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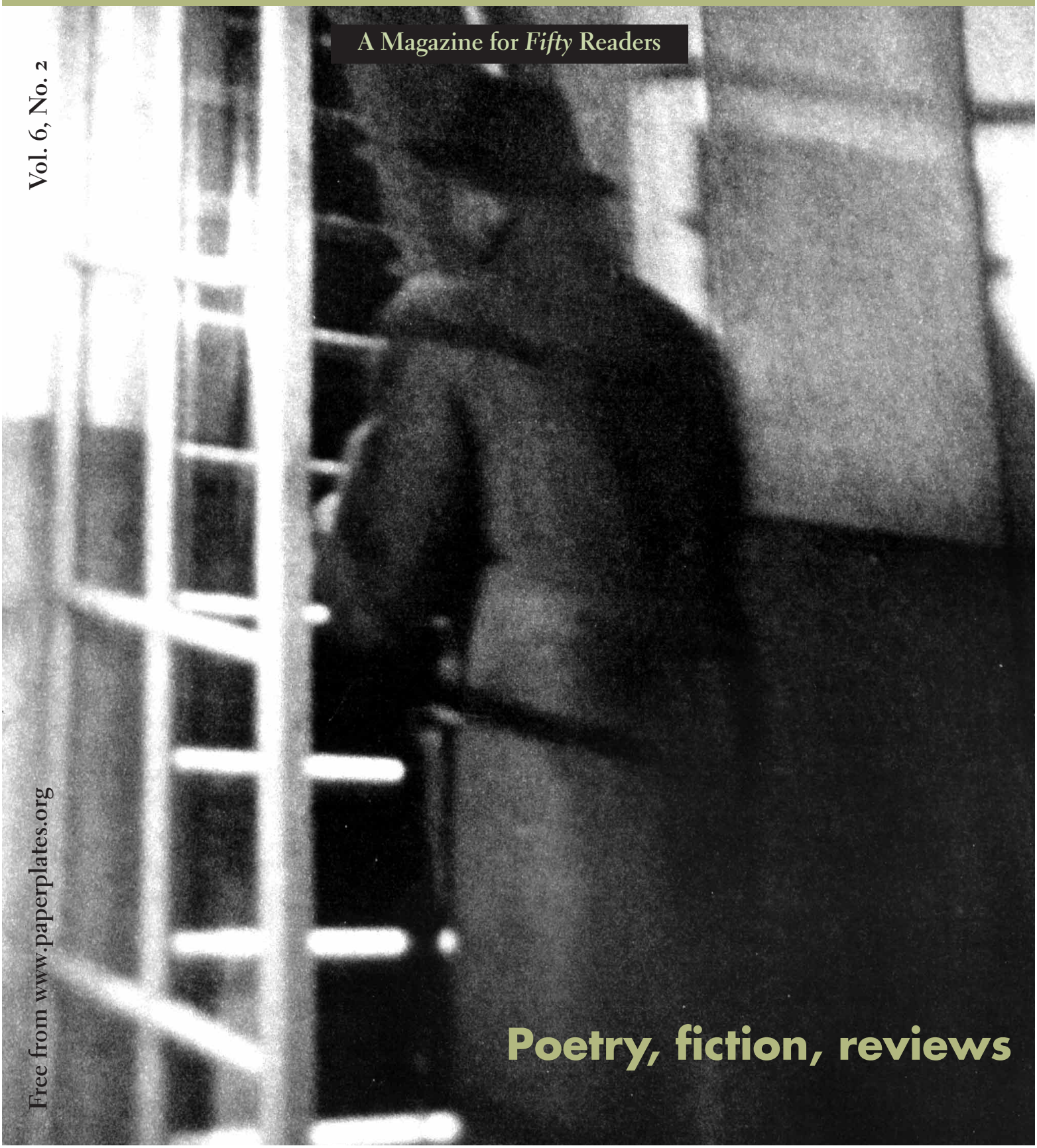

A Magazine for *Fifty* Readers

Vol. 6, No. 2

Free from www.paperplates.org

Poetry, fiction, reviews

Vol. 6, No. 2

COVER PHOTO: David Jeremias

paperplates

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www.perkolator.com

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ISSN 1183-3742

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We welcome submissions. For our guidelines, send a stamped self-addressed envelope to the address above, or
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SASE. Let's do away with them if we can. There is no need for an envelope with return postage or an IRC if you've given us an e-mail address to reply to. (A reliable address, though. Hotmail and Yahoo accounts will lapse unless you keep using them.) As always, we prefer to receive submissions by surface mail. They are easier to handle and harder to lose. E-mail submissions are less convenient for editors than they are for submittors — not that that should stop you, but a slight bias does creep in, especially when the computer has been turned off and a pile of brown envelopes drawn near.

Queries. By all means, send them. It helps to be reminded that we have yet to make up our minds. But be patient, too. And remember that we've been accepting simultaneous submissions for the very reason that we can't promise to answer any sooner. (Don't expect your query itself to be answered right away. That doesn't mean, however, that it won't have had the desired effect.)

Acceptance. If your story or poem is accepted for publication, it will then be scheduled to appear in a future (not necessarily the next) issue. This may take a while, as we publish only two or, at most, three times a year. There's nothing particularly scientific (or sadistic) about the process. We do try to maintain a balance. And we're sticking to the paper model's optimal length. In other words, a 400-page issue isn't likely.

Once your contribution has been published, there are a couple of things you can do to help fortify the link. You can make a point of mentioning *paperplates* in your list of publishing credits when you submit to other magazines. And you can send a brief note to the poetry or fiction editor here to tell her of your pleasure at the result.

Letters, general. If you're a reader who has been engaged by what you've found in *paperplates*, we'd like to know about it. Nothing is more discouraging to writers than to get published and still feel ignored. Don't ignore them. Write a letter.

– Bernard Kelly

homeplate

I got a ride to Drummondville with John the Baptist

It was all going fine until he told us that he was a Christian. Then all hell broke loose. I sat in the back of the car, wondering why we had turned down that first ride. But the woman who had initially pulled over for us had only been going to Kingston, and the guy in the Napanee Canadian Tire told us that we'd be okay hitchhiking here, but no one would pick us up in Kingston because there was a prison there and no one picks up hitchhikers in Kingston because you never know what might happen. So this guy — the Christian, that is — was the second car to pull over for us on the Trans-Canada just outside of Napanee, Ontario, but it wasn't until we were in Montreal that it all began.

Us was me and Christian — a person, not to be confused with the religion mentioned earlier. Christian was from Denmark, and was on his way to Halifax to catch his flight home. I had met him because we had both answered an ad on the Mountain Equipment Co-op ride board. The ad had been posted by Torie, who was planning to drive to Halifax. Torie had driven us that evening to her family's maple syrup farm just an hour outside of Toronto. We had embarked the next morning with high hopes, despite the fact that the engine temperature gauge of her car kept hovering just above the red HOT mark. So she had stopped by the Napanee Canadian Tire just in case, and a couple of hours and a blown head gasket later, Christian and I were hitching.

John pulled over for us about fifteen minutes after we arrived at our spot on the highway. Christian sat in the front seat and I sat in the back, amongst the business suit hanging in a transparent plastic bag and the golf clubs. John was a fairly small man. Tanned face, pug nose, tinted glasses, balding. He wore a white polo shirt and navy blue shorts.

"Where are you two from?" he asked us.

"I'm from Denmark," Christian answered.

"What?"

"Denmark," said Christian patiently. "I'm from Denmark."

"Denmark!" exclaimed John. "Whoa. That's a long ways away." He then peered at me in the rearview mirror. "What about you? Where are you from?"

"I'm from BC," I told him.

And John replied with a knowing "Ooooh."

(*Ooooh* is right. No one out there seemed to react when I told them where I was from. BC is a long way from Napanee, but they've been to Vancouver once and think that they know what you mean.)

We got to Montreal around lunch time, and John took us off the freeways and into the city so Christian could get a brief tour. We went through Mont Royal Park, stopped at the lookout, and then went to a concession stand for lunch. Christian and I both ordered a side of fries and both attempted to speak French; John ordered a cheese burger and spoke no French at all. (In retrospect I see that as an insight into the rest of his personality: someone who lives in a place where he doesn't attempt to speak the language, but still expects to get served.) The three of us sat at a picnic table to eat. The fries were lukewarm and a little soggy, but I ate them anyway. Lots of vinegar and ketchup. And that was when it all started.

Maybe it was because we had just passed by St. Joseph's Basilica, and the Catholic aura of Montreal had begun to go to John's head. Who knows? But it started. It began innocuously enough: he told us that as the result of a stroke, he'd lost the ability to speak. "But I'm a Christian," he explained, "and my doctor couldn't understand why I wasn't afraid to die. I just wasn't afraid."

"What happened?" both Christian and I asked.

John leaned closer, peered at us through his darkened lenses. "God tells us that we learn more with our ears than with our tongues." He leaned back. "But most people don't know that."

Back in the car, of course, I had the good seat. Despite John's sponsorship of empathetic listening, we were given an earful of his physical, mystical, and spiritual experiences, complete with quotes from the Bible. We were over the bridge and well past Montreal when John began what became his trademark habit: from somewhere below the driver's seat, he had stashed a small pocket-sized copy of the Bible. And he didn't pull over to find the quote he was looking for, he kept driving 120 km per hour, book pressed to the steering wheel as he flipped through the pages.

Christian was good at asking questions, but almost every time he did, John would scan the lines highlighted in fluorescent green, yellow, and pink and manage to find the answer that he wanted.

He handed the book to Christian.

"You see that?" he said. "Read that."

There was a pause as Christian read the lines. I saw him scratch his head.

"So, what ... what does this mean?"

"It means I have *eternal life*. I have eternal life. I'll live forever! That's why, when I was sick, I wasn't afraid to die. My doctor couldn't understand it. He thinks my recovery is amazing!"

"What do you mean by 'eternal life'?"

"It means I'll live forever. I won't die. That's why I'm *not afraid* to die. Not any more. I left Jesus once, but He never left me. He kicked my ass — and now look — I can speak. He kicked my ass! I'll never leave Him again."

IF ONLY GOOD old John had known with whom he was dealing. In a restaurant in Quebec City a couple of days later, Christian told me a little about his previous trip to South America.

"I guess I'd call myself a socialist," he said, rubbing his eyes and pondering the menu that was written in French. "I'm a big admirer of Che Guavera. What's 'fromage'?"

"It's cheese. Why did you go to South America?" I asked him.

"To start the revolution."

"To start the revolution?"

"Yeah." He laughed a little. "It didn't really happen."

JOHN TRIED TO convince us to let him drive us all the way to Quebec City (even though he was only travelling to Sherbrooke). Perhaps a hitchhiker turning down a ride may seem a bit idiotic, but his offer was to drive us to Quebec where we could *find a hotel*, maybe *pitch in for gas*, and then he'd *let us go in the morning*. Christian's blonde head popped around the seat to look at me when John made his offer; and when I voted no, Christian managed to diplomatically turn the proposal down.

So we let John go on the Trans-Canada near Drummondville, Quebec. He gave Christian a business card with a happy face on the front and quotes from the Bible and John's cell number on the back. Christian promised that he'd call him when we got to Quebec. (He later pocketed it and said he'd call him from Halifax where there was a good distance between us. Quebec City was still a little too close to Sherbrooke.)

We got stuck on that spot for a while, almost an hour. I had the idea of writing on the hack of our sign (the front of which read NOVA SCOTIA) QUÉBEC in blue to put a bit of a separatist bent to it in hopes of improving our chances of getting a lift. While we stood on the side of the highway, holding up our blue QUÉBEC sign, we talked about John and laughed at the thought of going all the way to Quebec with him.

"I doubt he'd want to stop there!" I said. "He'd probably want to go all the way to Halifax with us."

"Yeah," said Christian. "I think we should call him John the Baptist from now on. I think it suits him."

"Ha! John the Baptist! I like that. I bet he wishes he was John the Baptist, especially with that happy face business card he gave you. I guess he really wants to spread the word."

``Maybe ... but I don't think he was very strong in his religion. He couldn't explain anything."

After about twenty minutes and still no ride, Christian asked me, "How far are we from Quebec City?"

"I think about two hours," I said.

"And to Halifax2 How far is it from Quebec to Halifax?"

"I think it's about ten or twelve hours."

"Twelve hours?" barked Christian. "This country is kicking my ass!"

– C. Michelle Deines

The cat

THE HOUSE where I once lived was possessed of a roofed back porch which ran the whole length of the back of the house. *Verandah* would perhaps describe it better. It was about eight feet in width and thirty-some feet long, floored by brown-painted tongue-in-groove planking, railed by black-painted wrought iron. Steps led down from it to the back yard, which soon gave way to a large closely wooded area. Immediately across from these steps was my kitchen door, in which was framed the only window along that entire wall.

My verandah was one of my favourite places to sit, on an old bench of the same red-brown as the floor. Sheltered from rain or snow, largely removed from insects, and private from my neighbours whose houses did not extend as close to the woods as mine, my porch was my refuge, my solace, my observation post.

From my porch, I was able to watch raccoons, rabbits, foxes, all manner of birds in their season; and feed them, of course. Hummingbirds in the summer, and all the others during the winter. Raccoons would make acrobatic nocturnal raids on the bird-feeder which was suspended from the overhang of the porch, as well as assuring themselves of their share of whatever crusts and so on that I put out at the edge of the woods for the others. Not that I set food out to entice these visitors. Except for the birds, that is, I waited until I saw them, usually in the cold weeks of winter when food was scarce and hunger great. Then they would venture close to houses in their need to fuel themselves against the weather. And so it would be that within twenty to thirty feet of my porch, winged and furred creatures fed, honouring me, I felt, by so doing.

Now there were also, in that wooded area behind my house, numerous cats.

Cats that lived wild. Dumped there by less than committed humans, straying there on their own, living, feeding, dying, breeding there. And of the creatures who inhabited the woods, these cats were the least visible. There may have been only two or three of them at any given time, there may have been a dozen or more. I only knew that they were there from their tracks in the snow. Cat-like, they kept to themselves.

Over the years, during particularly brutal periods of brutal winters, one of these cats would occasionally find its way to my back porch. Then I would put food out for it, never approaching or being approached by the wary being. In a few days the cat would disappear again, to be seen — no matter how I looked — no more.

ONE JANUARY day when the thermometer stood at minus twenty degrees and the wind howled all the way from its home at the north pole to mine, I stood looking out my kitchen door window. Snow fallen the previous day scudded and lashed airborne and frigid, blurring the railings of the porch. And there, creeping heedfully up the stairs, was a black cat. It examined seeds dropped from the bird-feeder, tried one or two. While it was thus engaged I hurriedly mixed some food up for it in a bowl, then opened the door quietly, only wide enough to slip the bowl outside. Then quietly pulled it to again. Even this minimal motion on my part sent the cat in a bound to the end of the porch, whence it crouched and eyed the door suspiciously. I busied myself with tidying up after the hasty preparation of cat food, and returned to the door to peep unobtrusively out. The bowl was empty; the cat gone.

The next afternoon at about the same time I made a point of looking out the door again. The wind had dropped considerably, and so had the temperature. There, in the same corner as yesterday, eyeing the door, crouched the cat. Without the swirling snow I could see that it was large, short-haired, yellow-eyed. Something in its bearing put me in mind of a panther ranging free in its grassland realm. I quickly prepared food for it, slipped the bowl out the door. When I looked out in a few minutes, once again the bowl was empty and the cat gone.

The next day this pattern repeated itself. On the fourth day as I set the bowl down, the cat began to move toward it before I had drawn hand inside. I did so slowly, then peeked out through the door's window. And I saw that the cat limped, one front paw much swollen and clearly painful. I stayed, watching to see if perhaps it would remain a little longer on the porch today. The bowl emptied. The cat sat down. I rushed off to get ready a sterile solution for the swollen paw. By the time I returned to the door, the cat was, once again, gone.

The next day I was prepared. Food ready, solution ready. Though how I intended to handle this creature of the woods I had no idea. I had leather gloves at the ready, to spare my hands from claws and teeth, that was all. The cat came. I put the bowl out, this time not quite closing the door. I squatted there, a foot or so away from the creature, the winter air charging in at me. The cat ignored me, eating hungrily, carefully, cleaning the bowl utterly. Then it sat again, and considered the slightly open door. Slowly, slowly, I opened it wider. Softly, softly, I spoke to the cat. Then, averting my face, which I wished now that I had protected in some way, I gently eased gloved hands toward the injured wildness before me. Eased, eased, and closed softly around the cat's middle. Gently lifted, explaining steadily all the while that I would help if I could. Pulled the door quietly closed with the cat inside now, then to a chair pulled out in readiness. Slowly sat down, the cat on my lap before me. Smoothly drew the dish with antiseptic solution from the table to my lap. Still explaining my actions in a calming tone, I slightly raised the tender paw, slid the dish under it, and gradually lowered the limb again. Lower. Into the warm solution. Held it there, talking all the while.

During all this the cat reacted not at all. The head did not turn to demand what I thought I was doing. The tail did not switch menacingly. The claws did not unsheathe or rake at me. The ears did not flatten or twitch. No hissing or warning sounds of any kind emanated from the throat of the cat. Nothing. In no way did the cat betray fear or hostility — or pleasure for that matter. In no way did it behave as though its current experience was anything outside its routine. It sat its substantial weight on my lap as though it had often done so, allowed its paw to soak as though it had often done so, took in its surroundings as though they were its own.

The cat's fur, as I have said, was black. A rich velvety blackness, the fur itself short and very dense. I had by now removed my gloves, and even ventured to stroke the neck of this creature whose unmistakable power was held in dignified abeyance. As I did so it occurred to me that I could not put the cat outside with a soaking wet paw in this frigid weather. What then, I wondered, looking about the kitchen, casting about for an answer. It was the cat itself that solved the problem.

When the dish had been set back on the table, and its paw patted gently with a towel, it remained on my lap only long enough to make its first inscrutable feline eye contact with me, then made a three-foot landing on the floor. It padded knowingly down the short hall toward the living room.

My dogs were in the living room. They had been told to stay there

while I ministered to the cat, and I knew that I could trust them to do so. But they enjoyed the chasing of cats, and took the defence of their home turf rather seriously. I followed behind the cat, speaking firmly to the dogs of their goodness and the necessity of their staying where they were. At the threshold of the living room the cat stopped. It surveyed the room, taking in, I thought, every last detail. Then, showing no reaction of fear, anger, or warning, it continued its way across the room to supplely leap onto the sofa to lie sphinx-like, elegant and at ease. The dogs, once the cat was settled, approached to within a couple of feet of it with uncharacteristic restraint, sniffing in vigorously whatever information they could gather. Then, much to my surprise and relief, they returned to their baskets, ignoring or accepting the cat as it ignored or accepted them. The cat closed its eyes. All was well, though I couldn't help wondering what it was that brought this model behaviour upon my dogs. Perhaps they had detected the infected paw and shied away from it. Perhaps they were trying to accommodate yet another caprice of their human. Perhaps they were rendering obeisance to some quality they had recognized in the cat; wild speaking to wild. Perhaps all three. Whatever the cause, the effect was calm and peaceful.

After some twenty minutes of this peace, the cat rose, proceeded calmly back to the kitchen, to the door, whence its lemon-yellow eyes turned eloquently upon me. I let it out.

FOR SEVERAL more days this sequence of events repeated itself without the minutest variation. The cat would eat outside, I would bathe its paw, it would allow itself precisely twenty minutes of luxury on my sofa, and then depart. On the fourth day I noticed that the afflicted paw was slightly less swollen. Much less swollen on the fifth. Not discernibly swollen at all on the sixth. On the seventh day, the cat did not return. I had almost expected it not to, but felt disappointment all the same. Several times I returned to the door and peered out. Several times I ended by wishing the cat well. The next day and the next I looked for it, accepting finally that its need for me was past and the privilege of helping it was ended. And I wished it well.

I have often thought of that cat. A fine, independent creature, who, needing help, sought and took it where it was offered. It retained its intrinsic dignity by simply not relinquishing it. Sitting there on my lap with a paw inserted in a bowl of wetness, its being, its self, its dignity was not one whit diminished. Assistance was needed; assistance was accepted. This physical reality did not have the capacity of rendering the cat less than it was.

And then I think that we humans, when we first begin to whine about the loss of our dignity, take thereby the first step towards its loss.

– Hanne Armstrong

The backbone of my life

I WAS ONE OF three children. As so often happens when there are three, one is left out. I was the one left out. My two elder sisters were not unkind to me, but they regarded me as a baby, too young to join in anything. My parents were not social people. They liked to holiday in lonely places in the wilds of Scotland, preferred deserted beaches to settle and swim where no other human being was in sight. I never had another child to play with and had to resort to the company of the family dog.

It is extraordinary to remember how keen feelings were at the age of three. Because I was never allowed to join in my sisters' games or secrets, I used to wander into the wild part of my grandfather's garden, the grass so long it rose like a forest above my head. Here, where no one could see me, I would fling myself down and cry as if my heart would break because I thought I was too dull to be accepted as a playmate.

It never occurred to me to put my troubles into words. I was ashamed of them. Jerry was the only living thing I shared them with. Jerry-Mya-Hayloft my mother called him, because he had been born in a hayloft. He had cost only seven pounds — one pound extra for his beautiful nature, or so the gipsy said who sold him to us. He was priceless to me: he was willing to sit close by my side in a windy house for hours and share his time with me. He was a little black and white dog with a fluffy tail like a rabbit's, but he had a sheepdog's faithful eyes. I told him my troubles, not in words but by stroking his small silky paws. He was my constant companion and saw me through my early childhood.

Jerry died when I was eleven years old. It was a major event. My mother, obsessed with dogs herself, realized how serious it was for me and sent me away to stay with my aunt in London. I sped south in the Flying Scotsman.

IN CONTRAST TO the dirt and grime of the sunken city of Glasgow, where I had been brought up, my first impression of England was of a sunny, brilliant area of red brick. My aunt met me at Euston Station and took me back to Hampstead, where she lived.

Everything was new. The Tube. The electric lift that shot up from the catacombs, letting us out into the bright sunlight of the busy High Street. After the grey granite of Glasgow, the colour of the buildings and the gaiety of the

shops made me feel as if I were entering a fun fair. We climbed and climbed high narrow streets until we reached a tall house with a gnarled wooden door. (It had once been the home of the cartoonist Gerald Du Maurier.) Up, up again. Up delicate stairs and finally into the glass bird's nest in which my aunt lived, perched (as it seemed to me) on the very highest pinnacle above London. Far below us stretched a massive mirage of rooftops, and in the misty distance glittered the golden dome of St Paul's.

My aunt was very kind to me. She saw my distress. The secret purpose of the visit was to buy me another dog. The very next day, we set out to look for one. Petticoat Lane was then the place to buy a puppy. Dogs for sale were set out on tablecloths on the pavement. They were a motley crew. My sister, who was at art college in London, came with us. She had a preference for pekinese. We all stopped short before the smallest, fluffiest creature, lolling about on a handkerchief. We felt we had to have it. It was a pekinese, but its nose was running. We were to go back in a few days and collect it, as it was too young yet to leave its mother.

When we returned, however, the woman announced that the tiny article had died of a chest infection. Our search had to begin again. This time, we went to a pet shop in Baker's Street, where, in the window, buff-coloured balls of fluff were bouncing about. They were crossed welsh collies, the woman there told us. We picked one out and bought a basket. That's how my life with Ben started. It was an active one from the beginning. The new puppy had to be carried around the sites of London. He had to be let out secretly to tear up and down between the pews at Westminster Abbey and to be left in the ladies' room at the Tower of London.

Ben turned out to be a full-time job — too much for me sometimes, when I had to hand him over to my calmer older sister. He certainly kept me busy and led me into often very awkward adventures. His ruling passion in life was balls. He could nose them out anywhere. He would manage to find one on the most desolate of Scottish moors. To my horror, he retrieved them from irate gentlemen on the putting green and from earnest tennis players on the courts. Ben had another habit: spending pennies in unsuitable places — like the bare legs of men sunbathing on the beach. The victims in question would leap up in a rage ... while I hid, trembling, behind a beach hut. Another favourite place was on the huge hooves of the cart horses in the stable where I kept my pony. In his old age, Ben developed a fear of guns and used to begin raking up the carpet whenever he heard a bang. This neurosis of his became so bad that my father, who was a heart specialist, sometimes had to take him to work to give us peace. On one or two occasions, Ben escaped into the hospital and rushed down the wards, spending pennies on the bed legs as he passed.

Welsh sheep dogs are supposed to be the most intelligent of breeds. Ben's intelligence was as outrageous as his habits and often made us smile in astonishment. He always looked right and left before he crossed the busy thoroughfare on which we lived. He jumped on city buses and went on trips ... but always returned safe and intact. Sometimes, though, he did things beyond the normal prowess of a dog.

On one occasion, when my father's car was being repaired, the garage, which was on the other side of town, about 15 miles away, rang up to ask, Did we know a dog was sitting in the car? How Ben had got there we never knew. Another time, when we went on holiday, we had to take two houses, there were so many of us. When we arrived at this entirely new seaside resort, my mother and half of the family went to the first house with Ben while I was driven to the other house, about 10 miles further on. Being the smallest, and as there was little room, I was put to bed in what must have been a disused cupboard. I awoke in the night to find beetles and spiders creeping over my bed. As I sat up in terror, I thought, "Oh. if only I had Ben, I would not be so frightened." I lay there, frozen, for some time when suddenly there was a scratch at the door. I opened it cautiously, not knowing who or what was there, and in walked Ben, wagging his tail. He settled down at once. Heaven knows how he had found his way or got in. (The front door was locked.) It must have been his sheepdog instincts.

I GREW UP. Left home. Work and sociabilities took over. I saw Ben only during the holidays, but he remained my faithful friend. Years later, when he had long been dead, I had to leave all my friends in London and return home to look after my elderly mother. Once again I was isolated and lonely and once again dogs came to my rescue — this time, in the form of a small grey cairn terrier called Lindy. Somehow we needed someone to help us through. I needed another little mother, as my own mother's mind was giving out. I rang the vet to ask whether he knew of any puppies. He said he had a bunch of cairn puppies in his office that needed homes. When I got there, I thought the mother was one of the puppies, she was so small. She looked straight at me, and a light seemed to come out of her that said: "I am the right dog. Take me." It's a great thing in life when you have no doubt at all about a decision. I had no doubt at all about Lindy.

As soon as Lindy arrived, she became my, or our, little mother. She was a quiet but utterly determined dog and quickly got us into a routine.

At one o'clock every day, she went into the kitchen to await her dinner. She did not move until it was served. She looked rather like a hedgehog, with a pointed nose and little bright eyes. In spite of her size, she was a most mature dog, who never panicked but who seemed to consider it her duty to watch over and supervise the human beings she found herself with.

As the state of my mother's mind deteriorated, Lindy provided much relaxation and peace for me. My parents' house bordered on allotment land. A place of birds and blossom in the spring, it had been the breeding ground of the yellow plum tree and was a white wonderland in April. The allotments were interwoven with a maze-way of tiny paths amidst long, waving grass. Lindy liked to choose the path we would take each day and set off in a spirit of adventure. She loved me to stop and lie down in the long grass while she watched the beetles and grasshopppers. Sometimes she would begin digging with great excitement, but when she did finally reach something like a mole she got very embarrassed and gazed up at the sky, pretending the mole was not there, as if to say: "I know I ought to kill this, but I can't bear to do it."

When Lindy got old and rather fat, I wheeled her about in a wicker shopping basket, but she always remained my little mother, and I found myself telling her all my troubles, as I would Jerry when I was a child.

WHEN LINDY DIED, she was replaced by a very different dog, who was more like my child than my mother.

Shortly after Lindy's death, my sister rang me up to say she had heard of two west highland terriers that needed rescuing: their owners had died and unless they were given a home, they would be put down. I decided that I could not live without the comfort of a dog, so I drove up to Yorkshire, where the dogs were. Only three years old, they were sisters and had already been in kennels for a year. Martha, the elder, was a heavily built, overwhelmingly friendly dog. Daisy, her younger sister, looked half starved and was very timid and retreating. I bundled both of them into my car and set off down the motorway. It was a bad journey. The dogs jumped up on the back window sill and refused to move, so I could not see out. Nearing home, I stopped to get some milk. When I came out, I was horrified to find that they had ripped up the back seat — maybe because they had not liked the looks of another dog sitting outside the shop. This proved to be a habit with Daisy: whenever she was upset, she began ripping up.

The days that followed were a bit of a nightmare. I don't usually ever dislike a dog, but I grew to dislike Martha. She was a bully and made Daisy's life a misery. She had obviously eaten her sister's dinners in the kennel, as Daisy was so undernourished. Martha had apparently grown totally dependent on Daisy: if I took her away, she attacked her. She would pin Daisy to the floor with both paws if she wanted to punish her. She would not let her sit by the fire or have any games. I could not watch such bullying, so eventually I decided to give Martha back. (I heard later that she had to be re-homed three times and ended up with the captain of the pleasure steamer on Lake Windermere. She probably needed a man.)

On the journey home, Daisy crept forward to lick my hand. She had never done this before. I knew everything was going to be all right. From that day forward, Daisy blossomed, becoming a different dog altogether. I got the smallest companion I could find for her. Mi Mi was the size of a mouse, but I wanted to make sure that nothing would bully Daisy again. She adopted Mi Mi as her puppy and did an extraordinary thing, according to the vet: she grew an undercoat.

Mi Mi is a bright, lively little dog. She has acquired an enormous vocabulary. Dogs, obviously, are still the backbone of my life.

– Rosie MacLennan

Highway 2

I WILL CALL YOU Jaime. For these purposes. Out of some feeling of obligation I guess, an expectation to say in parentheses (not her real name), though everyone who knows me will know who I am talking about anyway. Will understand what I am saying before I get there. But I will call you Jaime because it has some of the same letters, and because the real name will be different one day anyway, in my ears and in my throat.

But now it is spring, and none of us know the end of the story yet. Jaime can be this you, the you we are taking a road trip with. That girl with another name is a girl that hasn't happened yet, a you of a different place in time.

Now it is spring, or that time of year when the calendar says it's spring but it is really still as cold as January. And you are the kind of friend who is always cracking jokes, who always makes a ton of food at parties, who, when you saw the colour we painted our living room, had to give us your oversized Ikea mugs because they were the exact same colour. We pick you up at 5:30 and you have a story to tell. Other friends come to our barbeques for your stories – the one about the weird lady on the bus who said her cat has a fuzzy tail because its mother was a rabbit, or the vendor in Cairo who refused to sell you bananas (no bananas for you!). Amazing that such a voice can come out of your small mousy body, an impressive volume, an eight octave range complete

with accents. You speak in hyperbole, each day you can't begin to tell us what happened to you, and then, do. Today you lost your bank card, and didn't notice till you had filled your car with gas, and you told the guy you lost your bank card, and could you give him a cheque until you could come back with some cash, and all he said was "We don't take cheques."

This is familiar. This is the knowing look we exchange, me and my boyfriend Kent, as we pass Ellerslie on to the highway, the city falling away behind. Farmland spreading out before us like pancake batter spooned into a pan. Your voice pointing the way, from the back seat, three hours straight. It will reach Calgary before we do, telling us how you're in line at the bank to get a new card and it's 5:00 so of course there's a huge line. So you start cracking jokes with the guy in front of you and then you noticed that the girl behind you was your cousin! Who you haven't seen in years!

Three hours straight to Calgary and your boyfriend, Jason (not his real name), will meet us there, flying in from his oil job in Korea (month on, month off). And then to Banff in the morning. Canmore, actually, a two-bedroom cabin with an AMA members discount. The kind of trip we don't usually take, Kent and me, leaving essays and exams behind, spending a chunk of the student loan. An impulse, more exciting than it should be.

I will remember this drive whenever I hear that David Gray song. Acoustic guitar sounds right on a prairie highway, with the sun on the wheat, or whatever it is in that field, golden. A winter without snow. A CD you burned with tracks you downloaded off Napster. And then the track that your little boy picked with the farting noises, that you play over and over at top volume because you love that it drives me crazy. (Later this night I will try to hide the CD, but you will find it anyway.)

Soon this trip will seem strange – over the summer becoming better friends with Chris and Tara, and Jason will always be in Korea anyway, month on, month off. But right now we spend almost every weekend together, you and Jason, me and Kent, walking to Whyte Ave and letting you talk up the bouncers to get around the cover charge, or drinking beer and playing board games, you making nachos with what is I swear an entire block of cheese. A craving, you say. Living just across the street from each other, "stumbling distance".

We spend the night in Calgary at your parent's place, your dad giving us the inside scoop on the provincial Liberal Party, me and Kent sitting awkwardly on the edge of the couch in our jackets. Jason meets us at a local pub when his plane lands. Then, later, lying in bed laughing at the sounds of you, Jason and Jaime, having sex in the basement spare bed, your sounds climbing the stairs to us, as we lie surrounded by the white furniture of a childhood-Jaime, with a smaller voice. Wondering if your parents can hear you as well as us, your (capital L) Liberal father, your mom with her bell palsy smile that makes her look like she's hiding an ancient disappointment.

Your names form one unit, JasonandJaime (those aren't your real names, but your real names do that, conjoin into one word without breath between). JasonandJaime, let's phone JasonandJaime, where are JasonandJaime? Never the other way around, never Jaime and Jason, that would sound weird. And I suppose that to you we are KentandJen. And one day we, KentandJen, will say remember when Jason and Jaime… and then recall a story in half sentences, one filling in for the other as we remember. I will say to him, remember that trip we took with JasonandJaime, how you threw Jaime's old stuffed animals down the basement steps to scare them, and it became a teddy bear fight? One day, when it will be Jason and Caroline, we will still say Jason and Jaime, out of habit, and then thank God we didn't make the mistake to their faces.

NEXT MORNING we slip along the highway to Banff, the sun bright on the windshield, rain falling into glass. Listening to Dave Mathew's "Crash," without even realizing the morbidity of the song title on a mountain drive. And when Dave gets to the part where he sings "I'm the king of the castle, you're the dirty rascal," we all sing along without really knowing why. We drive past a certain refinery and you tell us that if we press our faces to the windows we will feel heat from it, and only Jason believes you, the engineer, his skin pressed up against the cold glass until you can't hold in your laughter anymore. One day I will pass this place again, and smile to myself.

We check in and, laughing, pick bedrooms by the amount the beds squeak, all knowing we have already passed that point in our friendship, the point where modesty or discreetness may have mattered, before your basement wails or the story you told about your trip to Egypt. We are close enough as couples to tease each other about our sex lives, to have fun going out the four of us on a Saturday night. But if Jason and I are left alone in a room together, we count the seconds of awkward silence until you or Kent returns. There is never silence between me and you because you fill it like a diary, compulsively. You assume that my life is good, and it is, but you do not ask. Playing the board game "Scruples", where you have cards with moral questions on them and you try and predict your opponent's answers, I am always asked the nice girl questions, the "Would you go through a red light at 3 a.m." questions, because you know I will answer no. And I find my high school sore

spot has been rediscovered, the "Jen, you are always so quiet!" comment, despite my best efforts to say clever and outgoing things. Because sometimes I find I just don't have anything to say.

We lunch on the food you brought from home – crackers and blocks of cheese, smoked mussels, a tin of herring, some sausage, chips and chocolate bars, a jar of olives. We find a fly in a wine glass of water and put it outside to watch it freeze. Later Kent will take a picture of it. That afternoon we wander around downtown Banff, ducking into stores to window-shop within the windows, an icy wind drying out our eyes as we hurry from door to door. It is too cold to take the gondola up the mountain, so we have coffee, you and me, at the bottom in the chalet, while the boys play outside with Kent's new camera, climbing through the snow. You tell everything, but we are not girlfriends. You tell the same stories to people in line at the bank. Your divorce, how terrible your sister is, how cruel your ex in-laws are, your drunk driving conviction. How jealous you are of me and Kent, how he holds my hand in the bar instead of encouraging the advances of pretty waitresses. How we are your only real friends in the city. And I know that you could use some help but you are not asking for it. You only like to talk. And it only seems like you tell everything; it is only more than I would tell.

IN A FEW MONTHS you will break up with him because of a phone number in his pocket. And you will ask why he gives his cell number to "just friends", instead of the number at the house. And he will fly you out to Korea and you will forgive, and we all will know that there is more, things that even you won't tell. We will know when every time we go out you flirt with other people, and make friends with the guys playing pool, and dance with them between the tables. And then finally tell Jason to fuck off and start walking in the direction of the railroad tracks, away from the direction of home, and hide behind trees when he goes after you. And kick your legs and call his name and cry when he picks you up and slings you over his shoulder, carrying you all the way home. Kent and me walking awkwardly a few metres ahead, fast enough to offer privacy, slow enough to offer support. And Jason will be embarrassed, and we will apologize to waitresses and other friends, and say she's sweet when she's not drinking, really. And we will know that there's more when mutual friends in Victoria tell us how they found the contents of your stomach in a milk carton in the garbage, when you have been visiting. These things will happen and have already been happening, a little. But not enough yet to let the machine pick up the phone or notice every time you go to the bathroom. Not enough to avoid a road trip to the mountains with friends.

TONIGHT WE GO to the Grizzly House, a fondue restaurant. It is a touristy spot, candlelight and dark wood grain, the ritzy-rustic look, to match the get-away cottages for wealthy Banff tourists, cottages that cost more than urban mansions. You have carefully made a reservation, excitedly, and when at first the hostess can't find it you flip out a little, your voice raised, your spine stiff, your hair wild framing your cold pink face. But then there is a table for us and we sit down and drink sips of water and look at the menu. And then we decide to leave, astounded at the astronomical prices, embarrassed by the attention we've already called to ourselves, the goggle-white eyes of tanned couples in sporty jackets – I imagine them all in ski boots beneath the tables. And then, two blocks down on a hunt for another, cheaper restaurant, you realize that you forgot your purse. And then I realize that I left mine, too, in our haste, neither of us in the habit of carrying purses. And we run back and grab them from our table as discreetly as possible, our boyfriends laughing at our ridiculousness, at the coincidence of it. You laughing at the sidewalk, me laughing into the back of your head as I follow, into that long mass of dark curls.

Like a night at the Folk Festival when Jason will ask me to follow you because you have an argument – he will be worried but will know that he would only drive you further and faster into the crowd. Running up the hill behind your stumbling form, running, but it is steep and it will be more like trudging. And when I catch up to you you will grab me in a frenetic waltz, spinning me up the hill, singing along to whatever band it is, ignoring my questions. And then you will twirl away, away up the hill, laughing maniacally. And still I will follow, stupidly, stubbornly, feeling like a character on Degrassi Junior High. Wondering how anyone could vomit voluntarily in a port-a-potty.

But that comes later, it has not happened yet. Now we are in Banff, Canmore actually, where we try not to think about what are only suspicions, drinking wine and playing "Trivial Pursuit" in the cabin, trying to get the bloody pie wedges out of the playing pieces, wedged in the wrong way from some previous game. And everyone but me lands on the literature questions, I only get the 70's sitcom ones. Or science. The middle of the board piled with the lunch leftovers, the smell of Italian sausage on the cards. And Kent takes pictures of the rest of us with the coloured filters on his camera. Jason in green, me in blue. And you grinning with pink teeth, your skin a blood-red that will make my eyes sore, later, in an album.

Jason will meet someone on a flight to Korea but that will not be the reason.

He will tell you it's over while we are at another friend's party, wondering why you guys haven't shown up (they're either fighting or doing it). The next morning we will get a call from this other friend, telling us how you showed up drunk at 4 a.m., started dancing with Paul and passed out in his arms, woke up the next morning and left to stumble home. And when I get home later that morning you will already have phoned Kent to talk to him for an hour (he, like you, has always attracted the weirdoes at bus stops, has somehow always elicited life stories and confidences). You will already have ranted between sips of something, told him to tell your kids you love them, hung up on him and chased a bottle of rum with a bottle of Tylenol. Will already have brought Kent running across the street to save you. Will already have passed out in the car to the hospital, because the car would be faster than an ambulance.

ON THE WAY back to the city we play that game where one person says a movie title, and the next person has to think of one that begins with the last letter of the title before. We keep getting stuck on the y's. *Yellow Submarine. E.T. Titanic.* Taking the scenic route back, avoiding Calgary, through Cochrane. *Casablanca. Armageddon.* We stop in Red Deer for food, too late to be lunch, too early to be dinner. Kent and I share sushi and you share nachos. Too tired for beers. With the bill they give us fruit-flavoured candies and we squabble over the flavours, until you find the dish at the server's station and steal a handful for the car.

And one day on a sunny afternoon like this we will be waiting at the emergency room in the hospital, grabbing greasy hangover lunches in the cafeteria. Trying not to think about our homework. How you have implanted yourself in our heads, in spite of physiology exams and post-colonial theory papers. Jason will have spent all night driving to Vancouver, to get away, to make it harder to turn around. Asking Kent on his cell phone if he is a terrible person. Sick with love for you, his eyes will have been sunken for months; growing a goatee that does not hide the dull pallor of his face beneath. A love so requited it will devour him from inside. He will give us the number of your sister in Calgary. And the nurse will tell us how your blood alcohol level alone should have killed you. They will only let Kent go in to see you because he was the one who brought you in, and you will start screaming as soon as he steps into the ward. And I will only imagine you, wild-eyed in the hospital bed. I will not see you again.

Later in the fall you will phone to see if we got your e-mail. Kent will pretend he isn't home, still angry, his head full of images that he cannot share with me, the glaze of your eyes, the lightness of your limp body as he carried you to the car. And I will listen to you for an hour, supper getting cold, while you tell of how Jason cheated on you, how when you tried to break up with him before he begged you to come back, how your kids cried and asked why Jason doesn't love them anymore. Refusing to acknowledge your own isms and disorders. The time you were so drunk you pushed me in the bar, your arrest for assaulting a cop on Whyte Ave that summer – you were strong for five-foot-two. Glossing over the fact that by September you weighed less than ninety pounds. Complaining that Jason won't stop sending you e-mail, won't let you move on with your life. How he calculated it from Korea to torture you, told you he loved you on the phone. How what you did that morning really wasn't a big deal. And you will ask if we can still be friends.

And I will not be able to help thinking, if you really wanted to die, really, then you wouldn't have phoned the friend who lived across the street, the one whom everyone turns to, to tell him so. And when Jason still didn't come back, and you were released from the hospital when you sobered up, you wouldn't have tried to hire a moving company with stolen cheques to take his furniture to Calgary. And the stories you told wouldn't suddenly seem like movies, the kind where you find out at the end that the one person you trusted has really been the murderer all along, or that Mr Darcy, who seemed like such a jerk, is really the one-true-love. The kind where suddenly everything up to that point seems so doubtful, so horribly distorted. Suddenly realizing that you had been threatening him with suicide for months, to make him stay, and when he finally left, you could not break your promise, could not change the ending to the drama. And I will be glad things are going well at SAIT, and I will hope you are getting some help. And, in spite of my conscience, I will not want to talk to you anymore.

WE TURN OUT of gasoline alley back on to the highway, the sun on the rear windshield, teeth clicking the candy in our mouths. Tired of car cramps and movie titles, looking out our windows in different directions, in search of our own thoughts. One day I will think of your face, that thing you said, remember when we took that road trip? And wonder how you are. All the roads I will not go down with you.

– Jennifer Delisle

Kurt Halliday

Once upon a time in Freedonia

I am writing this from that slice of the millennium in which Arnold Schwarzenegger is the Governor of California.

Only analysis can save us now.

I've invited a few hopelessly intellectual friends (and one aimlessly academic acquaintance) around to *Splat* for the revenging.

I'm also, this moment, a little convinced the point could be the fall-rise of America, the dying back of the big picture, the midnighting of the world, the End Days themselves. Since America's a beacon, etc.

Myself, I look to others a ruggedly workable mix of god and man, communitarian and community, Greenie and he-feminist, realist and ex-impressionist, citizen and jurist, producer and consumer, people and thing. I am for the neo-contemporary if not the postmodern. Plastic art is art made flexible. Organizations are only as good as their organization. Animals don't need jobs. Progress is going somewhere.

I'm a guy, man and maybe male who is approaching fifty, three hundred pounds and certified anonymity. I have not been in *The New Yorker*. I have not been on a skidoo. I keep track. I am afraid of Garrison Keillor. I will be survived by one wife and car, two kids and cats, five computers and sixty-seven manuscripts.

Some of which is why I'm standing up crazy and honest like this. And besides. Arnie's thereness fades me.

Arly "Charlie" Mudge is a sixty-eight-year-old closet father whose name, like other names here, has been non-Freedom of Informationed to protect the intelligent. Not that he sneaks out to underground men's events where they put on, say, a backwards reading of Margaret Atwood in which Revelations can be discerned.

He's a practising anarcho-communist – the only one, except for that Jungian bastard – in all Cityville. He started as whatever they called associate professors at Block University in 1962. He lived through the Left, the New Left, the New Age, Personal Growth, the New Right, the Postmodern and Noam "Savonarola" Chomsky. He has more than 10,000 original recordings on magnetic tape in his home. He's bought every *Harper's* since Christ was a corporal. He's not at all above correcting his friends when it comes to saving the dictionary.

Arly drives a Subaru because he can't drive a Volvo. He drives it now, right up to *Splat*, which is not in a mall, filled with enmity over Arnie. Enmity and Arly have done a lot of business over the years. Superior anger of various kinds is where his energy, identity, utility, and so forth, come from.

Arly's included in tonight's talking resistance because he's been writing an essay / fable / exposé / new last book of the Bible called *Once upon a Time in Freedonia*. In Freedonia we meet the lovably accidental scion of a wannabe-oil family whose clan was fast-tracked to glory through the Intelligence Community of a certain superpower located somewhere in the middle of North America.

Arly's a passing ironist and impenetrable social critic as he gives us a living mix of Connolly and Vonnegut sewn up in the skin of Markie Judge, tabloiding historian of the

scion and his "shoot first" regime.

FREEDONIA is an exercise or game played on the NSA quantum supercomputer. The box cost six billion dollars and the exercise is about "freeing" other countries – like Equalitania, located just to the north of Freedonia, or Iraq.

In the game, the lovable scion is The Anarch, absolute ruler of a freedom-loving people who are absolutely ruled through their love of freedom.

ARLY ARRIVES IN a huff, as always. He growls his name for me – Arturo – like everybody, I'm supposed to read Alfred Jarry – and looks all over the four of us here at the Three Stooges end of the room. The heads of the Stooges fly out above the guaranteed Victorian fireplace, surprised by, and vaguely competitive with, mosaic Marilyn. Monroe fills the opposite wall here in The Revisionary Room and is made up of head shots of her fellow philosophers.

It's in this very spot [that] the Cityville – Fort Piano – Shadow Falls chapter of the Green Party was born.

Arly stops. And watches.

Under the Stooges, through the gloom, we have Dump, Zeitl, Ravishna and me. The four of us majorly squirming for his take on this latest seminal instant in the democratic experiment: Arnie enfranchised.

ZEITL, WHO IS deeply, deeply, way too deeply, into Human Time, utterly loves how stuck things Arnoldian (never mind Kennedyesque) simply are. She watched the PBS Newshour assault on the subject, and, as a natural gothic woman, just felt sad. There IS a kind of leap from content-free Reagan to The Governator (a must-say play on The Terminator). It's the same kind of leap from the comic book and TV Hulk to the Hollywood Hulk. In the movie, Bruce LIKES what happens to him when he Hulks up. Rage is power (or at least capacity). Power (or at least capacity) is good.

In the crumbly old lefty-liberal universe, power was a necessary evil, the lesser of two evils, or something of the sort. Society was organized and had to be run, so there was representative democracy. Power was held by The Few and the legal person in the street accepted this.

The shift from representative whatever to media-ocracy (rule by spin) is the stuckness for our black-underscored informant (Zeitl). Stuckness, the raw re-occurrence, and the legislated rightness, the being-at-the-centre-of-it-all-really, that goes with it, is the result of the Twentieth Century American encounter with necessity, force, limitation, confrontation, competition – especially in the Cold War. Arnie, and The Greater Arnieness, are habits of mind: personality disorders still being minded by those who lived second-order empire in the old days (when Uncle Sam filled in for the Brits after World War Two).

This is all sadistic fun for Zed, who still can't get past that most people most of the time don't see [that] there are kinds-of-time-so-kinds-of-mind, will not chew on that chunk of Plato, and absolutely deserve what they get.

DUMP IS DUMP because of his Dump of the Day, which takes place always exactly from 6:14 to 7:32 unless massive content, like *The Closing of the American Mind*, is literally in hand to speed it up.

He's also Dump because he dumps. On all.

He's been in the English Department for twenty-two years. In the English Department a loss of reality, wisdom-wise, is not always detectable, so the unhappiness habit doesn't get policed every day.

Dump's thing is: content's under fire. When Newt & Company, for example, flash nasty about American civilization –

Where's civilization *per se*? Where's the bleeding Pantheon? Never mind the sodding Smithsonian. The jigging Spirit of St. Louis had kerfuffling well got to be part of it all – not heart of it all.

"Oh, haw!" we chipper. Lifting our Guinnesses.

Dump collects ex-encyclopedias. Ex-encyclopedias have, in fact, more information than encyclopedias. (Encyclopedias being current.) Ex-encyclopedias have information about Humanity.

The infamous 1929 Encyclopedia Britannica article on civilization by [whoever] takes civilization (the other C-word) for a sort of recording. Civilization is, in the formula a Bertie Russell might wake up to, the world over time. (The world being all things human.)

ZEITL SIMMERS HERE that History tends to smack of Time, and, while there is time, there is no Time – rather in the way there is art but no Art – at which point she is interrupted.

RAVISHNA AND REALITY have been living together since Eternity.

She is resistant to many of the things she hears in the East and the West and the East of the West.

For her, it is all a question of Reasoning from Fact to Fact. This is Aristotle's logic, after all. The capricious modern logicians who have become embroiled in meaning and the use of concepts as elementary units – conceptual atoms – are directly responsible for our being at the precipice.

Undoubtedly, they have created the Charlie Mansons and the bell hookses.

When she reads about one hundred visionaries in *Utne Reader* she wants to get out her mini-nuke.

If she ever catches that little Dutch bastard who wrote *The Life of Pi* –

"How about, um, Arnie?"
Oh, that.
All is lost.

IT'S THE CORONATION. The swearing in. On one of those hand-held electronic doohickeys. We gather our Guinnesses and belly up to Sacramento.

There's Arnie. His sculpted right hand raised in a suit that doesn't dare not fit.

There's Maria. Effectively public-spirited.

There's California Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronald George.

And Arnie.

"I am humbled, I am honoured and I am moved beyond words to be your Governor."

This is with no prior experience as an elected official.

We drink about it.

"I enter this office beholden to no one except you, my fellow citizens. I pledge my governorship to your interests, not to special interests."

The highlight of the rest of his day is an invitation-only reception sponsored by the state Chamber of Commerce.

We squint into the doohickey and we drink about it.

The Stooges loom.

Seven hundred and forty journalists cover the ceremony.

Fifteen dignitaries from thirteen countries are in attendance.

For the one I'm not finished with

There will be a time
when we outlive, outgrow
the rest, all the poison smoothed away
like a breath or the weeping pass of pain.
There will be another morning in your kitchen,
peeled from our uncooperative skins.
Your fingers, with words enough for two.

Tonight, when I am in the house alone
and you are so close,
my fugitive heart runs down
over the hill
to bang
on your one lit window.

Merrill's birthday in Tors Cove

was a night like any other –
all the stars expletives
and god's underwear
flapping in the breeze.
The table sagged with
codfish, coffee, cake and spoons,
all from an unlatched suitcase
stashed for just such an occasion.
Laughter lit the windows,
the tiny house ablaze for miles.

– Monica Kidd

how the Tolstoys might fare

LUBLIN, POLAND (1997)

Leo connects the computer after a plate of fish and bread,
a three point one German clunker courtesy of a student who's emigrated.
he begins writing again on an autumn evening when the harvest moon
rises neatly above the eastern blocks. Sonya is in full sleep
while the children are dreaming about cats and mice,
and nothing to do with the revolution. *how clean the house*, he types,
depends on how dirty the shoes. at two in the morning (six months later)

he finishes the first books of *Anna K.*, he saves them to disk
and sends them to an editor unsolicited; he can't afford a reliable printer yet
and he can't afford the ribbon (ink?) either. they're living in meagre times
on a tutor's poor wages. Sonya is a nurse at the local clinic,
she attends twenty operations a day but she hasn't been paid
since December. she watches the women of modern Russia
spread their independent legs,

sees the blood slip beneath their buttocks onto indelibly stained cotton.
on her way home she carries plastic bags to the dumpster
then she stops at the bread truck; one afternoon she arrives to Leo
drinking the most insanely cheap vodka, he's sitting by the computer
while little Katka is hanging out the window of their fifth floor apartment
singing a variation of the old slogan song, *Glory to the Soviet People*.
Leo hands her an envelope,

there are three disks inside and a letter from the New Western Publisher
(in Moscow). it begins, *thank you Mr. Tolstoy for your submission ...*
Sonya tosses the package onto the table, she lights a cigarette
and pours herself a vodka. *oh the times have changed*, she says,
oh the times have changed; yet Leo doesn't breathe the same April dampness,
he taps the keyboard with one finger, *the war,* he says, *may have been cold,*
but this peace ...

– Michael Quilty

Patrick Roscoe

Compromise

That we have ended up in this salt-spiced house surrounded by wild gardens and crumbling stone walls presents itself as a fresh surprise each day. Was it ever our fantasy to move over the earth's skin with such caution, always fearing further loss in an unlikely landscape? On May mornings I watch you carefully descend the cliff to gather feathers fallen from Icarus's foolish wings. Now they float at the edge of the sea, now they fill pillows upon which we no longer dare to dream. My arms can never hold you tightly enough and you will never look at me with Jesse's eyes. We have agreed not to ask each other for much; there is little left to give. Perhaps I offer you more coffee in the afternoon or you wonder if there is anything I need in town. During restless nights we refuse to hear wind stir the apple trees. At least it's peaceful, we think—while in darkness beyond our walls crickets shrilly complain against quiet. A newspaper delivered daily to the door describes distant battles; our nearest neighbors are far away. Jesse sails yachts around Adriatic islands, or tosses lucky dice in Monte Carlo.

First he loved you, then he loved me; for a single season he loved us both. Of what was fleeting, photographs remain: Jesse always poses in the middle, careless arms around our shoulders, evasive eyes already shifting toward a summer absent of us—bleached Saturdays in Sicily, say. On that famous Barcelona balcony, our heartstrings vibrate beneath the same expert touch that strums his guitar, that commands an audience of other gypsies to gather in the street below. Jesse throws red and yellow roses down through flamenco darkness, one false flower for each of his betrayals in another Ramblas alley. Later, on the midnight ship to Formentera, his white teeth part to serenade the present with premature nostalgia, to wish on the starry wake for more and more. Even the two of us together are not enough for Jesse as even Paris cannot satisfy his senses. He will leave no farewell note behind, he will leave us to each other: this was an act of compassion, I finally understand. Now I pass an open doorway to glimpse you sitting on the edge of our bed. Your arms emerge brown and veined from white sleeves, your large hands hold snapshots of Spain and also Andorra. I continue toward the kitchen without intruding on the time and place to which you have boomeranged back. No, we never stride into each other's secrets; we share silent seasons separately. You don't mention how often I call out in sleep and I don't ask if your lips on my throat hunger for taste of him. Waking beside empty space on hot August nights, I am spared fear that you have obeyed summons to search for Jesse in crowded California bars or on some beach of Mexico. I know you have only slipped past the rotting barn and entered our orchard to shift sprinklers that keep grass lush and green even when there is no rain.

On Monday I do the laundry and you steer the spitting iron through Tuesday and every Wednesday we wash the windows that stare upon the sea. Already another year has passed. Waves do not stop breaking on the rocks below, the horizon has not neared. Sometimes town children come to play in these haunted gardens; their calls draw you out to wander through the long grass on the rise. We can bear no heirs. So it startles me to notice that suddenly – already – your Levis have faded like the sky before it dusks. I try to smooth away lines etched around my mirrored eyes. Aren't we still young and strong? Haven't countless others survived defeat to continue fighting? I would tell Jesse that we do what we are able. We don't forget to wind the clocks or to split the wood for winter. Mail arrives at noon and supper is at six. In June we tread the dusty lane, our sleeves brushing lightly, to where the stream still rages with spring.

Adam Honsinger

An open love letter

I wouldn't be the first to suggest that the contemplation of art – specifically, those rare and brilliant masterpieces that have been bequeathed to us through time, can sometimes inspire a feeling of divine communion. This spiritual state can be stimulated by fine or crudely placed brush strokes of paint, musical notes recited by a virtuoso, or a rhyming composition of words consisting of three quatrains and one couplet. I am not generally prone to what could be labeled paranormal phenomenon, and I do not mess with narcotics, unless you consider my addiction to the hallucinogenic properties of literature. Blake, Emerson, and Borges have all inspired me to question the basic and fundamental experience of perception.

The transcendental experience I would like to share with you took place in a moment of absolute sobriety, triggered by an ordinary eight and a half by eleven inch handwritten notice taped to a lamppost. I confess I am in the habit of stopping to read such notices – ads for losing weight, home businesses, missing pets, but this advertisement was of a different genre.

Though it did not address me by name, it spoke to my fascination with the exercise of being absolutely present. It was entitled *An Open Love Letter* and it simply professed a love for peeling paint, fading graffiti, light, rust and juxtaposition. It was complete with a crudely drawn map of my neighbourhood, the anonymous author's favourite sites marked by the symbol of a circle with an eye in its centre and an arrow pointing in the direction in which to look. This symbol was also drawn in chalk on the pavement or sidewalk of each location.

When I stopped and read the notice, I was reminded that I was not alone. Somewhere in the city there was at least one other person who was aware and as deeply moved by such things as a certain light on a keyhole, or a fire hydrant gleaming yellow after a rain, the colour of fading paint on brick, etc.; things that catch me off guard, things that make me stop and be present, things that most people do not notice.

Symbols have long fascinated me – languages in code representing whole concepts, philosophies, identities, and meaning. Some symbols transcend language and operate as windows into other perspectives, a communication that visually articulates what cannot be spoken.

From pictograms, hieroglyphics, cuneiform, and the metaphysical symbols of the esoteric realm, the alchemists have meddled with and deciphered many cryptic communications that lie just beyond the veil of our five senses. But it is the obligation of art to preserve and express the metaphysical potential of humanity. We call it literature, surrealism, ultraismo, but never fact.

The five senses are, I believe, a design to keep our minds occupied, distracting us from the potential of our imaginations. A schematic that keeps us focused on this dimension – empirically grounded. It is glorious to inhale the fragrance of a freshly peeled orange, to simply sip a cup of tea, listen to rain on a rooftop, or respond subconsciously to the subtle operations of arousal as detected by the olfactory senses. But these are all experiences based in time, the turning of the mortal wheel. There is

another reality, experienced only when we manage to curb these conditioned tools of the body long enough to open our perceptions to other possibilities. A reality akin perhaps to the realm of dreams, where things happen simultaneously and are witnessed from all angles. Aromas, textures, taste, sight, sound, and colour are obscured by simply experiencing the event beyond the limits of the body – dreams don't make sense because they function beyond the senses.

We don't have to be asleep to dream. When I followed the map of the *Open Love Letter and Proposal*, I felt as if I were a traveller visiting a new country. Works of art, history, culture, and architecture, all designed and forged by the detail of wind, rain, oxidization, and neglect. I scrutinized and contemplated these sites with an eye of appreciation, enriched by the sheer simplicity of the experience. My neighbourhood had become a museum, a gallery, a sacred site, a living thesis of simple awareness. In that three-hour stroll, being aware had become a narcotic, a religion.

THE LAST MARKED symbol was across the street from where I lived. I stood in the chalk circle and looked in the direction of the arrow. It was then that I noticed that there was a little note written next to this last location. It read: *5:49 a.m., third floor, window on the left.*

I stared at the drawn curtain of my kitchen window. Unlike the other sites on the map, this one was obviously familiar to me. Though I had spent time looking out this window, I had rarely looked in. I squinted my eyes, tilted my head to the left and the right, but could discern nothing unusual. I closed my eyes, opened them. I listened. I lit a cigarette, and resolved to return the next day at the appointed time.

I WAS REMINDED of the poet Jorge Luis Borges and two of his stories, *The Zahir* and *The Aleph*. Both of them outline a metamorphosis, not in the physical sense, but rather internally in gradual increments, noticed only after the transformation is well under way. A gradual transformation of one's being and perception, disengaged from their identity. Borges survived both experiences, I believe, because he was able to document them. The power of language grounding and defying the processes of madness. Even in translation I could sense his otherworldliness. Perhaps because of his familiarity with metaphor and transpersonal exploration was he able to convert the ineffable into art – this is true alchemy.

Both Borges' stories were explorations of interior transitions effected by an external symbol. In the case of *The Zahir*, a simple coin which in the poet's possession revealed its previous incarnations as a Persian astrolabe sunk in the Mediterranean, a compass wrapped in a turban, a vein running through a marble column in Tetuan, and the bottom of a well [à la Haruki Murakami]. This coin haunted the author to the point of obsession, revealing subtle and fleeting glimpses of its metaphoric power. The fact that he could not be rid of the coin or its image led Borges to the analogy of the Sufis and their mantras – repetition speculatively leading one to God.

The Aleph materialized in Borges' friend Carlos Argentino's basement and could be viewed only by lying down on the floor and fixed one's gaze on the nineteenth step. The Aleph, according to legend, is where all things in the world exist at once and are experienced from every possible angle, the micro- and the macrocosm, the Shangri-la of alchemists, cabbalists, magicians, and … This experience is remarkably explained in one long paragraph spanning pages 150-151 in Borges' *Personal Anthology*, copyright 1967.

As can be imagined, this experience would have residual effects upon one's being, perhaps challenging all spiritual assumptions – a juxtaposition of alienation and bliss. In such circumstances, one must transcend the limitations of language in order to remain a functioning member of society. Woe to the artless few who labour without imagination.

I too have survived journeys into the metaphysical, returned to the mass agreement of rationality, and found that part of me is left behind – beside, below, above, in front, etc. I have found the transformation disconcerting. It is difficult to negotiate the two dimensions simultaneously. Society is unsympathetic to such possibilities. One is wise to keep things to oneself until drawn to the absolute necessity of catharsis, at which point the artist picks up the pen and disguises the miracle in fiction.

Like the Aleph and the Zahir of Borges, the symbol of the eye in the circle permeated my consciousness, and I began not only to see the inadvertent masterpieces of the world but to smell them, taste them, hear them; yet it all stopped at the limitations of the senses. That night I couldn't sleep, as the symbol appeared everywhere I looked. I saw it at the bottom of my cup of tea, in the reflection in the window, in the television screen, on the insides of my eyelids. I couldn't stop noticing details that I

had never seen before. Everything that I looked at revealed itself as a thing of exceptional originality, and by 4 a.m. I was not sure any more if I was awake or dreaming.

I ALMOST MISSED it. I had forgotten to reset the alarm, and so I awoke at its usual setting of 5:45 a.m. I had just enough time to throw on some clothes and stumble down the stairs and cross the street. I stood in the circle, my bare feet cold against the morning cement, and fixed my eyes on the curtains of my kitchen window. I anticipated the rising sun playing some trick of light on the glass. I imagined a rainbow or a reflection, but it was still dark and the potential for anything illuminating appeared unlikely. I glanced at my watch and counted down the last seven seconds.

At precisely 5:49 the curtains were drawn and I watched as I raised a cup of coffee to my lips and stared groggily down at the street. When our eyes met, I inhaled sharply, dropped my coffee, which shattered in the circle with the eye in its centre drawn on my kitchen floor.

IT IS DIFFICULT to recover from seeing oneself, from transcending dimensions, from empirically impossible experiences. Who would believe me? Perhaps Blake, Emerson, Borges. I realized that the audience of madness is not present, but rather based in history and posterity. Insanity, as many artists know, is only appreciated in retrospect.

Borges advocated the use of bold image and daring metaphor, marrying history with the imagination of the future. This is a transcendence in itself. And art lends itself as an unconditional landscape for this documentation. Symbols are the language of the interior realms of the psyche, and within this context there is only possibility – overt powers hidden in anonymous proposals taped to telephone poles, in a 1929 twenty centavos coin, between the steps in the darkness of a friend's basement, in the textures of peeling paint, fading graffiti, light, rust, and juxtaposition.

I now recognize the wonder beyond the gifts of the senses. I recognize the master and the potential of the imagination. I try to keep it all to myself until I can no longer resist. I throw caution to the wind. I say, Damn you, rationality, you shall not hold my spirit at bay. And I write it all down because I believe in the catharsis of art and the equivocal line between fact and fiction.

I believe in you, Borges, you and your symbolic journeys into … not the absurd, but the divine. Perhaps that is what art is – the documentation of the artist seeing God in everything.

bear love

salmon spine
curved into a C among the river rocks
like a bleached fern frond
a huge naked feather
like a bear's quill pen

the bear writes on river rocks
on salmon skulls
the bear sucks the bones dry

and uses the great white quills
to write love songs to the river
songs of unrequited gratitude for fish
songs written in salmon blood

the bear can't keep the songs in
he must make the quill sing for him
he hurls the rocks, the skulls, into the river
into his deaf lover's lap
where they're washed away with no reply

he sees another fish and his thoughts
turn bloody, but his belly's not empty

the bear hunts for love songs
the bear needs more ink

The balcony II

Just the Big Dipper.
It's the only one I can find myself
this close to summer.
I can follow the dipper's front
up to the North Star.
Not the biggest one, but always
there, they say.
Always hanging over the way north.

The rest of them my eyes try to gather
into pictures – a wing? An outstretched
neck? A water jar, suspended?
But it's no use.

For me they're just a million
shiny scrabble tiles flung into space.
For you they are the natives
of a country gathered for dancing,
their rune-spangled map
stored in you like a jewel.

And you're not here to show me
how the stars whisper history,
etch ancient imagination
in their silverpoint,

which leaves me alone.
This is all I am without you:
a squinter into the dark, necksore and nameless.

– Diane L. Tucker

Roger Jones

Connie

Annoyed by the heavy banging on my front door, I opened it fractionally. A wide-eyed waif stared at me, fist raised from the latest thump. Her long, frizzled hair draped a coarse-fabric poncho with mud-spattered hem. A large carpet bag slumped on the stone threshold beside her.

"I'm Connie," she said, hitching the strap of an over-sized carry-all up her shoulder. "I've come about the room."

She tagged in after me, bumping into my back as I jabbed a finger at the shoe mat. After a struggle with filthy cowboy boots, she followed me into my office.

"Do you have a job?" I asked.

She eyed with approval the scripts and film reels strewn on my desk. "Of course," she said. She rummaged in her shoulder bag to produce a white card. It read "Connie Cowley" in embossed gilt, with a local phone number and the outline of a skeletal, behatted mannequin.

"This number?" I said, twisting the card back and forth with my fingers.

"The Apollo Dance Theatre," she said. I'd a vague image of it – a slummy tavern near the docks. She forestalled more questions with another burrow.

"First and last," she said, proffering a crumpled cheque. "I've filled in all but your name."

I liked her more than I had realized. "Perhaps you could help our new tenant with her bag," I said genially to the hitherto ignored back hunched over the other desk in the room, and dropped the cheque on a stack of unpaid bills.

"Doesn't she want to inspect the room?" the back, whose name was Syd, asked.

"I'll see it when we get there won't I?" said Connie pertly. "Can you help me?" Syd swivelled in his chair, reached for the carpet bag handle, grunted under its weight, lugged it up to her room, and beat a speedy retreat back to his computer.

He was squinting at the script for a TV commercial when breath moistened the back of his neck. I watched, intrigued; Syd twisted his head and came up against Connie's beaming face six inches away, mascara lashes batting at him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"My job," Syd answered shortly.

She picked up a business card. "Syd Grounsell, Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, Cinematic Enterprises International (Canada)," she read.

"An artist like myself!" she exclaimed. She proudly placed one of her cards next to his. "There!"

"This was not a good choice," Syd complained, as soon as she was gone. "Did you smell her breath? She drinks."

"As long as she pays the rent," I reassured him, "there's no problem." I patted the cheque fondly. "A bit of liveliness in the home won't hurt."

Three days later, Syd found an envelope on his desk. Papers had been slid to the sides to make it conspicuous. Cheap scent assaulted his nostrils. He read, between

sniffs, from the slip of paper inside:

It gleams in your eyes,
your longing and your loneliness,
your need for love.

It was unsigned.

"What the hell is this?" he complained, throwing the note over.

"Discount drugstore cologne?" I hazarded.

"No, the note; the message."

I read it slowly out loud. "Not from me," I said. "Not my sentiments."

The following morning, under a tiny box of expensive chocolates, was scribbled "Desire Conquers All" on thick magenta paper with ragged edges. "This is you, isn't it?" Syd confronted Connie as she sped down the staircase. She flashed him a mischievous smile, fluttered lashes, and bolted for work.

FRIDAY EVENING, I slouched on the floor against the sofa, beer can in hand. My week-end girlfriend Beatrice rested her head on my shoulder. The fire blazed. My pet pigeon perched high on the bookshelf, asleep and continent. Tisa the cat sprawled on the brown shag hearth-mat, claws temporarily sheathed. Syd occupied the lone armchair, rambling about his latest commercial.

"It's all in the subtlety," he said. He took a pull of beer, and plunked the bottle down beside a cluster of empties. "You think you're getting one message, while the real one is oozing into you."

A grumpy sniff emanated from the dark side of the room. Connie squatted against the wall, glowering. She clutched the neck of an open bottle of red wine. An empty lay beside her. She appeared engrossed in a wordless conversation with herself, blowing out crossly, making a *moue*, grimacing and rocking her head from side to side in debate.

"Subliminal. That's what it's all about," Syd said.

Connie snorted.

Syd pressed on. "You're drawn in without knowing it."

"Huh!" said Connie contemptuously.

"You've seen my work?" Syd said, confronting her.

"I know what you don't do," Connie retorted pointedly, and gulped down a mouthful of wine.

"I have an idea," Beatrice said brightly. "We should have a showing. A special retrospective." She cuddled closer to me.

Connie blew a raspberry, forgetting that her mouth was full. Red wine splattered the oak flooring.

THEREAFTER, CONNIE avoided us. Of a weekday morning, she tottered down the stairs hollow-eyed, to return nine hours later toting a liquor store bag. She cocooned long hours in her room, shunning the kitchen other than to make swift sorties for tea and toast. Then a spark flared back. On her way out to work, she stopped to dragoon Syd to attend a performance at the Apollo.

"It's Bill's new show," she said proudly. "He's our Resident Choreographer." Before he could think up a refusal, she said, "See you there tonight, then. Seven-thirty. Ask for me at the door." As an afterthought, she invited me too.

THE CLUB OCCUPIED a converted Victorian mansion – gables, turrets and all – on a derelict downtown corner. "What do you think's going to happen?" Syd asked me as we entered to find vocational drinkers hunkered down over draught beer. Beyond, a larger back salon had been converted to a noisy jazz and strip show theatre. "Don't forget she's yours," I said, and enquired of the cold-eyed man at the archway between the two rooms for Connie. "Downstairs," he said laconically.

The narrow corridor stank of sweat. We pressed past a girl spattered with sequins. Around a corner, squeezed among clothes racks, Connie pedalled a clattering sewing machine, hemming a muslin bra with red velvet. A half-empty bottle of red wine stuck out of a cuttings box.

"Hi, guys!" she called out. "Just finishing."

An emaciated girl clad in panties dashed in, grabbed the bra and spindled off.

"Show time!" said Connie.

Syd went in first to our seats, topmost in the bleachers. Connie pushed between us, giggling "Ladies in the middle!" Her arm locked on Syd's, whose eyes stared glumly forward through a pall of cigarette smoke. On stage, three barely pubescent girls strung wispy veils over body protrusions and through interstices. A male counterpart probed assertively with his hands and the central part of his body. At the side, a reedy guitarist strummed and shouted lyrics, and a percussionist slammed, red with effort, at three drums and a skewered cymbal.

"All original!" Connie whispered. "It's art!" She pressed closer to Syd. At the intermission, she proposed drinks. "Could we see backstage instead," Syd asked hastily. We were introduced to choreographer Bill. He wore tight jeans, and blinked dewlapped eyes. He gave me a clammy handshake. "I've heard about you," he said to Syd.

HOME BECAME A sniping range of hurt glances, contemptuous shrugs, stoic endurance and malicious maneuvering. I was indentured in mid-field, pricked and prodded by crossfire. I wouldn't have minded too much, except that both Syd and Connie dismissed me as supine in their feral universe. Beatrice backed Connie, pinning on me complicity in Syd's shortcomings. Support I proffered Syd was shunned.

Then suddenly, not getting what she wanted, Connie moved on. Our film business faltered. Syd moved out, tried freelancing, then joined an advertising agency, leaving me to struggle alone with boarders and bills. Eventually Beatrice, too, decamped.

OF A STIR-CRAZY evening, I took a long stroll, aimlessly turning corner after corner. A booming through an open door brought me up short. It seemed to come from an inner room, though it deafened even at the entrance. Then I remembered I'd been there before. I edged through the front, hands instinctively blocking my ears. At the archway, a voice called out: "Jim," or something like it. In the dim, I made out a damp round table topped with beer bottles, and a figure slumped against a banquette.

"Hi, Jim," the slurred voice repeated. It was Connie.

"Still working here?"

"Nah. Just a patron" She gave an owlish grin to no one in particular. "I had him," she said triumphantly.

"Yes?" I said.

"Syd. It was great. Got him over to my new place. Once was enough." Her eyes went vacant. "Men," she murmured. She waved a hand indifferently. "You wouldn't get it."

The din, the fug and the gloom put me out of time and place. It was like stepping off a plane into the start of a tropical vacation and marvelling at the intense bright and humid heat co-existing with the dark dry cold of my Northern home, and why my life was caught in the one place and not the other. It's true. I didn't get it; the question answered itself the way it always did. I slipped out.

Connie didn't notice.

R. Rèti

Abraham

And I could imagine still another Abraham and other Abrahams besides and even that the ram might have its say:

And stretching forth his hand a second time, Abraham took hold of the sacrificial knife. His grip was firm enough; the blade did not tremble in his hand and the light reflecting from it was a steady beam. In his left hand, Abraham held the ram's homs and Isaac held its legs upon the altar.

And Abraham would have slain the ram then but, in that instant before the slaughter when even the most resolute of souls will hesitate, the ram called out to him: "Abraham! Abraham! This is another test. What God really wants is Isaac."

One Abraham who heard the ram looked to heaven. And then to Isaac. And to the ram. And back to Isaac.

Another Abraham who heard the ram thought: "This ram is Satan. To Adam he appeared as a serpent. To Abraham he appeared as a ram, which Abraham slaughtered" and thrust the knife into the ram's throat.

Another Abraham who heard the ram thought: "This ram may be Satan. Or it may be an angel of the Lord. But if I let go of it to lay my hand upon Isaac once more, will God provide Himself with yet another ram?"

A fourth Abraham is conceivable: one who heard the ram and thought these thoughts and other thoughts as well and who looked to the ram and then to heaven and then to Isaac and then – whether out of fear or with an heroic will, or whether out of an anguished or a weary despair, or whether merely out of the confusion of it all – thrust the sacrificial knife into his own breast.

With the same knife a fifth Abraham did not thrust himself, either for the same reason or for all these reasons.

Robben Island, a history: five haiku

1. Exploitation
Men steal penguin's eggs
and guano where they nest. Death
threats in black and white.

2. Isolation
Lepers with too-white
skin and men deemed insane, willed
out of existence.

3. Incarceration
Beaten, they build their
own jail. It's thought that on black
skin, the scars don't show.

4. Evacuation
Penguins saved from oil-
bruised sea are cleaned, restored to
feathered harmony.

5. Reconciliation
The museum proves
that over old wounds, new skin
of many hues grows.

Kulusuk cruising

Perfect, I said at the start of the day
when we hired this tiny boat
and the sun was shining
and the icebergs gleamed like cadets lined up for
inspection or seemed borrowed from a theatre set, benign
as polystyrene.

As we sailed, we saw all sorts of shapes – ivory pawns and
bishops,
a pair of sheepskin slippers,
a giant white chocolate mouse,
the Sydney Opera House.

Then, Act Two and the backdrop changed:
the sun slunk off, upstaged by the rain
and the wind screamed
'til the air turned to splinters,
puncturing our fingers and cheeks.

Now the pawns and bishops are despotic kings and we're
boxed in –
checkmate.
The slippers are a dictator's boots,
the chocolate mouse a wolf
with ten-feet-high incisors.

I cling to the pitching boat and listen. In the Opera House,
the fat lady's started to sing.

– Susan Richardson

Jon Boilard

Cornfield

We parked in a cornfield. It was her father's car. They found cancer in his butt. Annie left the radio on and there was a little light from it. Meatloaf was playing. The moon was orange and full. We talked. We drank a fifth of vodka. We tongue kissed and she told me to take my shirt off. She was wearing a short black skirt. Her tits were soft and perfect scoops and I played with them while she used her hand on me. There was moisturizing lotion in the glove box. It smelled like bananas. Her father smoked dope to ease the pain.

He was getting treatment in Boston, which was more than a hundred miles away. Her mother quit cigarettes and cried on the porch every night after her shift at the Polish Club. Then I told Annie about blue balls and she helped me take my pants off. I watched her slip her skirt down her legs that were tan and smooth and strong from being a lifeguard at the Greenfield swimming hole. Her panties were white. I put my hand inside them and it was warm. She didn't need to shave. I finger banged her. She closed her eyes.

The steering wheel was getting in the way so we got into the back seat. There were mosquitoes but they didn't bother me. We fired up a joint from her father's stash. She told me he was going to die. The doctors had given him six months to live. He lost sixty pounds and his hair fell out. He still collected disability from the railroad where he'd been a welder for thirty years. I didn't have a rubber so she told me to pull it out in time. She said, Please. She said, Not like before. Her panties were on the floor, crumpled.

Her breath was hot and in my ear. She whispered my name. We pounded against each other for several minutes. We were slippery with sweat and other fluids. The noise we made was swampy. Together we smelled musty and wild. Then I blew my nut inside her because it felt better that way and she wouldn't look at me. She was so mad she cried. I got dressed and smoked outside, leaning against the Impala, and waiting for her to stop.

Jon Boilard

Liberty

I was getting a tan in Washington Square. One Leg Johnny fought in Vietnam and stepped on a land mine. He was still pissed about it. He came by with Big Al Ma. Big Al worked in the pantry of the President Roosevelt for almost thirty years. At thirty years he could retire with his pension. One month shy they fired him for being drunk. One Leg Johnny and Al were broke. They didn't ask me for anything. They never did. I'd just won money on Tiger Slew at Bay Meadows. It was a hunch. I sent Big Al to the corner for a twelve-pack of Pabst. We drank it in the sun. All the cops knew us but this rookie walked up. He said we couldn't drink in the park. I apologized and One Leg Johnny and I dumped our beers. Big Al Ma kept drinking. And the rookie kept talking and finally he grabbed the beer away from him and Big Al pulled a steak knife out of his coat. I don't know where he got it or what he thought he was going to do with it. It happened so fast. Big Al was only about four-and-a-half feet tall and he weighed maybe a hundred pounds soaking wet. He was under arrest before you knew it. One Leg Johnny couldn't stop laughing.

We hit Golden Boy for a slice of pepperoni. Gino and Carlo's had the usual crowd. It was Saturday afternoon. Pierre was in there smiling through his one tooth. I once saw him carry a refrigerator up five flights of stairs. I bought him a shot of Jack Daniels. He stunk to high heaven. The Iranian was in there bothering people as usual. I told Marco behind the bar that the Iranian had to go but Marco said he was still breaking him in. Marco liked projects. He liked to say that I was one of his projects and look how I turned out. It was true. I used to be in worse shape. I raised my glass to him. The Giants were on the television. Benito Santiago hit a two-run dinger.

Brown Sugar saw me standing by the bathroom. I was making sure One Leg Johnny made it okay. She put her quarters down for a game of pool. She told me she was available if I wanted to come by her place later. She had a clean little apartment in a dirty building on Market Street. She was a decent girl. She stripped at a joint on Larkin where stripping wasn't the only thing she did. It was good money. I wasn't in a position to judge anybody. I told her I probably wouldn't be able to walk that far. She told me to take a cab. One part of me wanted to go and a bigger part of me did not. One Leg Johnny fell down against the door so I couldn't even get to him. He pissed all over himself. The Iranian had some smart things to say to us so I socked him in the lip. I used to get paid to hit people as hard as I hit him. Brown Sugar got out of the way. I told Marco behind the bar that I was sorry and we left so he wouldn't have to ask us to leave.

I used to have a wife. She taught school. She said she divorced me because of my drinking and that was before I really started drinking. That sucked everything out of me for years. She was a local girl too and every now and then I hear things about her and I'm glad she is doing better. She has a nice house in the Bernal Heights and a family and all the things I could never give to her. I think she married an investment guy from back east somewhere, maybe Connecticut. For a while I called her a two-timing whore but that was never the case. Now even when one of my brothers eggs

me on just for kicks I can't think of a bad thing to say about her. She is perfect in memory.

ONE LEG JOHNNY didn't want to go to La Rocca's. That is what he would do. He would hit the wall. So I bought him a turkey sandwich and some gnocci and a halfpint of Jim Beam. I gave him half a pack of smokes. I left him on a bench in the shade. Dougie was working and he had my drink poured before I sat down. Some fat fucking punk from the Sunset I used to knock the shit out of was sizing me up. In the old days I would've started in on him right away but I let it go. I let everything go now. The Giants lost to the Braves. There was basketball on too. When Dougie's shift ended then Erin with her curly blond hair took over. I sang pop songs to her and she rolled her eyes at me. She was young and she had a couple young boyfriends hanging out at the end of the bar keeping tabs on me. Then they helped her push me out the door at closing time but weren't really as rough as they could've been. I wouldn't have blamed them for trying.

I sat in the park for a while. A few kids from the projects rolled some yuppie who had veered off course. I recognized them from Salesian. It was pretty harmless. He was all right. I helped him up and his nose was busted and needed some attention. I told him to get it looked at. He pushed me away and called me an old drunk. I hailed a cab and told the driver to bring me to Market and Sixth. I couldn't remember her exact address. If he dropped me there I could find it. Brown Sugar buzzed me up. She was burning incense. She told me she won four or five games of pool and the Iranian was talking shit the whole time. That fucking guy. She went to mix a couple drinks but then she could tell that I'd had it. Her bed was soft. I didn't want to talk anymore because my head hurt. I got these headaches. She undressed me. Her skin was smooth in most places. She put a rubber on me and used some jelly on herself to save me the trouble. Then she did all the work but it was a good long time and she was able to finish. She was a professional and took pride in what she could do but I was too numb to really feel anything. I was happy to help her fall asleep. And the visuals of what we had just done would help me later when I was alone.

When I woke up she was gone and there was a fat black cockroach inches from my face on the pillow. I checked my roll of cash and it was a bit smaller but that was an understanding we had.

I PICKED UP Big Al Ma at North Station. He needed a drink in the worst way. He told me that jail wasn't bad. Screws gave him some food that tasted like a peanut butter sandwich and an old blanket that smelled like mildew. They let him call his sister but his brother-in-law answered and wouldn't put him through. Family had disowned him years ago. They used to have a sweet little studio in the garage for him. He had told me this story a million times but I let him continue because I didn't have the energy to stop him. He was crying. I put my arm around him and we stood like that. He came from Hong Kong in 1961. He traveled the world on the President Roosevelt. After he got fucked out of his pension he didn't know what to do. He moved in with his sister's family and drank whatever he could get his hands on. It was bad for the children so his brother-in-law told him to leave. They kept his savings and his monthly social security checks and gave him an allowance. It was enough to pay for a hotel room and meals but that was about it so he was always asking for more. Eventually they got tired of him bothering them so they opened an account for him at Wells Fargo and let him do what he wanted. He told me that was a great day. He used the word liberty. He looked up at me and his eyes were dried out and blank. Big Al Ma shuddered and I held onto him tight so he wouldn't blow away in the wind.

John Tavares

Parenting

All this parenting! This chaos on the verge of the evening when they would plant the massive truckload of homemade explosives at the base of the HalebopCorp Tower. Saloun's kids were running everywhere in the restaurant, yelling, screaming, shrieking, laughing, giggling, toppling messy food trays, interrupting other customer's meals, throwing newspapers around, delighting in ridiculous children's pranks, stomping on condiments packets, sending ketchup splattering in every direction. Saloun had given up trying to cook for his children at home; they were simply too finicky, bitchy, and picky, refusing to eat what he methodically cooked for them, even though he would always carefully follow the directions in the cookbook, measuring precisely ingredients listed in the recipes, ladling out a teaspoon of salt, two tablespoons of safflower oil, boiling eight cups of water for just the right amount of time, exactly ten minutes, or whatever the cook book instruction indicated, stirring in precisely half-a-cup of milk, one cup of shredded mozzarella, two cups of stewed tomatoes, chopping exactly this amount of that vegetable, mixing in just that amount of this herb, that spice, this seasoning, and no more and no less.

What a waste! Now these unholy, heathen, foreign kids of his were bickering and arguing with him in a fast food restaurant of a popular franchise chain, making a mess of their hamburgers and fries. He thanked Allah that the restaurant was spacious and that it was not crowded. Several weeks ago, their mother had left him and their children to live with her Scottish and Irish-Canadian parents. She was upset, this Canadian bitch of his, distraught because she had not been admitted to medical school.

They had exchanged accusations and incriminations. He had told her that she had no concern for the children: She didn't want to take care of them when, worst of all, she, and she alone, was the only person who commanded the kids' respect and fear. She accused him of laziness, insulting him with complaints he was too feebleminded and fat to work at any job better then a cab-driver. Then she got even more vicious, protesting that he spent too much time at the mosque, in prayer.

And all this happened on the verge of his and Saswan's plot to plant a large bomb at the base of the massive HalebopCorp Tower office complex downtown.

"Thomas, you quiet down, sit, and eat! Mohammed, quit mashing your french fries with your fork and eat!" "Jennifer, why are you crying again? Can't you just drink your orange pop and be quiet?"

The previous evening he had brought the children to a shopping mall with a huge indoor playground and, when Mohammed had been getting especially stubborn, refusing to leave the toy store, he had been forced to spank him on the bottom. Then the toy store sales clerk threatened to report him to the authorities for child abuse! You just go ahead and do that, he thought, and we'll plant the bomb here and not at the base of the HalebopCorp Tower.

These kids of his were simply driving him nuts! Why had he become a father in the first place? Well, it wasn't as if he had planned it that way. His tykes were acting like a little pack of urban gang members. Something about the mixture of Arab and Anglo-Saxon genes, plus the fact of them being raised in this sprawling cosmopolitan metropolis, this modern day Babylon, he figured, just didn't go down right, contributed to their delinquent behaviour and hyperactivity. No, maybe that wasn't it, either, he had to admit to himself. He had simply been a failure as a father.

He cuffed and scooped up the screaming, excited mob of his progeny and packed them in a car to drive them to their grandparents. He was already late. He had told Saswan he would be ready for the bombing at eight. They had yet to wire the detonator and set the timer, when they had promised each other they would have the bomb tucked at the base of the HalebopCorp Tower already. Yes, he thought, as he slammed the door of the hatchback. There was no question that he had been a failure as a father. Now how he did as a terrorist remained to be seen.

John Tavares

The problem of nudity

THE AUGUST NIGHTS were getting even more hot and humid, and Ahmed was beginning to feel restless and agitated. So, instead of taking his nickel-plated Magnum handgun and stepping outside and shooting the lonely dog in heat that was howling crazily in the moonlight and then going to the owner's bedroom window and aiming the weapon's sights at him and discharging a bullet into his head, he did what he thought would be the next best thing: he packed a towel, a fresh bar of antibacterial deodorant soap, dandruff shampoo, candles, wine, a wheel of assorted European cheeses, and a textbook of neuropathology that he had been obliged to study (once a bookworm, he no longer read medical literature unless absolutely required), into his backpack and, although he had use of a hospital car, walked through the south end of town, knowing the exercise would do him some good. Once he reached the highway, he hiked along the nature trail to the Stormy Bluff beaches. Wearing cutoffs that revealed extremely hairy legs, a T-shirt, and padded comfortable sneakers, he found himself meandering along the edge of a new housing subdivision as he hiked the several kilometres along the nature trail to the Stormy Bluff beaches. He set his towel down on the sandy beach, lit several candles, popped open a bottle of red wine, and then started studying the relevant passages from the neuropathology textbook that he borrowed from the reference section of the hospital since he had recently been asked to consult with an aged doctor, a veteran local doctor, practically venerated, about a patient with an exceedingly rare neurological condition. Then he realized that the wine and cheese were not agreeing with his gastrointestinal system and he had to go to the washroom. After he had a bowel movement in the woods, his first dump in his entire life in the bush, using the front pages and a few index pages of the reference book as tissue paper, he decided that it was time for a swim. He stripped down naked, swam several laps in the lake, and then washed his arms, chest, and underarms in the refreshing cool lake water. He was shampooing his thick wiry black hair when he looked up, disturbed by a noise. A man and a woman were reclining on the beach, and they seemed annoyed that Ahmed had, apparently, violated the private space of their favourite secret hideaway for a romantic escapade. Ahmed said hello, but no reply came through the darkness; the woman in the pair just seemed to glare at him as she dragged on a cigarette, which sparingly lit up a few highlights of her fine featured face, with the moonlight providing some additional illumination. Finally, Ahmed, deciding that he would merely avoid them, waded out from the shallow water into the deeper ends, and dove down into the deeper waters. Ahmed thought that he was giving the couple greater privacy for romance, space that they needed or wanted. When he looked and realized they were gone, he headed to the shoreline and the sandy beach to the spot where he thought that he had left his clothes and pack. However, his clothes were gone, and he realized that it appeared as if the younger people had really and truly taken exception to his presence and unintended intrusion and had taken his apparel and shoes. Burying himself in the sand, Ahmed decided that he would spend the next few hours until dawn napping in a trench in the sand that he dug with his bare hands and sticks. Then, at first light, he

decided he would swim from the Sandy Bluff beach to the town dock beach, whence he would walk home, since, if he remembered correctly, the distance wasn't far from the apartment where he was in residence, and, yes, he assumed, somehow make it home naked. There really didn't appear to be any solution to the problem of nudity, especially since it was a Friday night – actually a Saturday morning, when hordes of beachgoers would be descending upon the beach to escape the uncomfortable summer muggy heat and humidity in Beaverbrooke, and he would be in a state of complete undress. He decided that this was simply not a good situation, and that he was certainly not going to be risking any damage to his reputation by walking home naked to the new student doctor's residence, even if there was little lighting – that is, poor street lighting and practically no lighting along the trail at the place where he had been allowed to make his residence in the town that he had decided to call home.

WITH THE ARRIVAL of light, having had no sleep, hungry, he waded back into the water along the beach and started treading water, as he swam his way several metres distant from the shoreline. Several houses were located along the jagged shoreline, and he hoped, just prayed, that no one would see him naked in the water and that somehow he might find his way out of this predicament. He swam past longer docks with bigger boats and homes that housed what appeared to be the affluent. He trod water along the shore past a nurse that he recognized as one of the nurses at the hospital where he was doing his residency and before he could call out to her and explain his predicament she stood staring at him as if he was a dangerous pervert, and donned a sweatshirt from where she had been sunbathing topless, and she sped up to the trail to what he presumed was her home, and no doubt – knowing the neurotic and panicky nature and personality of the woman (she routinely called the police on drunks and mentally ill persons seeking treatment in the emergency department to the praise of the administration and bewilderment of frontline medical personnel) – the first thing she did was dial 911 and contact the police, the armed forces, the coast guard, water bombers.

When he rounded the bend in the bay of the lake, there was a boathouse and a floatplane moored to a sturdy dock and an elderly woman beating a rug with a broom. When she spotted his Semitic head and what parts of his untanned body remained above the water bobbing along she called out that he was on private property and that she was going to call the police. Now he did realize that people in this area could own beachfront and had thought in the back of his mind that as soon as he saved enough money he would purchase some property on the beach himself, but he figured that he was far enough out in the lake on public property, crown land, and swam further along quietly, knowing full well that the old bat was indeed going to be calling the police or the water patrol, if there was one, which was really something that he would have preferred to avoid.

When he rounded the next bend a woman was sitting on the dock soaking her feet and smoking a joint and when she saw Ahmed she started laughing and laughing and laughing and the hilarity came in spasmodic waves that he would have sworn were giving her multiple orgasms. Then, as he rounded another point, he came to a neatly groomed lawn with a house made of logs and a good old-fashioned clothesline. He grabbed a shirt and pants and disappeared into the bushes adjacent to the lot and cut and scraped his limbs on branches and sticks and dirtied, scratched, and stubbed his feet and toes as he scrambled through the deep foliage towards what appeared to be the road and nature trail he had originally taken to the beach. He walked along the nature trail and alongside the road of speedy traffic bare foot. Not surprisingly, nobody stopped to pick up a Semitic-looking hitchhiker.

When he arrived home, he spent hours gauzing, bandaging, and cleaning his blistered and cut feet. He had finally finished soaking his feet when he got a call from a nurse demanding he get down to the hospital emergency room immediately; aside from a middle-aged jogger who had suffered a myocardial infarction and a senior who had had a transient ischemic attack, several patients had just arrived from a boating accident that occurred when a speeding police patrol boat collided with a bass boat – the police speeding to respond to calls of a naked man, possibly belonging to a terrorist cell, swimming along the lake shoreline. And just as he received this news he realized that he had forgotten the expensive text on neuropathology at the beach, but remembered that he had torn several index and front pages from it to wipe his bottom when he went to take a shit in the bushes and anyway who would want anything to do with such a text, even if it was the latest, the nineteenth, edition.

Puñeta

the type of word that could halt
conversation at a party, on the lips

of arthritic old men, or my friend's
grandfather, Luis, who lived to 93,

and whose knees gave out, the pain
would make him curse, and he'd

say it sharp and sonorous: *puñeta*,
followed by me *cago erz la leche* …

these red-hot insults spoke to no one
or everyone, everything. In pale,

dusty light, *puñeta* sound like cannon
blast, a royal trumpeter announcing

the arrival of the Queen. Literally
means to jerk-off, and it fits the day

when you can no longer move, aches
strapped about your thighs like rope,

and then you might as well say it,
loud, as if it were your dying word.

Punctuation

Commas, eyebrows, plucked, stuck between the pages of this book.

Repetition of the double "rs" in Spanish, *cigarro, ferrocarril* …

Or the other letters I love "ñ" which distinguishes *año* from *ano*.

Wire-strung, bird on the telephone line; it calls you out, write.

– Virgil Suárez

Room

"We have all been in rooms we cannot die in. "
– James Dickey from "Adultery"

This one the windows don't open, they've been welded
shut, in fear of the man who will plunge fifteen stories.

Carpet stains from ominous patterns of the face of dead
people, other tenants awaiting layover flights, rain storms,

lovers who will greet them with a serpent-charm embrace,
shiny studs on their tongues, torches for eyes. This one

with its cracked sink smells putrid of spilled whine, sexual
encounters with room service food, a leather strop still tied

to the bed frame. The bathroom mirror hangs askew, not
wanting to crack its own secrets. Water runs cold this high

up. Next door you can hear a couple arguing about chicken.
One light bulb socket is all it takes, an ice-cube bucket,

some water. At night the curdled moonlight lingers here
long enough to cast shadows of your own demise. Hanging

there is the image of your entanglements, this red-purple
vein you call a rope, leading from the door to your arm.

Tied to the doorknob. If someone walked in now, they'd pull
it and you'd bleed to death. This is the way it is here in such

rooms. The gauzy light of morning is there to greet you. Smile.

– Virgil Suárez

Sophia Holder

In love with you

The wig was slipping, the make-up beginning to run. And so was I … running for my life.

It all started at that wedding. I gazed at him, handsome and dignified. I looked at her, petite and dull. I felt that she would never fully understand his potential brilliance.

Girls had always flocked around Mark in droves. Prancing about. He was intelligent, fashionable and popular. He charmed women and wrestled with any man who said a word against them. I was never bullied at school. No one ever mentioned my thick glasses, thick red hair, teeth, weight, acne or braces. This was largely due to my friendship with him. Being a sensitive soul, I hated fights and quarrels, and was indebted to him.

Now in our late twenties, he was more dashing than ever, and I was becoming more attractive as I matured. We met up regularly to discuss world politics, art, our favourite philosophical theorists and the best looking girls we knew. Despite my growing beauty, I had not allowed myself to think about him in a sexual way. Although we had always held each other in high esteem, I knew he could never be mine. However, I always felt a twang of jealousy whenever girls flirted with him. And insanely jealous when it was reciprocated.

As I watched him exchanging vows with that pretty little airhead, I realised the extent of my feelings for Mark. I was desolate. I had been to happier funerals.

Although we would often go for a month at a time with no contact, I pined for him deeply when he was away on his two-week honeymoon. On their return, the gang elected to celebrate their matrimony in style. A fancy dress party. After a few arguments, we all finally settled for the eternally successful; tramps and tarts. Everyone looked fantastic. All of the lads were dressed in drag, with their hair prettily tousled, their make-up gaudy and distasteful, their enormous breasts of balloons and/or socks, and their ornate ball gowns from Oxfam.

Mark made his grand entrance and the room shook with laughter. However good-looking he was when male, however manly and desirable, he cut a striking figure as a woman. The tension between Mark and me that night was thrilling and intense for both of us were highly charged. We were alone when it happened. I told him. I disclosed to him what I had always felt for him, but had not allowed myself to explore until two weeks previous. Since I gave my short, revealing speech on impulse, I had not given any thought as to how Mark might react.

His big red cheeks glowed then burned, melting his heavy make-up.

"You fucking shirt lifter! I'll fucking show you bent!"

"I'm not gay Mark. I'm just in love with you." I responded quietly.

"You fucking want the living crap bet out of you, Tom?"

But he was too traumatised and sickened to move. I took advantage of this and quickly left.

I needed to inhale clean air. I began to trudge wretchedly along the pavement towards the coast. I heard the door slam and turned around. Mark had followed. I fled. I careered down the street at full pelt. He gave chase, galloping wildly after me.

I increased my speed, panicking to get away. This comrade, who, from the early years had always protected me from the thugs with his wit, his articulate way with words, and his brute strength. This hero. Was now against me. And I was about to recoup all that had been doled out in my defence.

He had a violent temper, and running towards the sea was a foolish idea. Mark knew that I could not swim.

Sweat and rain were pouring down me. My clothes were drenched. My wig, irritating me now, was slipping off my itchy scalp. Rain and tears dampened my perfectly painted face. The make-up was beginning to run. And so was I … running for my life. I turned back to see that I was losing him. For I was able to glide gracefully down the street in my stilettos. He looked clumsy trying to hurry along in his sister's shoes. As I looked back, I was struck with awe. The awe and wonder I had felt for Mark my idol since the age of twelve. Now, after three seconds of drunken distraction, of love-filled lunacy, I had lost him. My eyes burned, and I went into a sudden panic as I realised that I would never see him again. My breathing became short and shallow. It was difficult to suck the biting wind into my lungs. My shining cavalier. Gone forever. As I approached the sea, waves of grief washed over me.

Feverish, nauseous, and sweating chilly fluids from every pore, I could no longer breathe. I had to stop. I fell onto the sea wall. I heard his steps behind me. I had lost all feeling in my limbs and knew that I would be unable for the mêlée. I lay my body against the wall, quivering with dread, anxiety and cold, wondering where I was going to receive the first blow.

HE PUT AN arm around me and turned me towards him. The stomach? The groin? The nose?

He put his hand on my hip and drew my body against his. I braced myself for his head butt which I'd seen break another man's nose. Instead, I felt his lips against mine; soft, warm and sweet. The kindest, sweetest, most gentle kiss I had ever had. I fell against his shoulder and relaxed into his arms, tears streaming down my frown. He held me up, declaring that I was beautiful, and that this had always been his most sincere desire.

We went to the beach and made love. Afterwards, I lay in his arms, worrying about what we should do. Mark comforted me, soft and soothing. We returned to the party hand in hand. I was blissfully happy, with my wig half on my head and mascara stains down my face.

"Quiet, please." Mark made the plea over the microphone, my hand still firmly in his grasp. "I have an announcement." I looked at him agog. Thinking how brave he was to do this, wondering what he would say. He had only been married for two weeks.

He lifted my hand in the air and declared,

"Tom … " he paused to build up to the climax " … is a fucking bender!" Nobody spoke. "No word of a lie. He told me just now. Ain't that right, Tom?"

I was in hospital for two months recovering from what Mark and the lads did to me that night. I was on crutches for another two, and it was two years before I could walk a mile comfortably.

I moved far far away. And lived the rest of my life as a sexless straight man.

At the circus today

1.

Sigmund Freud must have invented the circus.

Babylon's beside Barnum repeating
the uneven present, and everyone
keeps jumping through rings.

After he's already sacrificed
her once in a rocket, the Ringmaster
chains a woman inside
a moving doorway. Spread

wide, she could be waiting
for Kong. And then she's
sealed away from
the rest of us.

The ringmaster taunts
the motorcycle between his legs
before bursting through the doorway
in sparks, exploding paper, and Wagnerian
guitar. The woman needed to be

destroyed again if she's
to uncurl once more unharmed
from her velvet box that's glowing with stars
and the rings of Saturn.

2.

I don't know anything about elephants.

But at the circus today, from way, way behind
worn down headgear, and desert folds, one looked
at me. She could tell she was

in front of everyone and she was
also breathing in another world

and when she gathered me
in her eye my shoes first and then
the rest of me began to disappear. And then

she went around the ring again
tagged to another's tail, her
skin a map that kept moving. Her
scent rubbed

the popcorn, the green
smoke rippling with stage
lightning, the barking
crowd, and each

3·

new poem desires
to hold fast to reshape
different kinds of
love/but then the sudden
world occurs, sweeping apart
every street. Because

the roar carries us away, throws
anchors down where no
one would ever want
to stay, I first had to give

you the circus's falling
noise/only now

can you meet the elephant's
touch. When she

pushed me down into
someplace else, your

fingers came from behind
and lifted me, then wafted us

both, like Chagall's lovers, nearly
to the top of the tent. The circus went

on as if we were only
missing, but the elephants drew us
down, gave us

their million wrinkled
pathways
to follow/and

4·

it's also true
that everything –

everything is done
to avoid
rehearsing

the dirty velvet
of your already
receding voice.

– Michael Trussler

Karina Fuentes

Good and ready

THE FIRST TIME Larry saw Nadia she did a cartwheel across the stage and almost skewered his hand with a stiletto. Without thinking, he thrust a fistful of twenties at her. She grabbed them with her teeth, winking at him, but turned away before letting her top fall.

When she turned around he immediately saw that her right breast was playful; the left one, which had a slightly smaller nipple, was more serious. It was also obvious that neither breast was particularly bright, but they weren't stupid, either, unlike some of the vacant melons Larry tended to meet.

He had to come back eight nights in a row before she agreed to sit with him between sets.

"Are you a cop?" she asked, pointing at his blue shirt.

"Bus driver."

"Good."

She leaned in front of him, exposing him to a sea of black roots, and sniffed his drink. "What kind of beer is this?" she asked.

"It's brandy."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What's brandy?"

"Try some."

She took a huge gulp and swiped at her tearing eyes. Her face crinkled, then split into a smile. "It tastes like hot candy," she said. She was impressed, he could tell – he'd dreamed about it long enough, the upturned tilt of an eyebrow – and he had to fight the urge to propose.

Their dates were always the same: movies at second-run theatres and greasy food served on thick, chipped diner plates. According to Larry such food was authentic, and therefore trendier than the overpriced stuff served at five-star restaurants. Then it was back to Larry's basement suite, where she gripped his head with her thighs and made him beg, desire and hatred speeding through him in twin currents.

Afterward, she liked to lie in bed and watch wrestling on his grainy television. "Go, King Cobra!" she'd scream.

They were eating corn dogs one night while watching a cage match. She dropped her corn dog on the threadbare blanket and reached over to squeeze his bicep. "You should've been a wrestler," she said. He got out of bed and crossed the faded green linoleum to the tiny refrigerator in the corner of the room. He dug through loose beer cans until he pulled out a bottle of Dijon mustard. "Something special for that corn dog," he said, bringing it back to bed.

"What's that?"

"Dijon."

"Dee what? Damn, Larry, you should be living in one of those fancy houses over on the west side," she laughed.

"Some day I will."

Television light flickered across her breasts, and he was struck by how perfect they were, just big enough to make her look cheap but not ridiculous. He took a swig of beer and her right breast, which had turned out to be a bit of an alcoholic as well as playful,

pointed at his beer can. He held the can up to the breast. Nadia shrieked and giggled. "That's cold! Larry," she said anxiously, "do they feel real?" She grabbed a breast in each hand and held them up for him to feel. He felt each one carefully. Minutes passed. "Yes," he finally said. "They do."

He turned off the television and switched on his stereo. He fiddled with the tuning knob until he found a station playing heavy metal music. "Dance for me," he said.

She bounced out of bed and climbed on the wobbly kitchen table next to the stereo. "This music's a little fast," she said, arching backward.

He tossed her tank top at her. "Put it on and don't take it off until the song's over," he commanded.

She slipped it over her head and began undulating in a small circle. Her bare feet stuck to the tacky table surface, hitting patches of old syrup. Her face wrinkled with disgust as she stretched one foot past her head. "The table feels wobbly," she complained.

"Hush," Larry said gently.

She braced one hand against the wall and resumed her dance. Halfway through the song the table collapsed. She paused a moment, startled, then picked up the beat with a vicious shimmy that made Larry's heart expand with his version of love.

TODAY IS ROUTE twelve. Mothers with squalling infants and sloppy-jointed kids with their pants on backwards. The kids are the worst; Larry takes it personally.

He keeps calm during the first two hours of the run. At this time of morning the only people on the bus are suburbanites who sit perfectly still, stunned to find they're no longer in bed. Larry counts on seeing the same people at the same stops. Sometimes, if someone's missing or has gotten bored and wandered up a block or two, he forgets to stop the bus.

By the time he gets to Argyle Avenue, the last stop before downtown, everyone is in the right place. The frizzy blonde who always sits halfway back is there, reading her book. At the very back is the man who smells like sardines. And here is the guy who wears a trench coat with plaid lining, paying with a fistful of pennies like he does every day, a cascade of copper falling so fast there's no way Larry can count to make sure it's the correct fare.

He stomps on the gas before the man can grab a handgrip. The man stumbles but doesn't fall.

"Watch your step," Larry says.

LIKE MOST BAD ideas, it was good at first. Nadia got a job working the midnight shift at a SnakStop after they were married. "Time to move on to better things," she sang, as she crammed a spangled thong into a shoebox. "Whoa," said Larry. "No need to pack that away."

She danced for him at night, before she left for work. She did it with gusto, jumping on the bed until first the frame collapsed and then the box spring cracked.

"Try the dresser," Larry suggested.

He loved watching her scuff their already-scuffed furniture with her stilettos. When she slowed down he tossed out an obscure line of poetry, or the name of a fictitious wine, and she whipped off her bra in a frenzy.

He stewed for months over what to name her breasts. He settled on Pandora for the right one after she knocked over his drink during a football game. She apologized, saying that sneaking a sip with no hands was tricky. The left one proved to be less friendly than she'd appeared at first, and he was disappointed when she wouldn't laugh at his jokes. Emily; it was the most serious name he could think of.

Eventually, he was promoted to a morning run, No. 7, and they celebrated with a real wine that they couldn't afford. After the wine, and after Nadia had finished a dance by tackling Larry around the knees, they lay in bed and ate packaged croissants from the SnakStop.

"Can we stay at the same hotel where Jim Morrison stayed?" asked Nadia. Larry was going to take her to Paris. Some day.

"We'll rent the whole floor."

"And we'll go to the loob?"

It took him a moment to figure out what she meant. "It's the Louvre, not loob," he said, speaking into Emily's nipple.

"You don't have to shout," said Emily.

One day Nadia rolled off Larry and pulled a pile of magazines out from under the bed. "Here," she said.

He flipped through them and realized they were university calendars, not magazines. "What are these for?"

She punched him lightly and laughed. "For you going back to school, like we planned. This is your first step."

A ball of ice formed in his stomach. Whenever he thought about university he pictured an autumn breeze tousling his hair as he exited the library, his arms full of books, their titles obscured, and that felt fine. Details – a timetable, a campus map – made his gums itch.

He dropped the calendars on the floor and nuzzled Nadia's neck. "I'll look at them later," he murmured.

For their first Christmas she bought him a briefcase. It was black leather, its interior lined with something that felt like suede. Larry's initials were monogrammed on a brass plate beneath the handle. He turned it over on his lap and ran a hand along its sleek surface.

"You shouldn't have, we can't afford this," he chided her.

Her mouth drooped. "I wanted to get you something special."

"What am I going to use a briefcase for?"

"School. You'll have books and papers to carry home."

"Aren't we kind of jumping the gun here?"

"Even if you don't get in this year you'll get in next year. It'll keep."

She squealed with excitement when she opened one of her gifts, a bottle of cheap drugstore perfume in a bottle that mimicked a designer brand. "Only the best for you," he said, caressing her cheek. Emily wrinkled her areola at him and frowned.

"It's the thought that counts," Pandora said happily.

ROUTE TWELVE PASSES by a junior high school. Tara's stop is the last one before the school. Larry sees her the moment he turns the corner before her stop. She's blonde, like Nadia, but with Larry's arrow-straight hair.

He's agreed not to speak to her on the bus. It would be weird, she'd insisted. What did that mean? he wanted to know. Shrug.

He feels something lodge behind his left eye and press on the nerves as he rattles to a stop. Blue stars circle in front of him and he grips the wheel hard to re-focus. The bus doors open and Tara silently flashes her pass as she climbs the steps, quickly turning her head away but not before Larry sees the ring of silver hanging from her nostril. She knows how he feels about kids poking holes in their faces.

"Good morning, Tara." He doesn't mean to shout but it happens. She freezes and turns to face him. Her friends stop their jostling and stare first at her, then at Larry. They wait breathlessly.

Larry looks Tara directly in the eye. "Hi," she hisses. She flies to the back of the bus, her friends trailing like tentacles.

"Who's that?" they ask in unison. Her reply is lost in the engine's noise but Larry sees her in the mirror, rubbing her nose ring with her sleeve so that it shines like a bullet.

NADIA STARTED THROWING up the day after they moved into the bungalow. Larry thought it was the excitement of buying their first house. By the end of the week they were out shopping for cribs, both of them grinning from ear to ear.

"This doesn't have to change anything," she said. "We'll manage."

"Of course we'll manage," Emily chimed in. Larry shot her a dirty look through Nadia's tank top.

He tapped the headboard of a stained pine crib. "I can't go now – we need my income."

"I'll be back at work a few months after the baby's born. You can get a student loan – we'll find a way."

"This crib is lopsided."

"I liked the white one in that last store better. Now is the time to do it, so we can build a future for the baby."

He pushed down sharply on one side of the crib. A saleswoman eyed him nervously from behind a row of strollers.

"What are you saying – our baby has no future if I don't change careers? Did you forget that driving a bus paid for our house?" he said coldly.

The saleswoman hurried over. "Can I help you?"

"I don't think so," said Nadia. "Let's go."

They drove home in silence. Larry spent the rest of the day puttering around the yard. When she called him in for supper he ignored her.

After the sun went down he came inside, made a bologna sandwich and carried it upstairs, past the living room, where Nadia was sprawled across a cardboard box, watching *Hee Haw*, a show he despised for its corniness. His heart thawed a little.

He sat on the bed and ate the sandwich in small bites, like a kid. He thought about how he didn't like or dislike driving a bus. It was just something he did, like flossing his teeth or buying a lottery ticket every time he bought gas. All he could say for certain was that it was temporary. Someday he'd wear a linen suit to work with a carnation tucked in the lapel, and on Fridays he'd have his shoes shined by a boy named Charles because even though he'd never seen a shoeshine boy he was sure they existed.

He heard the last strains of banjo music fade from downstairs, followed by the click of the television. He tossed the plate under the bed, snapped off the light and scrambled under the covers. She fumbled around in the dark, cursing softly after a loud thump. When she eased into bed Larry could hear a starchy rustling, and he knew she'd put on her best nightie, a scratchy black lace number from Zellers that both Pandora and Emily hated.

He inhaled and exhaled noisily.

"I know you're awake," she said. No reply.

She sighed and rolled to face him, careful to keep a swatch of space between them. "I don't care if you're a bus driver or a janitor or the Prime Minister. You keep saying you want to go to school and do something else with your life – I'm just trying to encourage you. I want you to be happy, Larry."

He turned his back on her and bit his knuckle hard, feeling a trickle of sweat run across his forehead.

"She means it," said Pandora. "She just wants you to be happy." Emily snorted. "You're the one who keeps talking about becoming a big success in business. What do you think – Donald Trump's going to come by the bus barn and give you a company?"

"You've developed a real attitude problem, Emily. I'll go when I'm good and ready. Or maybe I won't go – a degree isn't everything."

"It's more than what you've got," taunted Emily. "What do you know? You're a bag of silicone!"

"What was that?" asked Nadia.

"Nothing."

He faked a snore and fell asleep to the sound of Pandora and Emily arguing.

THE DAY GOES downhill steadily. A woman with a thick Haitian accent throws her bus map at Larry when he can't tell her the address of the Blood of the Lamb Daycare. A kid spills animal crackers and the mother says it wouldn't have happened if Larry knew how to drive. He tilts his head and feels the pressure behind his left eye swell.

A young mother lumbers on board. Stroller, baby, purse; arms and legs squirming everywhere. She's smiling, though. It must be her first.

He waits until she's settled in a seat before pulling out. Nadia was like that, too, he remembers. She loved the bulkiness of motherhood, the flaps and pouches and secret stashes.

The baby gurgles. The mother smiles again and leans over as though whispering a secret in its ear. Larry strains to hear but can't.

BY THE TIME Tara was in school Nadia had finished high school and two years of community college.

"Somebody had to do it," said Emily one night, when Larry complained that he never saw Nadia anymore.

"Don't be so hard on him," protested Pandora. "Larry's going to be a huge success, whether or not he goes back to school. We'll be the first ones to congratulate him when he makes a million, won't we, Emily? Em?"

(Emily had left to help Nadia with some accounting homework.)

Larry thought it was kind of cute, how Nadia carried her (his) briefcase and sat at the dining room table for hours, leaving grey dots around her mouth where she tapped with a pencil. He could see her landing an entry-level job and staying there, the assistant to somebody who never had his shoes shined. Pandora and Emily, his good friends, his dancing friends, would make sure it never went further than that. Well, Pandora would stay true to her roots; Emily often put on airs, saying she preferred white cotton to sequined silk.

Nadia had also taken a shine to white cotton. "I'm not wearing this any more," she said, waving a G-string at Larry. "It's demeaning. That part of my life is over."

"Yes, fine, it's over, but you hardly ever dance for me any more," he cried. "What's the matter, you're too good to dance now that you're a college girl?"

Nadia crumpled the G-string and hurled it into the trash. "College has nothing to do with it. I'm not a kid any more. Deal with it."

On Thursday nights she hosted her study group. Larry sprinted upstairs with Tara under his arm as soon as he saw the first one pull up in front of the house. Chris – it was always Chris, half an hour, sometimes an hour early, offering to wait in his car while Larry and Nadia finished supper, but of course Nadia wouldn't have that, and there he'd be, rambling about balance sheets while he stuffed his face with the last pork chop. Larry, sitting at his own dining room table, a good oak one paid for by No. 7, feeling like he might snatch the pork chop and throw it out the window. Balance that, he'd say.

"Where are you going?" cried Nadia. "She hasn't finished her vegetables."

Larry ignored her and whisked Tara into the bathroom. He waited outside while she took her bath. When she was done he put her to bed and read her favourite story, a fairy tale that Emily didn't approve of. The prince was a necrophiliac, she complained.

"Heeee'sh a lonely boy," slurred Pandora.

Sadness washed over Larry. Emily is not the same breast I married, he thought.

After the story he slunk down the stairs and past the dining room, where a debate about vouchers was going on. It was important that they not see him. Madeline, a grey-haired woman twice his age, liked to tell him what a peach Nadia was, what an absolute brain, and how she'd never get through the course if it weren't for Nadia. Oh, Nadia was a bright one, he'd agree.

He sat in the dark with the television muted. He couldn't get her to watch *Hee Haw* any more – too busy with her homework these days. No matter how much he cajoled, laughing like a maniac at Minnie Pearl, singing off-key whenever the banjo fired up, she wouldn't budge from the dining room table. He hated the show more than ever.

She'd pronounced wrestling as off-limits after Tara was born, saying it was a bad influence. Shortly afterward she'd banned corn dogs. Artery cloggers, she declared. He made a point of hiding a package under an ice clump in the freezer. He liked to microwave them late at night and eat them with ketchup in total darkness at the kitchen sink, ignoring his heartburn and wondering what had gone wrong.

Pandora: *Relax, Larry. We'll be back in those tassels in no time. Remember the time I accidentally got you in the eye? Ha ha! How about a beer?*

Emily: *Face it, pal. The show's over.*

The voices in the dining room rose and fell in their great voucher debate until Nadia exclaimed, "Look, it's right here!" There were happy murmurs. "You've got a real knack for this," said Chris.

Larry squinted at the silent television until he heard the scraping of chairs an hour later. "Oh, here he is, sitting in the dark," said Madeline, poking her head into the room. "Nadia is such a lifesaver, Larry. She really got us out of a pickle tonight. See you next week."

He was dimly aware of the others saying goodnight. He

repeated what they said, *goodbye*, *goodnight*, *see you*, until Chris said, "You'll wreck your eyes watching TV in the dark."

"Last time I checked, I wasn't a complete moron," said Larry, turning up the volume.

Silence, then quick footsteps, muted talk at the front door. Nadia returned and clicked off the television. "That was really rude. He was just joking," she said, crossing her arms over Pandora and Emily. He caught a sympathetic jiggle from Pandora.

"When I need his advice I'll ask for it."

She sat down on the couch and took his hand. "You know, you could take the prerequisites for this course over the summer and we could take the next half together, next year. Wouldn't that be fun?" He punched the remote with a finger and the television sparked back to life.

"When was the last time you opened a beer bottle with your teeth?"

"What?"

He stared at the television, where a man in a rooster suit was trying to fit into an airplane seat. It was touch-and-go; his tail was too big.

"You heard me. Before we got married you used to pull off the lid with your back teeth, never even cut your gums. Come to think of it, I don't remember the last time I saw you drink a beer. You like those wine coolers now, don't you?" He was polite and curious, an acquaintance catching up after a year in Africa.

She withdrew her hand and looked at him closely. He kept his eyes riveted on the TV. "You're afraid," she finally said. "Oh, Larry, I had no idea. I'm so sorry. Let's just –"

He jumped off the couch and crossed the room in two strides. He paused at the door and turned to face the TV. "I'll tell you what you have a knack for," he said. "You have a knack for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time." He pointed accusingly at Pandora and Emily. "That's who you are. Naughty Nadia, ready to straddle a pole for an A. What do you think Chris would say if he knew?"

She began to cry. The man in the rooster suit managed to sit down and the plane took off without a hitch. Relieved, Larry went to bed.

DIRECTLY BEHIND LARRY is the man who sneaks peanuts. There's a sign right behind Larry's head that says *No Eating or Drinking Allowed*. Larry sees the guy glance around before every peanut and it burns him up. "There's no eating allowed," he calls over his shoulder. The peanut-eater crumples the bag shut. "I wasn't eating anything," he says. Larry's supervisor has suggested that it might be time for a vacation; he thinks Larry's looking a little stressed lately. They've been watching him closely ever since that incident years ago with those university kids, back when he was still on route seven.

The kids claimed that Larry went berserk and threw the first punch when one of them asked how to get to North Vancouver. In his written statement Larry explained that the kids had appeared to be high and had threatened to hijack the bus. There were no witnesses. In the end there was a suspension but no criminal charges, and it was unanimously agreed that Larry should be taken off route seven.

"If I see you so much as lick a finger I'm kicking you off," Larry says.

The peanut-eater's eyes grow wide. "You can't do that."

"Try me."

They stare at each other in the rear-view mirror. Larry's glad he grew a mustache; it gives him an extra air of authority, like a cop. The peanut-eater turns to look out the window.

WHEN NADIA WAS promoted to senior account manager she surprised Larry with two tickets to Paris.

"We're finally going," she beamed.

"Jim Morrison, here we come!" exclaimed Pandora.

"Grow up," said Emily. "And lay off the booze, you're going to get us both in trouble."

Larry read the small blue print on the tickets. Departure, arrival; it looked so simple.

"I can't go," he said flatly.

"Don't be silly," she said. "I booked these dates to match up with your holidays."

"I had to switch days with someone."

Her face crumpled as if she was about to cry, then smoothed into an unreadable mask.

"Fine. I'll go without you."

"You can't do that," he barked. Somehow, her going alone was even worse than the thought of her taking him.

But she did go, and she sent a dozen postcards to Tara and none to him. "They're private," Tara snapped when Larry asked to see one. So Larry composed his own, late at night, when Tara was asleep.

"You should have gone," Emily said reproachfully. "You don't know a good thing when you see it."

Larry shook his pen to get the ink flowing. "He's a busy man," Pandora scolded, rubbing against a glass of wine. "He'll go when he's good and ready. Is this a Chardonnay?"

All the postcards ended the same way: *You could've waited*. They'd been living on the west side for five years by then. It still didn't feel like home. The sunken living room irritated Larry – he couldn't figure out which was supposed to be the showpiece, the living room or the rest of the house, and Nadia wasn't telling. She also wasn't telling how the mortgage on their sprawling brick bungalow was paid, but she was kind enough to say that if Larry didn't have so much vacation pay they'd have to forgo pool maintenance.

When he picked her up at the airport she kissed him on

both cheeks and stepped away when he tried to hug her. He carried her suitcases out to the car and loaded them in carefully, the way a valet would.

"I had a lot of time to think over there," Nadia said. "I was thinking I might get my implants removed."

Larry pulled over to the side of the road and turned to face her. "You can't do that."

"Why not?"

Cold space filled his mouth. He could do without Emily, pressed against the glass and scowling at him through the shower door, but then what would become of Pandora, alone and unbalanced? Sweet Pandora, a believer to the bitter end.

"Think of the unnecessary risk. They're beautiful, Nadia. Are you ashamed of who you are?"

"They're not who I am," she said crisply.

Tara stood at the front door, insisting that Nadia fill her in on the details of her trip before going to bed. They locked themselves in Tara's room. Larry stood outside with his ear pressed against the door for ten minutes before he gave up and drove to the SnakStop, where he bought three packaged croissants. He took one bite before throwing them away in an alley.

"Cochon," said Emily.

Larry leaned his head against the steering wheel. "Make her dance for me," he moaned. "You two are my last hope. She won't listen to me."

"Oh, poor Larry!" cried Pandora. "If it was up to me we'd dance for you every night."

"Not me," sniffed Emily. "*Executive* breasts don't dance."

It was around this time that a starfish-shaped rash bloomed on both of his thighs. Stress, said his doctor. Larry had to learn to relax. Easier said than done when you're living with a stranger, he thought.

Bored and restless, he dug through the attic one night and came across a box full of spangled bikinis. He lifted a black one to his face and felt his eyes fill with tears, wracked with nostalgia for a time when he alone knew the French word for candle. "Larry, put it down," Pandora warned. "Not now."

Ignoring her, he ran down the stairs and waved the frayed nylon in Nadia's face. "I bet you could still fit into this," he told her, hope and accusation raising his voice.

She looked up from her ironing and turned pale. "Why would you say that?" she asked.

"Oh, no," Pandora groaned.

He shook the flimsy scraps in front of Nadia's face. "We were happier then!" he yelled.

Nadia unplugged her iron and took the outfit from Larry. She marched into the kitchen and returned without it. "You're a coward in every sense of the word," she said, folding her ironing into a neat pile. He laid his left hand gently across hers, preventing her from folding. With his right hand he poked Pandora, the way you poke a soap bubble in the air when you don't want it to pop. "Don't do it," Pandora whispered. His breathing was slow and steady. Nadia looked down at the finger poking her, then up at his face. A minute passed. "I was wondering if maybe you could get a refund on these," he said. Poke – the squishy flesh indented, springing back in his finger's wake. It had always amazed him, how real they felt. "Since you're not using them to make a living any more. Or are you?"

"Game over," Emily said.

It was soon after that when he came home with his starfish-rash to find the house empty. It stayed empty all that day, and the next. The phone rang in the middle of the third day, rousing him from where he'd passed out behind the couch. They'd moved into an apartment and Larry could see Tara on the weekend. He could hear her in the background: *Tell him to bring all my things.*

PEANUT-EATER KEEPS his bag of peanuts tucked between his knees, folded shut but easily accessible. Larry watches him closely as he idles at a red light, waiting for his chance.

NADIA MOVED IN with Chris a few months after she left Larry. He phoned her new number a few times and hung up no matter who answered. He didn't want to speak to anyone; he just wanted confirmation that if he dialed someone else's number, a number he had no memory of, it would connect him with his wife. It fascinated him, how the woman he'd married was accessible only through another man's number, as if Chris's phone had captured her.

Emily refused to speak to him. "She's become a real stick in the mud," confided Pandora late at night, over the phone. "Nothing but white and beige. Trust me, you're better off without her."

Nadia and Chris were married in an old stone church, with Tara as the flower girl. On the day of the wedding Larry dug up a picture of a drunken Nadia, decked out in sequined dance gear and sprawled across a truck. Her grin was lopsided and she looked like she'd just had a stroke. He wrapped it in paper printed with tiny silver hearts and left it on the church's doorstep.

THE AFTERNOON SUN bounces off the pavement. Larry glances at his watch and sees one more hour to go. After work he may stop at his favourite bar for a beer or two, then head home for an evening of microwaved food and re-runs. There are worse fates, although at the moment he can't think of any.

When he thinks of Nadia he thinks only of Emily and Pandora. He misses them both, even Emily, who treated him so badly, especially at the end, when she wouldn't come out of her bra to say hello. The thought of Pandora, listing to one

side and slurring slightly while she spun a tassel, breaks his heart. He sits by the phone late at night when he can't sleep, waiting for Pandora to call. He fears the worst. He rolls to a stop at an intersection behind the No. 7 bus. John's elbow protrudes from the driver's window. Larry can tell by the elbow's angle that John is smiling. John always smiles. He gives a goofy two-handed wave out the window and Larry looks away.

A convertible pulls up on the left, all chrome and red. The driver, a woman, has a smart hairdo and tortoise-shell glasses. She looks at home in the driver's seat. The man next to her is laughing, presumably at something she's just said. He reaches over and touches her leg. The light changes and No. 7 roars off. The convertible pulls forward and disappears beside the bus.

Larry's eyes shift from the convertible to the back of No. 7, an imprint of the woman driver burning his eyes. She looked the same but different, like two photographs taken ten years apart. He can't figure out what's changed, other than her hair. His thighs itch fiercely but his hands are stuck. The hard plastic of the wheel is soft as taffy under his straining palms, trapping him like a fly, a stupid, bumbling fly that can't find the open screen door. His thighs progress past itching and begin to burn. He wonders briefly if it's time to see a dermatologist. He can hear horns from a great distance, as though from a different point in time.

Suddenly he bursts into laughter. He turns and faces the peanut-eater. "She had them removed," he laughs. "That's why she looks different. And that's why Pandora doesn't call anymore. She's gone." He throws his head back and roars with laughter. The peanut-eater's eyes grow wide. "I thought she'd gone to detox!" howls Larry, tears streaming down his face. He presses his foot down on the accelerator and the gap between him and No. 7 closes steadily. He can see the convertible's rear bumper hovering next to the bus's.

Larry floors the accelerator. He hears dim screams behind him as the bus picks up speed and hurtles forward. "Cheers, Pandora," he chuckles, closing his eyes at the last moment.

No trestles or tracks

Tim Conley on the illusion of biography

I Am Alive and You Are Dead: A Journey Into the Mind of Philip K. Dick
Emmanuel Carrère
translated by Timothy Bent
Metropolitan Books
315 pages, $38.95

A man goes to a doctor and complains, "Someone is putting something in my food that makes me paranoid." That's a favourite joke of Philip K. Dick, a writer whose protean enemies were, depending at what point in his life of many novels, marriages, and drugs you asked, Richard Nixon, Soviet brainwashers, and God. Like William S. Burroughs, the author of *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) and *Ubik* (1969) did not think of his best work as "fiction," but rather as important reports on the (at best) provisional nature of our reality. With a personal history which makes words like "weird" or "paranoid" altogether inadequate, Dick chose his jokes like he wrote his work, knowing the last laugh was probably on himself.

According to Emmanuel Carrère, Dick was fond of remarking that America entertains two superstitions – "that God doesn't exist and that there's actually a difference between different brands of cigarettes." Whether there is much difference between books about Philip K. Dick, cult figure, is sometimes as meaty a question. Carrère, hitherto a writer of fiction and "true crime" books, notes how, despite the remove from the kind of popularity and respectability at which he remained in his own lifetime, "Dick has become part of the mainstream. The present book is yet another indication." This is a vexing admission, made in the short – and, a point I'll return to, curiously undated – preface to *I Am Alive and You Are Dead*. Carrère has seen the success of film adaptations (the enthralling *Blade Runner*, the appalling *Total Recall*, the Affleck-afflicted *Paycheck*) and books about Dick (Lawrence Sutin, author of *Divine Invasions*, is lauded as Dick's "scrupulous biographer") and, with disarming frankness, wants in on the action. Nothing wrong in that, maybe, but questions nag at the reader: if this book is not a biography, as Carrère casually and rather late in the book seems to suggest, what exactly is it? Does Carrère provide any new information about Dick, or reveal new insights into his work?

The more obvious it becomes that the answer to the second question is negative, the more difficult it is to know how to answer the first. The subtitle of Carrère's book suggests that it represents a "journey into the mind," so it is probably best to understand Carrère's approach as one of pop-psychology. We are invited to gaze upon Dick the Freak, though not without sympathy; he may not be as marketable as a serial killer but, boy, is this guy cra-*hay*-zy. Carrère's hero, whom he habitually calls "Phil," is as imaginary and unreal a being as Dick himself frequently worried he might be (or, alternately, everybody *else* might be). Getting into "the mind" of Philip K. Dick involves, on the one hand, giving plot summaries of certain of his novels whose elements somehow reflect the flavour of mania Dick prefers at the time of writing, and, on the other hand, relishing the squalid rumours about how trying it is for wives and friends to live with Dick.

Carrère's "journey into the mind" is often an approximation, something like the virtual roller coaster rides in which passengers who are not actually passengers at all have their seats tilt and shake as they watch a screened image of tracks and loops. The reader of *I Am Alive and You Are Dead* feels uncertain what to think when faced with a claim like "Phil knew if he was going to avoid killing himself he would have to find a way never to be alone, not even for a minute" or "in the days that followed, Phil's dreams became even more intense" – because there is no evident authority for such statements. There is not one single note, not one listed source apart from the prefatory mention of other biographies, in Carrère's book. There isn't even an index. When one is "riding" the virtual roller coaster, the illusion is dispelled just by looking under one's seat and seeing no alarming altitude, no trestles or tracks. Every so often Carrère tries to assume Dick's voice or pretends to be intimate with his thoughts and feelings, a trick which could be sly but comes off as almost seedy. Consider the following remarks on Dick's second wife: "She may have looked like the model American wife, but there was something of the Nazi inside her: a cruelty born of the absolute certainty of being right, of believing that the natural order of things, indeed nature itself, was on her side." That looks very like an actionable bit of slander, that offhand Nazi comparison, and though Carrère's lawyer would likely defend it as an attempt to portray Dick's own muddled attitude toward his wife at this time, the absence of any cited, credible source here (diaries, letters, notebooks, anything?) would fortify the plaintiff's case. Besides, the style of the attempt has the vulgarity of a Fox network television special.

Carrère's interest in Dick's psychology is curiously limited – superficial, even – and he does not bother to dig where the soil is clearly disturbed. For example, he mentions that as a young man Dick has some anxiety that he might be homosexual, but eventually he sleeps with a girl and that, for Carrère, is as good as Samuel Johnson kicking the stone to refute the notion that the world we live in exists only as a sensory perception. Without any other knowledge or leads to go on, I'd still be skeptical about such a simplistic depiction of sexuality and neurosis, but I have read about an incident which Carrère does not seem to know about. While happily working in a record store in Berkeley, Dick once roomed with the poet Robert Duncan (a connection which boggles the mind). "One day, Duncan recalled years later," write Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian in their *Poet Be Like God* (1998), "Dick arrived on his threshold as Robert sat on his bed. With a short, convulsive movement, like Nijinsky's in the *Spectre of the Rose*, Dick arched his back and masturbated in front of an astonished Duncan." That ballet doesn't sound flatly heterosexual to me. Ellingham and Killian have notes to back up biographical anecdotes like these, and a complete index, too.

I Am Alive and You Are Dead perplexes me, not least because Dick is such an intriguing subject. The original French version of the book appeared in 1993; it has been translated more than a decade later, yet the undated preface refers to very recent movies like *Paycheck* and *Minority Report*. Carrère refers to the Polish science fiction writer "Stanislas Lem," but I have never seen his first name spelled anywhere other than Stanislaw (did no editor at the press think to check this?). Dick apparently vanishes for a couple of weeks in March 1972, last known whereabouts Vancouver; Carrère furrows his brow:

> Were I writing a novel, I would have no qualms about extrapolating at this point and would feel free to describe in detail the next two weeks in Dick's life. These two weeks constitute a black hole in my subject's biography, and I don't think one can be a novelist and not dream of building a nest in a hole like that … . A powerful novelistic magic informs those places that lack witnesses.

Never mind the absurd business of nesting in a black hole; were Carrère writing a careful and thorough biography rather than staging a dramatization, he would have no qualms about researching the problem and, if yet empty-handed, admit to minor failure, perhaps honestly speculate on the question – not exclusively the prerogative of the novelist. If Carrère is fond of reminding us that he is a novelist, it may be because he is hopeful his professional magic will disguise his lack of witnesses. ●

Funny fatalism

Gordon Dueck on the work of a fellow *yant zeeder*

A Complicated Kindness
Miriam Toews
Alfred A. Knopf Canada
246 pages, $29.95.

When *A Complicated Kindness* was released a few months back, the nation's major newspapers and trade magazines went out of their way – the *Toronto Star* reviewed it twice – to persuade an already sated Canadian reading public that this book was something special. It is. This is Miriam Toews's fourth book, her third novel. First there was *Summer of My Amazing Luck* (1996), nominated for the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal. Then came *A Boy of Good Breeding* (1998). Described as "goofy" and "sassy," these early efforts were populated by characters with names like Euphemia Funk; Indigo, Callemachus, and Finbar; Combine Jo; and Summer Feelin'. They were fun, but slight by comparison.

Instead of another quirky offering, *A Complicated Kindness* can be considered a companion piece to Toews's one "serious" book, *Swing Low: A Life* (2000). Although classified as non-fiction, *Swing Low* was an audacious work of the imagination, the story of her father's last days, written from his – a suicide's – point of view. Needless to say, it did not get nominated for the Leacock prize for humour and neither, I'm guessing, will *A Complicated Kindness*. They're both too heartrending. And yet they're also funnier than anything Toews has written before. The *Globe & Mail* reviewer, Bill Richardson, struggled to account for the paradox:

> Lord in heaven, it all sounds grim, and lord in heaven, it is, it really is. So why the compulsion to laugh so often and so heartily when reading *A Complicated Kindness*? That's the book's mystery and its miracle. Has any of our novelists ever married, so brilliantly, the funny – and I mean posture-damaging, shoulder-heaving, threaten-the-grip-of-gravity-on-recently-ingested-food brand of funny – and the desperately sad – that would be the three-ply-tissue, insufficient-to-the-day, who-knew-I-had-this-much-snot-in-me brand of sad? I don't think so.

Yeah, Bill's a bit of a booster. And he never met a hyphen he didn't like. But he's right about Toews's ability to turn the most unlikely material into big laughs. Who knew fatalism could be so funny?

The first-person narrator, Nomi

Nickel, has been described as a female Holden Caulfield. Sixteen and cynical, she lives in a small Mennonite town – East Village, a fictionalized Steinbach, Manitoba – and it is 1982. Like the Amish settlements in Pennsylvania's Lancaster County, East Village is a place that people from all over the world visit "for a first-hand look [at] backward Jesus freaks." Nomi, short for Naomi, enjoys shocking the tourists, who leave the arts and crafts displays in East Village's living museum only to encounter a genuine, thoroughly modern, local girl sitting on the curb, smoking Sweet Caporals, wearing short shorts and a tank top.

If Nomi had her way, she'd be hanging out in the other East Village, the one in Manhattan, with Lou Reed. Her mother, Trudie, has deserted the family, even though Dad Ray "loved the shit out of her, and she loved the shit out of him." Older sister Tasha has also taken off for parts unknown. Ray copes by meticulously rearranging the contents of the local dump into an order of his own devising; odd behaviour, given that he is a school teacher, not a waste-management specialist.

Nomi copes by doing dope and listening to and talking about music. (I have never come across a book so suffused with musical references. I say this despite having just read Rafi Zabor's *The Bear Comes Home*, a book about musicianship by a musician.) Her boyfriend, Travis, plays guitar when not working at the museum as an historical re-enactor. He smokes pot, too, whenever he can; even on the job, during breaks, clad in austere nineteenth century togs. He picked up Nomi at a bush party:

> You like reggae, right, he asked [passing her the hash-pipe].
>
> Kinda, I said. Some of it. And he said he did too. And then we just started talking about music because that was sort of the test of potential. Even a Menno sheltered from the world knows not to stick her tongue into the mouth of a boy who owns an Air Supply record. You might stick your tongue into the mouth of a boy who owned some Emerson, Lake and Palmer, but you would not date him on a regular basis, or openly. And then somehow Travis mentioned the name of Lou Reed without acting like a fawning dork about it and I knew then that I wanted to be his girlfriend so I stopped talking for a while and tried to act demure by keeping my lips a certain way.

TOEWS IS NOT the first Manitoba Mennonite of Russian background to write comic novels but she may be the first to write about her people in a manner that outsiders can readily understand and appreciate. Arnold Dyck, another writer from Steinbach, was the first to explore the risible potential of the Russian Mennonite dialect, but never intended his books to be read by an English-speaking public. His "Koop and Bua" story cycle, begun in the 1940s, was written entirely in Plautdietsch and is not available in translation. The closest relative to *A Complicated Kindness* would have to be Armin Wiebe's *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens*, published twenty years ago. It earned the author the Books In Canada First Novel Award in 1984, and was short-listed for the Leacock. But you probably haven't heard of Armin Wiebe either, because his fiction, while written in a kind of English, is also too rooted in the soil of the Mennonite demotic language for it to be widely appreciated.

Wiebe's portrait of Mennonite life was unashamedly, gloriously down home, although never sentimental. It was a parochial novel in the best sense, yet setting alone was not what made it so. *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* is a first-person narrative rendered in a distinctively Russian Mennonite blend of English and Plautdietsch, comparable to what Leo Rosten calls Yinglish: Yiddish + English. Because it emerged in New York City, and everyone (even a sheltered Menno) knows a little about New York, Yinglish is a lingo familiar to most readers (e.g., *you poor shmo, shlepping your yenta of a mother-in-law around the city while she kibbitzes from the back seat*). Plinglish (Plautdietsch + English), on the other hand, is a rural bumpkin, never straying far from the creeks, culverts, and gravel roads of its place of origin. As good a story as it is, Yasch's tale cannot help but be more rewarding for readers familiar with Plautdietsch.

Example: "The year they built the TV tower I was heista kopp in love with Shaftich Shreeda's daughter, Fleeda," is how Yasch begins his story. *Heista* = magpie; *heista kopp* = head over heels (because magpies can somersault); *shaftich* = cheerful; *Shreeda* = Schroeder; and *Fleeda* = Lilac. Thus, in plain old English – and English alone constitutes a very plain substitute – the sentence reads: "The year they built the TV tower I was head over heels in love with Cheerful Schroeder's daughter, Lilac."

Language, not locale, is the difference between universalism and parochialism in this instance. Both Nomi and Yasch are characters residing in rural Manitoba, he from the West Mennonite Reserve and she from the East. He could be her older cousin from *yant zeed* (the "other side" of the Red River). Both are alienated youths, but she is on the verge of assimilating, if not already there, and he feels he has no choice but to eventually settle down in the village of his birth. Nomi speaks and thinks in terms foreign to her immediate surroundings. Yasch has internalized the Manitoba Mennonite vernacular to the point where he cannot express even his most secret, forbidden

thoughts without it. Much of the pleasure to be derived from Wiebe's book, then, lies in his knack for capturing exactly how people from this part of the country speak. Or spoke, rather, because Plautdietsch is a dying language. Toew's rendering of her protagonist's inability or unwillingness to speak like an *echt* Mennonite is just as accurate, as authentic, given Nomi's age and aspirations. She knows how to curse, mock, and blaspheme ("schput") in the "whimsical language" of her people; and she knows it sounds "vaguely Yiddish." But making fun is about the extent of Nomi's engagement with her heritage.

In short, one reason *A Complicated Kindness* is so approachable is that Nomi is herself somewhat of an outsider. The most fallible of narrators at times, having no appreciation of the depth and complexity of her people's history, their reasons for being, she says things, most of them incisive but some just plain wrong-headed, about their beliefs and traditions that are hurtful to her parents. She is every immigrant's kid, in that respect.

In other respects, however, Nomi is unusually worldly for a Mennonite teen, or any teenager for that matter. She discusses Günter Grass with Travis, admires the art of Andrew Wyeth, and, as mentioned before, has been exposed to more music, secular as well as sacred, than most: besides Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground, and the early 80s pop coming over the radio (The Cars, Fleetwood Mac, Billy Joel), the girl listens to recordings of Jacques Brel, Thelonious Monk, Keith Jarrett, and Django Reinhardt. Her cultural literacy might strike the reader as unrealistically precocious – but therein lies a plot twist, a family secret not revealed until near the end of her story.

Miriam Toews grew up in Steinbach, home of the Mennonite Heritage Village, listened to the same music as Nomi, and her father was a school teacher. But *A Complicated Kindness* is autobiographical only in the sense that much of its humour and *tsuris* derives from a closely observed and carefully rendered time and place. (Full disclosure: I am a *yant zeeder*, having grown up in one of the outlying villages depicted in the narrative, and am roughly the same age as Toews.) As the raves of previous reviewers indicate, this is a book that is apt to produce juddering shocks of recognition in all readers, whatever their background. ●

World of mimicry

Clelia Scala on the tale of a counterfeiting family

Mackerel Sky
Natalee Caple
Thomas Allen Publishers
254 pages, $32.95

A few years ago when I was going through a career-choice crisis, a friend of mine gave me some advice: if you are simply interested in making money, you might as well make money. Counterfeiting is a more honest – or at least a more straightforward – approach to achieving the same end as investment banking, stock trading, or so many other career choices in our capitalist society. My friend was not seriously advocating that I take up a life of crime, but rather that I do what I love with my life. Nonetheless, he had unwittingly made an interesting point: money has no inherent value, only the value we give it. Martine and Isabelle, the mother-daughter counterfeiting team in Natalee Caple's wonderful second novel, *Mackerel Sky*, would whole-heartedly agree with my friend's assessment of jobs in a capitalist world. As they drink wine and smoke tobacco rolled in fake US currency, Martine explains her anti-capitalist philosophy to Guy, Isabelle's father: "The world doesn't distinguish between gold and silver, women and men, between diamonds and amethysts. But we do, because we create names for them."

According to Martine, human perception is unsynchronous with the non-human world. Language, Martine explains, has created "an entire world of mimicry that lies beside the real world." Words may fail us on a fundamental level and perhaps a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose and that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet; but isn't imposed value, value nonetheless? Moreover, if language never quite matches up with the world, it is also true that one person's language seldom matches up with another person's language. For example, what may be valueless paper with a president's face on it to one person, may save another person from starvation, and love may to you mean something very different from what it means to me. In *Mackerel Sky*, Caple manages to convey the enigmatic space between the "world of mimicry" and the "real world" where our words and emotions clash and coalesce to give shape to our messy lives.

Mackerel Sky comprises two stories, one set in Ravel, Quebec, and the other in Montreal. The two stories eventually unite in the town of Ste-Famille, Quebec. In the principal story, Guy returns to a farmhouse in Ravel to meet his nineteen-year-old daughter, Isabelle. When Martine, Isabelle's mother, was twenty-five years old, she seduced sixteen-year-old Guy because she wanted to have a baby. Wanting the love of a child, but not the constant company of a man,

and believing that a teenage boy would become terrified at the prospect of fatherhood and inevitably run away, Martine decided that Guy, a close family friend, was the ideal candidate for the role of absentee father of her child. Twenty years later, Guy returns to Ravel ostensibly for his daughter, but like most men he is intensely drawn to Martine and willing to risk life and limb (literally) to have sex with her.

Martine's young lover, Harry, who also lives in the farmhouse, is upset by Guy's return. Not only is he threatened sexually, but he worries that Guy will interfere in the counterfeiting operation. After leaving Martine's father, her mother, Sally, had started the counterfeiting business as a means of supporting herself, her daughter, and other women in need. Upon Sally's death, Martine took over the family business, and she, Isabelle, and Harry produce counterfeit US currency for the black market. Not caring about money themselves, except as a means of survival and a subject for late-night, drunken debate, the three carefully make the bills that they are to deliver to a couple of men that Sally used to do business with.

Initially, Martine's doctrine of life seems to fall under the fortune-cookie adage "love and do what you like," but as the novel progresses the damage inflicted by Martine's actions begin to add up, and it becomes disturbingly apparent that her seemingly carefree philosophy does not apply to the parent-child, or more specifically, the mother-daughter bond. Martine believes that "language is a system of appropriation" and she is unable to prevent herself (though it is not clear that she feels any need to) from claiming ownership over Isabelle's life.

Parent-child relationships are a central theme in *Mackerel Sky*. The second story in the novel is about Jules and Jim, two homosexual hit men living in Montreal. Towards the end of the novel, Jim thinks of his daughter, Chloe: "Mon petit chaton triste, tu es vraiment au centre de mon cœur. Tu es seule. Chloe, let me look at your fingers. Oh, Chloe, you are beyond me. Even when my heart stops, I will still remember you." Caple's description of Jim's love for his daughter is heart-wrenching, as is her description of Jules and Jim's love for each other. Jules and Jim, however, are quite loathsome men: "They used to smack people in the face with those spiked bats if they didn't pay on time. Blinded at least a few guys. Killed a woman once for screaming at them while they worked on her husband; she was begging them to stop. Jules Legrand and Jim Mann, look at them, killers."

ONE OF CAPLE'S talents as a storyteller is an ability to create characters of such rich complexity that the reader is forced to recognize the characters' humanness, no matter how repellent their actions. In her first novel, *The Plight of Happy People in an Ordinary World* (1999), Caple created a sympathetic character in Josef, a thirty-something neglectful father with a predilection for teenage girls. While Jules and Jim are even more repellent in their actions than Josef, Caple still describes them with honesty and sympathy. People are not, as Martine suggests, outside of nature. Language may be inadequate to explain the world, but language as a part of the human process must be a part of nature. Money, or the power it is given, does seem to be outside of nature. Caple's descriptions of the process of making money are quite mechanical – they read like a dry, step-by-step guide to counterfeiting – and they contrast harshly with her descriptions of nature and human interaction. A technique that is, overall, very effective.

Mackerel Sky opens with Guy explaining a revelation that he experienced when he was an office worker in Boston:

> There was a time when I thought a great deal about money. Then one day instead of going to my office I visited the aquarium … I found myself standing in front of a tank, staring at the sea horses hovering beneath the exit sign. Their spiny white bodies looked like question marks carved out of ice, suspended in the seaweed behind the dirty glass. A sign under the tank said that it is the male sea horse who becomes pregnant after sex … I stared at one obviously pregnant steed, and I thought to myself, I don't know anything about the world.

Mackerel Sky will start you thinking, like Guy, a great deal about money, and will leave you contemplating the intricacy, intangibility, and beauty of the world. ●

Worth believing

ANTJE M. RAUWERDA on some commonplace irreconcilable binaries

If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?
Finding Common Ground
J. EDWARD CHAMBERLIN
Alfred A. Knopf
271 pages, $36.95

Finding Common Ground is a long essay on the importance of stories by J. Edward Chamberlin (Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto). Two-hundred and seventy-one pages is indeed long for an essay, but the term fits better

than others, for though there is much academic material here, the book is not a Study nor does it have the feel of an Academic Book; though there are many stories in it, it is not fiction; and though there is much about Chamberlin himself and a fair bit about his family, it is not autobiography. It reads like an *essai*: an exploration of ideas, an effort. That is not to downplay what Chamberlin does, which is impressive, if a bit difficult to categorize.

The text concerns itself with irreconcilable binaries, how they are a commonplace in almost all aspects of our world, and how we can, and often do, live with them. One of the key binaries is fact and fiction. Fact: we live on land, *real* estate. Fiction: the stories we make up to explain and justify how we wound up here. Chamberlin indicates that we (white, settler North Americans in particular) like to imagine our location and existence as predicated on facts. We discredit stories. For instance, in the incident that opens the book, British Columbian government officials discredit a Gitskan land claim in the 1800s because the Gitskan testimonies are often stories and songs rather than "facts."

Chamberlin works us round to recognizing that fictions underscore even the facts we consider most empirical. Most importantly, he shows how settler North Americans, like native North Americans, South African San bushmen, Australian aborigines, Greek philosophers, British mathematicians, country or blues singers, Rastafarians and Homeric heroes (and this list is not exhaustive) are willing to believe simultaneously in contradictory "facts." We believe the earth is round and yet also use the fallacious terms sunrise and sunset. We believe in numbers like 0 (which exists and yet also signifies "nothing"). We humans, all types of us (and this is the "common ground" Chamberlin seeks), believe both quantifiable facts and representatively accurate fictions at the same time – and both are simultaneously and equally credible to us. This example is helpful:

> The notion of contradictory truths is troubling, but well beyond a setting sun and a round earth we routinely accept all sorts of them. Think of two painters sitting early one evening across the harbour from a ship at anchor. One of them, working in one mode of truthtelling, paints the ship according to the knowledge she has of it – for instance, that it has twenty-seven portholes and is grey. The other, working in an equally creditable tradition, paints seven portholes, because that's all he can see in the twilight, and he paints the ship in unlikely tones of pink and green, because that's what it looks like from where he's sitting at that hour of the day. He knows it's wrong, but he also knows it's right … . Both [portraits] are believable; and we can believe both, praising each for its authenticity and authority.

"Praising" falls short of what Chamberlin ultimately suggests about the representations we find authentic or authoritative. We don't just "praise," we believe and "We need to understand that it is in this act of believing … rather than in the particular belief, that we come together" (224). In other words, our common ground as human beings is our willingness to be like a theatre audience: to willingly suspend our disbelief. We are most unified when we share the act of believing.

OFTEN, WE suspend disbelief in order that the truth of what is fictionally represented becomes clear for us. Chamberlin argues that we rely on what is metaphorically rather than literally true. Ideally, representations are both truths and extravagant exaggerations of the real. Chamberlin quotes Thoreau: "I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extravagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced" (156). In other words, the simple truth is not enough to convey the real thing. Chamberlin adds that there is inadequate sustenance in the simple truth. We need the extravagance, for it is "the quality that counteracts what Thoreau called a life of quiet desperation; that takes us beyond the true and the untrue" (156). Chamberlin does not explicitly write what he implies here: what we want most in our true representations are versions of reality which are worthy of our belief; we want realities in which we can have faith. We'll even believe in versions of reality that exaggerate the negative because we can find reassurance and solace in them. (A fair chunk of text is dedicated to elegies that function in this way.) Chamberlin's evidence points to a startling supposition: we believe things that aren't quite true precisely because their extravagances or exaggerations make them seem more true to us. That says something significant about human psychology, doesn't it? This point grips me, but isn't the one on which Chamberlin focuses. He reiterates instead the salvific nature of stories (which may be a tad self-justifying on his part, given that he is a literary scholar who describes his profession – teaching at a University – as essentially story-telling).

I had expected the construction of "home" itself to be a more prominent feature of this *essai* than it is, though the material that is here on home makes for powerful, even emotional, reading (and draws on sources as disparate as Homer and Hank Williams). Throughout his text, Chamberlin also takes many examples from land-claims

cases (which are, of course, about home) both nineteenth- and twentieth-century, from Australia, Canada and South Africa. I find this material very compelling … but I myself have researched similar issues in those geographical areas. I wonder who else would turn to this book with the glee I did? Who is he imagining reading this? I think he would be disappointed to know it is me: another literary scholar in a similar field. The text seems to be meant to be for a "general" readership; but as with all generalizations, something is lost in an effort to be too inclusive. (Hopefully, that something is not this entire book.)

THE BOOK IS sometimes deliberately (and sometimes awkwardly) colloquial. Vocabulary choices (especially in the early chapters) are ostentatiously plain-speaking: babblers, doodlers. (If we can read in a font smaller than 26 point, surely we can be spared oversimplified terms like this?) The terms are incongruous given the elegance with which Chamberlin nuances his ideas and the sophisticated connections that bring together extremely disparate materials. Likewise (and again this is a problem mostly in the early chapters) there are some intrusive "signposts": "Let's look at," "Let me now turn to," "Let me conclude with." These rhetorical gestures to a "general" audience that may have gotten lost in his ideas are jarringly unnecessary, given that the path of the argument is usually clear. (Strangely, these intrusions almost always include the word "let".) The endnotes and index came as a bit of a surprise. They gesture towards academic research and yet, in that the notes are not numbered or referred to in the body of the text, shy away from it.

The main benefit of Chamberlin's effort to be both conversational and well-researched is that he weds academic and anecdotal detail. Thus, for example, discussions of language, identity and landscape are anchored by a powerful image like this one:

> On the wall of my room as I write this I have a picture of an Indian woman, Mrs Jimmy, whose son I used to hunt with in the Rockies. She is in a hospital bed, smoking a cigarette with fierce intensity, the last native speaker of the Kootenai dialect in that part of the country.

The immediacy of personal detail is undeniable. This story, and the broader story of language and loss, become more real (or more "true") to me because of this picture on Chamberlin's wall and because of his connection to Mrs Jimmy's son.

The truly impressive feature of this book is Chamberlin's alacrity with literary, philosophical, musical, quotidian and mathematical *exempla*. One of my favorite sections discusses our understanding of infinity (a thing we must believe in, as if it were a story, because we cannot prove it). Chamberlin starts with the ancient logical problem of Achilles and the tortoise. If Achilles gives the tortoise half the distance of the race as a head start and then runs to catch up, "[h]e never catches up, according to one impeccable line of logic, and he does catch up, according to another." Chamberlin segues from here to calculus, arguing that calculus believes in end points and limits … but cannot unequivocally prove them: "Calculus insists that calculating an *exact* area or *precise* speed can best be done – indeed can only be done – by *approximation*." Thus "calculus agrees that Achilles catches the tortoise, even though we don't know how or why." Calculus strives for the definite, but all along its definite limits are based on approximations (and on the possibility of doubt, inaccuracy and error: subtending its formulas is the fear that maybe Achiles *doesn't* catch up with the tortoise). Chamberlin seems to personify calculus as an Odyssean hero searching for a concrete home: "calculus … lives in an infinite sea and it doesn't like it. It is always looking for dry land, for a place where things have finite shape and size. But it can't live there, so it dreams about it." These connections are magical enough, but Chamberlin adds more, going on to suggest that the problem of the turtle and Achilles, calculus lost-at-sea, and your common all-garden aphorism are analogues, for aphorisms "are resolved and then dissolve and are resolved again in an endless sequence of closings and openings. *Ad infinitum*, like Achilles and the tortoise. Aphorisms provide a continual promise of meaning and continual disappointment." This line of argument is like being led through a dream: every turn presents something surprising and yet perfectly logical too.

Chamberlin convinces me by making the world sound as if everything has to do with that contradictory quality of human "truth": it usually involves at least two incompatible versions of reality, or two different stories, at the same time. He implies that if we can recognize this, we can be united in our acts of believing rather than divided by the different things we believe in. Of course this requires that we all be willing to look at the things we believe most dearly – religion, for instance – as stories. ●

Lonely melody

Brenda Keble on a novel in the form of a memoir that takes History to task

Waltzes I Have Not Forgotten
Bernadette Gabay Dyer
Women's Press
218 pp, $23.95

Bernadette dyer is the author of *Villa Fair*, a collection of short stories. (She has also contributed to *paperplates*.) *Waltzes I Have Not Forgotten*, her first novel begins with the narrator's startlingly blunt declaration that his mother was murdered in 1919. He goes on to say that

> History will not speak of her or record how valiantly she, who was little more than a child, struggled to survive against overwhelming poverty.

This narrative in the form of a memoir will record, therefore, what History has not – the tale of a boy, John, and how he was conceived during a rape, orphaned while still an infant and taken into care, first by Madame Hung Chin, a member of the Hakka Chinese community in Jamaica, then by an American storyteller, Miss Fiona Shaw, and finally by Dr and Mrs Meitner, with whom he sailed for England in 1927.

This dialogue with History may explain why some of the characters, in their own dialogue, converse as if they intended to be overheard. Such stiffness, particularly in the second part, would lend itself to a little mild amusement were it not Dyer's obvious intention to keep the reader informed of what, historically, was going on.

> "Make note of this, boys," says one of John's teachers. "History is being made as we speak! I just read in the paper that there is now a telephone line connecting London and New York. […] And another thing, an American named Charles Lindbergh has flown across the Atlantic … ."

Far from being intrusions, these facts, justified as well by John's supposedly amateur status (he's not a novelist but a memoirist), are the very signposts of memory. A psychology is certainly at work in the narrative but it seems to grow, as John does, more resilient, less impressionable. The death of Madam Hung Chin, his first stepmother, affected him deeply:

> There were times in my imaginings when, from the corners of my eyes, I thought I saw steam rise from a phantom teacup in the dark, and I would turn around quickly to see her, but she was always elusive, beyond the edge of sunbeams or the sooty darkness and the lonely melody of the house as it sighed and shifted in the night, brick against board against stone.

Feelings, however, are not the primary material; events are – which may account for the headlong impetus given to John's (quite credible) development. Not so much an *éducation sentimentale* as a simple *savoir-vivre*, John's acquiring of wisdom involves him in some dangerous situations (forged papers, the rescue of refugees) and indirectly reinforces the lesson, which he has been learning since childhood, that it is our essential goodness we should depend on to make us kin. This, despite some rather painful (not to say horrific) losses: of all John's mother figures in the novel, only Miss Shaw survives — and even she had virtually abandoned him for years. The fate of the many other characters becomes central as the novel-memoir ends. John cannot leave a single story unresolved.

The two parts of the novel are not, it must be admitted, of equal interest. Although another murder and a dangerous journey figure largely in the second half, they are less compelling to read about than the attachments John, as a child, formed with Madam Hung Chin and Miss Shaw, the descriptions of which have a freshness the more familiar plot points inevitably lack. I, for one, would have been content with less of the after-story if the author had allowed us to stay somewhat longer in Jamaica. All the same, the pacing remains strong throughout and the writing is clear, sometimes elegant.

Its structure and characterization suggest that *Waltzes I Have Not Forgotten* may be intended for a younger, though mature, reader, one who might well identify with the struggles of a displaced orphan to redeem his sorry beginnings and, by his own record, honour the memory of a much wronged mother. ●

Contributors

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Karina Fuentes's fiction has appeared in *The Adirondack Review* and *Grain*. She is currently working on her first novel.

Kurt Halliday has published in *Geist* and 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.

Adam Honsinger's work has been published in *Exile*, *subTerrain*, and *Pottersfield Portfolio*.

Roger Jones has been an arts critic and advisor but now writes full time. He lives in Toronto.

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Michael Quilty, when not travelling, rides the lines of pavement between Toronto and the spirited shores of Southern Georgian Bay. He is currently working on a full-length poetry manuscript.

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