes, but he was pretty unsure about whether or not he was allowed to leave and then come back, because what if he went to call her and found out that she had already left for the happening strobing pub and he missed her and couldn't get back in or that she was just about to leave or any other series of things that would end up the same: with them not together, which was how they were now, he feeling unbearably alone without her, her feelings a mystery? He wanted to get answers to his questions, but he was already forgetting what they were and wishing he was still in his friend's room drinking rye and he was wondering where his friends were and he was wondering if the phone was really there at the corner and he was wondering where he could get a quarter and he was wondering where he could get more to drink.

The sight that broke him from this ethanol-induced stuporous stream of questions was a bright yellow jacket with the words "Campus Police" written on the outside of it and his friend standing on the inside of it. His friend would have the answers because he was sober, the only sober person in sight, the only one who couldn't feel this incredibly spinning rush he was feeling overtop of his rejection and confusion and pain and lack of self-esteem.

"Am I allowed to leave and then come back again?" he asked, not sure if he had said "again" twice. "Like, can I go use the phone and come back in if I want to?" He was totally unsure if he was getting his message across; his friend's face looked bewildered a little and amused a little and preoccupied a little, but then it cleared a little.

"You can go in and out," his friend said. "Why do you

need to use the phone?"

He didn't want to answer this question or any questions, questions like when he had to borrow the blue glasses. He didn't know why everyone wanted him to tell them that he was desperately and drunkenly pursuing a girl who had casually said that she might see him there, that he was so obsessed with seeing her that he was going to leave the party at the throbbing pub that everyone else was still in line trying to get to in order to call this girl and see if she had rejected him before he'd given her the chance to?

"I'm calling someone I was supposed to meet here," he said. "Can I borrow a quarter, please?" A wave of sadness hit him hard for the first time, then the alcohol swelled stochically up to cover any sadness or shame or fear that might be lurking in him, hiding behind blue glasses and trying to come out.

If more words were said he didn't hear them – once the quarter was in his hand he was walking, quite steadily he thought, towards the door; the beating got louder and quieter, depending on which way he faced, walking or stumbling or whatever past the line-up of people trying to get in, scanning their faces to see if she was there but knowing instinctively before he looked that she was not there, feeling the cold of the outside embrace him and push him and try to rape him as he finally got outside of the building. Part of his mind — the part that liked coke better than rye — began to whisper that if she was coming she would be there already, even the fashionably late people were in line, everybody who was anybody that was going to be there was already there; it was crowded; there would be no room for her even if she came. But the rest of him did not hear this voice for it had set upon a solution: it knew that it was walking towards a phone that, when dialled, might reveal her shining voice on the other end, the voice that would be delighted to hear from him and be just getting out of the shower or just waking up or just getting ready to leave and definitely looking forward to seeing him.

HE IS WALKING down a steep hill now and there is a street below, and part of him that is not the other two parts knows that this is dangerous, and is amused by it in a distanced, detached, and esoteric way, although it is attached enough to allow a smile to cross over his face as his feet go faster than his brain tells them to, but they know better than his silly old rye-infested brain how fast to go, and another, older part of the brain knows how to keep his balance and is doing a wonderful job of it.

Now the smile is because he made it down the hill without falling and is relieved in every part of him and smug in only some, then the smile is because the blood is humming in his ears through his head and that feels wonderful and

sounds wonderful although he fears it may not look wonderful if his ears have turned all red like they used to when he was embarrassed, and now the smile is because he sees the phone, the link, the communication device that will connect him to that shining voice, that wonderful cadence, that feminine instrument which he was sure would evince such pure, clear pleasure and satisfaction, such soothing of his fears and doubts and insecurities that it would feel like cold aloe cream rubbed over a sunburn, or an itch soothed with a scented unguent. The psychic version of this relief is what the phone promised, and it was mere steps away, mere steps and another semi-dangerous street, which was really deserted and not dangerous at all, but what good would it do to die before reaching the phone? and after all he was drunk so what harm could it do to be cautious? but of course he was not nearly so drunk as the crack-pixie who had been so silly and incautious and unguarded and who didn't know how to pace himself at all.

The phone booth had been blurry for most of his trip, probably because of the cold, he thought, or else a trick of the light or maybe just maybe a trick of the rye. In any case, it was coming into view now, he was almost upon it, it was becoming clear but there was something intensely wrong about it suddenly, and his body and mind and soul were suddenly united in an unparalleled panic while his mind tried, reeling and rye-besotted, to decode what his eyes were telling him.

Light was streaming out behind him from the KwikMart and there was a light in the phone booth and another light behind it, and suddenly when all these lights converged he saw that there was someone in the phone booth, someone using the phone he needed to use, someone standing where he needed to stand, and that there were two other people the same size standing outside the phone booth.

Then something cleared again and he could see and think almost like normal. And he saw that the person in the phone booth was not using the phone, but standing in a position that was only ever used at one time, that he had only ever seen in one place and for one activity, and that place was in washrooms at urinals and in woods and behind snow-covered cabins, and it had always and only been used for pissing. It had a swagger and a bravado and a machismo about it, this posture, feet planted more firmly apart than usual, arms sticking out a little from the body, making a firm silhouette accenting the fact that the hands were occupied at that centre of male attention and Freudian female envy, the head either turned down to watch in fascination or back with eyes closed in satisfaction, the stream splashing noisily on whatever surface had been chosen. It was not without a certain enviable nobility, this pose, except he needed the phone this pisser was pissing

on, and another part of his brain immediately showed him that the pisser was drunk and so were his friends, and another part of his brain was shocked that he had not stopped to watch from a distance but was walking right up to this pissing perpetrator, and that from his new vantage point he could see that the pisser, in his drunkenness, was not aiming his stream down to the concrete where it may have been tolerated, but that drunkenness and mischievousness and youth and urgency had all combined with lack of balance and a small group of boys, and that this pisser was pissing everywhere, on the buttons and the receiver and the phone and the phone book and the glass and the ground and then the piss was gone, done, dried up, released. Then his ears kicked in as though coming back from vacation when the pisser stumbled out of the stall to his screaming friends, and his ears heard "Oh my god you pissed on the phone you pissed on it oh my god that guy's going to use the phone you pissed on it's covered in piss he's going to use it I can't believe you did that oh my god!"

The second wave of sadness of the evening shook him, this time mingled with shame and embarrassment and the knowledge that what he was doing was somehow awful and pitiable and comparable to picking food out of the garbage and eating it. But the rye came to the rescue once more, and although he had stopped wanting it the rye that was in him already was getting stronger, it was just beginning its night, and it wanted to have fun, and it was surging all through him. And so he stepped into the phone booth and gingerly lifted the receiver off of the cradle and placed it to his ear, and he felt the wetness dripping on his ear but he didn't care that it was wet on his ear and that the wet was piss, and he put in the quarter, and he dialled her number from memory and felt the wetness of the numbers as he pressed them in the right order and the wetness was still piss.

And then came the ringing, the ringing that seemed ceaseless; part of him was counting the ringing and knew that the ringing had been going on for far too long and that the ringing should have stopped by now and that the ringing wouldn't stop until he hung up the phone; part of him was fascinated by the ringing, so deep and repetitive and seeking an answer almost as desperately as he was seeking her; and part of him was shocked by the ringing, petrified by it, as though the tone had turned him into stone like some sort of Medusa's head, and indeed the ringing and the prospect that she was not at home to answer the ringing and not at the throbbing pub and that she must therefore be somewhere else and that the somewhere could be anywhere were so shocking that he could not move but could only listen to the ringing and feel the wetness which was piss dripping in his ear.

And then either the rye or his reflexes or the deepest deepest part of him that had esteem hung up the phone and put

an end to the ringing. But then that part of him which had picked up a piss-soaked phone with a hand full of rye-soaked blood and a mind that could not take the lack of her at both the gyrating pub and the ringing phone that was connected to her home put the quarter back in and dialled again, but again there was only ringing and the reflex or whatever had to hang up again and his brain had to accept that, rye or not, blue glasses or not, piss-covered phone or not, she was not going to answer the phone.

This was a very important moment, and the rye in him knew that and knew that it had to do something if its fun was to continue, and it also knew that this was a small town and a small campus and that other parts of the brain knew where her house was and that it wasn't far, and that the only way to really know if she was home or not was to go there and find out. And somehow the rye convinced the rest of his brain and his body and even most of his soul that this was the right thing to do, that he would have to walk to her house and see what was wrong, because there was surely something wrong or else she would have seen him there since she had (casually) said that she would (maybe) see him there and a promise was a promise was a promise and she wouldn't break a promise, especially to him, and so he would have to go and see what was keeping her and why she didn't answer the phone.

AND SO HE BEGAN to walk, away from the pissy phone booth and the blurry lights and the people coming in and out of the KwikMart, across the street, and off towards her house. Taking the shortcut through the park, he would be at her house in a matter of minutes. Part of him wanted to run, to get there quickly; he was finally going to see her after all this waiting, going to talk to her, look at her, maybe even touch her. But another part of him that had been cautious around the cars didn't think he was capable of running, especially not through this uneven path through this park.

He was making involuntary movements with his face now; it felt really good to bite his tongue or put his teeth over his top lip. He was numb in some places and it felt wonderful; he was blissfully unaware of the cold November air around him. Looking up at the stars provided an excellent view of the stars, he thought, and they were all blurry and spinning and waving hello and wishing him luck and pointing the way to her house.

Soon he was on concrete again, the stars and the moon and the streetlights were bouncing off the pavement and making sparkles, his head seeming to jerk with each footfall, the rye reaching its peak and enjoying this slow drunken walk, this bouncing sparkly perambulation towards her house and hopefully her. Turning the corner he was almost there, heart starting to beat more quickly now, and then he was

there, standing in front of her house in which many of the shiny lights were on, and wondering if he was really going to go in.

Before he can think of what he's going to do he sees a cat approaching him, a cat coming towards him, and he reaches down to pet it because after all the cat is cute and she might like it if she sees him with a cat outside of her house. And the cat has come up to him and is rubbing up against his legs, and he wonders if the cat is as desperate as he is and maybe if the cat was told to fuck someone's brains out by one of its friends. And he likes the feeling of the cat rubbing against his legs, it feels good to be touched, and he reaches down and strokes the cat in the middle of the street in the middle of the night, hoping that no cars come by to force him to move. And without really wanting to he closes his eyes.

And when he opens them, an hour later, everything is the same. He is still in the middle of the street and he is still stroking the cat and the cat is still rubbing up against his legs and the house is still there with the lights on and he still hasn't seen her and the stars are still shining and spinning and dancing up above him and it's still a little bit cold. And he realizes that it can't be an hour later and that it's not and that he must have only closed his eyes for a second (but boy does it feel like longer).

And he decides he has to go to her house now, before another almost-hour passes out here in the street and it becomes too late to go back to the party, although maybe that means they'll just hang out here but there's a fat chance of that happening anyway, despite what anyone else thinks or told him to do. So he staggers a few steps closer to the house but the cat moves with him and is making figure eights between his legs and feet and he's afraid he's going to step on it by accident and then it will have been crushed in its search for love and he would have hurt a cat because he was drunk and she would come out and see him in the street with a crushed cat and think he was a monster or a pervert and then he would have been crushed in his desperate search for love too. So he stops lest all this happen, and he reaches down to pet the cat again and to tell it to go, to go to the other cat's house and maybe find it there like he was going to find his here and tell it that he couldn't stay with the cat any more and had to stop procrastinating in a snivelling sick stalker-like way standing outside of her house and too afraid to go in and too busy with a cat in the middle of the street. But he realizes, and even the rye realizes, that the cat can't speak English, and besides it feels so nice to pet it here in the cold night (thank god for the cold night to keep him sober) and then he closes his eyes again.

And then another hour has passed but he knows it's not an hour this time – he's wiser and stronger and he's not



even confused by the fact that every time he closes his eyes an hour seems to go by and maybe that means that he really did have too much rye (but still not as much too much as the crack-pixie with his scotch), so really there was no reason to worry, really.

He took one last look at the stars, which took longer than he had intended it too, because he really did love the way they were dancing and the way they were so much brighter here and he tried to remember that the Latin word for star was *astra* (or something like that) and that there was an expression something *astra ad astra* (or something like that) and he wished he could remember it now while he was looking up at them and seeing them dance and shine but alas, there was too much rye in his brain to allow any room for Latin, and he had too many things to think about, like getting rid of this cat and going into that house.

So he started striding this time, towards the back of the house, which was the door that they used which he knew because he had been there with her once or twice before, which was probably more than the other guys she had (casually) told she (might) see there could say, and maybe even more than the guys she was probably with instead of him (for why would she want to be with him anyway?). But at least he was bolder than the cat because it wasn't brave enough to follow him this far, but he felt he owed it to the cat to look back at it as it sat there on the lawn watching him for a bit before it ran off in search of its proper lover.

And then with three quick steps he was actually at her back door (my god he had actually come to her house!) and what was there to do now except knock and hope that she was there and that she didn't think he was the biggest fool in the world and that she liked the blue glasses that he had just put back on? And he knocked and there was no answer and he knocked again and there was no answer and this was too much like the ringing phone and it hurt too much so he did what he had to do, he opened the door and went in.

AND NOW HE WAS inside (by god he was inside her house) and he had come there and he didn't even know if she was there and he had gone all the way in and what if she was there what would he say? and what if she wasn't there and all this was for nothing? and what if one of her roommates saw him then what would he say? and would the roommate tell him where she was, please? because he really really had to see her, but there was no one there so far, so he just stood very very still in her kitchen and listened, because maybe she was in the shower after all and he could leave without her ever having known that he had gone all the way to her house when there was no answer on the piss-soaked phone and that he had gone in when there was no answer to the knocking because surely she wasn't going to

like that he had been there, surely this was some sort of invasion of privacy or breaking of the law, but they did know each other and the door was unlocked and he didn't think she'd mind because that wasn't the way she was, but if he really knew how she was then how come she hadn't been at the throbbing pub and he had expected her to be and by god he was still in her house!

Even the rye thought that this was ridiculous, that it was a mistake that his foot was taking another step further into the kitchen and he couldn't even tell if he was being quiet because of the pounding of the blood and the rye in his ears with that sort of ringing that was probably left over from the beating singing blasting pub where she wasn't. And so part of him, or all of him, or none of him, suddenly called out "Lara!" in what was surely not a very loud voice, but which sounded so very loud in its pleading and desperation and naked desire until the silence that answered it came back much louder and overpowering and mocking and cruel.

And so now he knew that she wasn't there and that he should just leave and go home defeated, but to his surprise he was still walking, still slowly and almost silently, now towards the stairs and he couldn't believe it and couldn't stop himself and he didn't even know what he was going to do or why he was doing it and now was the first time that he felt a little scared and wondered if it was all worth it, but by the time he had time to think of that question he was already standing outside her bedroom, and before he could be shocked at that he walked in.

AND NOW HE AND the rye were in her room, this room that was everything about her, all her trappings and belongings and even things he'd given her and the look of her and the feel of her and the smell of her and probably even the taste of her if he knew how to taste it. Every sense and every pore and every bit of him drank her up and she was so much sweeter than the rye, so much more intoxicating, but so much more painful because she wasn't really there and hadn't really given herself to him and probably wouldn't like that he was there in her room without permission, and suddenly his exquisite joy at absorbing her turned into bitter, bitter, soul-wrenching pain, because he knew now for sure that he had been rejected before he started, rejected even as he had shamed himself to get the blue glasses, rejected even as he had shamed himself in the piss-infested phone booth, rejected as he had played with the cat, and that he had shamed himself further by making sure he knew that he was rejected by coming into her house, and shamed himself by being there, and still not leaving. He was essentially raping her room, he knew that, and it was horrible, but he still felt sorry for himself as he stood there and all he

felt was pain and all he thought was remorse, but the feelings were stronger and the pain consumed him, and he flopped down on her bed in drunken, searing agony.

But he opened his eyes again and this time it didn't even seem like it had been an hour, and he was already starting to recover because down in the deepest places in him he had never believed that she could love him, he didn't believe that anyone could love him, and although sometimes he thought this was too hard, it was times like these that he knew it was really true and that it would always be true and he would just have to accept it.

And he had to save face in this situation, and the rye was fleeing away so fast and cowardly that he knew he really had to do something; he could not just leave this place and not have her know that he was here, the moments he had spent here had been too painful and significant for it to be unknown to anyone but him. So he pulled himself up off of her bed (on he which he would never lie again, on which she would probably lie with other guys who had not better blue glasses but better lives and were better people, on which she would lie with them and quite possibly fuck their brains out, and never, never once lie and think of him) and started looking for materials with which to write a note.

And without having to root through her things too much he found a piece of paper and a pencil crayon, and he sat down to write and wondered if he was too drunk (but surely she would understand that, for surely she was off getting drunk with someone right now, someone to whom the comment that she would see him there had been less casual, someone about whom she cared more than she cared about him). And he picked up the pencil crayon and he wrote:

Dear Lara,

Missed you at the pub. Came over to see if you were here and found the house empty. Hope you don't mind that I came in.

Hopefully we can get together soon.

Love, Mark.

P.S. Please excuse the drunken nature of this note.

He left it on her bed (the bed that he would never lie on again) and was impressed that it was so neat and legible and spelled correctly, and he left her house, and walked away, without looking back, and without looking up at the stars, and without knowing whether he was going home or back to the throbbing pulsing (empty empty) pub, and without hope, and without tears.

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# On war between civilizations

**H**IGGINS'S AT HOME *thinking about thinking*. Even thinking about *our* thinking. For instance, do we *understand* our thinking? More broadly, does thinking *help* us understand? Then. How do we *get from* our thinking to responsibility? And. Looking out the old apartment window here above One World Donuts. When suddenly. He *goes* to the mall.

He gets into Wotan, the grey-on-grey Volvo, the one he bought from his Montreal friend with the Jewish father, and he drives across the fat rolling boulevard to the ridiculous mall.

Where he has a question.

In a research sort of sense.

And he gets out Whitman, the notebook with the replaceable important part from Dollar Daze here at the mall.

And he sits first in the food court, like a regular person, then in Starbucks. While in Starbucks he wonders rather ineffectually about punctuation first. Shouldn't it be Starbuck's or Starbucks'? Then about coffee. Who is drinking all this coffee? Caffeine, he writes, is the performance-enhancing drug we should really worry about. And stop bothering all those poor Olympic hopefuls. Look at the example we few back here in civilization are setting.

"Oh my God," he gags.

The question's refined itself.

His mind did it and his self was watching.

The question isn't going to be just about the struggle to achieve individuality — especially with all this personal stuff going on in the news.

It's going to include things like competition between societies, cultures, civilizations, and all that.

"Absolutely," he winks at this real individual who is visibly struggling to be chic and keen and clever and up to eleven other efficient things behind the counter.

THE FIRST ONE'S Wall Street Guy. Wall Street Guy has the *Financial Post* and has parked him & it at a little table in the farthest corner, where he, Wall Street Guy, who does look damnably like Warren Buffett, squints at interlopers. He's clearly got a personal tradition of squinting at interlopers, squinting them ideally away.

Higgins's onto WSG like credentials to the sociopath.

He wants to know about the war between civilizations. Islam, say. And. You know. *Us*.

But WSG isn't coming out with a simple Bomb The Wogs. He isn't even really into *Them*. So. The types aren't working once again. He, WSG, is reviewing Higgins on this *Us* thing. He finds our multiculturalism to be the point and if there are lots of Muslims around us here and now, then that's wunnerful.

Put another way, though, Higgins gets in, there is a certain competition between what we might actually call *civilizations* ... factoring in the secularization, the modernist understanding of the world ... the end of the Caliphate in 1924.

WSG tends to approach these things on a personal level. He ... recognizes that this may not be thoroughly historical ... even scientific. But if a guy comes up to him and he needs a job ...

What, says Higgins, if it's not about a job. What if the guy comes up and he needs ... a metaphysics, say. Or. A month *off* from a job to fast and run down the mountain in Mecca, there, seven times ...

And.

WSG may be cracking, or may know he should crack, or may know he could crack here but he's not supposed to. He ... wonders if this is about individualism ...

At which Higgins is making a diagram. Perhaps the *great* diagram. Of individualism. With individuality on one side: which is not the same as individualism. And ideology on the other side.

The interviewee is looking at his pinky, at his ring. He's looking through his pinky ring, which is rose, right into the world. Then he sort of sees that yes if the medieval type in question is still living with a collectivist paradigm, hasn't got around to individuality ... and never mind that this is a liberal preoccupation ... this problem of the Crusades ... they attacked us first. Yes. I'm sorry. We didn't go there in 732. To Jerusalem. We were *stopping* them at the Battle of Tours in 732 ...

ROSIE'S THE BARBER. Not the riveter. And she has a mustache. Her mustache probably puts her in mind of barbering. Then she goes out and becomes a barber.

Higgins is thinking about all those mustaches in Afghanistan. What the West needs to do, probably, is get the good guys to shave off their mustaches so the bombs don't hit them.

Not that it's not hard to see a mustache from B-52 height.

It's not like looking at Rosie's.

"Yeah," she says. "I can talk."

Higgins is just obviously doing people and what they think here today. One moment he's half & halving his decaf. The next moment they're in this together.

She drinks hers black and real.

There is, she says, a civilized order that must be maintained. Due process. All that. You ask me, she says, about civilization. I noticed they talked civilization on the third day. On the first and second days – September the eleventh and twelfth – the Dick, the Bush and the Colin, there, were talking about attacks on freedom and democracy. But on the third day they were talking about civilization. This World Trade Centre thing was an attack on civilization. And Big Tony – not the Mafia one, the English one, the Prime Minister there – he was talking civilization, too.

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## THE STATE OF THE CIVILIZATION

### Chrétien to Go in for the Gipper

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2002 —

US President George W. Bush and Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien met in Detroit today to discuss US – Canada relations, border security and the attack on Iraq proposed by the Bush Administration.

CNN reported that the pair were “strangely silent” on the Attack Iraq initiative after their meeting. The news network also mentioned Chrétien’s earlier statement that Canada would not participate in military action against the Middle Eastern nation without seeing evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Sources close to the President later called the exchange between the heads of state more than cordial. The President apparently noted Chrétien’s upcoming retirement from politics and stated that he had seen the stocky Little Guy From Shawinigan “take down one of them protestors in a single smooth choke hold just like a regular commando there on the campaign trail”.

The President then winked in his heart-warming signature way and presented Mr. Chrétien with one M-4 assault rifle (Colt model 727), one KZ custom-made tactical super grade .45 caliber automatic pistol, one titanium-lined Wilson Combat daily carry folding tactical knife, one set #313 grip screw & plunger tube, one Safariland Gold Flex™ body armor vest (Threat Level 3A), one unidentifiable suicide pill, one helmet-fitted GPS-ready satellite up-link base station courtesy of MSNBC, one Force Recon pre-approved all-duties physical fitness and mental health certificate ...

The Prime Minister stated clearly that he was speechless and that of course Canada would do everything it could to support a united front in the ongoing effort to “upstand all over the enemies of what we have going on here”.

Not long after, Deputy Prime Minister John Manley, widely touted as the successor to Mr. Chrétien, spoke to reporters in Windsor, Ontario, acknowledging that Saddam Hussein had “caused a disruption in his area” and confirming that establishment of a direct connection between the al-Qaeda terrorist network and the Iraqi regime would make progress on the initiative much smoother.

– Kurt Halliday

Do you think, says Higgins, that was an attempt to reach for some foundation? To say the foundation has been attacked and therefore there is no question of defending it.

Yeah, she says. And they couldn't say Humanity's been attacked. You know. Like what feminists say about males.

Oh, he says, um, he says.

But the goddam media, she says.

Okay, he says.

Here in Canada on the second day, she says, the muppet one from the CBC, there, the Canned Broadcasting Corporation, was trying to get the American ambassador, who is a very De Niro or DeNiro or Deniro type, to come out and say Canada was the soft underbelly.

Or, he writes, maybe overbelly, being north.

North, she establishes. Yeah.

But, he says.

But the goddam journalists, she says. When are they gonna decide those bastards are part of the terror?

I was kinda workin' on the intellectuals, myself, he says.

Oh, she levies. Yeah.

What, he wonders, do you think of the fact there is an Arab TV station in Qatar broadcasting images of things like Jews hitting children in the streets of Palestine all the time and not giving a sort of objective, scientific analysis?

Well, she says, that's what you were talking about before. Isn't it? There's no universality and objectivity and individualism.

Individuality, actually, he says.

It's kinda like that's what you're lookin' for, she says.

Oh, he says.

Like. You're prompting me. She says.

Oh, he says. Yeah.

Putting words in my mouth, she says.

Yeah, he says.

About my goddam individuality, she says.

NEXT, WE NEED somebody who takes care of herself.

This one's a consultant, he thinks. She's a professional. She's like this all day long. Her name's Judy or Barbara or Irene.

"It's Barbara," she finds.

Hers is the biggest latte, with oomph, with cinnamon. She cradles, even educates, the massive glassy glass in one hand and womanhandles *The New Yorker* with another.

It is her contention, from a counselor-turned-consultant's point of view, that several civilizations exist within our own. Surely the culture, backed by the mind, that harbours *Reader's Digest* or gives succor to whatever's left of *The Saturday Evening Post*, surely that culture-mind is not the same as the culture-mind running along behind *Time* and *Newsweek* and *Discover*. And both of those (then a big

straw-sip from the life-giving latte) are not the same as the euphoric, knowing, world-workable culture-mind we see springing from, breathing self into, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Scientific American*.

Higgins, at the moment, is still back at her neat and controlled appearance, getting her voice down in words, finding her face with his own defensive little pack of emotions.

But she's lurching ahead to people making the world and the world making them right back and language in between. The complexity and fluidity and connectedness and musicality and thereness and relativism of language.

Higgins is wondering what kind of a counselor-turned-consultant she was-is.

She seems to sense his questioning.

"I was a people person," she says, "for the longest time. Then I got sick to death of people. I began to see how they were all the same. An extension of me. So. I. Started reading more ..."

She worked on a new religion for a Madison Avenue firm – something about just giving in to Bill Gates – and then found intellectualism.

Higgins writes that into his faux-Gila-monster-skinned hotel register-style notebook thingy, page 119. He writes *Intellectualism* with a capital "I." The "I" driving me.

"And," she says, "that's really the difference. Isn't it? How much does one person think or know? How much does one *culture* think or know. So. I guess. For your purposes. How much does one *civilization* think or know."

"Hum," says Higgins. His Englishness coming out. "Knowing, you know, is so Old World."

"Yes. Not very North American at all."

"We're into thinking, of course."

"Mmm."

So, he writes, even diagrams, that the formula would have to do with knowing. With. How many people know how much? Is basic knowledge generally held? Do only the élites understand, say, general mathematical principles?

"Oh my God," she says.

"I know," he says.

"I don't know those at all," she says.

Of course she believes in them. We all believe in them. And we know we do. Because. Well. They work. We think.

The question for today, however, is War.

War between civilizations.

She's got her arms crossed, there in her beige fuzzy suit (Higgins isn't good with materials) and in front of her galloping latte. And she wants to know if it has to be War. Why not reciprocity or cooperation or just even a broad consensus?

And he's having to tell her no, well, it doesn't have to be War. But it, um, is, you see. It *is* War.



There *has* been War between scientific civilization and the natives, scientific civilization and the salesmen, scientific civilization and the Jesus jumpers, scientific civilization and the cowboys ...

“Don’t forget Margaret Atwood,” she says.

Higgins looks correct. Then something else.

“I always thought,” she says, “that ol’ cowboy could sue Margaret for reducing him to the level of the backdrop.”

There’s a famous Atwood poem, and Warning shot, called “Backdrop Addresses Cowboy.”

This brings her back to her Intellectuals. Tuesdays at eleven. It seems they’ve all discovered this ur-bistro underground somewhere called Das Kafé ...

WALLY DOESN’T THINK there’s been a War a-tall. There’s been a gradual moving into the Middle East, more like a migration. The European powers obviously encroached during the Nineteenth Century pretty good. And the English were into India since time immemorial. Then there’s Israel.

Wally looks around, pulling somewhat self-consciously on his left suspender strap, at the shoulder, with the closest thumb. At this point he lets go he’s Jewish.

He wanted to be a cop but he got into Tai Chi and things like this and now he’s Jewish and trapped in this failing quality used book store. Did Higgins’s readers know that, strictly speaking, selling a used book is like the copyright infringement you get taping a song from the radio or copying a computer program?

Then Higgins is wondering about civilization *per se*. Wally seems to be a well-rounded guy. What does he think of civilization, our civilization and oh say War between civilizations?

Wally says, first of all, that civilizations replace one another. They can’t really be at War. But. If they can. Then he’s glad to be a leading follower in the mightiest and most self-deprecating of them all.

“Replace one another,” Higgins says. “Like the Romans replaced the Greeks?”

No, Wally says. It was Greek civilization all along. The Romans were engineers.

What, says Higgins, were the Greeks?

Heroes. Poets. Philosophers. Maybe individuals.

How about Virgil, says Higgins. Wasn’t he a poet?

The Greek people *were* poets. Even the Philistines, if you have to know the truth. Today of course your Greeks’re merely political. Damn economics gottem.

Higgins is finding this a little incommensurate to diagram. Then he wonders if we could put it like: what should we do with the Muslims?

“Oh, Muslims. Crap. Re-settle em.”

Big look from Higgins.

“Naw,” says Wally. “I’m kidding.”

Little look from Higgins.

“Lettem stay.”

Diagrammatic look from Higgins.

“Lettem ... take what they can carry. No, that’s French Canadians. Lettem ... go to school and figure something out for once, for God’s sake. You know what that Islam is like? Getting a hard-on for God five times a day? It’s sideways shit, man. Better to be just unstopably confident. Like Noam Chomsky. And stay at home.”

Higgins ventures whether there isn’t a powerful social organization at the basis of religion – once the survival-of-death and thumbing ontological thumbs at nature is got past – so that desperate societies, unable to build empires, cornered and replete, go out and build empires in the imagination, as it were.

“You’re talking about the Jews. Aren’t you?”

“Well, I, um, I.”

“So, talk.”

“Awready.”

“What?”

“You forgot to say: awready.”

“Oh.”

“So, talk, awready.”

“Oh.”

“Is how it would go.”

This guy Wally’s with, a doctor of some kind, an old-fashioned one in a leather jacket: he wonders heavy-handedly whether somebody wouldn’t like to freshen up his coffee.

THERE SHOULD ALWAYS be at least one solidly subcultural person in these things.

We come to Spew.

He’s here without his agent. Without his drugs. Without his music. Not without his destiny.

Higgins wants to know can they talk.

Spew says or sort-of-says he himself don’t know, can they? Can they talk?

Higgins thinks, doesn’t say, how Eighties that is. But no doubt’ll be at the heart of a hit single soon.

And Higgins, keeping to the Englishy readerly type, doesn’t quite know the latest smash & grab for the ear. He doesn’t know Spew. Not in the been-on-the-front-lines-bent-over-the-toilet-bowl-at-Planet-Hollywood-with-him kind of know.

Spew seems to think what we really need to do is just give these guys, the Muslims or the fundamentalists or the rag-heads or the freaks of some kind, what we really need to do is just give these guys clean needles and a clothing allowance (or no, make it vouchers) ...

“Um,” says Higgins, knowing that, to Spew, he does look a lot like Mr. Bean, “the point, here, was the civilizations.

You see. Not just the gits on television jumping around and making that shrieky noise and putting women in tents and so on.”

But Spew is kind of taking off on something. He says he’s going to shave off all his body hair. He can see how he’s going to throw up on El Al. He makes that shrieky noise, with the tongue going back and forth, which actually the women make when they’re grieving or something like that, and then he does a big explosion – so that the joke, and this is a joke, the joke is just two sounds: it’s terribly efficient, really, for a joke: it’s the grieving noise, then the blast.

NOT THAT ANYBODY can leave it with that. Nobody can end the research, the report, with “then the blast.” So Higgins is looking about for another voice, another *kind* of voice.

Someone who can meaningfully answer the question, perhaps.

Nobody seems to be able to address the underlying basic foundational problem – what with its historical and economic and anthropological and cultural depth.

Unless that poet in the food court, sneaking the cigarette, resolute about not spending her time in Starbucks, is doing something in the area of what he needs.

She’s writing a piece called “September the Eleventh.” *A little boy with a mustache, she poetizes, running along the sand. Holds a plane in either hand. And uses them for daggers on the tall grey boxes.*

Then her poem kind of wantonly conflates the boxes with computers. Office universals. The grey getting in there like a foundation, somehow. Meaning something. Reaching out to say something about us.

Like we’re this giant mechanical thing standing on the shore.

And the little boy blows through in a little boy’s excitement.

And from the top of the tower, even while it’s going down, we can see the far distance.

The *far distance*, of course, is *filled with humanity*.

But things are burning now and we’re going to fall. We’re not falling yet but we know we’re going to fall. And the one thing that comes to us, just before we have to deal with death ... is looking into *the life of everyone*.

Looking into the world or civilization or something.

And wondering whether civilization isn’t, just at the end or the beginning of itself, the *idea* of civilization.

The awareness that we need something between us.

*To let the world work.*

## Saturday movies

Before movies with boys trying to put their hands in under angora or a felt jumper and after the endless westerns, dust, hats and hooves pounding, boring we thought, sucking on Junior Mints, it was the movies with stars we ached to be. Vera Ellen with a 16 inch waist, Pier Angeli pale and shy Photoplay said, in a peasant dress I cut out and put on my wall near the cinch belted Vera, stood near my mother’s mirror with my waist pulled in, sucking myself into myself as if I could swallow my pink glasses, little paunch. I never wanted to be Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell or Jayne Mansfield, women with huge hips, breasts but Audrey Hepburn slim, able to slip into a new life, escape from my grandfather sneakily lurking behind me at parties or the movies. I wanted to wear postage size cashmere, pale and silvery shoes I could balance forever in, suspended on toes that could brush your skin while you slept, hover around your quilt, a movie queen angel you’d wake to the dazzling glow of, wild to keep and hold

## Now I’m into more sensible cars

more sensible ones  
that won’t fall apart,  
leave me stranded.  
No more Daimlers  
that crunch and  
crumble with a  
few bumps or run  
out of gas and leave  
me in dangerous  
straits. It was one  
thing to long for  
Bogattis, Aristocrats  
with a Morris  
Minor engine that  
spurred, balked at  
going up hill.

I lusted for every  
thing in you that  
was as flashy, rare  
but after being  
abandoned, stranded  
and shaking in the  
dark, I had to give you  
up for something  
with a better track  
record except in  
dreams, except in my  
blood

– Lyn Lifshin

## Crazy Joe Panama

When I was living in New York, Ken says,  
a woman I knew told me she'd met  
a charming man, and started dating him.  
He had two kids; I asked her who he was;  
she said Joe Panama.  
I said, "Not Crazy Joe?"

She said, "Ah,  
you shouldn't listen to all that stuff."  
They got married; I used to visit them.  
We'd talk for hours.  
Joe had just come out of jail  
after a ten year stretch.

They gunned him down one night  
at Francesca's Diner, right where he sat  
between his wife and kids.  
At the funeral, I recalled  
what he'd said.

"I like you, bud, know why?  
If you came down the street  
and there was two guys beating me,  
you'd wait till it was over,  
then take me home and fix me up,  
look after me till I was better.

"Now me, if you were in a fight,  
it wouldn't matter if there were ten of them,  
I'd jump right in and bite their noses off."

## The photograph

I burst into tears, she says,  
when I unwrapped the photograph.  
My friend was hurt;  
she'd gone back specially to buy it,  
from the store I'd run out of, crying,  
the week before.

We'd gone there shopping  
for her daughter's wedding.  
As soon as we entered the store,  
I said: I'm scared.  
In the bedroom section  
I began to shake.  
And then I saw the picture  
in the silver frame:  
myself, aged ten,  
my sisters, and my parents.  
I recalled the day it was taken  
And many other days  
and months, and years.

I looked round;  
I was in my parents' bedroom.  
It was our furniture, set up identically.  
How had it got there? It was fifteen years  
since the day the bailiffs came,  
the day after my father went to jail.

– *David Rachel*

# The Assignments

1



HEY WROTE AND then they read their first-day free-writes aloud. I called it random raving on a topic; today: why take Advanced Writing?

“You bring up an interesting issue, Tom,” I said, being myself the only person in the room of twelve not snorting and groaning.

“Girls like to write,” he had read from his paper. “They love to self-express.” He’d already spotted a cute girl with long black hair, he continued, that he hoped to share some major self-expression with.

“So what about this?” I plowed through the commotion. “Is self-expression what we’re doing here?”

Thanks to the class clown, the lid came off the first day, and the class became a conversation.

Maristella tossed her black mane over her shoulders and raised her hand. “Craft,” she said. “It’s about craft.” She rolled her *r*’s so slightly I wondered if only I noticed.

AT THE NEXT MEETING, not just Tom but two other guys spaced themselves around the front row seat where Maristella had sat the previous class. When she breezed in that second day, she looked at the empty seat with its chorus of psyched-up guys, and went around to the other side. As she sat, Maristella noticed I noticed; she tugged her skirt a tad closer to her knees, folded her booted calves under her seat, and beamed me a conspiratorial smile.

After that, she came early, with her girl friends, and they sat together near the front, an impenetrable clump. On this campus, the smarter girls thought the guys were shallow drunken boars or ne’er-do-well freaks, and a lot of them went off-campus for their dates. The girl-friend barricade was a common strategy

2

WITH STUDENTS WRITING every week, the raw material of their lives and more – and sometimes too much – lay scattered around our discussions. The students didn’t read everything to each other, but enough – enough for Tom to build hopes on.

Everything you’ve lived can source discovery, even if you think it’s so mundane – so *random, excuse me*.

But you have to deliver it. You can’t just let it blow around like old newspapers around people’s feet. You have to put it there under their eyes, make your life, your scene, your idea, something they can see.

Maristella was an education major; her papers dripped caramel until you felt pain. The class sent their drafts to my in-box, and so I had an archive of her sugared lumps.

**Using the five senses actively portray a unified idea about a memory.**

My stepfather screamed so loud, my ears burst with curses, Spanish curses, English curses. I always hid, and I heard everything through walls. When he’d throw things, the

noise hit me like punches. His cursing was harsh, afterward my ears felt beaten. . . .

Our house in Camden was full of smells, onions and spices, ashy cigarette smoke, the stink of beer, and the candy scent of my mother's makeup. The smells were trapped because the windows on the ground floor of our row house were nailed shut. Everyday we breathed in yesterday and the day before, nothing fresh. . . .

The touch I most remember happened the day my uncle Jorge came with empty suitcases and packed everything of mine and my brother's. My mother got trash bags, and filled them up with stuff. My brother Michael and I were pushed into the back seat, and we clung to a mountain of our family's goods as we drove across the Ben Franklin Bridge to Philadelphia. I had a hanger scraping my leg and black plastic sticking to my thighs making them sweat. My arms were stuck up on scratchy sweaters and crumpled dresses and I couldn't bring them down to my sides. I felt my heart beat fast, because I worried that my stepfather would come after us.

I thought, likely he's following you yet; I'll see him in the shadows of other compositions.

I said something sympathetic when I turned back the paper.

"Oh, it was a long time ago," she said reassuringly. "And now I'm much better. My life is good." The strong r and pure vowels tasted like her past to me, no matter what she said.

"I love your set," she added. She pointed to my rings. "Your wedding set. I think the marquise stone is the most beautiful."

I looked down at my hands gripping the sheaf of type-scripts. They were clean-up hands, all knobs and stringy veins, hands looking provisional under the crystal certainty of my husband's choice stone.

"It's what I want," she said, "the marquise."

### 3

DIALOGUE ROLLS OVER the log of memory and the bugs come out, squirming, scattering primitive, life churned up by curly quotes.

Whose life, I left out, but of course it was theirs. Put words in anyone's mouth, and whose tongue wags? I didn't say that.

"Can it be many people talking?" Maristella wanted to know.

"It's not a portrait, this assignment," I said. "Go for it."

Though it will portray.

She titled it:

## Pre-School Dialogue

Sometimes where I work you see a child sitting off to the side with a Band-Aid on his head or a sore arm that he hugs like a crushed wing. When you ask, they'll just say, "I don't know." If you keep asking, you'll get nowhere.

"How did you hurt your head, Jimmy?"

"I go boom down stairs."

"Wasn't anybody there to stop you?"

He'll turn away. Then there may be a child who hits or screams.

For example, I ask little Rita, "Why are you so mad? Tell Maristella. You can tell me. What makes you mad?"

Rita is three, and she sniffles her little nose to hold all the pain inside.

Her mother is not friendly when I ask what Rita might have to be so angry about. She gives me a dirty look. "Rita hates school. She isn't bad at home. There's nothing wrong with her." She puts the accent on her, and gives me the once-over. I feel I can't let her get away with this, and I ask her every time she comes, "Why is Rita throwing things at the other children?" Or, "What is making Rita slap? Does she get slapped?"

One day the boss of the preschool comes over to me and tells me to mind my own business. "We take care of kids from 8 to 5 and the rest is not our business," she tells me.

With pity and righteousness, Maristella was leaving her stepfather every day. I rooted for her despite the odds. I was giving her A's. The class was in her palm.

### 4

ON THE WALKWAY from the faculty parking lot, Maristella waited for me to catch up and smiled that smile. She beamed it whenever she spoke in class, whenever she raised her hand. This was the first time I'd felt its effects close up.

"Hello, Professor! I mean, Jess." My advanced students used my first name.

She opened the door to the Comm building for me, and I slid through with briefcase and satchels dangling from my arms.

I accused her with a grin: "You rode my bumper under the gate? Way to go!" as if to suggest that trailing a legitimate passcard-holder through the security barrier to cop a faculty parking space was hilarious.

"Oh," she laughed. "No, never! I work here. I have a staff card!" She reached into her leather baguette as if to show me, gaily, like a kid showing off a prize.

"Oh, I believe you!" I told her. I didn't want her to think I was a priss. "Are you in the dean's office?"

"No, I'm a FILM STUDIO TECHNICIAN!" She spoke this



in capital letters.

“Really?” *Weird*, I thought. “I didn’t know work-study got you parking privileges.”

“No, I have a real job. Part-time, but I’m going to apply for full-time starting in June. I think I’ll get it. I really like the work.” She beamed.

“You’re graduating!” I used a hearty, approving tone. It wasn’t the moment to reality-check my assumptions about her life.

“Yeah, just two months now, two-and-a-half, really.” Her lips were glossed a sheer tangerine orange, and she looked more like a YM cover girl than a techie.

“Well, good luck to you,” I finished, hoping to make this generic reply sound personal. “See you in class.”

I turned to go down the rhetoric hall, and she clicked the other way, to the studios, in kitten-heel boots and mini. I was perplexed, and a bit silly for it. Who cared, really, where she worked, what she was into?

## 5

NOW I NOTICED Maristella all the time in the Comm building. I’d see her striding the hall from the studio to the editing lab, with a swoony smile, trotting here and there, with her tiny hips mobile under a swoosh of skirt, disappearing around a curve in the hall, sometimes just a glimpse in my field of vision. Was she after some guy in the film lab? Who was trouble enough for her? I’d think.

Then sometimes, *Watch out, Barry*, I’d joke to myself, a private joke, between the current me and the me of long ago.

The streams merged – I was flooded: Barry was trouble enough for a girl like her. Barry had a rep like a roiling sewer.

## 6

WHO WAS BARRY? Anymore, I didn’t know. We never talked, just said “Hello” to each other in the hall with an extra beat of eye-contact, a faint tick of body heat.

No one ever mentioned him in my presence, even now, ten years after. Everyone was still keeping the well-known secret – so loyal of them.

I heard Barry got divorced second or third hand. A new prof – oblivious to haunted topics of conversation – philosophized to me that the opportune moment for divorce was the day after driving your youngest to college and then he golly-geed that Barry Emil had hit it just right.

Timing is king, I sniffed.

Not long after, a new secretary told me a coincidence: here she’d just gotten a job at Runyan, and her best friend was going out with a professor she’d met in a bar – that Professor Emil in D wing. What a yuck! Did I think he was cute?

I could smell my coffee was brewed.

## 7

“So you’re working in film?” I said to Maristella one day before class got going.

“Yes, I am. I’m so glad! I took *Intro to Film* just because I thought it would help my teaching résumé. And I loved it! It’s so cool. And I’m good at it. It’s different than being good with kids. But I think it’s more fulfilling, because it’s technical. You have to know something; you have to have information and technique.

“And, my professor says I have good instincts for it. He says I know what to focus on to get the feeling in a scene; I’m good at editing in the camera. He says, success comes in the shooting, if it’s going to come at all,” she laughed. “I must sound so full of it! But it’s so exciting to discover something you love. And I have everything it takes, I have it all, according to my professor.”

I was mumbling things like “That’s great” and “Wow” through this monologue. “But what about your teaching? Didn’t you write about that? About helping kids?” I challenged her.

“Yes. I will do that, somehow. But this new thing, this film career, it’s right for me!” In a conversation, you could see her eyes flashing as she talked, and she looked at you sharply; it felt like a hook going down.

“It’s too bad you didn’t find out earlier so you could major in it,” I pointed out.

“Well, if I work full-time in the studio, I can take courses, and eventually get the second major. And I’ll be making a living in film already. And my professor has contacts. If I want to get an outside job in a few years, you know, he could help me. He knows the production companies in Philadelphia, the whole tri-state region.”

“Well, you could go anywhere. You don’t have to stick around here. There’s a lot more media work in New York or California.”

“Well, I do have to stay here. I have a relationship. That’s really important to me. I wouldn’t want to give that up.” She smiled triumphantly at me.

I smiled back. I nodded. Sure, I was telling her by gesture. Sure. And Barry would have had to sign off on her hire. He was chair of Film and Video.

“And he can’t move,” she continued, “my boyfriend. I’m doing my character study on him.”

I discouraged her, in principle.

To reveal the hidden, to present the contradictions, to scrape off the veneer of your subject, you need more distance.

“But,” she said, “he is a person of such character that he merits a study. It’s not just that I’m in love with him,” she assured me.

I frowned. She insisted. I said, “I’m not sure you understand the goal of the assignment.”

WHEN I FIRST started at Runyan, as an adjunct, I clumped in the damp basement of Oak Hall with other part-timers, all of us teaching writing or media. The camaraderie of the oppressed developed: we graded papers and sneered at the place, the pathetic excuse for a college that wouldn't put us on tenure-track. Rundown College, we named it. Barry Emil and I started going off for lunch, to the faculty end of the cafeteria, and then off-campus, then even to the city. And eventually one thing led to another, the whole cheese: single woman and married guy, father of two, seven-year itch – the whole bad Camembert.

After a year, Barry convinced the dean that students wanted a film major, not just one catch-all course, and that he was the person who could break it out. I myself got on the staff full-time a year or so after, when the department began to be split into specialties. A year or so further on, Barry and I were sent to offices at opposite ends of the new Comm building, like kids who didn't play well together.

By then we didn't play at all.

IT'S HARDER THAN you expect, capturing someone in words: go after the hidden, follow the tap roots into whatever muck. Character is mixed. College girls get in over their heads. I'd read sketches of back-home guys who worked lawn-care and demanded weekly visits; or about senior engineering geeks who ran down women's thinking; or about townies with six-packs and muscle cars who, the women would insist, just didn't know their own strength.

I'd be in a conference about the papers, and gradually, as if it were just occurring to me, notice the dark images referring to the guy. I'd say maybe, go deeper there, tell more. Then the writer'd blurt, and I'd get to tell her about the counselling service.

THE MARRIED ONE formulates a statement about what the hell he is doing. The single one accepts it, however generic. She imagines the scenes behind the phrases: *no spark; stale sex; humdrum; boring; taking each other for granted*. She has time to imagine everything, the time when he is home in his generic house with his generic wife and generic deeply loved children, together with them in the generic yellow incandescent light of married life.

With pointed conversation, such lovers penetrate each other's lives: yes, penetrate – meaning a slippery, well-timed, full-flood, temporary merger.

The woman listens for every sub-textual nub of fact, excavates every anecdote. She secretly drives past his house. Then one day, the man drives her past his house while his

wife is away. They get so close. They do not stop. That is how it goes. It's generic.

ONCE I ASKED, then after that I knew better. I don't think it was causative, but who knows?

"Do you sleep with your wife?"

No response.

"Do it with her?"

"I know what you mean."

"Well? Do you?" Heart pounding, chest belted, afraid, I think, of any answer, I kept at him. He kept silent.

"I won't lie to you," he said finally. "It happens." We were in the car, and he looked out the window, away from me.

Later, too many years later, I realized there was such a thing as a loving lie.

HE SAID HE would allow nothing, especially not her, the wife, to split us apart. Then one day he said he realized: if he ever divorced, it would be for freedom, and not for love. Then, after a decent interval, about ten days, he had another thought: *Goodbye, you*.

I THOUGHT THERE was an outside chance Maristella would drip treacle on some Danny, some Manuel, some guy from her back-home, serving up his pride, his manliness, his protectiveness. She'd give him bonus points for being nowhere near as bad as he had a right to be, given his upbringing.

It was an outside chance, but I wasn't counting on it.

I made sure I was home when I dug her paper out of the pile.

I will call him the Prince because that is what he is. A prince protects and uses his power for good. Those few who know his life story know he is a prince.

No. It was impossible.

He is a passionate man. He gravitates to feeling; he recognizes passion in others. He goes as far as he can with his passions, but he will not cause pain. So many inflict pain to satisfy their lusts. But not the prince.

Many years ago, his passionate nature drew the prince to a woman. They were magnets to each other, a north and a south, pulled irresistibly. For the first time in their lives, they reached the end of their passion, the bottom of the sea of their passion. Her name was Willow, and she was like her name. She was light and gentle, and I think he meant she

was tall and fair. She was very beautiful, and a match for him in every way.

But it was a secret love the prince had with his beautiful passionate Willow. She told him she had waited for him; she had lived fully and deeply, but stayed free, because she knew she would someday meet him. But he had made a mistake. He married the first girl that came along, thinking the lust of youth was true love. Now he had children, and this girl he had married was now their mother.

So here my prince doesn't look too good anymore. Ten years ago, he was a married man with a girl friend on-the-side. He was a sneak and a cheater. He was a sinner. An evil man, many would say.

I crumpled the paper, but then thought – *How could I explain that?* – and pressed it out again. I crushed it to me so no one could see it, as if my kids were looking, as if my husband cared about my students' scribbles, and took it to the laundry room. Nobody goes there except me.

It almost killed him, but he put on his prince's crown and got on his white horse and rode back to his castle, giving up the love of his life, the Willow of his heart, to remain a good father to his children. He made sure they had two parents at home and a stable upbringing. They grew up respecting him, never knowing he had strayed from his marriage oath. No one ever knew how his magnificent passion had almost destroyed their little innocent lives.

His children are grown now; both are in college. Like a prince, he waited ten years before getting the divorce he wanted for so long. So he is free to be my boyfriend.

14

I WAS STANDING down there in the damp cellar, and I put laundry in the washer. I just pulled it out of the baskets and threw it in. Cold water washes everything. I piled it in, heaping it up, extra-large load.

There's no lack of dirty laundry when you have two kids and a husband. You can wash and never be done. You can wash like you're an obsessive and always have fodder for your disease.

So it had been a good deed, to her, the wife, and to the kids. Funny I had never thought of it that way.

A good deed: he says, *Sorry. Whoops. A growth experience for both of us.*

15

THE THREE YEARS it took me to get over him kicked a big black hole in my life. Much bigger than the hole in the dryer where you put in the wet underwear. Much bigger than my laundry room.

He made me mythic. I should be honoured.

He'd got me naked again, one more time. And this time there was a third party in the room. He had one of us on each end of a rope, keeping him from falling all the way in.

16

SUNDAY NIGHT, I realized that not only did I have to put a grade on this piece of excrement but I had to hand it back as if it were just a paper. My comments ran to the vague and minimal, lest a critique crack my privacy. I suggested the fairy-story presentation was not every reader's cup of tea. And, wickedly, I wrote, "What happened to Willow?" in the margin. It would serve him right to be bugged about things he could not reveal.

And finally I suggested she was possibly too close to the material, and she should put it aside and return to it sometime in the far, far distant future. As a kicker, I gave her a high enough grade so she wouldn't be tempted to rewrite and hand it back in.

17

THE STUDENTS WERE seeing me for conferences.

"Maristella," I said, "let me be blunt. Maybe, just maybe," I told her, "your choice of this boyfriend as a topic is a cry for help."

She cried out, "No, no, not at all!" and then told me she had good news. She had just been made full-time in the film studio, to start late July, after a break for graduation and vacation. "I'll be here 9 to 5, a real job!" The connection between her lover and her job hung in the air, a pull chain that would drench us in muck.

"You idealize him," I said, to refocus us on her writing. "Perhaps you should draw back and see that possibly you are giving more than you are getting. Sometimes these May – December romances are ..."

"But no, he's not December! No, no! He's August, maybe September!" Maristella was laughing. "He's taking me to Paris for my graduation. My girlfriend – you know, Vicky, in the class – she thinks he's going to propose, but I don't, not yet. I think we'll live together, though, when we come back, if we have a good time together for the two weeks; I think he'll say we should get an apartment."

Several moments passed. "Congratulate me!" she said.

I did. And she left my office.

18

THE SEMESTER WAS heading into its last month. In the pack of Advanced Writing revisions, I found Maristella's reworked character study. She had answered my question: *What happened to Willow?* She couldn't live with even one B+. I should have known.

She stuck it on at the end:

Willow understood his decision. It was mutual, because she understood. Even in parting, their two hearts were one. She felt sorrow, but she was noble too. She never did anything to hurt him. She never again called him. She never took revenge. You read about women who call the wife and tell her the cruelest things. Willow wasn't like that.

At least Willow wasn't a vengeful harridan. Two points for me. I imagined Barry sucking his mouth in, turning away from her, resisting interrogation.

Or was this all he could remember, that I wasn't a bitch?

19

NOT LONG AFTER that, I was going through the far hall, the one that arched off the main axis of our building like a broken wing, and I saw Barry sitting in his office, door open, staring into space. I walked in.

"Maristella Perez is in my Advanced Writing class, did you know?"

"Yeah," he smiled. "She likes it. And you. She speaks highly of you."

"Hmm. Lucky me." I stared at him. "She wrote a paper about you. A character study, did you know that?"

"No!" He sounded doubtful.

"Except it's not really about you. She's obsessed with your earlier life and the affair you had when you were married."

Now he stared at me. "What? No!" He looked away, and shrugged, shaking his head. "I don't see why she'd do that. I don't get it. Are you sure?"

"What do you mean, am I sure? I know the details by heart."

"Well, it seems ... ." He floundered for words. "Uncalled-for." He frowned.

"She finds it your most important characteristic, that you renounced what she calls your great love to protect your children."

He kept staring. "What?"

"That's what she wrote. You'd be a hero to intact families everywhere, if she had her way."

He put his palm across his forehead for a moment, staring blankly ahead, and then stroked his frown lines with his fingertips. He wore his hair shorter now, and it was laced with grey.

After a pause, when it was clear he wasn't going to say anything, I told him, "I think it sucks you talked about it with her. I mean, really!"

"It was so long ago."

"Well, that's my point. Why would you bother? Unless you want to portray yourself as some kind of, I don't know, martyr?"

"She asked me."

"About what?"

"Someone told her I'd dated you."

"What?" I was crumpled. "Are you telling me, she knows it's me?"

"Well, yeah." He acted like, how could she not?

"She wrote a paper about my affair with you, and she knows I'm the woman?"

"Everybody knows it."

"It was ten years ago!" I spun around and shut his door, so fiercely it resounded in the hall. "You mean people have nothing better to do than gossip about what happened half a generation ago? I mean, this girl was in kindergarten, god damn it!"

"Sixth grade." He corrected me.

"Did she know this when she signed up for my course?"

He nodded, shrugging. "You're the only advanced writing prof. What was she going to do?"

I was speechless for a moment and turned to go, but then I looked back. "Is this some kind of a game? You were always a coward, Barry, but I didn't think you played games." I reached for the doorknob behind my back.

"Jess," he said. "Wait." He put two fingers up to his temple like shrapnel had just winged him. I knew I didn't want to listen to a smog of self-defense and turned away. "I never – I never told you ... I think my apology is overdue."

I just stared.

"I don't think I ever said I was sorry."

"No." I had to grant him that. "Barry, you didn't. I assumed you didn't because you weren't." I stepped back around and squared up with his desk. "I know you weren't."

"No," he admitted. "I wasn't. I felt I'd gotten what I was entitled to – what we had. It was golden. It was the best, the peak of everything between a man and a woman. It was *Jules and Jim*, *Calmos*, *Swept Away*, ..."

"Enough," I said. "Movies end."

"Later I came to understand how much it hurt you, how bereft you were. But I never said anything because we'd gone on. You'd gone on. Life had gone on. We weren't close anymore; we weren't close enough for me to say I was sorry." He paused. "Isn't that weird?"

"Uh," I grunted. "Stupid. Cowardly."

He kind of sighed, kind of laughed. In the long pause that followed he got up and came around the desk. Standing right in front of me, he told me he was sorry. I didn't deserve to be hurt or to lose out the way I did. "If I could make it up to you, I would," he said. "If there were something that I could do now ... but I realize there's nothing."

"So you've changed?" I told him. "To being sorry?" He nodded. "Well, thank you. But it's a little late. It doesn't mean what it would have." I paused. "And here's what you

can do for me ... Break up with her."

He looked appalled. He started to shake his head.

I laughed. "Just testing. ... I'm not going to tell you not to hurt her, either. Because I've learned something too. It's not in your control, not really."

He looked relieved.

"Which is not a license to be a cad," I scolded. "Just promise me not to marry her."

His jaw dropped. "I assure you ..."

"Oh, no? ... She thinks you might."

"How do you know?"

"She told me."

"She told you? That's unbelievable." He wheeled around and stalked the few paces across his office. "What the hell. What are you, best buddies or something? Are you pumping her?"

I put up my hands. "Hey, I'm just a good listener. They tell me all sorts of stuff. They need somebody to bounce it all off of. And no, I haven't pumped her. I know more than I want to know, frankly. That's the point. That's why I walked in here."

"Well, stop listening!"

I laughed. "Barry," I said.

## 20

THE NEXT TIME I saw Maristella in the hallway, I invited her into my office. She clicked in the room in her little heels and sat in my side chair, smoothing her skirt.

"What did you mean by this?" I asked her, tapping the paper.

She just looked at me, giving me her tangerine smile.

"The revision? I wanted to give Willow's perspective, like you asked," she said and paused. "I wanted to show the other woman could be honourable, too." She looked at me with satisfaction.

"Suppose that wasn't the way it was?"

"It's a healthy way to look at it. It was a terrible violation that ... that was overcome. It shows that people can triumph over this kind of thing, this falling." – she gestured with her hand, making a tumbling motion down along her legs – "falling into the worst and then recover and go onward from a sordid past." She smiled again. "It's quite admirable," she said reassuringly.

I looked at her for a long time. She broadened her smile, tilting her head endearingly in the long pause before I spoke.

"You have a lot of nerve. Suppose I just gave you a D? An F?"

"You're a good person," she explained. She nodded at me in approval. "You won't."

"Fuck you I won't" stuck on my lips, and I paused. I looked down at her essay, feeling astonished.

"You know, Maristella, this paper doesn't meet the requirements as I spelled them out," I found myself telling her. "The character study presents a rounded view of the subject, with interaction, with scenes. I don't know why I didn't notice this before." I touched down my red pen. "Here, and here, it's all explaining, slanting. It's babble. You don't provide direct experience for the reader. I don't know why I gave you such a high grade to begin with."

"What?" she said in a cracked voice.

"There's no dialogue in this paper. None at all."

Her eyes filled up with tears, and then they flowed down her cheeks.

"There's much too much to do for you to rework it for the final portfolio. Let's just leave it as a B+, because I didn't give you a full critique on the first go-through."

She sniffed and smiled at me, bouncing her head up and down.

"Just one thing, though," I finished. "Change her name. Ann, Susan, anything, anything else."



# five poems

where are all the biographies  
of the periphery  
those people ranged around the edges  
of the big lives  
the great suicides  
the fascinating maniacs  
Warren Plath  
where are you



a frog  
run down in his prime  
plump virility squirts on the road  
bullish no more  
freshly expired  
mid-leap

cats and rain lick  
the body clean  
leave  
a pre-fossilized  
caricature

with a little shellac  
and a craft shop pin  
he could be jewellery  
an unusual brooch  
he could be resurrected  
life after death



don't go being  
in such a hurry  
to part with things  
you have 2 of  
like pairs of pants  
dates sets of dishes

like thumbs  
breasts kidneys  
or brothers

I know trains go to important places  
because at night  
when the sky is clear  
moonlight follows the tracks



oh Gary  
not a sound?  
not a rushing push  
of sound?  
how disappointing  
really  
I hoped  
for whispers  
which would grow  
up to be poems  
I thought  
your thick-throated  
voice would  
taunt and lure  
or at least  
make incoherent gestures  
telltale voicing  
but no  
not even a final  
punctuating  
huh.

– A. Mary Murphy

# The Golden Rabbit

“

I’M COMIN’ FOR YEH, me beauty. Soon enough,” slurred Old Jake Rabbit as he packed his last few items into the leather satchel at his feet. He dropped a worn magnifying glass on top of his bottle of whiskey that lay at the top of the bag. His shining new camera hung loose around his neck. “Soon enough, soon enough,” he repeated as he put on his only boots, plunked his tan cowboy hat on his weather-spotted head and locked the door to his hovel.

For, you see, Old Jake Rabbit was about to set foot on destiny’s trail, or so he thought. He was about to embark on the golden path that would lead directly to his Heart’s Desire. You know, the Heart’s Desire, the one thing that every person longs to have, or do, or be. It’s the thing that gnaws at you slowly, night and day, sunrise and sunset – the thing that you have been licking your chops about since the day you were born. Some die trying to find it. Some go mad searching for it. Others don’t even try, for fear of what might happen if they actually find it. These are them who are called wise. I was called wise once, a long time ago, but this ain’t my story. This one belongs to Old Jake Rabbit and his search for the Lost Superstition Gold.

To get right into it, Old Jake was the kind of man you might think was one rose short of a dozen, not the sharpest tool in the shed, a few bricks short of a load. You get the drift. You could find him, most nights, in Juanita’s Beer Barn, sipping whiskey and water and staring at old maps, cursing now and again and scratching at a grisly grey beard. If you were a tourist or something, hanging out in that part of the desert town, you might be inclined to stay away from him and content yourself staring from the safety of a shadowy booth. For Old Jake was something to look at, all right. Yessirree, especially at night, inside smoky Juanita’s, sipping his whiskey and scratching that grey beard, the waitresses rushin’ past him in red dresses and the Spanish music spewing from that dusty ol’ juke-box. And the coyotes always seemed to be howling outside. No matter how loud it got in Juanita’s, whenever Old Jake walked in, you could always hear them coyotes.

If you were a local, you might saddle on to the stool next to him, order yourself another cerveza and say something like “Hey hey, ol’ Jakey. Found yer gold yet?” He would never answer you, but you’d try again anyhow. “I heard a story a coupl’er days back about that there gold yer always jawing about.”

“Eh?” he would ask and scratch at that grey beard.

You’d move back a tad, thinking there was a good chance he might have fleas. But once he had fixed you with his yellow eyes and you knew you had his attention, you couldn’t resist. “Yep. That gold. I know where ye might check there, Jakey. See that amiga? In the red? With the nice chi-chi’s?” Then you’d lean in a bit closer. “Lift up her skirt, Jakey, you’ll find yer pot o’ gold. Ain’t no rainbow but there’s gold in there, I swear it by the nose on my face!” Then you’d laugh, slap Old Jake on the back and sidle back over to your amigos.

Old Jake wouldn’t laugh, though. He’d just scratch spastically at that grey beard and grunt for another whiskey and water, all the while running his gnarled fingers like the roots of a tree, searching over his maps. But no matter what impression

folks got from him, there was one thing that everybody caught onto after a time. Old Jake Rabbit was sharp as an eagle, sly as a fox, slick as a snake. You understand? When he narrowed those yellow eyes, his mind was whirring a mile a minute. He was figuring things out, you see? Putting himself where he needed to be, on destiny's path.

OLD JAKE SAT back on his booted heels as the white sun blazed a trail through the day. He was waiting for the writers. They were slow, see? Canadians. He'd been waiting for them for a while. Old Jake knew this here land like the back of his hand – so far anyway. But soon they would be leading him into the unknown, the lands of legend, the place where he would find his gold. Now it's true, he realized, that the gold might actually be in a place he'd searched a dozen times before, but now that he had a map, *the* map, it was all brand spanking new for Old Jake. But he thought it unfair, as he unrolled his pouch of tobacco, that two such uppity, green behind the ears, city-folk like these two writers should hold the key to his Heart's Desire. But destiny worked in strange ways. Old Jake knew that much.

He watched as the writer on the left slid awkwardly off his grey horse, his legs buckling like wet noodles. His blue jeans were too tight and his attempt at looking like a cowboy left Old Jake grunting to himself in amusement. The writer's cowboy hat sat much too high and when he removed it to wipe the sweat from his eyes, his balding head shone with the noonday sun. "I suppose you're enjoying this, Mr Rabbit?" he asked in nasally, nervous tones.

Old Jake stayed silent and watched the writers carefully. They were both too clean and their faces too smooth and round. And their white heads were too big. He watched as the second writer slithered off his mount, his new boot getting caught in the left stirrup. He bobbed around flapping his white arms, trying to free his foot. Old Jake just chuckled and spat. *Canadians*, he thought to himself as he scratched his beard. *Maybe they was more used to ridin' reindeer.*

"Shouldn't you be taking some photos here, Mr Rabbit? You haven't taken one since we left town," the second writer snapped, hopping about, foot still in stirrup as his horse turned uncooperatively in circles.

Old Jake spat brown juice onto the bone-dry rocks at his feet and picked up the camera that was still hanging around his neck and, without focusing, snapped a shot of the second writer as he flapped and hopped. "You want pictures? There's a picture for ya." Old Jake laughed his dusty laugh and took a swig from his canteen.

The second writer had untangled himself and was smoothing his white shirt and jeans, attempting to dust away his humiliation. "We're going to need plenty of diverse shots here, eh? That's what you're here for. Not to laugh at us. Not

to show your desert superiority and knowledge. Just to take pictures? Got it?"

Old Jake stood up suddenly, sending both writers stumbling backwards. His leather skin set into stern lines and his yellow eyes pierced the writers' faces. He stood that way for a moment until both men looked away uncomfortably. He turned and mounted his nag with ease, spitting so the brown goo landed inches from the writers' shiny boots.

"Without me, do ya really think you'd have the balls to come up here by yerselves? You'd be meat for the coyotes. That's all. And what of your precious book then, gentlemen?" Old Jake had no use for their names. They both sounded the same anyway and he would never remember which name belonged to which big white face. So they were gentlemen to him. But Old Jake had no use for gentlemen. Who does, really?

AWAY HE WENT, horse shifting from side to side, lumbering up the desert hill. The two writers managed to scramble onto their mounts after the third or fourth try. Both horses then walked immediately through a low-lying cactus bush to scratch their bellies and the writers were degraded to mumbling Canadian curse-words as the sharp thorns pricked into their legs. But still they followed Old Jake.

For most of the ride he kept them enthralled with old Apache legends and stories about the lost gold. They rode behind him, staring at the back of his cowboy hat and stooped spine as his crackly voice floated over his shoulder. Every once in a while his hand would come up to scratch at that grey beard.

"Yessirree, the one most all the locals know is the legend of the Apache Giants. They say the giants roamed all this here land a long long time ago and they was so big, they could lift the mountains on their shoulders. Anyways, they says these giants were the guardians of the lost gold and they didn't want no greedy men coming into their hills lookin' to steal it. These giants was friends with the Apache y'see? So, whenever someone would come ridin' between the mountains with a map showin' where the gold was said to be, the giants would get real angry. And when the gold-digger was asleep, the giants would lift the mountains and the rocks and the hills and change them all around, real quiet, see? And when the man'd wake up, and try to foller his map, he couldn't tell east from west, north from south, his ass from his head. All the landmarks had disappeared. He'd go mad wanderin' and be lost to everyone forever. Except for the giants and the Apache, who would watch him from their secret hidin' spots in the rocks and laugh to theyselves!"

Of course, you must understand, Old Jake never believed a word of these stories himself – or so he liked folks to think.

He believed that men could become mad with desire, hearing stories about a place where there were so many riches you could put your shovel in the ground and it would come out overflowing with ribbons of gold. But even when the news came into town that another man had disappeared or been found dead in the Superstitions, decapitated or savagely murdered, Old Jake never bought into the legends. Or at least, not really. But he enjoyed telling the writers about the men found with their heads lopped off, their maps stolen, or with golden Apache arrows in their throats. He liked to think he was scaring them a little bit. After all, those stories had scared braver men than them. But never Old Jake. He had been up in those mountains time and time again, and he had never seen an Apache or a giant. So the legends to him were old wives' tales.

AND MAYBE THAT was how Old Jake made his first mistake. After all, everyone knows that if certain lands are protected by spirits, alive or dead, real or legend, you should always pay those lands some respect by saying a prayer, apologizing to the winds, or allowing some of your blood to fall on the dry grounds in penance. Well, Old Jake never offered anything except a trail of brown goo, spat from high up on his horse onto the dusty trail below. And if he ever felt anything like superstition creeping in with the wind, he never told a soul.

After a good long time riding through cactus-strewn land that was gently sloping upwards, one rider got up the nerve to speak. "I don't see why we can't stop for breaks more often?" He massaged his buttocks with two delicate thumbs. "It's not like we're in some big rush, Mr Rabbit. I mean, I'm barely able to get my thoughts straight on one portion of this landscape, before you're rushing us on to the next. And I can't manage both my tape recorder and the reins on this beast either! What's the rush?"

Old Jake froze in his saddle and his usually stooped spine snapped up like a whip. What was the rush? The rush was that he was so close to his gold that he could smell it, up through his flared nostrils, past the tangle of dripping grey and black hairs and straight up to his brain, where it was slowly registering that soon enough he would have it in his hands. But the writers could not, would not, know his urgency. "You got plenty o' time to make yer fancy descriptions. I'll help yeh. It's brown, it's dry, there are cactuses everyplace, and there's a big mother of a mountain straight ahead of us. There. Balls to your tapin' machine."

Old Jake had almost had it with them. But he held back, knowing they were leading him towards his destiny. And besides, it was their map. Sure, Old Jake had plenty of his own maps. His hovel was full of them. But he didn't have *this* map. The one he had been searching for for years, the

one that everyone had thought was lost, destroyed by the last Apache who knew of the Superstition Gold. That these two incompetent writers should be the ones who re-discovered it in a bar in Mexico ate at Old Jake more than you could know. But sometimes luck came in disturbing and dull forms. Old Jake could understand that.

AFTER ALL HE had found them. He had read the advertisement in the *Sun Valley Weekly* and had chuckled to himself until clear juices ran from his eyes. Of course fate must have led Old Jake to the newspaper. Must have. It wasn't every day he read the personals, scanning hopefully for an ad that might read: *Looking for old, poor cowboy who lacks in personal hygiene, doesn't have much to say, has had no tangible source of income for the past seventeen years, and is searching obsessively for a lost gold mine in the Superstition Mountains.* It was as his eyes ran searchingly over the black and white that the writers' advertisement unexpectedly jumped out at him. *Wanted! One experienced photographer to accompany two writers on an expedition to the site of the Lost Superstition Gold. Fully mapped expedition, will lead to possible publication. Experience and portfolio required.*

Well, if Old Jake wasn't an experienced photographer, I'm not sure what he was. Well, to be honest, he had never really taken a picture in his life. The closest he ever came to a camera was when a tourist couple had asked if he would pose for a picture with them in Juanita's Beer Barn.

"Isn't he great? Just like a real cowboy. I wonder if he's ever found any gold?" the couple whispered, then worked up the nerve to ask Old Jake for the photo. He consented gruffly, only after they promised to pay for his last six drinks and so the picture was taken.

But, if Old Jake couldn't find a way to *become* an experienced photographer, then ... well, anyway he did. Old Jake had acquaintances in high places, as well as in very low places. When you live in the same place as long as someone like Old Jake has you'll understand how often favours are doled out and snatched up, and how much people can end up owing somebody. Within two days, Old Jake had an impressively glossy and professional-looking portfolio of the work he did two years ago with *National Geographic*, a very official-looking letter of reference from the magazine itself, and a résumé detailing his extensive photographic work in the African Savannah. He also had a magnificent camera (borrowed from Juanita's son in Phoenix). Of course Old Jake had never seen even one issue of *National Geographic*. He didn't need to. The writers were gullible, and they were arrogant, as well as being Canadian, and so propelled by fate they took Old Jake at his word the moment they looked over his credentials.

And so the expedition had been planned – the writers extremely excited that Old Jake really looked the part of an

authentic gold miner. They decided that perhaps they would even allow a photograph to be used in the book of Old Jake himself, just to grab the reader's attention. The writers themselves never expected to find any lost gold. Never crossed their minds. And they never realized the importance of the map they carried in their chubby hands. But it *had* given them the idea for a very colourful, historical book, about the legends of the Lost Superstition Gold. They had done their homework and found that a book had not been written on the topic in years. Fresh meat, they thought. And with a very famous photographer tagging along to freeze them in immortality in the midst of exploring the caves and crevices of the red Superstition Mountains, the book would be sure to catch some international exposure. They thought it would make a great coffee table book.

They never let Old Jake hold their map. Not because they thought he was a threat to them in any way, or that he might steal it to go in search of the gold himself, or that it was an extremely important relic that was probably more than a hundred and fifty years old. No, they just didn't like the look of Old Jake's dirty old hands, or the yellow fingernails, and so they preferred not to let him handle it. He might leave a stain or worse. But that was OK with Old Jake. He had his plans. Sly as a fox, remember?

ANYWAYS, BACK TO the mountains. As they plodded on, under the afternoon, they noticed a hawk hanging in the balance just above their heads. Old Jake tilted his head back, shaded his eyes with his leathered hand, and caught the hawk's eye. One yellow eye held to another, and as the writers watched, amazed, they were quite certain they saw the hawk wink.

Later in the early evening, as the sun stretched out its last golden rays, and the dusty air became heavy and still, Old Jake caught sight of a lone coyote near the base of the looming mountains. He quietly *whoaed* his horses and the writers' mounts stopped close behind.

"Why are we stopping? Are we taking a break? Eh, Mr Rabbit, are we –"

Old Jake shushed the writer harshly and pointed a finger at the coyote that stood motionless, save for a finger of wind that rustled his mangy fur, less than a hundred yards away.

"Jesus Christ! Let's get the hell out of here. There might be more," one writer exclaimed, attempting to kick his horse into motion. The horse, however, would not budge without the command from Old Jake.

"Come on, Mr Rabbit. He's skinny. Probably means he's hungry." The writer's face was whiter than ever before and his black eyes snapped from Old Jake to the coyote and back.

But Old Jake just stood there, staring at the scruffy animal, figuring things out. A mile a minute, remember?

## Airport observatories

Toronto

An unmarried man  
would write different lines; he would  
have less time for notes.

Tokyo

Wings fly. The cabin  
clings to many highly torqued  
titanium bolts.

Vancouver

A jet, portholes full  
of eyes and glass-pressed noses.  
Landed now, they smile.

Las Vegas

Nomadic seller,  
smell the opportunity;  
forager, fly home.

– Stephen Brockwell

"He's not out to get ye, gentlemen. I'm sure he's got his own dinner plans and it don't include no Canadian bacon." Old Jake's eyes had stopped blinking and he spoke as if to himself, "He's been waiting for me, he has." He stared for a moment longer, then looked back at the writers. "If I were a man of superstitions, I might say he was our guardian spirit, gentlemen." The writers squirmed doubtfully in their creaking saddles. "There's a lot o' things out here that can kill ye. Not him. I reckon he's one of us."

THEY CAMPED IN a red canyon that night, the protective walls of the Superstitions leaning up on either side of their small campsite. As the sky was slowly drained of the day and the beautiful colours of the desert night crept in, Old Jake felt in his dry bones that tonight was to be *the* night. He was almost giddy with anticipation (as much as a man his age can be giddy) and he sang old cowboy songs about lost loves and faithful horses as he cooked their dinner on a bright fire – a fire that seemed to make the night around them even darker. He even made jokes with the writers and taught them how to get the stiffness out of their joints before



another long day in the saddle. For tomorrow Old Jake figured they would be heading back home. Alone.

“Mr Rabbit, why did you choose to come with us on this expedition? I would think a man of your esteem would choose more thrilling projects. Something with more adventure?” one of the writers asked.

The three men lay on their sleeping rolls, sipping on Old Jake’s whiskey, as the stars began to blot out the night and turn it to something of silver and shadow. Old Jake was silent for a while, chewing and spitting into the fire, scratching at his grey beard. If the writers had looked at his eyes then, under the shadows of his overhanging brows, they might have seen it – the lust, the desire, the glee that was almost madness. But as it was, they were shifting about, trying to get comfortable, checking their blankets every few minutes for any sign of desert snakes.

“Why’d I come?” Old Jake snorted and scratched. “Cause I have a respect for them that died up here, lookin’ for their gold. I wanna make sure this here story you gentlemen are tellin’ gets told right, get it?”

“Sure, sure,” the other writer said. “Gosh, what would make a man risk his life for gold that most likely doesn’t even exist and never did? These guys must be a little, you know, unstable, eh? I mean, why didn’t they just play the lottery or something. Probably the same chances at winning and you don’t have to worry about getting your head chopped off by wild Indians, you know?” Both men laughed for a while and then checked for snakes again.

Old Jake had stopped chewing and scratching and was staring into the flames. “There weren’t nothin’ wrong with them.” He spoke so softly the writers hardly noticed. “It was just in their blood, you see? They had no choice.” The writers stopped laughing and searching. The snakes were still. “Better a die tryin’ than live never havin’ searched for it. When they got it inter their heads about that gold ... ain’t nothin’ could take it out again. Not family, friends, whiskey. Nothin’. That gold led them out here to die. But it was worth it, gentlemen. If there was even a chance, it was worth it.”

The writers stared at Old Jake. Old Jake stared at the flames. The writers stared at each other. And up on a hill, a coyote with yellow eyes stared at all three of them. The writers decided now was as good a time as any to go to sleep and so they began to shift around for what seemed like ages until only Old Jake and the coyote were left awake with the night. He sat like that for a long time and when he finally realized that the writers were fast asleep, he began to quietly pack his gear. The coyote took one last look and bounded away into the shadows

“I’m comin’ for yeh, meh beauty. Soon enough,” he whispered to himself as he rolled up his sleeping sack, packing his few belongings. He quietly put out the dying fire and saddled

his nag. The most important thing he saved for last. He crept over to the sleeping writers and tried to remember which white face had carried the map last. He decided for the one on the left and in the starlight he slipped his hand into the writer’s pocket and pulled out the folded, dry yellow paper.

The writer rolled over then and mumbled, “Don’t! Don’t eat me.” Old Jake held his breath until he was sure it was only a dream. Then he crept away, mounted his horse and quietly left the campsite, leaving the heavy camera beside the firepit. When he had his gold, he would buy Juanita’s son a new one.

OLD JAKE FOLLOWED the map, toward two tall pointed rocks that would stand at the right of a clearing and three old fat cactuses lined up in a row to the left, to the place where his Heart’s Desire had sat undisturbed for more than a hundred and fifty years. Old Jake felt as though he was getting younger with every step his horse took. His bones felt strong and straight, his eyes felt clear and he had forever stopped scratching at his grey beard. Every instinct he had told him he was headed straight for the gold. And then, well, Old Jake hadn’t really thought about what would happen then. The first and only step was finding and holding that precious gold in his hands. The writers wouldn’t come after him when they found him missing in the morning. He was sure of that. He had told them enough stories that they would be too terrified to continue further into the mountains without him, especially without their map. They would return home and find a new idea for a book. They weren’t brave men, or particularly smart men, and after all they were only Canadians.

When Old Jake reached the place, under the silver sky, his heart began to race. He felt queer then, for only a moment, as if maybe, just maybe he shouldn’t continue. But he brushed the feeling away like a cobweb and dismounted. The two tall rocks were at the right of the clearing, the three short old cactuses were squatting at the left. Old Jake released the reins of his horse and prepared to take out his little shovel. Suddenly, without warning, his horse jerked, as if spooked and turned and ran, kicking up dust and stone as it thundered away behind the last mountain ridge. Old Jake just watched it go. It didn’t matter now.

He took a breath, looked up to the night sky and dug his spade into the ground. The mountains around him watched with yellow eyes high up on a ridge in the distance. And when Old Jake pulled his shovel out, he dropped to his knees and let out a strangled whoop. Small chunks of gold overflowed from the small shovel. Old Jake began to laugh then and when he turned and looked at the clearing with the stones and mountains rising up all around him, he saw that the walls of the mountain and the sides of the stones were sparkling in the fading starlight. Gold! Gold everywhere, even

in the grey-green cactuses and the dry shrubs within the clearing. And in his yellow eyes, as they dripped tears, you ain't never seen something so close to pure joy. Sparkling light, everywhere golden and bright and Old Jake had found his Heart's Desire.

And that was the last thought he had before a great shadow, darker than the night itself, moved over the land and struck him down. Old Jake was not afraid as the darkness began to blot out his sight. He mistook the darkness for something wonderful and pure that came to him in his greatest triumph. If only for a moment, and this was all that mattered, he had had it within his grasp.

When the writers mistakenly bumbled into the same clearing the following afternoon, there was nothing left but a broken spade half-buried in the ground. They were not, after all, lacking in courage as much as Old Jake had counted on. Or perhaps, when they found him gone, and only the camera remained, they were more afraid of going back without him, than carrying on alone to search for him. Whatever their reasons, they packed up the camp and moved out, calling to Old Jake the entire way. How did they happen to find the same clearing, you ask? Of course they had another copy of the map. In fact they had three. If not that smart or courageous, they were Canadian and they knew the importance of having back-up plans on every expedition. So they had followed the map, keeping their eyes out for signs of Old Jake. When they found his horse it followed along with them, complacently, with its head lowered.

They came to the clearing late in the afternoon. They were certain Old Jake would be there – that he had just forgotten his camera and wanted to get a head start to the map's site. They studied the map and looked at the clearing again. They had followed it meticulously, but none of it matched. There were three tall stones on the left of the clearing, and one small cactus on the right and none of the mountain forms surrounding it seemed quite right. "The map isn't even right," one writer complained. "I knew it was a hoax all along." They were about to turn around and extend their search elsewhere, when the other writer noticed the broken spade buried halfway in the earth. They picked it up and examined it.

Suddenly both writers had a queer feeling, as if they shouldn't be where they were. And a sound like laughter echoed distantly from the hills. The mountains watched with yellow eyes up on a ridge as the men re-mounted their horses and offered a quick prayer and apology to the still land. Their superstitions got the better of them – and rightly so. The eyes continued to watch as they turned and rode out of the clearing, their calls for Old Jake echoing off the rocky landscape.

## Nagoya

Sleep in these small, hard  
beds with 300 thread-per-inch sheets.  
Off to the office, buy heated canned  
espresso from a vending machine  
on the street. Bless your interpreter:  
so many streets  
you will recognize no sign  
without instruction. Sip  
while the client confers  
in the smoke-filled boardroom.  
Pre-fabricated sushi for lunch  
found in a mall that fills our ears  
with American Christmas classics.  
At 6:00 p.m. we team-build  
at a private bar they call a pub —  
Asahi flows, but in no pub  
have I seen a pizza of dried shredded  
shark. So we duck under the door of a fish  
grill house where the sake  
overflows the cup into a tray  
and you must drink  
from both. We can only point, That one!  
They love to laugh at us and we  
are happy they are laughing.  
Only when Craig, having  
eaten the barely cooked  
liver of the mackerel, falls  
from his chair, eyes  
streaming, full of stars, do I  
wish that one of us spoke Japanese, or that,  
by god, the cook perhaps spoke  
French.

– Stephen Brockwell

THEY NEVER FOUND Old Jake and they never knew how close they had come to becoming legends themselves. They informed the proper authorities when they returned to town and decided to postpone the book. When they returned to Canada they remembered one winter day that they still had the camera. They decided to develop the pictures, but when one writer opened the back, they found that it was empty. They abandoned the Lost Gold book idea then and there and decided instead to write about the art of reindeer farming in the wild white north. Old Jake's story then vanished with his body, and his Heart's Desire became lost once more.

## Drawn curtains

TIM CONLEY on a book club more liberating than most

*Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*

AZAR NAFISI  
Random House  
347 pages, \$36.95

Curiosity is insubordination in its purest form.

PRESENTED THUS, stripped of context, this aphorism may prompt us to many wrong guesses as to its author: Could this be Kafka? (No, too affirmative.) Brecht, perhaps? (The word “purest” discounts this possibility.) Bertrand Russell? Einstein? No – the startling right answer is Vladimir Nabokov, the revolutionary revolted by revolutions.

How would Nabokov react to the words “book club”? In Oprah’s wake the phenomenon has assumed a startlingly consumerist aspect, but before that mania throttled North America the small societies of mostly middle-class women who gathered in living rooms represented a more complicated (sometimes conflicting) array of notions. Depending on how you viewed it, the book club represented the democratization of literature or else merely the reclaiming of the novel by those for whom it was more or less expressly designed in the previous century. It was a chance for people to engage in an immediate and

meaningful way with significant works and ideas outside the professional and exclusive ordinances of the academy, or it was a pretext for gossip, new-age fads, and self-centred divulgements, far removed from anything like reading. Now that Oprah’s club has been resurrected with the announcement that she will stick to “classics” from now on (i.e., no more pesky living authors who might snub the big O), and will begin with, of all things, Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, it seems a safe bet that Nabokov will never make the list.

Those who would deny Nabokov any “revolutionary” qualities ought to consider why not, and read Azar Nafisi’s unusual memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

This is not the typical professorial memoir, a genre that has in recent years grown in popularity, but it is, as the best specimens of the genre are, at least as much about learning as about teaching – that is, learning through teaching. Nafisi remembers the days of the revolution and her tenure at the University of Tehran as well as leaving the university along with other female colleagues who refused to wear the veil in lecture. The rise of Ayatollah Khomeini (whose “blessings,” like THIS WAR IS A GREAT BLESSING FOR US! agitate Nafisi as she walks by the walls which bear them), the hateful rhetoric about “the Great Satan” that is Western (particularly American) culture, and cruel patriarchy gradually press Nafisi closer to the crucial decision about how much iniquity and inequity she can countenance. One of the most compelling episodes in the book is the classroom “trial” of *The Great Gatsby*, a novel whose only value, in the view of the zealous student who performs the role of prosecutor, “is that it exposes the immorality and decadence of American society,” though it is in the final analysis “the last hiccup of a dead culture.” While there are

able students ready to defend the novel (as Nafisi is: precisely as a novel), this dogmatic, censorious attitude is reflective of the national milieu in the wake of the fall of the Shah and its forceful establishment of limits of debate and expression inside as well as outside the university. Nafisi characterizes her feelings of alienation and disempowerment in Iran at this time (both as a woman and as an intellectual) as her “becoming irrelevant.”

She chose not to become irrelevant – or at least not officially. A devoted cabal of eight students (seven women plus one man, who met with Nafisi separately) gathered each week in the privacy of Nafisi’s home, dropped the oppressive robes and scarves and revealed their faces, hair, clothing, and personalities to one another, and talked about fiction. Books like *Daisy Miller*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Invitation to a Beheading* became thresholds of liberation for these women, who could with relief talk about the world that isn’t, the better and worse worlds of the imagination, as well as (often in comparison to) that troubling world just outside the drawn curtains.

IN ALL BOOK clubs, the criteria by which titles are selected are the crux, whether they are explicit or not. Oprah, for example, clearly prefers American authors with “inspirational” messages worn very plainly on their sleeves, while the Left Book Club of the 1930s preferred sleeveless works like *The Position of Women in the U.S.S.R.*, *The Protection of the Public from Aerial Attack*, and George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*. “The aim of the [Left Book] Club, is a simple one,” a flyer explains: “it is to help in the terribly urgent struggle for World Peace & a better social & economic order & against Fascism, by giving (to all who are determined to

play a part in this struggle) such knowledge as will immensely increase their efficiency.” That may or may not really be a “simple” aim, but it is undeniably an aim. One of the genuine problems with the “book club,” then, is its aptitude for deciding both the content and the reception of its books before choosing and reading the books themselves.

*Lolita* might not seem – especially to its vilifiers – an obvious pick for Nafisi’s circle of “irrelevant” women. How then did they approach this novel?

I formulated certain general questions for them to consider, the most central of which was how these great works of imagination could help us in our present trapped situation as women. We were not looking for blueprints, for an easy solution, but we did hope to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to. I remember reading to my girls Nabokov’s claim that “readers were born free and ought to remain free.”

Well, maybe some are born free, some achieve freedom, et cetera, et cetera. There are times – not often, but more frequently in the last chapter than elsewhere – when Nafisi veers toward generalities about “ideology,” and perhaps she wants to believe that art is somehow beyond trifles like opinion. I find her inexplicably simple-minded when she writes: “It is said that the personal is political. That is not true, of course. At the core of the fight for political rights is the desire to protect ourselves, to prevent the political from intruding on our individual lives.” That “of course” has a (Nabokovian?) smugness to it, and in fact this mean conception of human beings as primarily selfish and probably anti-social creatures is at odds with Nafisi’s earlier claims about the virtues of fiction, according to which the power to imagine gives us

the ability to pity and feel compassion (she quotes Flaubert: “You should have a heart in order to feel other people’s hearts”).

Nafisi writes how “it seemed to me that at times our lives were more fictional than fiction itself.” For this reader, North American and male, there is much that is other-worldly in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and the other world of those readers is not to be envied. I wonder, though, whether it more rightly belongs itself among Oprah’s pantheon or the Left Book Club’s roster. Nafisi’s “memoir in books” is true to its subtitle, as it comes as an unanticipated reminder of a vital precept, most succinctly expressed by G. K. Chesterton: “Literature is a luxury; fiction is a necessity.” ●

## Pirate muse

SARA JAMIESON ON  
“how tight to tie  
the fabric”

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### *The Dagger Between Her Teeth*

JENNIFER LOVEGROVE  
ECW  
79 pages, \$15.95

**T**he *Dagger Between Her Teeth* is the arresting debut collection by Toronto poet Jennifer LoveGrove, whose work will already be familiar to readers of such periodicals as *The Fiddlehead*, *Queen Street Quarterly*, and *sub-TERRAIN*. Whether we envision the dagger of the title being forcibly inserted (à la Hindley and Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*) or clenched in bravado between “her teeth,” these images suggest one of the most prominent themes of the book: a female

resistance to violent oppression that is itself swaggering aggressive. LoveGrove’s fascination with female ferocity is in ample evidence in the highly successful first section of the book, a sequence of ten poems that pays admiring tribute to the notorious 18th-century woman pirate, Anne Bonney. LoveGrove recounts some of Bonney’s early exploits, such as her alleged murder of a kitchen maid who scorns her illegitimacy and her boyish ways (“With a Carving Knife”). Having thrashed another woman in a Carolina bar brawl, she presents her pirate-husband James Bonney with a wedding gift, “a necklace, both talisman / and warning, two teeth / strung up, dangling” (“Wedding Present”).

The sequence revels in the homoeroticism that is often suppressed in historical accounts of Bonney and her crew: “Calico Jack” Rackham and dressmaker-turned-pirate Pierre the Pansy are clearly introduced as lovers; when Anne rubs expensive oil onto the scarred shoulders of fellow female swashbuckler Mary Read, we are told that the act has “Nothing to do / with pity, or with also / dressing as a man” (“Keelhauling”). Cross-dressing and violence combine in “Masquerade,” where the foursome smear themselves with turtle blood, don a stolen shipment of satin gowns intended for a London bordello (“Skirts bluster / over hot thighs”) and capture a ship that surrenders without so much as firing a shot. While this capitulation has been attributed to the natural superstitiousness of sailors who mistook Anne’s outlandish crew of “four garish whores” for the inhabitants of a ghost ship, LoveGrove’s version of events rejects incorporeality to emphasize instead the powerful spectacle of feminine display, a power that Bonney has managed to turn to her own advantage. The imagery of clothing and costume is loaded with significance throughout the sequence, but for LoveGrove’s

Bonney, dressing up is not just fun and games; it also carries risks. In “Fashion Tips for the Female Pirate,” dressing as a man makes possible a paradoxical kind of freedom, as the woman whose breasts are bound must learn exactly “how tight to tie the fabric / and still breathe.” Having successfully burst out of the restrictions of conventional femininity, Bonney risks other kinds of imprisonment and escape, ghoulishly signified in the image of a pirate’s body in a gibbet, its covering of tar “only cracking / as the flesh begins to bloat.”

In the last three poems of the sequence there is a shift away from overtly historical material as the speaker struggles to transpose her emulation of Bonney to the context of a contemporary relationship. Still prizing costume as a means to self-assertion and expression, the speaker desires

[... to dress for you  
in skirts of fire,  
with the splintered bones  
of pirates rattling  
'round my neck.

(“The Piracy of Breathing”)

This desire, however, goes unacknowledged: “You don’t see these costumes [...] Instead, you dress me in absences.” The sequence ends with the speaker caught between “how I was taught / to love” and the more rebellious model she desires to follow. The festivity of “pirate’s / confetti” from earlier in the sequence finally gives way to the curiously blank, bridal image of “the ships’ white sails / ruffling the wind.” The note of unfulfilled expectation on which the sequence ends perhaps reflects the indeterminacy that surrounds the fate of the historical Anne Bonney. She was arrested and condemned to hang in 1720, but there is no record that her execution ever took place. In speculative accounts of her post-pirate existence, all her fiery waywardness is snuffed out. Some

suggest, for example, that she was bailed out by the father who had previously disowned her, and lived out a disappointingly tame and conventional life with her family. In LoveGrove’s sequence as well, the celebration of Bonney’s rebelliousness proves difficult to sustain; it does, however, reverberate in subsequent sections of the book. “Naming Judith,” for example, from the rather truncated second section, draws connections between the rebellious heroine of Martha Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* and her biblical namesake. I did find myself wondering whether the final image of the “still-warm head / of Nebuchadnezzar” arose from a misreading, or was a deliberate indication that Ostenso’s Judith has somehow outdone her predecessor, cutting off the head of the king himself and not merely that of his general, Holofernes.

Section Three is prefaced by an epigraph from Sylvia Plath and faint echoes are heard throughout in lines like “Tea, Daddy?” (“Imitation Wood”) and “*You’re a bastard*” (“Reruns”). The poems in this section deal with family trauma in a small town: infant death, Christmases blighted by drink and domestic violence, tales of shunnings among Jehovah’s Witness relatives. While LoveGrove is unsentimental in mapping this dark territory, she also discovers moments of levity and stolen pleasure (“Prodigal”) that make possible a tenuous survival. Looking back on being hit by her father, the speaker in “Girl Refuses to Do Up Coat” asks herself, “You didn’t really want to die, did you?” and answers, “Not yet, not really, and not in that town.” In keeping with this note of understated hopefulness, the poem ends with a twist:

[...] A wedding – you throw  
birdseed instead of rice.

It seems more humane, really,  
until someone mentions Hitchcock.

Having invoked that most traditional of happily-ever-after endings, LoveGrove refuses to condone it, and despite small gestures of compassion, the world remains a threatening place.

Up to this point, almost all of the poems employ a terse, short-lined form in keeping with the predominant attitude of toughness. LoveGrove’s use of line breaks at times seems arbitrary, but at others is highly effective: note the commingled vulnerability and defiance in “The flogging does not break / me” (“Keelhauling”). In the fourth and final section, the line lengths and typography become more unpredictable, providing a welcome change that renewed my attention, which by this point in the book had begun to be lulled by a formal sameness to many of the poems. LoveGrove’s poems about serial killers put me in mind (not for the first time) of Lynn Crosbie’s work; in “The Worst-Ever Decomp,” for example, the vein of dark humour that runs through the book finds its clearest expression. It is chiefly this quality of edgy playfulness brought to bear on an impressive range of experiences that, for me, made this book a memorable and engaging read. ●



# As we know it

CLELIA SCALA on the link between nuclear fallout and urban poverty

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## *The Originals*

L.E. VOLLUCK  
DC Books  
260 pages

Now Reagan – there was a guy who freaked me out but good. He reminded me of a Hallowe'en mask. His big orange juice grin, his beady, watery eyes. It was pretty obvious to me that he was the one who was really aching to lob the big ones.

THE SPEAKER is Magpie Smith, the narrator and protagonist of *The Originals*. Of course, “the big ones” that Reagan and his cold war cronies lobbed in the 1980s were not nuclear warheads; instead, they hurled debilitating economic policies at the low-income segments of their populations. The characters in *The Originals* inhabit the economic urban wasteland of the early 1990s. Using nuclear fallout as a metaphor for urban poverty, L.E. Vollick has written a clever, sensitive, and hip first novel.

I hesitate to describe a novel as “hip” when I am recommending it (and I do recommend *The Originals*), since to do so may cause potential readers to forgo the book in question and reach instead for a Penguin Classic. “Hip”, however, is an inescapable adjective when describing *The Originals*, which possesses most of the standard trappings of a contemporary first novel: drugs, booze, clubbing, rock references, philosophical musings, and a tough-on-the-outside but sensitive-on-the-

inside protagonist. What sets *The Originals* apart from so many other novels about malcontent, clubbing youth – aside from the author’s arresting prose – is the fact that Vollick has firmly rooted her novel in the political context of the 1980s and 1990s; the cold war and its economic aftermath are intrinsic to the lives of Magpie Smith and her friends. In *The Originals*, character and context are indivisible, which makes the story simultaneously universal and deeply personal. Life is isolating, but if everyone feels isolated, shouldn’t that be a comfort in itself? The novel opens with this question: “We aren’t original ... so how come we feel so alone?”

*The Originals* is set in Canada in an unnamed city (obviously Toronto) in the early 90s. Throughout the novel, Magpie (a.k.a. Mary Margaret) Smith’s thoughts revert to her childhood and the cold war fears that plagued her. As children, Magpie and her best friend PK believe that nuclear war is inevitable. They believe that as Canadians they will not be blessed with a quick death when the bombs drop on the United States. Instead, nuclear contamination will thrust Canadians into an anarchic, Darwinian struggle for basic necessities. In order to cope with the pervasive fear of war, Magpie and her friends engage in elaborate fantasies of escape and redemption: when the neighbourhood kids play “war,” the Americans always win; Magpie and PK plan to run away when the bombs drop; and their friend Jessica wants to write to world leaders and ask them to disarm their nuclear weapons.

Magpie’s relationship with Jessica is one of the more interesting aspects of *The Originals*. Jessica is not on the same socio-economic plane as Magpie. Magpie lives with her single mother and two older brothers in run-down housing. Jessica, on the other hand, lives in a decent, seemingly sta-

ble, two-parent, middle-class household, and Magpie subjugates herself to Jessica so that she can enjoy the creature comforts of the middle class:

[Jessica] made me sleep on the floor but I got over that pretty fast. The dinners at her house were real good and the television was in colour. I remember roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, the fluffy smell of potatoes with real butter ... It was my wet dream. And so I followed her around, feeling my hands hot and aching, and hoping no one felt sorry for me. So I slept on the floor. No big deal – whatever she wanted. I’d never argue when she wanted to go to bed disgustingly early. I played with her hair, drew on her back with my fingertips. Anything. I would bunk down on the sleeping bag her father always pulled up from the basement for me, zip myself in and think about what it might be like to get new clothes for Christmas and birthdays.

Ultimately, class differences win out. Magpie cannot see Jessica’s problems (she sleeps in her closet and obsesses about war) through the mounds of Yorkshire pudding and mashed potatoes. Though all the children share the fear of nuclear war, Magpie and her friends have to worry about hungry stomachs and angry parents.

As a teenager in the 1990s, Magpie and her friends live in a violent, impoverished culture. Some of them are homeless, hungry, or living in abusive situations. The scope of Magpie’s worries narrows as she grows older: “It’s not about people starving in China. It’s about us, in the here and now. Nobody’s ever going to give us a fighting chance at anything.” Magpie, however, finds solace in the camaraderie of her group: “it’s like we’re all in it together,” she muses as she drinks with her friends in their favourite bar and sings along to R.E.M.’s “it’s the end of the world as

we know it (and i feel fine).” However, Magpie’s confidence in her safety-in-numbers theory begins to wane as she becomes increasingly aware of the violence and despair that permeate her life. In effect, Magpie is living in the post-nuclear world that she feared as a child: everyone is engaged in a vicious struggle for survival in which the weak are at a fatal disadvantage. Beneath the surface camaraderie of Magpie’s group lurk fear and loneliness; she may believe that they are “all in it together,” but as the novel progresses it becomes increasingly apparent that abject poverty can be as divisive and as decimating as nuclear contamination.

The power in Vollick’s prose derives from more than her clever metaphors and “hip” references. Her descriptions of the monotony and futility of poverty are heartwrenching. Magpie envisions her mother, a cleaning woman, “dreaming all Tetris-style of cleaning the steps to the altar every Saturday, bending down on hands and knees. I imagine this voice in her dreams, telling her there’s no escape. She cleans the windows, her hands baked in chemical juices and stained glass light.”

Vollick writes of her characters with a sensitivity that is evocative of Michael Turner’s beautiful and disturbing (or beautifully disturbing) novel *The Pornographer’s Poem*. *The Originals* and *The Pornographer’s Poem* seem to have little in common aside from being contemporary, Canadian, urban novels – Turner’s novel is about the middle class, while some of Vollick’s urban poor can barely feed themselves. Nevertheless, the two novels elicit a similar emotional response. Both authors have created characters who exist in reduced circumstances, material or emotional: stripped of artifice, mired in urban squalor, and painfully displaying their essential humanness.

Vollick, however, is not as skilful or as confident a writer as Turner. Though her prose is generally smooth, she occasionally seems to be trying too hard to write a trendy, urban novel. *The Originals* is at its weakest in sections that are peppered with hip cultural references; for instance, it strikes me as unnecessary to name every band that is splashed across the characters’ t-shirts. I also found it distracting that the novel so obviously takes place in Toronto, and yet the city is never named. I kept trying to figure out where the characters were drinking their drinks and eating their mashed potatoes and this would draw me away from the novel itself.

These criticisms, however, are slight and should not deter anyone from reading *The Originals*. L.E. Vollick’s first novel is very impressive – I look forward to her second. ●

## Mouth meat

**BRENDA KEBLE** on a collection that is more *red than green*

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DARRYL WHETTER  
*A Sharp Tooth in the Fur*  
Goose Lane Editions  
188 pages, \$19.95

A COLLECTION ATTUNED to the interests of a young and relatively unencumbered generation had better be up to date. Darryl Whetter’s thirteen stories are certainly that; some of them are a great deal more. The publisher’s news release (for which no one, least of all the author, need be faulted) identifies the target of his exploration as “the psyche of the 20-something male.” That seems unnecessarily limiting to me:

whatever the more or less inferrable age of the protagonists, there is nothing especially (reductively) typical about their experiences or, for that matter, their behaviour. Youth is a commodity like any other; it may not be exactly as shown in the catalogue.

In “Non-Violent, Not OK”, Chuck is faced with an ethical grid as he prepares to join the FTAA protests in Quebec City:

“In my top – which is it again? – left, we have ‘Violent but I’m OK with it.’ Next on the right is ‘Violent but I’m Not OK with it.’ Bottom left it’s ‘Non-Violent and I’m OK with it,’ then ‘Non-Violent, Not OK.’ Let’s say we’re walking down one of the march streets and someone shatters a McDonald’s window. Find your place on the Grid. Do you think breaking the window is violent or not, and is that OK with you?”

Chuck steps into the first affinity group, more in search of approval, it would seem, than out of conviction. Later on, the choice will be made even starker, the tolerance for violence measured out by a traffic-light metaphor: green being “very safe” and red being the most likely to bring about confrontation. In the end, for Chuck, all the categories are mixed; he has lost sense of just where he belongs in this m $\acute{e}$ l $\acute{e}$ e. It’s the tear gas that solidifies his reaction:

The dense cobwebs hung several metres in front of Chuck, and still every sinus cavity in his face was scour-fucked in a second as an expanding balloon spread back to dissolve epiglottis, tonsils, every accessible millimetre of mouth meat.

Like a battle-field medic, he runs from one blinded protestor to another, a spray of diluted antacid at the ready. This may not be victory (the real events have long since told us that), but it is certainly something larger, more accessible than confusion.

In “Enormous Sky White”, Grater is one of a crew of planters dropping

the seedlings from their hip pouches into the swiftly shovelled earth “two nowhere hours west of Thunder Bay”. His girlfriend Courtney, meanwhile, is in Paris, studying (the) French. Alex, his equally begrimed co-planter, offers him just the sort of comfort that Courtney herself has found, is finding, in the arms of Guillaume, another man’s phone number written undiscoverably (she hopes) on the sole of her foot. There is no obstructive morality here, no paralysing consciousness. No blocked-up exits, either, we’re finally led to believe, as Alex and Grater contemplate their next move. The humour, here as elsewhere, is pointed rather than tossed off; the descriptions are loaded with particularity:

On the field bus, Grater loves scanning for new combinations of sweat and grime. Necks are streaked crimson from scratching fingers. Eyelids are dusted so fine, nostrils and lips edged in powdery grey. In a few more days, the blackflies will be at their peak. Arms, cheeks and necks will be smeared with the repellent but carcinogenic Deet, one more fluid to hold the dust raised by the eternally screeching, kicking boots.

REVIEWERS LIKE TO call collections strong or weak, on the assumption that every author or publisher has made an attempt to include only the best or most acceptable work. That may well have been true for *A Sharp Tooth in the Fur*, as all the stories in it demonstrate the technical proficiency (and reviser’s polish) to be expected of a teacher of creative writing. Sometimes I thought the line a little too tight, the action verbs overworked. Sometimes the dialogue seemed a bit too locked in. Only two stories (“Profanity Issues, S.” and “Kermit Is Smut”), perhaps because of their similar tone, failed to engage me: I simply couldn’t *hear* them. Other readers, no doubt, will. Let’s call this, then, a strong collection, dense, artful,

and moving at times – one that may leave younger writers wondering how to do likewise and older writers wondering whether they themselves have yet done anything as good. ●

## Enter Bear

KARL BUCHNER on a tall tale of abandonment and survival

DOUGLAS GLOVER

*Elle, A Novel*

Goose Lane Editions

205 pp, \$21.95

LET’S ASSUME, for argument’s sake, that historical fiction is of two kinds: the *synthetic*, in which every effort is made to render the past as plausibly unified as the present, although far removed from it in habit and custom, and the *analytic*, in which such unity of effect is quite purposely avoided in favour of a shuddered image travelling back and forth, but never smoothly, between the two planes. There’s a risk in the second category that the reader won’t go along – or will sometimes refuse the incursion of one plane upon the other. Certainly, readers of *Elle*, Douglas Glover’s new novel (the first in ten years) may find themselves tugged in seemingly contrary directions: that of the sources for this tale – not only the accounts of Marguerite de Roberval, her “uncle”, and Cartier but all things Labradorian and shamanistic as well – and, no less aggressively, that of the tallness of the tale itself, the vigorous mixture of the knowable and the unknown, the painfully direct and the blandly roundabout.

It would be curious to see what a 16th-century reader might make of it,

a French reader, preferably, who knew more than a little English. The shipwreck narrative would go down easily enough: the General, Sieur de Roberval, as cruel as the times, puts ashore his cousin’s daughter, her lover, and her nurse on the Isle of Demons, in the St Lawrence, to rid himself of the nuisance she has been. The unnamed narrator, however, is much more candid about her feelings than such a reader would be expecting. More candid, more unrepentant, more demanding. More Moll Flanders than Robinson Crusoe . . . unfortunately for the little colony, which soon founders, leaving her bereft and alone, until a bear appears –

Her mewing modulates into a rumble. Black lips curling back, she snarls, then opens her cavernous mouth and roars. I have time to notice her worn-out teeth, bleeding gums and truly rancid breath before she lurches onto her hind legs, her torn foot pawing the air above her head in imitation of my raised finger. Her great roar vibrates over the island, sets my head ringing. The sound is black and terrible. It goes on and on. Then suddenly she falls upon me, those enormous jaws ready to tear me asunder. – and, shortly afterwards, *Itslk*, her “fat, bustling, talkative savage paramour” (the latter terms used ironically), accompanied by Léon, the dog whose leap into the ocean she had, through “an error in judgement”, inadvertently caused. (The bear, if you have to know, died.) Abandoned once again, she gives birth to a child like a fish, a dire portent our hypothetical reader would seize upon: “ . . . it has a face like my own, but . . . there is nothing else human about it. It is strangely deformed and sexless, and for arms and legs there are tiny appendages like fins.” Not even this companion, however, is given her for long. But then there is a second rescue . . . and then a third. The plot is far from being unimportant, and yet it doesn’t

drive (or tow) the narrative so well as the (to say the least) indomitable character of the protagonist does. Not only does she withstand these misadventures, she acquires, at the same time, an uncanny wisdom, chiefly in the lore of bears, and a mysterious transformative power. These are part of her legend (as she will learn when she returns to France). She knows quite a few other legends, and as she recounts them, it becomes apparent that she is Misfortune itself, the sum of a good many outcasts and captives. A head-strong girl rudely handled (though ultimately avenged).

I have sufficient education to be aware of certain foreshadowings, signs, omens, parallels, prognostications and analogies. Classical literature teems with stories of extreme child-rearing practices: young single girls left on rocks or deserted islands or thrust into dark tunnels as punishments or sacrifices or tribute or simply for their nutrient value vis-à-vis whatever slaving monster happens by.

Classical literature, presumably, does not teem with stories of girls returned to their homes by the good offices of a legless captain and a dwarf monk. Perhaps that's one reason the ultimate rescue seems to deliver us, all too abruptly, from one impasse into another. As interesting as the cameo appearance by Rabelais might be (his playful influence having figured throughout) – and as poignant as the fate of the native Comes Winter surely is – our heroine herself, more introspective and summary than ever, begins to lose both poignancy and interest, to fade into an explanation. And as symmetrical as the General's comeuppance is ... well, never mind, it was necessary, though it needn't have been so neat.

The project here, of course, was not to tell her story in the old, easily captivating way. The extra awareness,

the modern sensibility afford as great a pleasure, even while they blur our impressions of time and place. I suspect that a second reading would give more credit (and lend more credence) to these final pages. I'm not so sure about the epilogue.

Douglas Glover has written a fine, sophisticated account of persecution and survival, told in a voice very like (yet not quite like) our own – and wrapped in a myth as rugged as a bearskin. To those readers with a taste for temporal ambiguities, *Elle* has much to offer. ●

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# Contributors

**STEPHEN BROCKWELL** is the author of *Cometology* and *The Wire in Fences*. His work has appeared in *Queen St Quarterly*, *Danforth Review*, *Maisonneuve*, *Arc*, *Fiddlehead*, and *Antigonish Review*.

**LINDSAY DOWDEN** has been an editor, a freelance writer, a communications consultant, and an academic. She lives in Philadelphia.

**LYN FOX** lives in Chiapas, Mexico, and British Columbia. The phrase “philosophical adventure” describes his writing and his life as an avid world trekker with a master’s degree in philosophy.

His boxing career in tatters, **MATT HERN** now writes for a variety of places and co-edits *Crank*, a Vancouver-based political/literary magazine ([crankmagazine.com](http://crankmagazine.com)). His new book is called *In the Face of Schools* (New Star, 2003).

**KURT HALLIDAY** has published in *Geist* and [www.canadiancontent.com](http://www.canadiancontent.com). He is the author of *Tabloid*, a reasonably smart novel about the general dumbing down. He lives in Kingston, Ontario, with Janet Anderson, their two children Geoff and Ross, more than ten computers, and only two cats.

**SEAN HOWARD**, originally from the U.K., now lives in Nova Scotia. His work has appeared in *Acclaim*, *The New Writer*, *Writers’ Monthly*, *Envoi*, *Haiku Poetry Quarterly*, *Poetry Nottingham International*, and *Another Toronto Quarterly*.

**MEGHAN HOWCROFT** is a recent BFA graduate of the University of British Columbia, with a major in creative writing and a minor in medieval studies. Her work has appeared in *Wreck*.

**JASON MARKOWSKY** has had stories published in *Fait Accomplit* and *Tickled by Thunder*; he is one of the winners of CBC’s 2002/2003 Alberta Anthology writing contest. For the past five years, he has alternated homes between Edmonton and Vienna. During this time, he taught English, freelanced as a journalist, picked grapes, and modelled wristwatches.

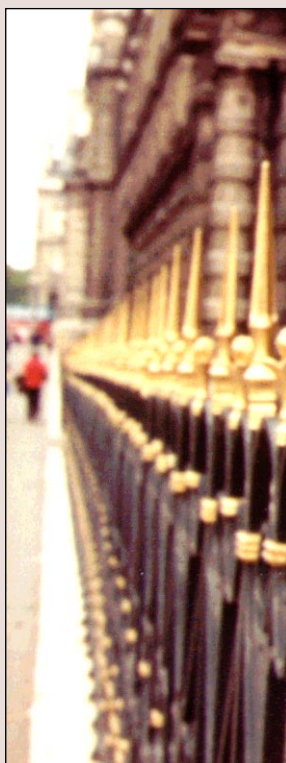
**A. MARY MURPHY** is an Alberta poet currently at work on her doctoral dissertation. Her poems have appeared in a variety of journals, including *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, *Canadian Literature*, *Wascana Review*, and *Other Voices*.

**DAVID RACHEL** has been a factory labourer, a forest fire fighter, a hospital chaplain, a massage therapist, a letter carrier, a teacher, and a professor. Author of several technical works, he now concentrates on fiction and poetry. He has published in *Antigonish Review*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Midwest Poetry Review*, *New Quarterly*, *Poetry Monthly*, *Prism International*, *Quadrant*, *Stand*, and *The Formalist*.

**MATTHEW J. TRAFFORD** recently earned a Bachelor of Arts from Mount Allison University in English and Modern Languages. He is spending a year working as an Administrative Computer Systems Assistant before entering the real world as a bohemian expatriate in Paris.







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