

Lola by Night

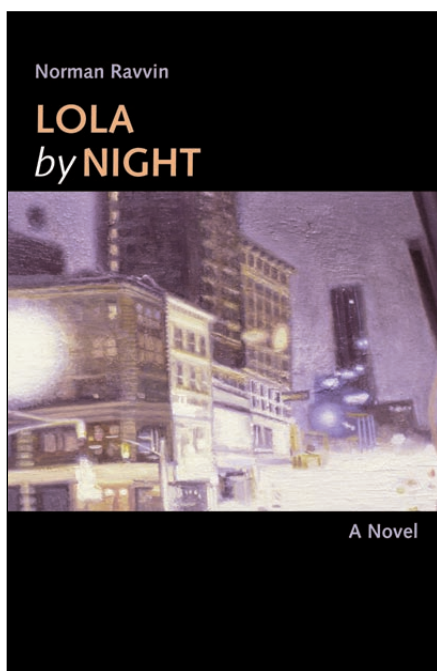
A novel by
Norman Ravvin

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

Join Lola (AKA Frida Bellavista) as she searches for the key to her father’s mysterious death, travelling from Barcelona to Vancouver, and from there to New York City, in pursuit of the recluse whose diary has furnished the first clue.

An intriguing new novel by the author of *Café des Westens* and *Sex, Skyscrapers, and Standard Yiddish*.

paper, 169 pp, \$19.95

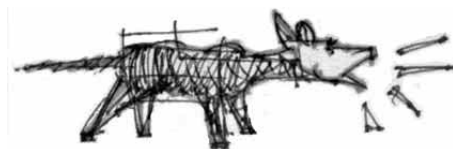


pb
paperplates
books

paperbytes

Resounding fiction
Free – Online

www.paperplates.org



NEW FROM PAPERPLATES BOOKS

papercuts

A subscription series of
printed chapbooks
dedicated to the short story

Four titles a year

One-year subscription: \$20

*Series to be edited by Rebecca Comay, Cary Fagan, and
Bernard Kelly*

Charter subscribers to receive a free copy of our
anthology *Dreaming Home*, edited by Bethany Gibson
(includes work by Michael Crummy, Elizabeth Hay,
Shauna Singh Baldwin and others)

Make cheques payable to *paperplates*

— Accepting submissions now —

Send both subscriptions and submissions
by *surface mail only* to
paperplates
19 Kenwood Ave, Toronto, ON M6C 2R8

Vol. 6, No. 3

11

ALAN M. DANZIS

Race

... the man slowly peered around the corner to see his beloved wife riding on top of a half-naked man draped in an extra-large black button-down as if he was a plastic horse ride from outside a supermarket.

MICHAEL ROTTMAN

That Thing at Bitter Bone

15

Zinga kept some bleached skulls out in front for tourists. They looked like art with the evening sunlight and all.

27

CAROLYN JOYCE BROWN

The Man Who Delivers

Once Dan was gone, she didn't find it as exciting to be having an affair. The VAR cancelled more often than he showed, blaming family commitments. She pressured him to leave his wife. He had one reason that he couldn't, then another. Same old story.

LISA FERBER

Worst Pie Ever

40

Every day Carl would look in the mirror and feel that he was living a lie. He'd look at himself and say, "Carl, you are a liar. A plain old liar."



- 5 *Japanese notes* Raymond Nakamura
- 6 *How awful* Carol Hoenig
- Deepest fear* Lyn Fox
- 9 *I want to be your best friend* Shane Allison
- 10 *Differentiating between tu and vous* Paul Ahern
- 12 *Salt* Robert James Berry
- Morning pilgrimage* Jannet Eldenwire
- 13 *Fat in the can* Liz Dolan
- 14 *The tub / two artists* Jim Johnstone
- 19 *The coffee was bitter* Ashok Niyogi
- 20 *Union Station* Owen Laukkanen
- 24 *Devices on stand-by* Kelly Ann Malone
- 25 *Tender Age* Ruth Latta
- 26 *Ann's Studio of Dance* Andrea Venantius
- 29 *Excavation* Cara Waterfall
- 30 *Newton exposed* Cathalynn Labonté-Smith
- Spring and winter* Richard Norman
- 31 *Moblinsky at the Wheel* Tim Lehnert
- 32 *Human Cosmos* Dave McIntyre
- 39 *Last things* Stephen Oliver
- Settling down / Atom* Amy Jan Vrem
- 45 Reviews by Michael Kelly, Brenda Keble, Karl Buchner, and Gordon Dueck
- 51 Contributors

COVER PHOTO: Bernard Kelly

In brackettes

paperplates

publisher & editor

Bernard Kelly

layout & production

Perkolator {Kommunikation}
www.perkolator.com

reviews editor

Tim Conley

fiction editor

Bethany Gibson

poetry editor

Colleen Flood

contributing editors

Maja Bannerman, Gil Gauvreau,
Michael Kelly, Dan Yashinsky

guiding light

Alice Kane 1908 – 2003

coordinates

paperplates
19 KENWOOD AVE
TORONTO, ONTARIO M6C 2R8
Tel: 416-651-2551
magazine@paperplates.org
www.paperplates.org

ISSN 1183-3742

submissions

We welcome submissions. For our guidelines, send a stamped self-addressed envelope to the address above, or write to guidelines@paperplates.org; or pick them up at our website

We cannot be held responsible for unsolicited material.

Copyright © 2005 *paperplates* for the contributors. No part of this publication may be reproduced without our consent.

RICHARD OUTRAM died earlier this year of what one newspaper described as “willful hypothermia,” a phrase that Richard himself (and perhaps he alone) would have had some fun with. He was a generous contributor to *paperplates*. The following is a sample of his wit.

18 July 1994

Dear Bernard

Ah well, I might have known that you are an Apple fancier. So here is the diskette [why is this suffix diminutive so *dreadful*? I mean, why not just small disk? Do you know of anyone who boasts in these post-art deconian times of having a ‘kitchenette’ in their ‘maisonette’? And what of gender implications: has a disk sex, liken unto an usherette or a drum majorette (‘a girl who twirls a baton,’ says Webster; what *economy* of mellifluous phrase! That a drum majorette might have sex inundated the reveries of many a stalwart youth of my high school days: ‘Honey, you can twirl my baton anytime ...’ now, why does this strike such a different note; rude, yes, as in rude health, yet somehow self-embarrassed, adolescent-crass; although in the blues of, say, Bertha ‘Chippie’ Hill – was it she who so memorably put it ‘See that spider, climbin up the wall. / I say, see that spider, climbin up the wall. / He goin up there / To git his ashes hauled’?? – such locutions perform effortlessly, from the ‘Moi bloke ’as got the biggest cucumber in the ’ole h’allotment ...’ of English music hall? When Auden was asked to describe the difference between English and American verse, he said, as usual, a wise thing: “The fingering is different.”) and one must suppose that a very small, compact cadency mark of a fourth son would have to be a ‘martletette’, but here the overburdened soul cries out ‘O lift me from the grass! / I die! I faint! I fail!’ or even, if one is partial to the *Epipsychidion*, ‘I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!’] you requested.

yours in travail,

Richard

– Bernard Kelly

Japanese notes

SOME STREET PUNKS and Nazis took me back to Japan the other day. They were part of a choir from a Japanese Christian girls school who performed *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music* in costume at UBC's Chan Centre. Their repertoire might have been Western, but everything else made me think of Japan.

They handed out English scripts because they sang in Japanese. I didn't have time to study, so I was glad I already knew the stories. I can converse in Japanese, but singing is hard to understand. Then again, even in English, musicals don't always make sense to me.

The light wood matrix of the stage backdrop looked like Japanese sliding doors, except that the white opaque panes were intact, unlike the paper ones in real Japanese homes where the kids poke them full of holes. I first saw *West Side Story* more than ten years ago, in the home of my supervisor at a marine station in southern Japan. On the day I arrived, he invited me for dinner. He, his wife and I sat around a low table eating steamed rice, grilled fish and pickled vegetables, watching young men dance with knives on a little tv. In Japan, everybody has little appliances; they have no room for big ones. I employed every last bit of my university Japanese to compliment the food and ask about the weather. The young Japanese women of this private Christian high school valiantly struggled to portray Hispanic male gang members. They had trouble projecting at lower registers and their body language seemed

too gentle. Some chorus members buttoned their shirts all the way up, looking more like geeks than gang members. The coarse masculine Japanese interjections of the men seemed to stick in their throats. It must have contravened all their upbringing. The latent violence and cultural tensions of *West Side Story* must have been utterly foreign to their experiences in the low crime, relative homogeneity of Japanese society. I admired them for stretching.

Japan has a theatrical history of cross-dressing. In Kabuki, men play all the parts. They even say only a man can play a perfect woman because a man knows what men want. Takarazuka features exclusively female musicals. I don't know if they make any claims to masculine perfection. After intermission, the choir appeared on stage as you might expect a Japanese choir to appear. The students formed a sea of blue sailor uniforms with streaks of red handkerchief. They sang Japanese folks songs, some of which I recognized, to my surprise. As a kid, I was a delinquent Japanese student. Maybe my mom played a scratchy 78 while I slept. They sang about the four seasons, of which the Japanese seem inordinately fond. When I lived in Japan, even people in the south, where it hardly snows, asked me if Canada had four seasons. As a cheeky Torontonionian, I said, "Yes, we do. In fact, our seasons are better than yours. We have snow and fall colours." Now I am a smug Vancouverite who distinguishes only the ski season and the beach volleyball season, although I don't participate in either. After these two sets, we could have gone home satisfied with a pleasant evening of music. But the Japanese are fond of the word "Gaman," which means something like "Put up with it." My parents and grandparents must have used the word a lot during World War II, when the Canadian government interned them for sharing

genes with the enemy. Modern Japanese are the sort of people who watch marathons on tv. I didn't expect this tenacity to apply to choir recitals as well. Following a twenty-minute intermission, they began *The Sound of Music*.

I first saw *The Sound of Music* in downtown Vancouver, a few years ago. I was one of the few guys — straight even, at the singalong version. We received props like plastic Edelweiss to wave when they sang the song, and party crackers to pop when the young lovers first kissed. The movie was subtitled, as in karaoke, but most people other than me already knew all the words. Enthusiastic as the performers were, my behind was not happy about being sat upon for so long. I was feeling less like ray, a drop of golden sun, and more like, doh, a phrase of Homer Simpson. Still, I had to admit *The Sound of Music* suited the choir better. I didn't mind so much if the Nazis were effeminate. I remembered the first time I saw a map of Kyoto and thought it was home to neo-Nazis. Then I found out the ancient symbol for a Buddhist temple is a swastika in the opposite direction. I wondered if the students thought about Japan's role in World War II. The Japanese government is notorious for doctoring history books regarding their position along the original axis of Evil. When what we hoped was the end arrived around the four-hour mark, we applauded politely. The conductor in some sort of fascist delusion took this as encouragement. They performed three more pieces before we could escape. Someone needed to slap the man and explain that even if some is good, more is not necessarily better. But that wouldn't be very Japanese.

— Raymond Nakamura

How awful!

HOW DID THE word *awe-ful* eventually come to mean *awful*? There used to be a time when the word meant *inspiring awe*. That no longer seems to be the case. For some reason, when I was considering this word and its definition, an image of Niagara Falls came to mind. It was only last summer when I trekked to one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World for the first time and what will most probably be the last. I did indeed wonder what made this tourist trap so attractive since I found it to be rather awful – no, not the poetic awe-filled, but awful.

I suppose if I were to have kept my eyes on the expansive spraying cataract and my back to the carnival atmosphere behind me, I might have been less disenchanted. However, as I approached the Falls, it wasn't the rush of water I could hear but the noise coming from the arcades strewn along the cluttered streets, and it wasn't the aroma of the outdoors in its rawest form but of sugary cotton candy and greasy burgers. I stayed long enough to say that I'd been there and then left.

JUST DAYS EARLIER than that disappointing venture, I had returned to the place where I'd been raised and wanted to see the nearby chasms of my childhood, about a ten-mile ride from my parents' home. My brother was also in town and agreed to take me. We had to turn off the main highway and on to a secondary road and then, finally, to a narrow shrubby path. My brother parked the car and we trekked down a steep dirt trail that led into the thick of woods. After several minutes of walking through pine duff and climbing over downed tree trunks, we could hear the sound of

rushing water. Childhood memories were stirred by the redolence of the musty outdoors, and then there they were, in all their untouched grandness: The Chasms. Granted, they were not nearly as wide or as high as the Seventh Natural Wonder, but they were unaffected by commercialism. The sight was awe-inspiring. Anxious about the unguarded drop below me, I stood back some and gazed at nature in its pristine state.

Moments later, we could hear the sound of voices in the distance. Then, four gangly teenagers appeared. They nodded in our direction. Without much hesitation, each in turn took a leap off the edge of the cliff and into a fifty foot or so drop, only a short distance from the more treacherous 120-foot fall. I was amazed at these young adventurous country boys. Once they found their way back to the top of the cliff, they did it all over again. There were no cacophonous sounds from a nearby arcade, no carnival aromas. The memory still makes me smile. I'm not sure if it could be defined as a simple pleasure, but it was confirmation that less is more. I thought about what Niagara Falls may have been like before some entrepreneur saw it as a money-making enterprise. I imagine there were those who packed a lunch and sat on the rocky edge across the way and watched as the water spilled ceaselessly into the chasm. It must have been romantic at one time, certainly the true honeymoon destination for many. Now, it's a cheapened spot for the less imaginative.

Still, I'm glad I had the opportunity to take the trip and experience it all for myself.

DAYS LATER, AFTER my vacation was over and I was at a meeting, someone asked what I did while off. I shared my experience and disappointment about Niagara Falls, going into detail about the tackiness of it all. Some

time passed and a young woman sitting across from me and new to the company started talking about her upcoming wedding. When asked where she and her fiancé were going on their honeymoon, she glanced in my direction and muttered, "Niagara Falls."

I smiled and attempted to backtrack by reasoning aloud that I was sure she'd have a great time, while thinking to myself, "How awful."

– Carol Hoenig

Deepest fear

INNOCENCE, in a sense, dies when fear is born.

Vancouver Island doesn't seem like the place to confront terror. Sailing, windsurfing, and kayaking don't seem like ways to do so. Yet it was, and they were. You see, my deepest fear is just that: phobia of the deep. This began with a near drowning, thrashing about wrapped in tentacles. I'll come back to that later.

Saturday, I rode a crisp, isle-bound breeze out of English Bay with my buddy Rob, his black mutt Wally, and two bikini-clad friends. (Vanquishing inner demons need not be unpleasant.)

We hoisted the sails. Virgin cloth unfurled in whip-cracking independence before succumbing to Calypso's caress. Wedding-white tufts billowed in a marriage of wind and craft, giving birth to speed.

W.O. Mitchell described prairie as the least common denominator of nature: land and sky; all around me was aqua prairie. I saw the blue, felt the spray, heard the roar, tasted the salt.

Gripping a taut line allowed me to lean out and peer down. Coho Salmon skiffed the surface. A luminous smack of Moon Jellies drifted in the murky depths. I imagined the

colossal White Sturgeon and Pacific Octopus skulking far below. I imagined there were things down there I couldn't imagine.

Suddenly, a signature sound spun my head like a Pavlovian bell. Uncapped beer! An ice-sweating bottle was pressed into my sweat-sweating hand. I indulged immoderately. (Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.)

More brews pressed themselves into my hand 'til a thought struck me: I had never fly cast from a sailboat. No one that I knew had. Why anglers never stand on a rocking deck whizzing a hook back and forth past ropes, sails, and human appendages was beyond me. Fetching my rod, I swaggered off to pioneer the sport Discovering the ocean lacked fish, I set about untangling my line.

SPLASH! ROB FELL overboard. With an "I-meant-to-do-that" smirk, he beckoned us to swim. Only loyal Wally responded. Once afloat, the panicky pup couldn't reboard. Attempting to board Rob instead, the hapless hound clawed a shirtless swimmer. Rob howled. Orgasmic at this display of canine affinity, Wally howled in harmony. By the time we hauled them aboard, man/beast bonding had shredded Rob bloody.

"You look like a skinned elk!"

"You still look like a —!"

While Lori and Angie doted over our wounded sailor, I wondered what injuries I could incur.

Lori went below deck to pee. "Oh, my gosh! Angie! You gotta see these cute little nautical fixtures." Directly above, Angie opened a hatch and began photographing Lori on the toilet. Rob and I exchanged "pinch-me-I'm-dreamin'" glances as adolescent fantasy #47 was fulfilled.

At dusk, we coasted into the shallows of a remote skerry. China Rockfish fled from our approach as

Sea Anemones waved us in. Harbor Seals and Steller Sea Lions issued a honking, barking intruder alert.

Calling it a night, we anchored off the rocky islet. Wispy trees clung to bleached boulders like nymphs embracing hulks. Being gentlemen, we let the girls sleep on the boat. Being drunk, we offered to sleep on the girls.

Sunrise and a squawking gull came about five minutes later. Wally's tongue woke all slackers. We cast off quietly, barely rippling the still, glassy waters, and drifted like a ghost ship into the Georgia Strait.

All morning, a lone cloud raced our boat: two parallel ovals crossing azure planes without perceptible motion. An inquisitive Pacific Whitesided Dolphin briefly broke the monotony. Finding us boring, he moved on.

Mid-day sun. Shadows disappeared from the deck; shimmerings appeared on the horizon. Baked-brain euphoria. We docked at Parksville with glowing skin and dangerous bliss. Swapping sea legs for Highway 4 and a Ford Explorer, we started across the island.

Our first stop was Cathedral Grove. This towering stand of cedars goes back over eight-hundred years. These trees remember when the Americas were an infinite wilderness: the last worthy staging ground for a man's primal dreams.

For me, old-growth forest is sacred ground. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald, "I held my breath for a transitory enchanted moment in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation I neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to my capacity for wonder."

Abandoning such noble reflections, I attempted to impress the babes by hyperbolizing the California Redwoods (snow job falling on cedars). Rob would not be outdone. Offering a glimpse of even bigger tim-

ber, he reached for his zipper as I hastily changed the subject.

The drive to Nitinat Lake gave me time to panic. Sailing was one thing; windsurfing and kayaking were another. The watery abyss and I were about to get better acquainted. I remembered how fearless I used to be.

ONE CHILDHOOD SUMMER, my Dad and I climbed Half Dome. This lightning-charred geological celebrity, with its round back and sheer vertical face, has reigned over Yosemite for eons, awaiting the attentions of its personal paparazzi, Ansel Adams. Our trek was a historical footnote, except in the mind of a young boy.

We set up base camp just below the summit ascent. Didn't sleep much. A group of nearby nudists smoked herb and shuffled DNA. I was fascinated, and repulsed. (Getting back to nature may be great, but exposure to the elements had eroded these hippies rather harshly.)

Our boots hit the upward trail at dawn. Trees and clouds, each in turn, deserted us to our sole companion: the relentless sun. After a rest, just long enough for chipmunks to spoil our water, we poured the contaminated life-nectar on the ground.

My father was breathing hard. Suddenly, I realized that while I was growing up, he was growing old. "I guess we better turn around," he panted. "If I go much farther, I won't make it back down."

Glaring at him with fire in my eyes, I snapped, "Dad, we never said we'd make it back down; we just said we'd make it to the top!"

Bravado comes easy for kids. Not understanding life's value, they wager the commodity freely. Inhibition comes easy for adults. Not appreciating life's brevity, they let caution steal their dreams. A little fear is good, but it must be mastered.

WE FINALLY REACHED the dreaded loch. Nitinat Lake is an inlet that acts as a sea-breeze-collecting wind tunnel. Picture a hurricane, with a crowded campground.

Rob tossed me a slimy, foul-smelling wetsuit, probably harbouring more unseen critters than any body of water. I suited up with all the optimism of a Texas inmate filing for clemency. Grabbing our gear, we trudged to the shore.

In seamless motion, Rob hopped on his board, popped up his sail, and snagged a passing gust. Lori and Angie looked at me for a duplicate performance. I got on, fell off, got on, fell off, etc., etc., etc.

Some time later, I was saddling the wind and riding the range. *Yee Haw!* Then, it hit me: the longer I stayed up, the farther out I'd go. Every second I surfed was ten feet of algae I'd swim. Oh, the injustice! Rode that little Philly to the middle of the corral. Then the wind died. "Son-of-a —" *Kersploosh!*

Sputtering and thinking happy thoughts, I dog-paddled the rig through primordial broth. Rubbery, decomposing vegetation fondled my toes. I couldn't resist a flashback to when this paranoia began.

ONE CHILDHOOD SPRING, I was tubing down some torrential snowmelt. The brown, interchangeable forestry sign proclaimed the river safe. This satisfied my parents. (The only rafting reassurance I, Huckleberry Lyn, needed would have read: "Objects in icy mountain water are not as small and shriveled as they appear.")

Shooting over white, foamy moguls, I rounded a bend. Instantly, the water became still, deep, and green. Leaves circled aimlessly in whirlpools. Shade cooled the air and shadowed the sandy bottom. Submerged in the emerald calm was a hollow, fallen tree.

I dove down for a closer look.

Breaststroking into the cavernous root tangle, I snagged my sandal. A first freeing attempt failed. My lungs emptied; my confidence vanished. In a panicked frenzy, I hallucinated the roots were giant squid tentacles. Instead of unbuckling the tiny leather shackles, I yanked and yanked, losing consciousness.

Lying one-shoed and gasping on the bank, I remembered nothing of my escape to the realm of air. Dad and I searched all afternoon for the sandal. We didn't find it, because I didn't take him to the same place. To plagiarize Norman Maclean, I am haunted by waters. My fears merge into one, and a river runs through it.

SO THERE I was at Nitinat, encircled again by writhing plants. This time, I stayed cool. Neptune granted me safe passage; sea dragons took a holiday. I sloshed ashore as Rob readied the kayaks. Forgetting to be scared, I was soon mid-lake doin' the oar-and-torso boogie.

"Flip over!" Rob commanded. Flip over? Voluntarily? This was certainly counter-intuitive. Rob explained that a safe recovery is your basic kayaking skill. Hmmm. Sounded like a terrorist plot to me. I reached down deep, mustering a force even stronger than fear: male ego — you know, never let 'em see ya sweat, better dead than chicken, that sort of thing.

I flipped over. There is nothing more stimulating than looking at the reflective undersurface of a lake with a deluge surging up your nose. Did I say stimulating? I meant horrifying and nauseating.

Rob left me floundering, just long enough to pay for everything I'd ever done to him — real or imagined. Then he paddled alongside, so I could use his kayak to right myself. I practiced over and over 'til flipping became smooth.

All the way home, I savoured my

little victory — small step for mankind, big step for me. Nearing Vancouver, we dropped sail. A full moon hung in cobalt over the city's glittering-pearl skyline; snowcapped mountains saw-toothed across the horizon; sultry rhythms floated over from the Jericho Beach Jazz Festival.

While Angie grilled salmon, zucchini, and portabellas, Rob popped a cork. Lori stuffed a morsel of sourdough and Brie into my mouth as I garbled out, "If this is terror, I could probably get used to it."

THUS ENDS A ritual voyage from boyhood to manhood, from fallacies to phalluses. I no longer fear deep, dark waters. (Now, I fear brewski: lurking in those clear, golden waters are excess carbs and impaired seamanship.) Water was the spawning ground of my fears. Following life's cycle, I returned to the source.

Fear, in a sense, becomes the birthplace of courage.

— Lyn Fox

I want to be your best friend

I want to be your best friend,
So what do I have to do?
Who do I speak with about these
Latter-day Saint desires?
Surely there are steps that must be taken.
I'm sure there are rules to follow
Before one can become your best friend; a series of
Tests I must go through like
Walking across a bed of coals, hammer nails through my tongue
If I want to go to a movie.
I will have truckloads of flowers delivered to your wife.
I will come to your house every Saturday morning for six months
And wash your mother's Volvo.
I'm going out to bars more.
Practising getting drunk to the point of spending the night
At the house of some guy I throw up on.
I'm reading a book on bar etiquette.
I've damn near got a hold of this thing called "pool."
I'm learning to curse like a Brooklyn sailor & fart in public.
If need be, I will hit on a girl, talk about how great her tits
Are if need be.
I'll eat her pussy if it means I would be the first one you'd
Call in case of a flat tire or a battery that has dropped dead.
I have curled up beneath my covers with short stories by all your favourite
Authors. I take the time to memorize your poems on Sundays.
Cut off the edges like a p-nut butter & jelly sandwich & paste
Them in my journal w/ the black velvet cover this time.
I saw you at the poetry reading garnished in that black dress shirt
You bought from TJMaxx.
You looked tired, angry & rejected.
Did Allison Joseph piss you off again?
Do you think she's taking your work seriously
Or using them like biscuits to sop up her husband's piss?
You're more than a contender.
You're the goddamned heavyweight champion of contemporary poetry.
The Queen of England just called & wants an autographed copy of your
Chapbook, *Meat Out of the Eater*.
You are the tooth fairy visiting me dressed in faded jeans w/ side burns.
You're a thief w/ Stephen Dobyns' books stuffed in your thermal underwear.
The Easter Bunny ain't got shit on you.
You are the Poet Laureate of the Universe;
The only God I believe in.

– Shane Allison

Differentiating between tu and vous

Congratulations on the *fête du jour* and *prix fixe* as well as the *service compris* during a time of obvious *gratis non-publica*!

No doubt voices echoed down buffed halls and heads clinked off tiled floors; when the abscess burst it sent all afloat in not fruit but phlegm.

Don't stop thinking about shaded life with cigarettes dangling and long-coated collars raised and everything quite London, 1960's.

It reminds me of hitting the brakes not knowing if the car was big enough to take care of the Kamodo dragon (all 12 feet of it!) and hitting it, waiting for it to jump through the undercarriage like the endoplasm of a prehistoric egg.

But fate was with me and spun perfect and called for a Haz-Mat team to clear the venom that was like goo rather than rubbing alcohol spurting through the rubber-filmed one-way top of a flask in Flagstaff.

And I can't say that I haven't thrown years away myself, hoping drunk that the mattress and music would stay warm.

But late afternoon headaches came and ruined the vision of that: All the better! I've traded cold afternoon comforts and Budweiser beer for brighter days and better sleep and welcoming days, welcoming, as trite as that sounds.

And to walks and to not shake from without, but to bounce as one and not one independent of the other.

Still, I am drawn by the crisp and frosted even though I'd been burned back in the days of untimed toasters.

And I am still vulnerable to early drunks, next day phone calls and halitosis mornings.

But to walk down the street and feel some peace with it; no not as this or not nearly that, but now taken with the sauce as well as the meat and cheese of it, and not throwing the crust away either.

Only 110 calories take a long time to add up.

– Paul Ahern

Race

H

HE HAD FORGOTTEN his glasses that morning.

He had tossed them aside last night while Janet was nuzzling his neck; they were probably still on the bedroom nightstand between her current night-time paperback and a pair of diamond earrings he gave her for Christmas two weeks ago.

As he rushed back up the porch steps, back into the house, he began to hear the upstairs bedpost connecting with the newly painted bedroom wall. Slowly, he began to climb the thirteen hardwood stairs Janet insisted on when they bought the house four and a half years ago. He paused – for a moment – to pick up a pair of scissors their six-year-old son had left on the third step this morning while he rushed to finish a school project. When he reached the second floor, he heard the scant moans of ecstasy and pleas for something to be done harder.

Once reaching the bedroom door, the man slowly peered around the corner to see his beloved wife riding on top of a half-naked man draped in an extra-large black button-down as if he was a plastic horse ride from outside a supermarket. Neither seemed to notice the supposedly off-to-work husband, glaring at them from behind the doorframe ... until the baby began to cry. As Janet turned around – still in rhythm – she saw her husband of eight years staring straight into the eyes of her lover.

The blood drained from Janet's face; lust turned to dread.

Her loving husband's right hand, scarred from a stove fire he accidentally set as a child, was clutching a pair of scissors so hard, blood dripped from his palm onto the oriental bedroom rug. Eyeing her look, the husband began to walk over to the dresser, very slowly, and placed the scissors down, quietly, next to Janet's jewelry box. Janet's fears subsided until she followed her husband's eyes as they turned from disgust at what was on top of the bed, to relief at what was under it.

Janet didn't say anything; dread had turned to fear.

A few years ago, Janet was almost killed in a robbery attempt in the city. Her husband – a serious anti-gun advocate – resisted purchasing a handgun for years, until Janet threatened to get one with or without him.

Janet, of course, knew the gun was there as well. She knew her husband's temper and she knew his love for her; the love that she tried to forget every morning she spent with her lover. He was always more passionate than she was and was prone to violent outbursts; he once punched a hole in the kitchen wall when Janet dropped a box of new wine glasses. Janet quickly realized that by the time she had managed to push her lover out of the way, throw her arm under the bed, and place her shaking hands on the revolver, her husband would have already gotten there. He would win the race, hands down.

But there was nothing else to do; fear had turned to acceptance.

When her husband started walking towards the bed, avoiding eye contact with the formerly entwined couple, Janet did all she could do and moved across her lover's body. She started leaning over the bed to begin the frantic search for the revolver under the bed. The race was on; Larry's glasses would soon be splattered in blood.

Salt

for Ahila

A word like salt
needs no adjectives
to taste it.

Haunches of ham cure;
they hang saltily.

Thirst of the flat earth
is apocryphally,
a pillar of grief.

But I recall you
rolling sea salt between your
thumb and little finger

splendidly nude

your sight framing the cabbage trees
and a wall of rain, eating celery.

– *Robert James Berry*

Morning pilgrimage

Abstract

until details are so excluded you have a blank canvas.
He withers beyond the concrete,
mercury flavoured battery acid,
down his neck.

The lilies are making love to skylights,
tonight
and tomorrow in the shower they'll realize this
(guilt feeling, maybe).

Beyond the reach of dogmas:
Ah, now this is crumbling freedom!
Dr. Scientist, thank you.
His deceivers had many thoughts about Death,
too bad they're all forgotten,

now. Slipping in between split hairs,
Ah, now this is forsaken truth.
Fine line between pleasure and exhaustion.
Desire?
No, much more than that.
He'll know what it was tucked away under
cobwebs between her breasts.

– *Jannet Eldenwire*

Fat in the can

On the sunny back porch of his summer home,
Uncle Dan, even and easy like my mother,
constructing a lamp from wooden matchsticks,
calls me Crisco, Aunt Mary cutting chunks
of the luminous lard into her pie crust
on the vermilion table. I, eleven,
in t-shirt and shorts, clicking my Wrigley's,
cringe and shrink from him. Nine years later,
as I take the novice's white veil,
he stands proudly next to me,
my starved body swallowed by the folds
of a lily-coloured linen gown and scapular,
my thick hair shorn
my face as pallid as my wimple.
I took my mother's and father's names
when I should have been shedding them.
Did the sisters set me on this path
when they chose me at five to crown the Virgin
Queen of the May? She was elegant, imperially
slim unlike my full-breasted mother,
whisking the stir-about,
mewling babies on each ample hip,
her brother Dan, still single,
reading *The Daily News*,
slurping the cereal and sipping the tea
she brewed for him from a china cup.
Nobody was going to feed on my flesh.
Each day in school the Virgin loomed above us
her exquisite hands outstretched, her index finger
beckoning me. One by one we dropped our daisies,
her perfected foot crushing the head of the serpent.

– *Liz Dolan*

The tub

for Vicki Sloat

I can see where Adonis
climbed beyond the porcelain lip
quickly burning his foot

it was a threat

he had dreamed of becoming art
brushstrokes
defining his musculature

not this repetition
gingerly checking the deep
his hands wasting movement
never confined

to a demure body
soaked with rusty bathwater
insisting on a canvas

before all
filtered down the drain
& the room was bare

ready for the eyes of the masses
like a table with fake oranges
or apples

two artists

You had to train yourself to hear
in a room that was full of insects
you used to call it “your hell”
& regretted the buzzing of moths & flies
each wing owned your ears
with the hum of eaten silences
the character of lies in your mouth
when you spoke to me on frozen nights
forming your own definition of love
telling me that I could be the man
you dreamed of having listen to your own sounds
when all you were was a dancer
playing games in that lonely room
& today bringing me home to watch
your body bend in half
shape itself like a bell for my words
giving me the lonely task of a poet
rendering you with my eyes
building your movements with verbs
our lives private like the ocean inside a seashell
our words desperate to save what we left behind

– *Jim Johnstone*

That Thing at Bitter Bone



HERE WAS AN old place on the river called Bitter Bone. A fantastic Indian name, Bitter Bone, and Zinga lived near it, around where the river becomes a swamp. It's not much of anything where it's a river, truth be told, and that's where I lived.

Zinga sold animal skulls out of his shack. In a place called Bitter Bone, it's too perfect. I think that's why he chose it. First time I met him, I asked him why skulls.

"They're special. They have powers. To some people."

"I think they're fakes."

"They're all real skulls."

"I mean I think their powers are fake. I don't think they're the real thing."

"Yeah, and I pretend I'm an Indian too."

He was an Indian, though, and he could have made big money if he'd played it up, gone the craft circuit, but he didn't want to. It wasn't out of pride, it was 'cause Zinga didn't like people, white or Indian or whatever. He had his regular customers, mostly old women, and they didn't talk much, which suited him fine.

Second time I saw him, I asked about his business.

"What do you live on? I never see you sell anything."

"You only been here twice, what do you know about it? Most people pay in goods. It's enough for me."

"You ever paid taxes?"

"I sent the government a few rabbits once and they sent me back the feet."

I was surprised that he could tell a joke, and it seemed to take a lot out of him. "Go away," he said.

It took a few months before he would let me sit around for a day now and then. And listen, it wasn't like we made a great friendship or learned lessons about ourselves, anything that would make a great novel. I just had nothing else to do. Zinga's place was just a place to hang around. It had nice sunlight in the evening, and it made the swampy part look like paint. The sort of paint that you see in landscape painting, scraped off and turned into liquid again, but still looking like it was part of a painting. Like that. Zinga kept some bleached skulls out in front for tourists. They looked like art with the evening sunlight and all. Arty tourists were hard to come by, though, so the skulls were used by Indians.

"What for?"

"Who cares?"

I thought about it.

"Well, if they use one for something and its powers are supposed to do something else, wouldn't that be cause for some kind of —"

"Hey, shut up."

A few days later he said something about how he didn't make the powers, he didn't dip the skulls in a potion or anything, they just existed. I think it might have been an apology for saying "shut up," but I didn't want to ask because, as you know, ignorance is the best policy.

“Don’t you ever get lonely?”

“Screw everybody.”

There was a time to ask questions. You just had to know when. Zinga always acted like there was a measuring scale inside him, and you had to sit and wait, sometimes days, not talking – one time it was a week and a half, and I thought I was used to it, but that one drove me nuts. Anyway, maybe not a scale, but you had to wait for the air to lift, until you sensed he was ready. That’s when he’d give you an answer. Ask any other time, you’d get the mood all out of whack. Complicated for a simple guy, Zinga.

There were two things, and I don’t know if they were related, but it’s fun to think they are. This Indian woman, a regular, stepped up to the bone shelf one day, took a long look and told Zinga a few of his skulls had turned.

I asked, “You mean gone bad?”

She walked away.

“You think you can do better?” Zinga yelled. “If I lose business, I’m coming to find you.”

He looked at the skulls. They looked back. Today they were bored and heavy. Lazy. It was a pretty good show, watching these skulls day after day, because they changed a lot.

“Maybe they have osteoporosis,” I said. I laughed. Then I said it again.

Zinga sat down and we drank. He looked straight ahead. He seemed like he wanted to get up, but he didn’t. We sat for an hour and then he took one of the skulls. A little raccoon skull. He brought it up to his face and shut one eye. I don’t know what he was looking for, because they’re hollow. Then he turned it sideways and looked straight out the lined-up eye holes, one in front of the other.

“Looks like a cave.”

The funniest thing about skulls is how surprised they all seem. It’s the wide eye holes. They’re embarrassed that they don’t have skin. That’s my theory.

THAT WAS THE first thing. The other thing, it was the main thing. They’re kind of related, but only in a cheap way, like a cheap way to make two things make sense. I don’t know.

Zinga didn’t talk for a few days after that woman showed up, and a few days became a long time, no one bought, and for once it was getting to him. It was like he had to prove what good skulls he had. He needed to sell one and then it didn’t matter if he didn’t sell another for ten years.

So these two girls showed up. In a little square car. It just kind of appeared at the end of Zinga’s driveway, which is really long and not quite his, and we could see two girls talking. Then the car rolled up over the smooth rocks. The one girl’s head and arms popped through the sun roof.

“Evenin’, boys.”

There are two reasons people say things like that: they

want something or they’re making fun. Young, pretty, blonde girls like this, who don’t have to work at it, generally make fun. But you don’t come to Bitter Bone and turn down a road marked “Unmaintained” without some angle.

She tapped the roof. “Fine night for sitting.” She smiled at Zinga. No wonder. The guy had his hands on his hips, sitting straight-backed and bent-necked, lip out and mouth open, the caveman receiving fire.

“Fine night for driving,” I said. “What’s UFB?”

She touched her cap. “Just our school. I gotta tell you, whatever place this is, it’s perfect.” This was said more to the other girl. The blonde yanked up her shiny knees and chopped them through the side window. Then she slid herself out. That takes grace.

“Really, I’m not being ‘city girl,’ I come from near the country. Sparkstown? Sort of out eastish. I want to move back some day. I think I could handle being away from everything, but I’d need to get back to the city every once in a while.”

The other one stepped out of the driver’s side and I could tell her story, *bang*, in one shot. This was the Friend. Dark hair, uneasy. She looked like she was starting to thicken, the way most people’s bodies settle in their twenties. These lines around her eyes did a little dance whenever the blonde talked. Maybe it was lines from her jaw that did it, the jaw going tight when the other girl opened her mouth. The jaw makes these muscles in your temples move.

Zinga’s skulls. You can learn a lot.

The blonde came across the yard like she was walking to the fridge. “Diddle-din-don-din-don-din-don-din.” Just so you know, that’s the banjo riff from *Deliverance*. “D’you mind? We thought we’d see the country, get back to the woods. Mighty nature women.” She laughed a practised laugh for her friend. “I lasted one night in the tent. Then we started looking for motels. God, that was worse.”

The other one stood leaning on the car. She looked partial to cracking up. I felt for her. So I smiled. She didn’t smile back. I wondered who was paying for the motels.

“Admit it, this is wicked. They’re selling bones here.” The Friend was looking at Zinga’s lumpy roof. Zinga hadn’t moved. The blonde turned to me, ‘cause I was the one smiling. “Just visiting,” she says in this squeaky voice and little-girl face. “Won’t stay long?”

I wasn’t having this. I looked straight at her crotch and said, “Well, this is serendipity incarnate. This happens to be a hotel.”

She closed her mouth and licked her teeth. She laughed silently back at the brunette. “Oh, that’s *really* okay. We just wanted to get off the road.”

“We’re lost,” the brunette said.

“See, we don’t agree on what lost is. I say, lost is the

whole point of this trip. And she's like –

"Careful," Zinga yawped and pointed. Blondie had reached the skulls. "They have powers."

Here now, this was her real laugh, and it was a pipe-cutter.

"Ya got a young man?"

For God's sake, Zinga. I decided to get rid of them.

"I think what he means is, if the twain of you were to build a house ... would you use *studs* or *tongue-and-groove*?"

A snort from the beleaguered one. She was smirking but looking away. The bouncy one didn't quite get it, but she got the gist. She laughed really loudly.

"Well, you know, we're all alone on the open road, so, you know." Ironic little cluck of the tongue. Zinga's knee ticked up. He was still staring like a dog stares. I cracked my knuckles.

"Well, now you got a little privacy." I waved my hand at the house. If we were two jocks at Mardi Gras, she would've kept going, but with us that was the limit.

"I think the evil power is too much for me. Well, thanks for not pulling the shotgun. Kidding."

"Welcome to stay." I opened a beer.

"S'alright." She looked at Zinga again in case he had another non-sequitur *bon mot* up his sleeve. I think she hoped we'd be of the entertaining stripe of yokel, with stories about The Land, if The Land maybe wasn't so blah. "Miles to go before I sleep." She wiggled out to the woods, sizing it all up.

The dark-haired girl: "Don't mind if I do." She got up off the hood and flip-flopped her way to the porch. Trying to be light on her feet.

Her pal got twitchy. "Buying a skull?"

This one hadn't slept much. She had on a UFB sweat-shirt and old shorts, and that hair was beyond hiding under a cap. I handed her my beer without thinking.

The blonde tried to smirk. "You're driving, young lady."

The Friend took a huge pull on the bottle.

"Andrea!"

Andrea grimaced and turned away, probably unconsciously, like she wanted to shout "Yeah? What?" but had learned to keep it in. I wanted to tell her that she'd be doing it all her life if she didn't stop soon, but how could I violate my policy of ignorance? Andrea. Girls who get classical-sounding names always end up with a tougher time.

"I'm not offending your aesthetic, am I, gentlemen?" She heeled that bottle back, her shirt came up a bit, and she slapped her stomach when she was done. Zinga was watching this little tension play with a weird fascination. The blonde was getting back in the car, but Andrea sat down on the porch with a whump. She leaned back on her elbows and I swear, she looked like Zinga usually does when he sits.

THE BLONDE MUST have realized she looked stupid in the car, so she paraded back to the steps, all bounce again.

"Moonshine on the porch. Yes, sir."

Zinga nearly fell of his chair trying to get her a beer.

"So, what kind of powers do these bones have?" The blonde shook her fingers like she was casting the whammy.

"Depends. You have to have the right person." Zinga opened her beer and she slammed it too fast and it dribbled out of her mouth. She giggled and wiped it, then sucked her finger with a pop. Andrea was looking away on purpose.

"Some heal," I said. "Some increase sexual potency."

"Mm! Bet you sell a lot of those." She sat next to Zinga. Trying to get the air back into her that'd been punched out, fit to be tied, trying to guess what her pal was up to, which was absolutely nothing, and that's tough for a bouncy type to handle. Doing nothing and doing it hard. Here was Zinga prattling on about skulls, never seen him talk so much.

"You mean they're all real? We were at this festival where they made their own, like out of plaster. I almost got one for my boyfriend."

"No one'd buy plaster here."

The blonde was taking these snippy looks at Andrea and decided to beat her at her own game. She leaned back and sighed like Scarlett O'Hara. I wondered how long she could keep her mouth shut, pretending to watch the woods.

"I'll cast your skull."

Zinga. He knows how to shut everybody right up.

"Yeah, come inside. I'll cast your skull."

The blonde looked at Andrea. Andrea grabbed another beer and came close to smiling when she opened it. Then she turned away and sat forward on the steps.

Blondie laughed styrofoam. "Now *there's* an offer I've never gotten." Hopped up and flounced right into the shack, nearly threw the door off its hinges. Zinga looked like his skulls – shocked out of his skin. He lumbered up after her, dog to the end.

And there we were. Andrea sitting and drinking in front of me. You could just see those batteries recharging, the stiffness melting. I'd never seen a girl her age look so comfortable in a strange place. I moved off my milk crate stool to the steps.

I didn't ask what she took in school. Enough people ask you that, you want to rip their throats out. I stayed cool.

"She should have said, 'There's an offer I never thought I'd get a fourth time.'"

"What?"

I nodded backwards at the house.

"Her. That's what she should have said just now."

I let this sink in. Andrea drank.

"So what do you do?" she asked.

"Oh, I come here."

Be simple. Simplify. I guess she liked that. Simple explanation. She said, "That could mean anything," but she said it like it was a surprise gift. Nothing simple at UFB, I'm guessing. She was looking at the trees, which are no great hell, but they're okay. Looking at the weird patchy grass worn into packed dirt paths by skull-shoppers. "The skulls weigh more," I said, pointing at the dirt, and I meant to say that's why it was so worn, like a joke, but she nodded like she already understood. She was okay, this one.

Zinga, though, I don't know what he was up to. Things clattering around, that bouncy voice going on and on. I finally thought to look in a window, and he'd got out this mixing bowl – cracked – with all kinds of powder all over the place, and the girl walking around asking about every damn thing in the shack, probably 'cause she was getting nervous, 'cause maybe she realized she didn't know how he was going to "cast her skull," and maybe she was thinking he wanted to get at her real skull to do it. I would.

Andrea's lids were low. "Do you ever really look at all this around you?"

"That's pretty forward of you."

"How am I forward?"

"Well, you don't know me, but you just naturally assume I'm lacking in ... you know, that I'm artless. Art-poor, I mean. Wanting in soul."

"I'm sorry."

She gave me a look like I'm a little kid who's just said there's a ghost in his room and it's so precious. But she looked so damn cute when she did it. All of a sudden I saw a lot of stains on my pants and found myself trying to position my arms so the sun hit them and the hair looked gold. Things never change.

"S'okay. You have nice eyebrows. They knit well."

She laughed. This is a role I'm comfortable in. The guy who'll say anything, what a guy, let's forget about him and come back some time and he'll have some line ready that's a little bit off.

"I wish I was artless."

I was starting to resent this chickie a little.

FROM BEHIND, ZINGA looked like he was wrestling something. Maybe the goop in his mixing bowl. He was doing this with his hands and trying to corral the girl into a chair with his elbows. Big splotch of sweat on his back. The more he tried to do, the more antsy he got, more frantic, or maybe it was the girl hinting she wanted to leave that had him so worked up, and the more worked up he got, the harder she was finding it to leave. She had that irritable bowel face.

"Nice trees."

Andrea had her mouth in her sweatshirt sleeve. I don't know how they make sweatshirt sleeves feel so good on your face.

"What's that?"

"Just ... the trees."

"Yeah, they're okay. Kind of hoary."

She nodded. "So are we all."

Now we were getting somewhere. If only Zinga wasn't charging up and down his stairs. There has to be a quieter way to cast a skull. The blonde was saying, "I'm not putting that on. There's mildew."

Turned out Andrea didn't have anything else to say on the subject of humanity's hoariness. Instead, she started a really long story about a tree in the playground where she went to kindergarten. She called it "The Tree" as if all trees came from this tree. Then the kids who played in it, kids who played under it, names that took her back. I kind of lost interest at this part, but then she said she's in a struggle, she used the word "struggle," between wondering where all these kids ended up and not wanting to know. She hadn't seen some of them in twenty years, and if she found out so-and-so just lived some normal life and went to law school, it'd wreck this sense of loss she claimed to have.

Zinga ran out, grabbed an empty bottle and cracked it on the wall. Some burpy squealing from inside.

"Don't go to Paris," I said. "You meet everyone you've ever known."

She looked at my shoes. I looked at her shins.

"Legs gonna need a shave pretty soon."

The sound of her laughing was getting nicer. But then Zinga's door almost burst its fundament. Blondie barrelled down the porch and I thought she was going to sack Andrea on the way. Grey chunks in her hair, on her face, white stuff all over her shirt. She tripped on our beer and fell down the last two steps, spitting and horking up nastiness and coughing out sounds like an old cat makes. She grabbed handfuls of brown grass and wiped her eyes with them on a fast but bloody tortured stomp to the car.

Zinga had a shower cap filled with guck in one hand. He had a broken bottleneck in the other. He was holding it out to her.

"Breathe through this," he said, quiet and soft. I couldn't look at him. I watched the blonde careen her way past the car, up the road, out of sight, just a bowl of almost-skull to remember her.

Andrea groaned and pushed herself onto her legs. Her stubbly knees cracked. She put her hands in her sleeves and dragged her feet out to the car. Didn't see fit to say goodbye, since I guess I was just a fixture, just a prop in the story, and when she told it later, I wouldn't even rate a physical description, and the blonde probably wouldn't even remember there being a second guy. I'm not complaining. You wouldn't say goodbye to a motel bed you slept in. Well, if you were that type maybe you would, but Andrea was on the

lookout for a concrete girl fixing to walk back to UFB.
That's a heavy load.

Besides, Zinga's the real story, he's what you remember.
Zinga with his rubbery skin and wispy hair and Maori build,
the fading soccer shirt that had his name on it, if you can
believe that; I always meant to ask him about that and other
stuff from his life. And Zinga just stood there on his porch.
When he finally sat back down he put his lips on the bottle
neck and wheezed. I don't know if she'd had her lips on it.
Yes or no, he whipped it into the trees. His arms were statue-
white. The skulls looked pretty amused.

"Didn't want them to leave," I said, halfway like a question.

"Wanted to get it done before the plaster set."

He drank a beer.

"Gets really hard to stir."

The sun went down.

"So shut up."

Trying to draw Zinga out violates the ignorance policy,
how could I forget?

AFTER THAT, THINGS didn't go too great for Zinga. He
started cutting tiny pieces of cloth and arranging them
inside his skulls. He'd tell people the cloth was a shroud and
the skulls were replicas of the cave Jesus rose from. He sold
a few, I guess.

The coffee was bitter

He was barbaric, he was slow,
His slaughter was the result
Of the machinations of gods.
Those very gods
Of whom he stood in awe,
Truth and loyalty,
Such ugly words
In the beautiful poetry
Of scriptures.

Good triumphs over evil,
And wins the damsel,
As in a TV game show,
The anchor is orgasmic,
The audience dutifully claps,
In the studio.

And then there is the detergent
That washes incredibly white,
Followed by sanitary napkins
With odour prevention,
While my dog is maddened
By the odour,
Of my bitch in heat.

Cervantes slays the dragon
Guarding the Cape of Storms,
Makes passage for Vasco da Gama
Around the Cape of Good Hope.
All in the name of the mysterious Jew
Crucified between commercial breaks,
The robust Pole's passage to heaven
Is televised with global weather.

This will be a century of bloodshed.
The Pope is dead,
Long live the Pope.

– *Ashok Niyogi*

Union Station

T

THE SETTING IS an urban train station, late in the evening. Five people wait at the end of a long, unhappy line – a YOUNG COUPLE who kiss each other ceaselessly and three middle-aged BUSINESSPEOPLE who are obviously tired of waiting. A TICKET AGENT sits at her counter, alternately counting and recounting receipts and staring blankly into space.

ANNOUNCER: May I have your attention, please. Train number 67 from Ottawa, en route to New York City, is currently expected to arrive approximately 15 minutes late. We apologise for the inconvenience.

The three older passengers sigh loudly.

LADY #1: This is unbelievable.

MAN #1: You can say that again.

LADY #2: I'm never taking the train again.

All three take cellular phones from purses/pockets and begin to dial

ALL THREE: Hello?

L1: Margaret here.

M1: Michael here.

L2: Alice here.

ALL THREE: Listen, the train is late. No, we haven't even left yet. 15 minutes. (Sigh) I'll see you when I get there.

All three hang up in unison. Young couple continue to make out, to MARGARET's disgust.

Enter LONER. He sits on a bench beside the ticket agent.

TICKET AGENT (with distaste): Can I help you, sir?

LONER: Oh. No, thank you. I'm waiting for my girlfriend.

TICKET AGENT: Is she on a train?

LONER: Yes.

Pause. The TICKET AGENT waits for the LONER to elaborate.

TICKET AGENT: Well, which train is she on?

LONER: I can't say, exactly.

TICKET AGENT: Why not?

LONER: Well, I'm not really sure which one it is.

TICKET AGENT (sarcastically): Well, where is she coming from, sir?

LONER (scratches head): You got me.

TICKET AGENT: You don't know?

LONER: Yeah.

TICKET AGENT: You do know.

LONER: No.

TICKET AGENT: Well, which is it?!

LONER: Which is what?

TICKET AGENT (exasperated): Do you know which train your girlfriend is on, sir?

LONER: No.

TICKET AGENT: But you're sure she's arriving tonight.

LONER: I'm sure.

The TICKET AGENT shakes her head and goes back to her work.

MARGARET (to couple): Excuse me.

Everyone looks on in interest.

BOY AND GIRL: Yes?

MARGARET: Your carrying on is exceedingly distasteful.

BOY: Carrying on?

GIRL: How do you mean?

MARGARET: The way you're ... kissing and whatnot. It's totally inappropriate.

GIRL (to MICHAEL): Do you find it inappropriate?

MICHAEL: Well, I, uh –

MICHAEL is interrupted by a low, pervasive rumbling that seems to shake the foundations of the station. All passengers look around, disoriented and a little nervous.

ALICE: What is that?

ANNOUNCER: May I have your attention, please. (All characters look up. Business travellers pick up their bags, expecting their train has arrived) Train number 57 from Windsor is now arriving on track three.

TICKET AGENT (to LONER): Is this your girlfriend's train?

LONER: I'm not sure.

TICKET AGENT: Well, is she coming from Windsor, sir?

LONER: Maybe – I'm not sure – that sounds about right.

Business travellers put down their bags and sigh. YOUNG COUPLE continues to make out. In the background we hear the sounds of travellers detraining and walking through the station. LONER stands and moves to the centre of the stage, peering into the audience, searching for someone.

LONER: Rosalie? Rosalie? Over here! Hey!

The sound of the travellers slowly dies away.

LONER: Rosalie?

He moves back to his bench.

TICKET AGENT: Did you find your girlfriend, sir?

LONER (dejectedly): No.

TICKET AGENT: Maybe she missed the train.

LONER: I guess.

TICKET AGENT (somewhat exasperated): Or maybe she's just on another train.

LONER (brightens): Maybe! I didn't think she was in Windsor anyway.

MARGARET turns back to the YOUNG COUPLE, who continue to make out.

MARGARET: A-hem.

YOUNG COUPLE stop kissing and turn towards her.

MARGARET: As I was saying –

ANNOUNCER: May I have your attention, please. (All characters look up.) Train number 67 from Ottawa, en route to New York City, is currently expected to arrive an additional 10 minutes late. We apologise for the inconvenience.

Passengers sigh and go back to waiting.

YOUNG COUPLE resume making out.

ALICE: This is unbelievable.

MARGARET: You can say that again.

MICHAEL: I'm never taking the train again.

ALL THREE take cellular phones from purses/pockets and begin to dial

ALL THREE: Hello?

MARGARET: Margaret here.

MICHAEL: Michael here.

ALICE: Alice here.

ALL THREE: Listen, the train is late. No, we haven't even left yet. 10 minutes. (Sigh) I'll see you when I get there.

ALL THREE hang up in unison.

MARGARET storms over to the TICKET AGENT.

MARGARET: Excuse me.

TICKET AGENT: Can I help you, madam?

MARGARET: Why does my train keep getting delayed?

TICKET AGENT: Snow in the switch points, madam. It happens this time of year.

MARGARET: Snow in the switch points?

TICKET AGENT: That's right, madam. Snow in the switch points.

MARGARET: Well, can't you fix it?

TICKET AGENT: No, madam. There's nothing I can do.

MARGARET: Nothing?

TICKET AGENT: No, madam.

MARGARET stares at the ticket agent, bewildered. Meanwhile, MICHAEL turns to ALICE. They begin to converse in bored, reluctant tones.

MICHAEL: So, where are you headed?

ALICE: New York City.

MICHAEL: Business or pleasure?

ALICE: Family.

MICHAEL: Is that business or pleasure?

ALICE: Neither. It's hell.

MARGARET returns to the line in a huff.

She glares at the COUPLE.

MARGARET: I knew I should have flown. See, when you fly you don't run into people like that (gestures to the COUPLE). And people treat you nicely (glares at the

TICKET AGENT). And you never, never get delayed because of snow in the switch points.

After a pause, ALICE turns to MICHAEL

ALICE: Where are you going?

MICHAEL: Oh, I'm going to New York as well.

ALICE: For pleasure?

MICHAEL: No, no. I never go anywhere for pleasure.

ALICE: For business, then.

MICHAEL: I have a conference tomorrow with the Chairman of the Board.

ALICE: Ah.

As if on cue, the station is filled with a low, pervasive rumbling that seems to shake the foundations of the building. The passengers now recognise the noise and anticipate that their train has arrived. Business travellers pick up their bags and shift anxiously; COUPLE stops making out; LONER looks up expectantly.

MICHAEL: Here's our train.

ALICE: Finally.

MARGARET: I thought it would never come.

ANNOUNCER: May I have your attention, please. (All characters look up.) Train number 47 from North Bay is now arriving on track two.

TICKET AGENT (to LONER): Surely, this is your girlfriend's train.

LONER: I'm not sure.

TICKET AGENT: Do you remember if she's coming from North Bay?

LONER (with less enthusiasm than last time): Maybe – I'm not sure.

Business travellers put down their bags and sigh. YOUNG COUPLE begins making out again. In the background we hear the sounds of travellers detraining and walking through the station. LONER stares out into the audience as if searching for someone.

LONER: Rosalie? Are you there? Rosalie?

The sound of the travellers gradually dies away.

LONER (with a sigh): Rosalie?

LONER stares back down at the floor.

TICKET AGENT: Did you find your girlfriend, sir?

LONER: No.

TICKET AGENT: Perhaps she missed the train.

LONER: I guess.

TICKET AGENT: Or perhaps she's just on another train.

LONER: I guess.

Ticket agent regards LONER for a few seconds, looking him up and down. She

looks like she's about to say something else, but refrains.

ALICE storms over to the ticket agent.

ALICE: Excuse me.

TICKET AGENT: Can I help you, madam?

ALICE: Why does my train keep getting delayed?

TICKET AGENT: Derailment in Bowmanville. Freight train.

ALICE: Derailment in Bowmanville?

TICKET AGENT: That's right, madam. Derailment in Bowmanville.

ALICE: Well, can't you fix it?

TICKET AGENT: No, madam. There's nothing I can do.

ALICE: Nothing?

TICKET AGENT: No, madam.

ALICE stares at the TICKET AGENT, bewildered. Meanwhile, MICHAEL and MARGARET begin to converse in tired, reluctant tones.

MICHAEL: Where are you headed?

MARGARET: New York City.

MICHAEL: Business or pleasure?

MARGARET: Pleasure.

MICHAEL: Vacation?

MARGARET: Escape.

The LONER begins to speak to ALICE.

LONER: Going to New York City?

ALICE (with distaste): Yes.

LONER: New York is a nice place. I went there once. Really cold.

ALICE: I see.

LONER: I'm waiting for a train. My girlfriend's coming to visit. For Christmas.

ALICE: That's nice.

TICKET AGENT: Madam, is this man bothering you?

ANNOUNCER: May I have your attention, please. (All characters look up, ALICE looks relieved and walks back to the line) Train number 67 from Ottawa, en route to New York City, is currently expected to arrive an additional 5 minutes late. We apologise for the inconvenience.

Passengers sigh and go back to waiting.

YOUNG COUPLE resume making out.

MICHAEL: This is unbelievable.

ALICE: You can say that again.

MARGARET: I'm never taking the train again.

ALL THREE take cellular phones from purses/ pockets and begin to dial

ALL THREE: Hello?

MARGARET: Margaret here.

MICHAEL: Michael here.

ALICE: Alice here.

ALL THREE: Listen, the train is late. No, we haven't even

left yet. 5 minutes. (Sigh) I'll see you when I get there.
 ALL THREE hang up in unison.

ALICE: I knew I should have flown. See, when you fly you don't run into people like that (gestures to the LONER). And people treat you nicely (glares at the TICKET AGENT). And you never, never get delayed because of derailments in Bowmanville.

MICHAEL storms over to the ticket agent.

MICHAEL: Excuse me.

TICKET AGENT: Can I help you, sir?

MICHAEL: Why does my train keep getting delayed?

TICKET AGENT: Heavy holiday traffic, sir. Christmas and all.

MICHAEL: Heavy holiday traffic?

TICKET AGENT: That's right, sir. Heavy holiday traffic.

MICHAEL: Well, can't you fix it?

TICKET AGENT: No, sir. There's nothing I can do.

MICHAEL: Nothing?

TICKET AGENT: No, sir.

MICHAEL returns to the line. Meanwhile,
 MARGARET turns to the couple.

MARGARET: I must insist that you stop that immediately.
 BOY and GIRL stop kissing. ALICE,
 MICHAEL, and LONER look on with interest.

BOY: Lady, what is your problem?

MARGARET: As I've said, your carrying on is totally inappropriate.
 LONER stands up and walks towards the line.

LONER: Aw, come on. What's the big deal?
 TICKET AGENT looks up in surprise.

MARGARET: I find it offensive.

LONER: They're young. They're in love. Weren't you ever in love?

TICKET AGENT leaves her desk.

GIRL: Weren't you ever young?

MARGARET: Well, I never –

LONER: – loved anyone?
 TICKET AGENT (to LONER): Sir, if you're going to hang around the station you have to calm down.

LONER: But I'm not –

TICKET AGENT: Have a seat, sir.
 LONER sits down. TICKET AGENT returns to her desk. COUPLE sulks. They do not begin to make out again. MARGARET is triumphant.

MICHAEL: I knew I should have flown. See, when you fly you don't run into people like that (gestures to MARGARET). And people treat you nicely (glares at the

TICKET AGENT). And you never, never get delayed because of heavy holiday traffic.
 ALL THREE BUSINESSPEOPLE take out cell phones and dial.

MICHAEL: Hello, Air Canada?

MARGARET: Hello, USAir?

ALICE: Hello, Lufthansa?

ALL THREE: I need a flight from Toronto to New York City, ASAP.
 They listen.

ALL THREE: No, wait, don't –
 ALL THREE sigh and look at their phones.

ALL THREE: They put me on hold.

ANNOUNCER: May I have your attention, please. (No characters look up. All sigh and look miserable.) Train number 67 from Ottawa, en route to New York City, will arrive shortly. (All characters look up, shocked) We apologise for any inconvenience.
 The station is filled with a low, pervasive rumbling that seems to shake the foundations of the building. LONER looks up expectantly. BUSINESSPEOPLE suddenly remember to hang up their cell phones.

ANNOUNCER: May I have your attention, please. (All characters look up.) Train number 67 from Ottawa is now arriving on track one.
 BUSINESSPEOPLE are too shocked to speak; COUPLE starts to make out again. They file offstage through the arrivals/ departures gate.

TICKET AGENT (to LONER, once they are alone): Surely, this is your girlfriend's train.

LONER: I'm not sure.

TICKET AGENT: Do you remember if she's coming from Ottawa?

LONER (enthusiastically): Yes! That's it! She was coming from Ottawa!
 In the background, we hear the sounds of travellers detraining and walking through the station. LONER stands and paces around the stage, peering into the audience as if searching for someone.

LONER: Rosalie? Are you there? Rosalie?
 The sound of the travellers gradually dies away.

LONER: Rosalie?
 LONER returns to his seat, utterly dejected.

ANNOUNCER: May I have your attention, please. Train number 67 from Ottawa is now departing for New York City on track one. All aboard!

TICKET AGENT (preparing to leave): Did you find your girl-

friend, sir?
 LONER: No.
 TICKET AGENT: Well, that's the last train. Perhaps she missed it.
 LONER: The last train?
 TICKET AGENT (comes out from behind the ticket window): Yup. Last one until tomorrow morning.
 LONER: But I swear she said she was coming in tonight.
 TICKET AGENT: I'm sure she did. Anyways, the station is closed.
 LONER (stands up, bewildered): There must be some mistake!
 TICKET AGENT (ushers him towards the exit): You have to leave now.
 LONER: But, but, but –
 TICKET AGENT: Goodnight, sir (she pushes LONER offstage and locks the door behind him). The freaks you meet on this job. I bet he didn't even have a girlfriend.
 TICKET AGENT turns off all the lights but one in the centre of the stage and wanders offstage muttering to herself.
 Long pause. The station is silent and deserted. Finally from offstage ROSALIE's voice is heard.
 ROSALIE: Hello? Is anyone there?
 Enter ROSALIE from the arrivals gate, laden with suitcases. She wanders out to the middle of the stage and peers into the audience.
 ROSALIE: Hello? Tim? Anyone? I'm looking for my boyfriend. He was supposed to meet me here. Hello?
 She wanders out of the spotlight and off-stage, still calling for her boyfriend. Her voice slowly fades away as the light dims to black.
 ANNOUNCER: May I have your attention, please. Union Station is now closed. Please proceed to the exit immediately. Thank you and goodnight.

Devices on stand-by

I've tucked away two forty-fours.
 They're deep within a wall.
 Their bullets line my dresser drawers
 and wait for me to call.

Two vials filled with cyanide
 are safe within their space.
 I've stashed them in a pot outside
 beneath the Queen Anne's lace.

Two gleaming knives to slit my wrists
 sit nestled in a shed.
 I'll use them if my grief persists
 to soak my ivory bed.

Two slipknots made of sturdy rope
 sit limp upon a chair.
 It helps me when I cannot cope
 to know that they are there.

You ask me why they come in two's?
 the need for added stress?
 In case the first one that I choose
 is launched without success.

I've had these items in my house
 for over forty years.
 I've hid them from my kids and spouse,
 my neighbours and my peers.

I tried to do it years ago,
 but then I had a boy.
 And two more children in a row,
 brought intermittent joy.

At last I thought my work was done,
 and I could end my life.
 But now my daughter has a son,
 my son now has a wife.

I'll get around to my demise
 and give in to despair,
 when I can look into their eyes
 and tell them I don't care.

– Kelly Ann Malone

RUTH LATTA

Tender Age

T

HERE IS LAUGHTER in Hal's eyes as Haley passes him the photograph. Maisie, sitting on the love seat in their living room, in her flowered turtle-necked sweater and baggy jeans, is showing a photograph of her grandchildren, three toddlers who look to Haley very much like other babies. But these are a miracle – of modern medicine.

“They're cute as buttons now,” says Maisie, “but there's no forgetting the ordeal it was to have them. My daughter-in-law was enormous. None of her clothes fit. She had to stay off her feet that last month. I was really worried about her. I like the triplets now, but one baby at a time is enough for me.”

Haley furrows her brow, nodding at Maisie's words. A few minutes earlier, anger seized her when she passed the downstairs washroom and saw that Maisie, who had used the facility, had taken pains to straighten out the hand towels on the rail, which had been bunched up. Also, when Hal made and served the tea, Maisie praised him as if he were a nine-day wonder.

Maisie rubs Haley's hair the wrong way. Maisie is a crafter, a woman who knits, crochets, patchworks, does macramé. She has a double chin and froggy eyes behind bifocals. She lives in Auntie Lil's building, in a condo that she once shared with a husband, but he has been dead for a while and apparently didn't leave her quite enough to live on, so she supplements her income chauffeuring seniors for less than taxi rates.

Today she is chauffeuring Haley's Auntie Lil, age 82, who is on the love seat beside Maisie. They have dropped by after a trip to the mall. Brilliant Auntie Lil sits silently, observing, her eyes twinkling, as she lets Maisie dominate the discussion with domestic drivel. Years ago, Auntie Lil bested a cabinet minister in a debate over a woman's right to choose. She has always supported Haley's ambitions as a writer – unconventional when Haley was young in the early '60s. Now, she smiles as this frump talks about the difficulty of finding a certain type of yarn to finish some sweaters she's knitting for the triplets. For this, Haley has torn herself away from the computer, an article on the changing role of women!

It's not that Auntie Lil is over the hill; far from it. She's proving a point. She has deliberately brought Maisie to Haley and Hal's house to show that she will visit them on her terms, and that she is independent enough to make her own driving arrangements. She will force Haley to be gracious, to entertain in her home someone so arrogantly dull. Auntie Lil is sending a clear message, the same one that Haley lisped at a tender age to her: “You are not the boss of me!”

Oh, Auntie Lil is changing, no doubt of that. She was always a rebel against social conventions, and Haley has admired her for it. Now, in her old age, though, she is turning her iron will against those who love her. It is not second childhood yet, more like rebellious adolescence.

She is beginning to get tired of this little game, though. She's folding her paper napkin and putting her glasses back in her purse. She never was a big fan of babies; she has praised Haley for avoiding that trap, and Maisie's enthusiasm over the grandkids is

beginning to wear.

Struggling to her feet, leaning against her cane, she thanks Hal and Haley for their hospitality. As they leave, Maisie makes a big production of helping Auntie Lil down the three steps to the sidewalk. Haley and Hal see them into the car and wave as they go around the corner.

A thought occurs to Haley, one that has been lurking in the corners of her mind. Could her aunt and Maisie be more than just neighbours and friends? Auntie Lil has always loved women, but, in the past, they have always had some charm and elegance – never a frump who resembles “Laura Louise” from the original *Rosemary’s Baby*. It’s not the orientation that troubles Haley; it’s just that Maisie would constitute such a lapse of taste on Auntie Lil’s part, further evidence of her decline. Next thing, she’ll have a “praying hands” ornament on the mantel and Jim Nabors on the CD player.

Haley glances at Hal as they go back into the house. She doesn’t know how much to discuss with him. Hal is very traditional in some ways.

“Well, that was an hour of our life that we’ll never get back,” she says with a sigh.

Hal laughs. “One thing puzzles me,” he says, as they return to the living room. “Did you notice anything unusual about those triplets?”

Haley shrugs. “Not really.”

“They were dissimilar in looks. One was blonde and blue-eyed. One was dark and brown-eyed. One had red hair and a lot of freckles. Do you suppose they gave the mother three different squirts of sperm?”

Haley is speechless. As they talk about genetics for a while – his field, before retirement – she decides to report what he said to Aunt Lil later when they talk on the phone. In days gone by, such a remark would have amused her. It will be a way of finding out just how far gone Auntie Lil is.

Ann’s Studio of Dance

Long after we have left
the juice box machine
in the corner
of the waiting room,
the closet
turned shoe store,
the uniform colours
denoting grade level,

we still dance
for Anne.

Still remember
her words
of grandmotherly
advice.

Dirty hair
french braids well,
water jiggles
in your stomach,
listen to the music.

And, if you lean
on any barre
with all of your weight,
you won’t learn
to dance in the centre
of the room.

– *Andrea Venantius*

The Man Who Delivers



HIS IS NOT my story; this is my friend Angela's story.

Angela's boyfriend was nice, but he was going nowhere. She told me that every time she called me. "I just don't know where Dan is going."

She put in long hours managing the uptown store. When she came home, she found that Dan had loafed on the coach all day.

"Maybe he's depressed," I suggested, trying to be helpful.

"I don't think so. He seems happy with things just the way they are. I think he's got it pretty good."

That was when she bought a computer. She tried to talk to Dan about using the computer to look for a job. Dan had played guitar in a series of garage bands, and she thought he could get information on the music industry from the Internet. He might be motivated to work if he found a job in music, which was the only thing that interested him.

She bought the computer from a value-added reseller — a guy who supplies your computer, installs the software, sets everything up, even trains you if you want. "I don't know anything about computers. I'd rather pay someone else," Angela explained.

She called me the day after her computer was installed.

"How's the computer working?" I asked.

"Fine. The VAR came over right after work. He set everything up right away, and then he showed me all of the software, how to set up the printer, stuff like that."

"So he was really helpful?"

"He ended up staying for a couple of hours."

"Wow. And that's just part of the service? You don't have to pay him by the hour?"

"No. Henry says that he makes enough money selling computers that he covers his time. And he says it's important to provide the best training and advice possible to maintain a good reputation. He says good training up front cuts down on service calls later."

"So his name is Henry?"

"Yeah. He's got a really deep voice, like a radio announcer. A real bedroom voice."

"Uh, huh." I was beginning to suspect ...

"He was talking in my ear as he was leaning over me, showing me how to do things with the mouse," Angela continued. "And when he had shown me everything, he suggested we go to the pub down the street."

"The computer guy came on to you?"

"Well, it wasn't like that ..."

"Did you tell him to forget it?"

"He bought me a drink. And then we talked. Most of the time he just listened. I ended up telling him about all the problems with Dan ..."

I couldn't suppress a sigh. "Don't you see he's taking advantage of you because you're vulnerable?"

"Oh, his marriage isn't working either."

"They always say that when they want you to help them forget their cold, unfeeling wives."

"It wasn't like that ..." she protested. "He said he's used to listening to his customers

carefully. Ascertaining their needs.”

“So he’s just giving you what you need?” I started to laugh.

“Well, I guess he could tell that I was unhappy. Anyway, I’ve decided to see him again.”

I TOLD JOE all about Angela while we were watching TV.

“Can you believe that a value-added reseller would come on to his clients?”

“It’s pretty handy,” Joe pointed out. “He’s on the road all the time. He sees women in their homes. I bet he’s had lots of opportunities.”

“Oh, yeah, and he knows how to listen. Women always fall for that. Angela said he knows how to ascertain his clients’ needs. So if your client needs sex ...”

Joe snorted. “That’s value added, I guess.” And he went back to watching the hockey game.

THREE WEEKS LATER Angela called me to say that she was having an affair with the VAR.

She told me that she talked about the affair with a friend of hers who drove a cab. “Do you think that it’s reasonable to provide sex as part of customer service?”

The cab driver considered this. “Customer service is very important today. It’s what sets you apart from all of the others out there. For example, my business. There are a lot of cab drivers in Toronto – hundreds. But I have repeat customers who call me personally. Because they know that I provide the little extras. If one of my clients calls in the evening after working overtime, I put a few extra things in the back seat – soft pillows and a cool, refreshing drink. One of those sparkling fruit juices. Customers care about that. They know I take care of them. I ask them about themselves. I know how they are doing. Would I sleep with a customer if that’s what she wanted? I don’t know. Maybe.”

I WENT TO get my hair cut the day after Angela told me that she had succumbed to the VAR’s seduction.

I have gone to the same hairdresser for six years. Antoine is a very good-looking man, and he is always talking about one girlfriend or another. I asked him, “Do you think it’s all right for someone in a service industry – someone like you – to sleep with a client? If they’re both attached?”

Antoine cut hair in a methodical, precise way. When I asked the question, he stopped cutting, his arm aloft with the scissors pointed up, like a machine that had suddenly seized. He laughed nervously. “What? Like, if I tried to get you to sleep with me?”

“Do you think that that’s what it would be? If someone in a service industry suggests a date with a client, is he just using his job to try to get women in bed?”

“Is this a hypothetical question? Maybe you’re coming here for more than a haircut.”

I felt flushed and giddy. I wished I could erase everything I had just said.

“No, no! Not me! It’s my friend. My friend is seeing this guy who installed her computer.”

“Oh, sure, it’s your friend. They always say, ‘No, it’s not me. I need some advice for my friend.’”

“Come on. I’ve been coming here for a long time ...”

“Six years.”

“You’ve got a good memory. Six years. If I was interested in you, you’d know by now, right?”

“Maybe it’s taken me six years to finally woo you.”

“Woo? Woo?”

“OK, it’s not likely. What was the question? Would I sleep with a client? I guess it’s possible that two people could meet each other as client and hairdresser and have a real relationship. I don’t know. I never date clients. I don’t think I *could* date a client. Or, if I did, I couldn’t cut her hair any more.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not because there’s something wrong with it. It’s because women come here and tell me everything. I’m not just a hairdresser, I’m a ... counsellor. I meet a woman, I learn all about her annoying husband, her stupid boss, her dandruff. I couldn’t just start seeing some woman knowing all of that.” He was cutting my hair with gusto.

“I have a special relationship with my clients. I talk to them every month for several years. If I started sleeping with a client, I couldn’t have that relationship any more. You can’t go back. Once you’ve crossed that line ...”

When I was out of the chair and we were face to face, he looked at me in a new way, with amusement. By the time I had paid him, I was aware that he was watching me intently. I turned quickly to the door, almost tripping over my feet to leave.

ANGELA CALLED ME when Dan moved out.

“He found out about Henry.”

“How? Did you tell him?”

“No. I didn’t have the heart to. I just kept finding excuses to avoid sex.”

“So what happened?”

“Dan was home when he came over one night to help me with a program, supposedly. I think Dan just knew. They eyed each other, and started circling each other in the living room.”

“Like panthers.”

“Eventually I told them both to leave. I said, ‘I can’t stand this. Leave!’ I just pushed them out the door and sat down and drank about half a bottle of wine. Dan left two days later.”

Once Dan was gone, she didn't find it as exciting to be having an affair. The VAR cancelled more often than he showed, blaming family commitments. She pressured him to leave his wife. He had one reason that he couldn't, then another. Same old story.

"He's never going to leave his wife. You know that."

"I know," said Angela. "But I can't say no to him."

"Why are women like that?" I pondered aloud that night. Joe was reading a magazine. "They just fall head-over-heels in love and can't think straight."

"I read that it's a biochemical reaction. Being in love causes an endorphin release, like morphine. You can become addicted to it. Women like Angela are addicted to being in love. I don't think the object of their affection really matters."

"Whereas I have made a completely rational decision to live with you," I said, half joking, half not.

"You're just a much more sensible and level-headed person than most women," Joe said without an iota of sarcasm.

IT WAS ABOUT a month later that Angela called me, in tears. "I've broken up with him. I couldn't stand it any more. But then I keep thinking, what am I doing? He's the love of my life."

"I can't talk now. It's really busy," I said. It was a busy day, but the truth was that I didn't want to deal with Angela's break-up right at that moment. Or ever. "Can I call you back tonight? Are you going to be OK? I'll call you as soon as I get home, I promise."

The Purolator courier was standing patiently at my desk.

"Sorry. Friend in need," I explained.

"I have friends like that. Somehow they get my cell phone number. They always call me when I'm driving. They start telling me some long story and I drive right by my pick-up."

His voice was deep and soft.

"I called about this package. It was going to Indiana, and it was supposed to be there Wednesday. We've called twice, but they haven't received it. Here's the waybill. Can you trace it?"

"Uh, oh. Sorry about that." He examined the waybill. His hands on the clipboard were strong yet elegant. "Yeah, we can look into it right away and get back to you. Is this your phone number on the waybill?"

"Mm, hm."

He threw me a nervous sidelong glance. "Can I call you?"

"Yes."

"I mean ..." He shifted feet and looked away, in this maddening way that made my heart suddenly beat in my throat. "I don't usually do this. Would you like to go for a coffee or something?"

I felt a flush creep up my neck. I barely nodded.

"I finish at five-thirty."

Excavation

If you must excavate these ruins,
then uncover our myopic pilgrimage.
Stare into the stone eyes of this myth – its mirage crystallized
on both corneas, like salt.
Peer more deeply below the strata
and an enclave of laymen emerges,
carving your initials into layers of bone.

Your merchant gods are eager
to collect imagined debts,
idling in the theatre you created,
but – like Cassandra –
they lack an audience.

– *Cara Waterfall*

Newton exposed

We parachuted en masse
Over his city
Dotted the skies like glass pins falling from a table
He looked up
Saw our long hair streaming
Heard our silk voices calling
His name over traffic
He opened his arms
Received each apple-cheeked
Girl as they landed
Except me
I landed first
Cut free enough tangled hair from traces
To start a wig shop
Repacked chutes left behind
Like smalls blown off the line
He kissed their eyelids
Bid each adieu
Alone together
He said, "You smell like clean laundry"
He pulled at my ripcord
I said, "I'm sorry, but it doesn't work in reverse."

– *Cathalynn Labonté-Smith*

Spring and winter

Department stores are full of *sakura* this time of year.
Police peremptorily patrol arcades.
In the station, all the mobiles ring at once.
An analog stranger, a digital lover.
The melodies catcall a calculator-cute.

The eastern sun's blood-orange rays
Cross the globe as microwaves.

People mate in front of TVs,
The sound turned down. When they've wrapped things up
They rewind and catch up on the news.
Some don't. They walk quietly through a spring or winter park.

Seen through a restaurant window,
A young man holds his chopsticks like a fawn learning to walk.

A young woman smiles, continuing to talk.
Outdoors, it starts to snow in flakes as big as *sakura*.
Lovers kiss in the shadow of a civic statue.
Sunlight falls across the snow.
Love is all about the people that you know.

– *Richard Norman*

NOTE: *Sakura* is the Japanese word for cherry-blossoms.

TIM LEHNERT

Moblinsky at the Wheel

A

AS HE EXITED the highway, Moblinsky reached for a CD, *where the hell is it*; he poked under the passenger seat and along its side; *there*, he could feel the ridges of the case but couldn't work it free, *Jesus, pain in the ass thing* and leaning over and looking down as he tried to grasp it

¡BANG!

Moblinsky slammed forward and backward and forward. *Christ*. A grey minivan spun in front of him and hit the guardrail, *shit*. He wanted to keep going, *up along the boards*, but it lay on its side blocking his way and a car was coming up behind him, its headlights making him squint. Moblinsky hit the gas, *forward, cut to the inside*, but the Range Rover shuddered and he pulled over, killed it, and smelled a dusty chemical smell. He'd had some beers.

Moblinsky turned off the radio. *Rap shit; he wouldn't have been looking for the CD if that crap hadn't been playing. Goddamn rap. How many beers, how many beers, how many? None, a few, only a couple; a couple is best.*

Moblinsky sat motionless, the windshield was a TV. His hands shook, his ears rang, his head hurt.

A man with a beard approached, stared at him, and waved. Moblinsky made a fist and the man left. *Fuck, he'd been at the Kitten Room, nothing wrong with that, no matter what Lisa says, and there were beers and shots and an idiot who said he'd watched him play in Junior kept putting drinks on the bar. Afterwards he stopped with the Finns. Why not, no game next day. The Finns. Shitty rap music.*

Moblinsky folded the spent air bag over the steering wheel and called Bobby. *Voice mail. Shit*. He hung up. *Only a couple of beers. Only a couple*. He tried again, pressing the button with his pinky for luck, and Bobby was there. *Take it easy. Don't argue. You're shaken up, don't talk too much. Tell them you want to go to the hospital. See if they want some sticks or tickets, but only casually, offhand. I'd meet you but I'm out of town.*

Moblinsky closed the phone. He tried to remember how many sticks he had in back. The beard man was in the road opening the door of the sideways van, trying to pull someone out. Would he want a stick? Moblinsky could hear sirens now. He wished he could sit this one out.

Human Cosmos



THE GOOD LIFE hinged on the basics – this is what Jeff’s old man would insist back in the day. A perfect breakfast, like the ones Jeff’s mother prepared so easily: eggs sunny side up, bacon, a glass of O.J., coffee, toast. In his head he could hear his father’s scratchy baritone, the voice of a man as old-fashioned as Jeff himself was now often accused of being (“old-fashioned” being a code word for either “neanderthal” or “sexist”), recalling how he made it seem as if the entire universe pivoted upon something as galactically minor as a woman’s ability to cook a decent eggs and bacon in the morning.

Above the cramped kitchenette, the smoke detector began to screech. The frying pans on the stove were billowing smoke, the gummy bologna slices Jeff had used as a bacon substitute curling in the heat, the eggs in the adjacent pan shrivelling into unsavoury-looking globs. Mouldy bread in the cupboard. No orange juice. Instant coffee.

He yanked the ruined pans from the burners and shut off the stove. “Shut *you* up,” he said to the smoke detector as he ripped out its batteries.

Jeff was sick. Sick of his job at LogicNet, sick of sales pitches and discussions about TCP/IP protocols, sick of his closet Trekkie co-workers and quota-mongering Sales Manager. He had called in just before 8:30 and told Anita the bitch receptionist the bad news (“Well, Jeff, I always knew you were sick!” had been her sarcastic response) and then leapt nimbly out of bed to begin his recuperation. By 11:30 he had heroically wasted an entire morning with rounds of Playstation *Gran Turismo*, random bids on eBay, thumbing through back issues of FHM salvaged from the reading pile on his coffee table and now this futile attempt at breakfast. Pathetic. He flopped onto his couch and watched part of a TV report about how over fifty per cent of Ontarians were single and not looking for a mate (“It sure makes you glad to be married!” one of the two female reporters enthused vacuously to the other) before deciding to pull on some track pants and a Raptors jersey for a trip to the gym. According to the Weather Channel it was a beautiful day outside, and he figured only a fool would squander a sick day lazing around at home.

THE AIR WAS warm, a lemon-tinted daylight. Turning onto Cumberland Avenue, Jeff found the sidewalks blessed with dozens of good-looking women in business clothes and summer dresses. He fed his eyes on the breeze-stirred fabric fluttering across knees, the dancing of blouse fronts. Jeff smiled at the women of Toronto, but the women of Toronto never smiled back.

As he entered the gym lobby, the street sounds washed out behind the closing of the glass door like an airlock, replaced by the distant, threatening thump of an upper level aerobics class, high-pitched voices whooping like jungle birds above the bass’ rumble. Rhonda sat alone at the front desk, the *Absolute Fitness* logo dominating the wall behind her. Her facial expression brightening reflexively. “You’re a bit early today, Jeff,” she said.

“Day off today.” Jeff studied Rhonda as she slid his membership card through the magstripe reader. She was almost unrecognisable under the canopy of thick, coarse

hair flowing around her shoulders. “I like how you’re wearing your hair down,” he said. “It looks good.”

Rhonda half-smiled. “Just letting it breathe. Every other week my stylist has to let out the braids. It’s a pain.”

Jeff grinned. “I think it looks pretty hot,” he said.

Rhonda snorted. “You sound like Jojo,” she said. She then drew up her lips and imitated her husband’s Bajan lilt. “Ooh, *Rhoan*-dah, doll! You got dat white woman hair! That Beyonce vibe makin’ mee *crazy*, girl!” She shook her head. “You men all think alike. It’s pathetic.”

“Uh-oh, we got trouble now,” a voice called out. Jeff recognized the pinched, grandmotherly voice immediately, and turned around to see Alexis coming in from Cumberland Street.

“Axis in da house!” Jeff called Alexis by the nickname she was sometimes known by at Abso-Fit. The nickname was appropriate, neatly summarising her machine-like frame, like her torso could be an axis upon which a world turned, her sinewy arms flexing against the sphere across her back.

She punched Jeff on the shoulder. “Trouble is in the building!” she said.

“Trouble called in sick to work, toots!” He relished getting away with calling her “toots,” a word that at his workplace could easily earn him a reprimand and a talking-down-to by the Office Administrator. Unlike his co-workers, the gym rats at Abso-Fit generally had a sense of humour about these things.

“Calling sick, huh?” Axis shook her head. “Jeffer’s gonna get in *truh*-ble!” she sing-songed.

“Jeffer don’t give a *shi*-it! Done it a hundred *ti*-yimes!”

Axis put her hands on her hips and twisting her left thigh slightly toward him. “I’ll bet,” she said, throwing a playful scowl and then smiling broadly, her hawkish nose jutting over her upper lip. Jeff thought that Axis was the sort of girl who looked prettier when she wasn’t smiling. Her wide mouth exposed too much gum above her upper teeth and drew the fatless skin over her cheekbones in a manner that made her instantly look twenty years older. Secretly, he believed that when she was moody and sad-looking she could be the most beautiful woman at Abso-Fit.

Axis grabbed Jeff’s jersey and rubbed the nylon mesh over his abdomen. “Working on the six-pack, Jeffer? You’ve got a perfect stomach for it, good and flat.”

“Not the washboard abs thing again,” Jeff said, laughing. Axis dropped the jersey, her face wincing in embarrassment. “Besides,” Jeff continued, “if I want ab muscles all I gotta do is get some lipo, get rid of the love handles while I’m at it.”

“No liposuction!” Axis pursed her giggling lips. “Just stop eating bread like I told you, and concentrate on the

obliques. The bread is what’s putting the love handles there.” Axis often told her clients that whatever they ate, they wore, and that love handles were nothing but bread re-asserting itself in the body like a loaf stuck edgewise through the mid-section. Jeff often taunted her with tales of putting away entire medium anchovy pizzas followed by two pints of lager, which Axis insisted was nothing but “liquid bread” and no better than Coca-Cola. Talking about beer or soft drinks or potato chips always got Axis worked up.

“I’m going to have to draw you up a schedule, pal,” she said. “You’re not finishing the summer without a set of ab muscles you could play like a xylophone!” She then cupped her fingers in a baby wave and strutted up the stairwell to the workout floor.

Jeff turned to see Rhonda looking up bemusedly from the reception desk. “So when’s the wedding, ‘Jeffer?’” she said cattily.

JEFF FINISHED HIS stretches and studied his profile in the mirror. When he was sure no one was looking, he lifted his jersey and studied his stomach, trying to picture how the flat skin would look studded with abdominals. He recalled how weirded out he was when he first started going to health clubs and seeing men pause between sets to pull up their shirts and examine themselves. Yet with mirrors on virtually every wall at the gym, it was almost impossible for Jeff not to be lulled into bouts of self-observation. He could not escape himself here even if he wanted to.

Across the aerobics floor were couples talking, laughing, stretching and warming up. Jeff looked back at his reflection and wondered why he was still single. He was good-looking, had a decent job, was witty, smart – he was a *catch*, goddammit. Yet the women he had been pursuing of late all seemed to think otherwise, sooner or later, and the ones with spark and character never stuck around. Like Christina, his latest ex-future wife: all bookish neuroses and eagerness to please and a bedroom scream so loud that the condo superintendent had sent Jeff warning notices. After a mere three weeks she was moping into her daiquiri, flinching with his every touch and saying that she didn’t see him as a “long-term prospect,” like Jeff was a stock market investment, a set of bad numbers. Repeat this basic scenario times a couple dozen and you would have a general outline of Jeff’s romantic history dating all the way back to high school. Christina, Jennifer, Tanya, Jessica, Catherine, et-fricking-cetera. His life was measured in unanswered voicemails, uneasy glances across dance floors. When he asked his friends if perhaps he was doing wrong, no one seemed to have a useful answer.

Jeff wondered if he should have been working harder on hooking up with Axis. According to the magazine articles

he had read, Axis was exhibiting all the classic signs of attraction: touching Jeff on the neck or arm or stomach, aligning her shoulders with his when she faced him. Granted, she was a bit of a freak, socially awkward even around the hardcore gym rats, but neither was she like the secretaries and mall clerks Jeff had been chasing, those classically pretty girls with their baby-fat curves and prattle about their meaningless go-nowhere jobs. Axis was completely focused both physically and mentally, her body a testament to her dedication, with her grey sleeveless sweat-shirt knotted provocatively above her waist and her brown hair drawn neatly in a tight bun, her black leggings and platform boots moving with an alien grace. Her gym wardrobe rarely deviated, like a cartoon that never changed from episode to episode: predictably and perfectly drawn.

Sometimes when Jeff beat off at night he imagined Axis strutting through the empty health club, weaving through the Nautilus machines and benches, running her hands up and down her impeccable body. Axis was like the android Rachel from *Blade Runner*, the replicant discovering her human self, playing the piano melody that she had been programmed to play and then slowly improvising, loosening the notes in the progression. Jeff pictured Axis undoing her bun and letting the hair tumble over her shoulders like Rachel did, soft waves tumbling over hard deltoids, her fingers then skating across the folds of fabric that hid her chest, pulling out the sweatshirt knot and drawing the clothing over her head, exposing full, fleshy breasts the colour of whole-wheat bread. This image never failed to make Jeff stiff in the groin, and it wouldn't take much of imagining Axis stroking herself to orgasm before he too came roughly and with much satisfaction.

Jeff suddenly realized where he was, thinking all this, and looking down tried to put the Axis fantasy out of his head as quickly as possible. Half of the men milling by the weight racks were obviously gay, and the last thing Jeff needed was some homo catching a peek of the chubby in his shorts.

"Jeffer-son, my man!" Jeff's head snapped forward and he turned and saw Jojo approaching him, his smile a white slit cut into his thick beard. Jojo pumped Jeff's hand forcefully. "What you doin' here at this hour? Your boss turf you finally?"

"I wish! Naw, just a day off. What's your excuse?"

"Evening shift. Can't afford no 'days off' like you high-flyin' salesman, bro!"

Jojo towered over Jeff, linebacker-huge. Jeff wondered what sort of protein intake Jojo needed to maintain the bulk on his arms and chest.

"So, Jeff, you still terrorisin' the single women of Toronto or you finally hook up with that spiky blond girl I saw you wit'?"

"Christina? Naw man, that's over." Jeff changed the subject: the Raptors' recent road losses, Vince Carter's latest sidelining injury. He could as easily have been talking about the Maple Leafs or the Argos or the Blue Jays – Toronto was a city full of losing sports franchises that guys on the floor could grouse about between sets. Otherwise he could crack Jojo up with jokes about the other gym rats ("Serious, man, the guy's like Orgazmo The Magnificent over there, grunting and groaning even though he's benching less than I am!" "You're dangerous, brother!") or scrutinise the women who happened to peruse the weights rack ("Yo, check out the redhead in the green outfit. You could bounce quarters off that ass or what?" "Damn! Don't get a married man in trouble!"). Jojo made for the perfect audience for his jokes, plus he got him to shut up long enough to finish a set – best of both worlds.

Jojo pointed down the floor. "Check it out," he said. In the weights room a stumpy bearded man was shaking the tension out of his five foot tall, three foot wide body while a taller man loaded two additional 45-pound plates onto the leg press machine. A third man climbed on top of the machine's foot plate, acting as additional ballast. Already people were gathering around to watch.

Jeff counted the weight plates loaded on the leg press. "Shit, dude's pressing 900 pounds over there."

Jojo nodded. "I seen that guy before. He's monster."

The bearded man howled as if in agony, his legs thrusting. The man crouched on the foot plate above bobbed up and down, hooting like a kid while the man who had loaded the plates bellowed out a military count. Beneath the plate the man's tree-trunk legs were shaking violently.

"Monster," Jojo said admiringly.

The bearded man struggled with the final rep. He pulled himself up from the machine's seat and scuttled past Jeff and Jojo towards the water fountain, panting and trudging. "Good set, brother," Jojo called out, but the bearded man ignored him, scowling into space. "Yeah, don't mention it," Jeff added under his breath.

Jeff felt a hard finger poking insistently into his back. He turned and saw Axis standing with her legs crossed, eyeing him and Jojo suspiciously. "So tell me you guys carbed up properly before coming to work out," Axis taunted, dragging a finger along Jeff's side.

"I grabbed a steak sandwich on the way over," Jeff replied, bracing himself.

"No, no, no, no, NO!" Axis punched his bicep. "Bread: bad! Steak: worse! How many times do I have to tell you?"

"Baby, last night I had this peppercorn steak with mushroom sauce." He licked his lips, pausing for effect. "A good marbled cut of meat, tasty fat dripping off the side –"

Axis breathed heavily, as if having a seizure. "Don't talk about marbling of the steak, Jeff! That's all fat!" She

grabbed Jeff's side and shook it as if trying to dislodge a wedge of rib cage. "Fat – is – your – *enemy*!!!!"

Jojo bent forward, cackling uncontrollably. "Don't beat the boy up over a sandwich, girl!" he said between sobs of laughter.

Axis shook her head. "I swear, Jeff, I'm going have to put you over my knee and spank you for eating so much garbage."

"I'd like to see you try."

Axis folded her arms and stared at Jeff. "What *am* I gonna do with you?" she said, a half-smile stealing across her lips.

Jojo coughed and clapped Jeff on the shoulder. "I'ma let you kids work this out," he said, turning away. "See y'all at the funeral."

IN THE YEARS before Jeff had started working out, he had been able to forgive a girl who didn't stay in shape, but by now he was spoiled. Putting a finger to a woman's arm and finding the flesh yielding spongily to the slightest pressure turned him off completely. An unfit twenty-year-old would eventually turn into a flabby thirty-year-old, so any woman Jeff was going to be with had to be in decent shape. Maybe Axis was a bit too far gone in the other direction, but at least she wasn't going to fall apart. Christina had been pretty fit. Damn, the girl had stamina. Not that it mattered now.

Lately, there were fewer women working out at Absolute Fitness, partly because a women-only health club had opened up a block over on Bloor Street. Jeff missed the female presence on the workout floor, the office girls marching in tandem on the treadmills, the university students conjugating the verb "like" outside the aerobic studio. If he squinted his eyes he could blur the images of the women into shapes more to his preference, imagine them massaging each other's necks and upper arms as they spotted each other doing shoulder presses, their pliant bodies stretching on the padded mats. He could see their faces morph fantastically, features shifting until the black woman on the Stair Master became Rhonda busting out of her sports bra, nipples emerging like twin brown suns rising over their lycra horizon. He could envision Axis with a girl from the front desk exchanging finger fucks on a Hammer Strength incline bench, or Christina getting it on with one of his other previous girlfriends exploring the mysteries of the Downward Dog in the yoga class. Now men outnumbered women four to one at Abso-Fit, and no degree of eye adjustment could remedy that. Surely Jeff wasn't the only gym rat cursing the exodus, the women-only club no doubt drawing away the ladies with better monthly discounts – why else would the chicks have bailed in such large numbers?

"So check this," Jeff said, gloating. "Axis got a new computer last week, still hasn't set it up. I offered to help her put it together, so tonight I'll be going to her place. Sweet or what?"

Jojo pulled his massive leg up onto the bench, re-tying his sneakers. "So you a computer expert now?"

"I sell software, don't I? Instructor for hire. Dial 1-800-COMPUTE."

"Sounds like you intend on teaching her more than computers, bro."

"Oh, I'll be teaching her stuff all night if I have to!" He jerked his hips and imitated a porn soundtrack's *wah-wah* guitar solo. "I'll teach her but good!"

"You just watch she don't break you in half. A girl that juiced up don't know her strength sometimes."

Jeff paused. "You don't suppose she uses anabolics, do you?"

Jojo rolled his eyes. "Ask any of them guys on the floor. No girl looks that muscled up without juicing. She got more steroids in her than a damn racehorse."

Jeff nodded, recalling how Axis had been trying to convince him to check out a glutamine supplement that *Musclemag* had on special. She had described in detail how the glutamine worked to increase growth hormone levels, and how with a protein-synthesizing chaser like creatine a person could pack on "Schwarzenegger muscle mass" in weeks – Axis had explained this process excitedly, her voice rasping and her words quickening with an almost erotic charge.

"You think I should go for it?" Jeff asked.

"Alexis?" Jojo shrugged. "Why not? She don't know you well enough to hate you."

Jeff laughed. "I love you too, honey-bunch."

"Exactly."

Jeff moved behind the bench ready to spot Jojo on his reps. "So, Jo, I never see you work out with the wife. I mean, Rhonda works front desk and all."

Jojo fanned his fingers across the bar and began lifting. "Our schedules don't mesh. She does her thing. I do mine."

"Trouble at the henhouse?"

"Ah, we're just going through a time right now."

"The kids thing, again?"

"Yeah, the kids thing. I want 'em, she don't." Jojo sat up and rolled his shoulders, his back pushing up like a tidal wave breaking against the shoals of his neck. "A woman who don't want children, who would believe it?"

"So she doesn't want kids, what's the big deal?"

"Children are the deal, man. Children are your future."

"Thank you, Whitney Houston."

Jeff changed the barbell plates and lay on the bench. "I'd

like to have kids someday. It'd be all right."

Jojo laughed quietly. "You need to get yourself a woman first."

"Details, details." Jeff started his set. "I mean, why do you need to get married anyway? Just wait a year and collect the tax break, who cares? It's just a piece of paper."

"Man, that's not what marriage is. You wouldn't know."

"I know enough not to get trapped. You ever listen to yourself? You make it sound like a prison sentence."

Jeff pushed hard on the last rep, Jojo guiding the barbell onto the rack. "Marriage is what adults do," Jojo said. "It's compromising and making someone happy who makes you happy."

"So does Rhonda make you happy?"

Jojo lowered his voice. "Look, I don't get everything I want, but neither does she. We both give as much as we can, but we have limits, you know? It's like that nuclear policy, 'Mutual Assured Destruction.' I don't get everything I want, but I get enough to be happy, but in turn Rhonda don't get everything she wants either."

Jeff chuckled. "Mutual Assured Dissatisfaction." They changed positions on the bench.

"It's compromise, man. Being married is being in for the long haul, you know? Knowing you're not getting everything you want but liking it all the same."

"You make it sound like a real party." Jeff stood behind the bench and spotted Jojo, even though Jojo needed no assistance with his reps.

JEFF ALWAYS BRISTLED when he heard the word "compromise". He had compromised with his old man about which university to attend, compromised with the government over the repayment of his student loans, compromised with his supervisors over dress code and salary, compromised with customers over software prices. Surely, after twenty-seven years he had compromised enough in his life that he should get something useful back.

Even Axis was a potential compromise. In his mind Jeff could manipulate her image like a Photoshop JPEG, add the softness that her real-life equivalent lacked, edit out her ramblings about supplements and workout technique and body-fat percentages. Jeff often wondered how her previous boyfriends (whoever they were, wherever they might have gone) fared with Axis and her cardio-zealotry, how they were able to romance a woman for whom the heart was just another muscle to train and make efficient. Still, this mental re-configuration was crucial. Recently Jeff had seen Axis for the first time without her knotted sweatshirt, catching a glimpse of the chest that had remained hidden like some concealed treasure. But instead of the bouncing, heaving breasts Jeff had so fondly envisioned, the real Axis had pecs

instead of tits, hard shingles of flesh jutting mannishly against the inside of her spandex top. Of course, she spotted Jeff immediately and cornered him by the suggestion box, preaching about creatine and Met-RX and skinless chicken and the evils of fruit juice. Of course she was juicing – how could Jeff have ever convinced himself otherwise? He could only nod nervously, trying not to imagine what the chemicals in her body were doing to her, the steroids turning her arms and legs into tempered steel, the milk draining from her mammaries, the woman transformed irrevocably into an android, cold and efficient and wholly inhuman.

JEFF PACKED UP his gear and went to the lobby to wait for Axis, who was still in the change room. Rhonda was at the front desk along with Harmony, one of the interchangeable blonde girls who was just starting her afternoon shift. A heavy-bodied woman was standing by the front desk, talking excitedly at Harmony. Jeff waved a quick hello to Rhonda and dropped himself into the courtesy chair by the lobby doors.

"So Emily," Harmony said to the woman. "How long have you and Scott been seeing each other?"

"Well, we met at church up in Brampton about six months ago, it was an inter-faith function." Emily had thick red hair down to her waist and wore a green print dress that looked like it was from another century. Jeff surmised from her clothes and the fat on her neck and arms that she was not a gym member.

"I just love your hair," Harmony chimed. "It must, like, take forever to wash and set and stuff."

"Oh it does, but anything worth anything takes some tending to."

"Ain't that the truth," Rhonda said.

Harmony was sitting straight in her chair, her smile gleaming and sunshine-friendly. She was the perky cheerleader type that Jeff seemed to attract all too easily, his brain congealing inside his skull as if she were sucking the intelligence out of his cerebellum like a vampire with her chatter about classes at Ryerson and her deejay boyfriend who worked weekends at the Docks night club. Jeff felt stupider just looking at her, pleasant though she was to observe. On any Friday night Harmony was no doubt at the Docks dancing on a platform while her boyfriend pawed the vinyl on the turntables. She had a body made for dancing, slim and toned, the strobes playing on her gyrating torso, her pert breasts like torpedoes trying to launch through her black Abso-Fit polo shirt, her legs swivelling under her nylon workout pants, the snaps along the sides popping with her aggressive moves, the shirt coming untucked and flapping higher and higher –

"Look at Space Cadet over here!" Rhonda was staring at

Jeff with eyebrows raised. “Bored out of his mind by the girl talk, aren’t you?”

Jeff blinked and tried to appear composed. “I’m just zoning,” he said.

“I think buddy here’s considering his ‘personal training session’ tonight,” Rhonda said.

“Yeah, his hot date with Axis,” Harmony added with a wink.

Jeff gritted his teeth. “It’s not a date,” he said in a trailing voice. “I’m helping her put together a computer.” He grimaced and stared into the far corner, focusing instead on a poster hung on the far wall showing a man’s stomach, the abdominals bubbling under the skin like a chemical soup brought to boil.

Harmony turned back toward Emily. “It’s cool talking to someone who knows Scott. He never says anything even if you ask him.”

“Oh, he’s a pussycat. He’s always calling me up, doing little favours.” Emily grinned as if bursting with a wonderful secret. “Writes me poems and things.”

Rhonda’s eyes widened. “Oh lord, he writes poetry?”

“That’s so sweet,” Harmony said.

Jeff tipped his head back and imagined projectile-vomiting onto the ceiling.

Emily admitted that she had copies of the poems with her. Harmony and Rhonda insisted that she show them. “I shouldn’t be passing these around. Scott’d be so mad.” She paused and bit her lip, and then fished out some weathered pieces of paper from her purse. Rhonda took the unfolded paper handed to her and read aloud:

“Emily, a girl so true / How could one not love someone like you ...”

Her eyes worked their way to the bottom of the page. “Oh, that’s adorable!” She handed the paper to Harmony, and Harmony read the page. “Oh-my-gawd!” she said, laughing. “Scott wrote that? That’s so sweet!”

Axis entered the lobby wearing a loose ribbed sweater and cream-coloured capris, sauntering like a J.C. Penney model. Before Jeff could say hello and compliment Axis (her sweater agreeably obscured her upper body geography), Harmony was thrusting the first poem into Axis’ hands. “Just read it,” Rhonda said.

Axis studied the paper and smirked. “Scott wrote it,” Harmony chirped.

Axis raised her eyebrows. “Scott the Squat wrote that?” she asked. “Oh wow!”

Emily said that Scott had written her at least a dozen poems. “I keep them with me, close to my heart.” She re-folded the first poem and unfolded a second one.

“Read it for us,” Rhonda said.

“Yeah, read it,” Harmony added.

Emily scrunched up her face and giggled nervously, the cellulite on her arms wobbling. She turned toward Jeff. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Why would I mind?” Jeff said.

Emily held out the paper, her hands shaking, and then read aloud:

Emily, you are the one
I want to hold like a burning sun
Your face so pretty, smiling fair
The flowing river of your hair
Your laughter like the song of birds
My love for you, I have no words
I want to soar like the eagle flies
Through the human cosmos in your eyes

“That’s nice,” Axis said.

“Real sweet,” Rhonda added, coughing into her fist.

“You’re, like, so lucky,” Harmony said. “I mean, my boyfriend never writes me anything.”

Emily quickly re-folded the papers and shoved them in her purse just as a short figure entered the lobby from the gym floor entrance. It was the bearded man who earlier had been howling on the leg press machine. “Hey, Em,” Scott said, his face folding into a shy grimace. He kissed Emily lightly, standing on his toes to reach her lips.

“So Scott, we were just looking at your poems,” Axis said cheerfully. The other women glared at her, mortified.

“My what?” Scott said, his face slackening and blushing red.

“We asked Emily to read us your poems, Scott,” Rhonda said evenly. “They were really good.”

Scott turned toward Emily. His blush turned full-force. “Aw, Emmy!” he moaned. “That’s *embarrassing!* Those are, like, *personal* and stuff! Aw, man!” He shuffled his legs and then, to Jeff’s amusement, stamped his feet, looking for all the world like an enraged garden gnome.

“I just wanted to show them off,” Emily said, stroking Scott’s chin. “I’m just proud of you, honey, that’s all.” She rubbed a finger behind his ear and muttered soothing-sounding words. Scott cupped his beefy hands gently around the sides of Emily’s face and kissed her. The other women cooed. Jeff tried to hide his disgust.

“They really were nice poems,” Harmony said.

Scott stared at the floor. “Uh, thanks,” he said. He then whispered in Emily’s direction something about not wanting to be late. “It was nice meeting you people,” Emily said. She waved good-bye and then the two of them exited, holding hands like schoolchildren.

Axis collapsed against the front desk. “Oh my God, was that not just the *cutest* thing you ever saw in your life?”

Harmony giggled. "Scott looked like he was just gonna die!"

"I love how the woman just stood there," Rhonda said, holding her hands out before her. "You'd think she was reading the Constitution, she was so proud!"

"Yeah, it was pretty sad," Jeff said as he got up from the courtesy chair.

"That was not 'sad!'" Axis said to him with a mocking pout. "C'mon, Jeff, that was really nice of him to write poems for her."

"But the poems suck!" Jeff blurted.

Rhonda eyed him cautiously. "So what if the poems suck? That's not the point."

"They were awful! You just said so yourself."

"I said that she was proud of him, that's all."

"But they stink, you admit that."

"So what?" Rhonda replied, her head shaking.

"Jeff, wouldn't you ever write a poem for a woman you liked?" Axis asked.

Jeff snickered. "What am I, twelve? Why would I make an ass of myself like that?"

There was an uneasy silence. "Because," Harmony said, "maybe you *like* someone enough to do it?"

"Yeah, right. The world is full of crappy art and books and movies. Why add to the glut out there when you know the talent's not in you in the first place?"

"I thought the line about the 'human cosmos' was nice," Axis suggested meekly.

"Sure, like he could have come up with that."

Three sets of eyes bored into Jeff. "You really are an asshole," Rhonda sneered.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry for living." He turned toward Axis. "Anyway, are we off to check out your computer or what?"

Axis frowned. She eyed her friends behind the desk, their admonishing expressions. She forced a smile. "Actually, maybe tonight's not good. Something's come up ..." Her voice trailed and her mouth trembled wordlessly.

Jeff stared at Axis, caught off-guard by her refusal. He then shrugged, and picked up his gym kit. "Suit yourself," he said. "Maybe another time." He paused and looked over the three women by the lobby desk. "Night, guys. Catch you at poetry reading next week."

"Whatever you say, Jeff," Rhonda said. Harmony stared into the computer screen and said nothing. Axis stood with her arms folded and shoulders squared, looking at once impregnable and yet weirdly helpless.

THE WARM AFTERNOON air rushed over Jeff's skin, the whirl of traffic flooding his ears. Along Cumberland Avenue awnings fluttered lazily over crowded café patios. Jazz music played from a second-floor balcony. Exhilarated by

the rush of life in the open street, Jeff flipped his cell phone open and checked his messages. One was from the Sales Manager at LogicNet asking him to call in regarding an account that was over the ninety-day limit on payment terms ("Hope you're feeling better," the manager added). The other message was from Christina. She said she was sorry for shutting him out of her life and wondering if she hadn't acted rashly in doing so. She wanted to meet him for drinks at a club near her apartment in the Beaches, tonight if possible.

Jeff played the message back a second time, not quite believing her words. "I want to see if we can make things right," she was saying. Jeff clapped the phone closed and sneered toward the heavens. He formulated a plan in his head: he wouldn't call her back, not tonight at least. Make her sweat a little, wait a day or two and then call her at work, generously taking up her offer. By then it would be a Thursday, perfect timing for a long weekend of apologies and sweet reparations. Excellent.

He strode down the avenue, his head held high among the couples floating lock-armed, haughty *fashionistas* and mighty suits who, like Jeff, never quite deserved the things that fell into their waiting laps like manna from a benevolent god. His eyes fixed onto a thin woman walking a few paces ahead of him in a broad-brimmed sun hat and long gauzy dress, the fabric swishing against her thighs with the movement of her legs, and he thought of how his old man might have launched into a lecture on how mini-skirts were inferior to the sight of a long dress moving across a woman's skin, the poetry of cotton swinging and parting, allowing only for glimpses of tantalising shin and thigh. The woman turned her head and Jeff saw her looking back at him suddenly, accusingly, and for a moment he thought he was seeing Christina, even though this woman was obviously a good ten years older; yet, as she continued looking over her shoulder and Jeff's pupils contracted from a sudden burst of sunlight flooding his vision, he swore he was in fact looking at Axis, her face iridescent and frozen in a mask of inarticulate panic, heavy with sadness and utterly, utterly beautiful.

Last things

In this dream, you are on twilight
reconnaissance, the target not yet disclosed,
except for the moon, first coin of night,
that illuminates the wrecked flood plains
and difficult gorges. The river, weighty in its groove,
(sluggish as mercury) guides you back
toward the mountains. Peneus, – an old God –
barks his shins on locks and dams.

Would you go back if you knew
what future lay before you; *exuviae*, triumphs
that pass as smoke over broken pedestals,
wash of ocean liners, afterburn of jets, crowd roar
always the same, a baying for blood,
conflict and allegiance; diminution of worldly
resources, cleared tracts of forest,
diminished birdsong, this world that lost its
memory in a progressive sickness –
once it had fully embraced the colloquial?

– *Stephen Oliver*

Settling down

Making myself comfortable in her
forcing up fixtures
nailing pink flesh
framing fakes
sitting in enzyme
thinking perhaps you should have tried
It is why you are left pounding from
the inside out
beating the meat in the belly of the beast lying between
four walls of skin
disappointed at such dismal daring

oh jonah there are no women here.

Atom

Before creation there is no mention of time.

Greying heads full of greying matter

Tiny hands building tinfoil shrines

Skins of lovers under afternoon sheets

Feeding ducks on a bench by a pond.

What was before this?

– *Amy Jan Vrem*

Worst Pie Ever

P

AULINA'S HUSBAND HAD split after ten years because he didn't like her chicken pot pie. Paulina found this pretty unfortunate, but at the same time had gotten tired of trying to spice the pie just the way he liked it. Ernest had always complained it was too peppery, or not peppery enough, or at the last minute he'd say, "It would have killed you to put some garlic in it?"

After ten years any woman should have run out on all this complaining but Paulina had stayed with Ernest because she was in love with his T-shirt collection. Ernest had a variety of ironic T-shirts, including defunct financial companies and '70s sitcoms. Paulina felt a wave of love for Ernest every time she'd see him come home from a hard day of getting stoned with his friends wearing an Enron T-shirt.

Still, Ernest's complaining about the pie made Paulina question her love for this man every day, so when he finally left her with a note simply saying "worst pie ever," Paulina felt that her life was about to become her own, finally; after so many wasted nights and thwarted dreams.

ERNEST HAD PACKED his bag and promised himself he'd take the next Amtrak going anywhere. He had this notion that he'd meet his dream girl at the café cart of the train. He was right: There she was, buying a hamburger with a soda and a cheese-filled pretzel at 9 a.m. that Thursday morning. Tall, brunette and wearing the kind of lime-green pants that let Ernest know sometimes God designs pants.

Ernest handed a twenty to the guy behind the counter and said, "Keep the change, it's on me tonight," in a way that he hoped sounded like he was in a movie.

Shanana, who used to be a dock worker called Buddy (he was nobody's friend but there was already another Tim when he got there), couldn't believe her good luck. She'd only been fully female for fifteen hours and already some guy was paying for her breakfast! This was the part of being a woman Buddy had always wanted; having someone else pay for stuff. Oh, sure, the operation itself had cost thousands of dollars, but it wasn't about the saving of money overall; it was the gesture, the fact that just by having pretty hair and painted lips and a curve here and there, a person earned the privilege of having someone else want to pick up their tab. It made her feel special and beautiful and precious. Who knew her first romance in this body would take place on a morning train whose ultimate destination was Pittsburgh? Shanana said, "Thanks, I appreciate that," and as she walked toward a seat, she tried to shake her hips in the way she'd been taught by Marcel, a popular personal trainer for post-op trannies.

MEANWHILE PAULINA HAD baked eleven chicken pot pies and was sitting in front of the TV watching the Lifetime channel's drama about a woman whose son was kidnapped just when she found out she had breast cancer and her husband had run away with the maid. Each pie was made with slightly different spicing; a little oregano here, a little rosemary there. And damn it, she was going to stick her fingers in each one of them. Then the doorbell rang and it was the milkman. Sure, milkmen had gone out of fashion a long time ago, but the housewives in Paulina's neighborhood were so bored that they

had arranged for a milkman to come daily so they would be guaranteed a visitor. It had started out as an idea suggested by Mildred whose husband was never home, and all the women took to it.

Carl the milkman really hated milk but figured it was better than delivering eggs. Milk was about the most repulsive beverage Carl could imagine. In fact every time he delivered a bottle on somebody's doorstep he would cross himself to ward off evil spirits. Carl hated when people asked, "How's the milk this morning?" because he would always have to lie and say, "Tastes just like heaven!" Carl's life was filled with pain because while he hated milk (though not milk products such as cheese, ice cream, etc.) he had always wanted to be the friendly neighborhood milkman and felt bad about the fact that it involved deception.

Every day Carl would look in the mirror and feel that he was living a lie. He'd look at himself and say, "Carl, you are a liar. A plain old liar." And then he'd laugh and smooth his hair and make himself a breakfast of waffles and bacon and get ready for his day of being the milkman with a secret. Hating milk yet bringing it into people's house made him feel naughty – in the good way.

The cane-and-top-hat patterned curtains on Paulina's door were Carl's favorite on this block. Carl figured either Paulina or her husband must be an actor, and this made him attribute a fair amount of glamour to them, even though he had done a computer search on them and all he found was that Paulina ran a mail-order quilting business and Ernest worked at the canning plant.

Carl had always wished for a wife like Paulina, so beautiful and pleasant and always welcoming. Of course that's because he only saw her for two minutes every day and had no idea that she was prone to insane rants that would go on for ten straight minutes or more, though she really was for the most part lovely to be around; but hey, what good is a fantasy if it can't be perfect? Not very good, that's for sure, so Carl told himself that the reason he didn't have a wife like Paulina was that he was too busy being conflicted about his line of work, and that he probably radiated some kind of confusion that made women not drawn to him.

SHANANA HOPED HE was following her. She had walked her tray over to her chair and sat down. There he was. Shanana decided to tell him straight out that she used to be a man. Shanana didn't want to have to worry that she'd be having a great time with someone and then would reveal her true self and then they'd leave. She smiled and said, "Hi. Thank you for the meal. Listen, I've only been a woman for fifteen hours. What's your name?"

The "I've only been a woman for fifteen hours" wasn't audible because the train announcer had declared the next

stop over the loudspeaker at the very same time. And Ernest didn't want to say "What?" and ruin the smooth conversational exchange.

Ernest responded, "Ernest. What's your name?"

"Shanana. It's spelled like the band, except all one word and pronounced like Shoshanna, but different."

"You must be ..." He'd never seen a woman who looked like this before. Something about her was unlike anyone else. "American Indian? I mean, Native American, or something?"

"Sure. Or something. Let me guess about you. Sit on down. Tell me about yourself. No, wait, sometimes I'm a little bit psychic." Shanana had always felt her psychic powers were an innately feminine quality. "You're a guy who's real particular about certain things and you won't have it any other way."

"Oh my good heavens, Shanana." Ernest had always suspected that the Native Americans were blessed with special mystical ways about them.

"I'm gonna make sure you get things just how you like them, Ernest. Just you wait." She took a bite of hamburger and then mumbled in a way that sounded really sloppy but was still effective because Ernest was looking for love and magic right now and was willing to ignore anything that stood in the way.

He winked at her, his wink that he thought made him look slick but sometimes only struck people as a tic, and said, "I will do just that."

THE REAL REASON Carl didn't have a wife wasn't that he was devoid of looks, charm or good humour. In fact, Carl inspired comparisons to a young Pat Boone, with the shiny sandy-colored hair, straight teeth and winning smile. He was straight out of an America that didn't exist any more and, given that he was a milkman, he was a sort of fetish object for all the ladies on his route. The real reason was that Carl lived in shame about how much he hated milk, and he always ended the relationship with a woman when he felt himself on the verge of telling her. The shame was too much, and how could he explain that he loved the "being" a milkman but not the product itself? He assumed that anyone who liked him, liked him because they associated him with milk. It was a lactose-laden shame spiral that was driving him into the ground one drop at a time.

Carl smoothed his hair and knocked on Paulina's door. She had just tasted the chicken pot pie with paprika and had with each bite been telling herself how Ernest didn't know what he was missing. When Carl knocked, each of Paulina's fingers was covered in cream sauce. She called, "Just a minute!"

Paulina opened the door, happily knowing it was Carl arriving at this hour. She greeted him, "Hi, Carl! Nice to see

you. How's the milk this morning?" Paulina knew Carl would always say it was good, as he always did, but it just made her feel better to have someone tell her she was going to have a positive experience.

"Milk's real fresh this morning, ma'am."

"Well, nice to hear it." Carl sure cut a fine figure in his milkman outfit. "Carl, would you like to share some chicken pot pie? I've been experimenting with what's the best recipe. My husband isn't around now, you see, and I was just wondering, if you have the time, that is, to sit a moment."

Carl hadn't had homemade chicken pot pie ever in his life. Carl was an old-fashioned man who longed for a woman who just wanted to stay home and bake pies. Oh, sure, he'd had homemade pies before: apple, blueberry, and various other sweet ones, but a homemade main-dish pot pie, now that means someone loves you. Sure, it hadn't been made especially for him, but that didn't mean he couldn't eat the love inside.

"Are you entering a contest? If I'm not prying, that is."

"No, I just ... I just really like pie, Carl. I do. I like pie, and I like to be around a man who likes to eat my pie. Can you understand that, Carl? Can you?" Tears began to run down her face. She took Carl's hand and walked him over to the paprika-and-garlic pie, then gently took his second finger and stuck it through the crust and into the wetness. "I'm just going to leave you here with the pies, Carl."

"Sorry?"

"I'm just going to leave you here with the pies. I want to know which one you like best. They're all different. Some have no salt, some have no oregano, some are a little bit on the sweet side. Carl, I have to level with you. You're either going to love me for my pies or you're going to leave."

"I ... I have to deliver my milk. If I don't, I'll get in trouble." Paulina looked at him pleadingly with those small blue eyes. She was the most sad-looking beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Or maybe the most beautiful-looking sad woman. He was trying to decide. He couldn't leave. This was his chance to be a hero. And to eat some homemade chicken pot pie. To heck with his schedule. Carl took his hand out of Paulina's, and smiled as he stuck that finger in another pie.

SHANANA WANTED TO ask Ernest if he was interested in camping. While she herself was not much of the rustic sort, she had always dreamed of a man who enjoyed hunting and camping. She wanted a "real man," to make her feel like a real woman. And to Shanana, a real man went camping and wore flannel and would show her he was boss. None of these sissified city-guys in their suits and proper manners and neatly shaven faces and manicured nails. If Shanana had gone to the trouble to make herself into a full-out woman, she definitely wouldn't settle for less than a full-out

man. "How do you spend your time, when you're not riding the train? And where are you heading, anyway?"

Ernest had always enjoyed a good lie. He liked to think that he was helping the world with his creativity. Real life was pretty dull, and he thought himself pretty dull, but if he could brighten one person's life for a brief moment with a little lie, he had done the world a service. "I'm a modeling scout. You know, I travel here and there. L.A., Paris, Milan" He hoped Shanana wouldn't ask him to describe these places.

"Ooh, Paris! I have always, always wanted to go there. What's it like?"

"Well ... it has wonderful ... architecture? And ... art." He knew he was out of his league here as he knew nothing about either subject. "Also, surprisingly good camping."

Shanana recrossed her legs that were in those lime-green pants. "Camping? You've camped in Paris? You don't say, now."

Ernest loved camping. His favorite part about it, about being out in nature, was the sound of nothing. Sometimes it made him want to kill himself because it was so lonely and such proof that all he had in this world was himself. It reminded him that his regular life was just a distraction from the clear wind inside his mind and the emptiness in his stomach and the cold inside his body. The loneliness would become unbearable when he was outdoors but at least no one was around to hear him cry, so he could. At home he had to keep it together because that's the way it is around other people.

Shanana took another bite of her hamburger. Maybe this guy could help her get a job somewhere. She'd already told him she used to be a man and he didn't bat an eye. Maybe for once she would be accepted for who she was. She'd always felt like the only strange thing about her was that all her life she'd felt like a woman trapped in a man's body; but other than that she was pretty straight: against gay marriage, financially conservative, anti-welfare; why, everything about her was on the side that would call a person like her a "freak" or a "homosexual," except that she wasn't a freak or a homosexual, she was just a woman who'd been born in a man's body. Homosexuals and abortionists and welfare families were a bunch of freaks; Shanana was just a victim of a bad match. She hated that all those gay groups included transsexuals as family. Sure, she needed a place to go, but she was not a homo and did not want to be categorized among them; she just wanted to be a normal girl leading a normal life and not be constantly reminded that she wasn't real.

Ernest had never met a woman like this. "So are you getting off at Pittsburgh?" Maybe she could show him around. "And what do you ... if you don't mind my asking ... do with yourself?"

Since the change, Shanana'd had to start looking for work. The problem was she couldn't list any of her references because then she'd have to tell the potential employer, "Tell them I was called Buddy, then" or "Tim, then," and it would open up a whole can of worms. So far, the only job she'd been able to get was "waitress" in a small coffee shop that accepted her even though she hadn't waitressed before, because post-op trannies have long, lean legs, and that was all the people at Casey's Roadside Grill care about. Shanana had no idea where she'd go from here, but her dream was to marry wealth in order to avoid the tricky résumé situation. "I sling hash," she said. "Serve pancakes, waffles, sometimes an egg."

"Sometimes an egg, you don't say." Ernest liked eggs. And he liked waitresses. A good-looking girl in usually a short skirt who was bringing you food with a smile and then you got to pay her at the end; why it was almost as good as being with a hooker but you never had to take your clothes off and it was a better source of protein. "What kind of eggs?"

"What kind you like?" she asked, hoping he didn't think she was a good cook. Shanana had always been a fan of microwaving something and then putting it on a fancy plate so as to feel like she cooked it herself. It hit Shanana that learning to cook might be a necessary step in her becoming a woman. "See I can make all kind of eggs. Poached, scrambled, sunny side up ... omelets." She figured he wasn't about to come over right now anyway.

"I like a spinach and cheese omelet on a Sunday morning."

"Well, today's Thursday. That gives me a few days to go shopping." She couldn't believe a man this virile didn't mind a bit that she used to be a man. Sure, she had no idea if they had things in common or if he was kind, but this was her first time out and she'd already told him her secret and it would all be okay. It would all be okay.

CARL HAD TASTED all eleven pies and liked them all. He smiled at Paulina and said, "You make incredibly good pie, if you don't mind my saying. I bet your husband comes home early from work just to have a taste of these. I know I would."

Paulina began to sob. "Would you, Carl the Milkman?" She didn't mean to say "the milkman" out loud, but this was how she always thought of him. "I mean: Carl? You really like my pies, is that what you're saying? Wait, don't answer yet. I mean: would you like all my pies, no matter how they are spiced, and no matter how cold or hot they are?"

Because Carl lived with the sadness that his whole career was a lie, he made sure never to lie in any other situation, not even a little bit. "I'll be real straight with you, Mrs. Williams."

"Call me Paulina, Carl. A man who's gotten his hands

wet for me can surely use my first name."

Carl blushed a bit and smoothed that Pat-Boone-perfect hair that made the ladies love him. "Paulina. Paulina, I ..." It felt so good to say her first name. "Paulina ... that's a pretty name."

"My parents wanted to name me Paul. They were hoping for a boy."

"Well now, that's a little depressing."

"You're telling me. Why do you think I sit around baking pies all day? I'm a sad woman, Carl."

"I'm a sad man, Paulina. Why do you think I deliver milk?"

"Well, because ... milk is good for people. You're doing the community a service. Why, milk is a great source of calcium, and all us women over thirty need to make sure we get enough, to avoid osteoporosis."

"I guess that's true." How could he tell her that it wasn't that he didn't think his job was valid, but that the thought of drinking a cup of milk made him feel just this side of queasy?

"We all love you, Carl."

"Ya do?" Carl couldn't tell her; not yet; not now. "Paulina, the one thing I should tell you is that I do like my pies warm or hot. I know you want to be with a fella who'll love his pies spiced all different ways ... and that's me, for sure ... but I don't like a cold pie, I gotta be right honest with ya. Cold pie, that's the pie of hate, Paulina, it's the pie of I do not care. If you need a man for whom temperature is not an issue, then I don't want to mislead you."

Paulina felt torn. On the one hand, after all of Ernest's complaining, she really did just need a man who would shut up and eat whatever she gave him. On the other hand, temperature wasn't such a big deal; it had nothing to do with her personality the way spicing did. In fact, even she wouldn't want a cold pie. Indeed, the fact that with Carl she could experiment with spicing all she wanted probably did mean that she would be loved for her soul. "Sometimes I like to put a little honeyed ham in my chicken pot pie. Can you handle that, Carl? Can you handle that?"

ERNEST SAID, "So, you like to go to the movies much?" Ernest and his wife oftentimes had people ask them if they were actors because they were good-looking and had exaggerated mannerisms. Ernest and his wife had bonded because they both loved a life of renting movies all day and night until they fell asleep. They never went to theatre, museums or out to eat because that would take away from movie-renting time.

"If someone would take me." Shanana realized this sounded too desperate; she already had his attention. "I mean, sure I like the movies." As a young boy, Shanana/Tim had often fantasized about being one of those pretty girls on the arm of a handsome guy on a Saturday night at the movies. He

would buy her popcorn and a large soda and gumdrops, and when they sat down he'd put his arm around her and try to cop a feel. "I like all movies. Old, new. Funny, sad. Just being at the movies is enough for me."

Ernest felt himself craving eggs. He decided to be bold. Life is short and if you miss your chance, you won't get it again. No one person can replace another and if you're on an Amtrak to Pittsburgh and you've got the opportunity to eat a big fluffy omelet and you blow it, you've got your own self to blame when that pit of loneliness hits. "Shanana," Ernest said, mustering up his bravado, "I'd like to eat some of your eggs. Not Sunday like I said, but Thursday."

"Today?"

"Unless there's another Thursday you know about."

"Today. All right, Ernest who goes camping. I'm gonna rustle up some eggs for you today." She figured it was now or never. "You know, in the past, I never cooked. I mean, most guys don't expect another guy to cook for them."

"Most guys don't expect another guy to cook for them?"

"Right, like I said. You know, how I told you I ..." And then it hit her: the train conductor's voice announcing "Washington, DC, next stop, Washington, DC" over her explaining that she used to be a man. Uh-oh. Shanana really needed to be taken to the movies, but if she was going to fumble with cooking, she had to make sure she would be loved for herself, not have to hide a secret all night long. "I used to be a man."

"Sorry, ma'am?"

"I'll cook your eggs and I'll sit next to you at the movies. But you need to know that I used to be a man – that is, not really; only on the outside. I was a woman trapped in the body of a man."

"You were a man?"

"No. I was trapped in a man's body. I am a woman and I always have been. I was trapped. And now I'm free. And I'm going to make you the best eggs you ever had."

"You're a man."

"I have always been a woman. And it doesn't matter what I was. It matters who I am now. But besides I never was a man; there was a mix-up when I was made and I was stuck in a male body. I never was a man."

"But you ..."

"Who I am is a woman and I'm here now and this is what we have, Ernest. This is why you're riding this train because you just want to be in the right now. I told you I'm a little bit psychic. You want to be in the right now, don't you, Ernest?"

Woman or man, Shanana sure had some special kind of Native American special powers. "Yes. I want to be in the right now."

"So I'm going to make eggs and you're going to eat them."

Ernest really wanted someone to take him over. "You are

going to make eggs and I am going to eat them."

You will love me for my full self, she thought. You will love me for who I am now and who I was forced to be before I was able to be who I am. And then you will take me to a movie and buy me popcorn and try to cop a feel.

Ernest felt too disgusted. It was just weird. On the one hand, sure, we all have accidents, we all get born into a city that's arbitrary, a family that's arbitrary, even a face that's arbitrary. But a body that's arbitrary was too heavy. Too much to deal with. Ernest wished he'd gotten on a different train. Ernest knew right then and there that the train you get on is arbitrary too.

CARL NEEDED TO come clean about his guilt. If this woman was going to love him enough to bake him pies and spice them up and keep them warm, he was going to love her right back; and if that was to be the case then he would have to be loved for himself, including his secret. Better now than never. Carl stuck both hands into the pie that was heavy on paprika and said, "I need to relax, finally and forever."

"What do you mean? And may I pour you a glass of fresh milk to go with that pie you just put your fingers in?"

"Paulina ... While I ... appreciate the offer, I have to ... say, no, no, I do not want any milk right now. Or ... ever. Paulina. You might as well know." Ernest gazed up to the ceiling and raised his hands in the air. "I hate milk! I hate it! I hate every single thing about it, goddammit I hate milk!"

Paulina wrapped her arms around the pies nearest Ernest and moved them closer to her. "But you're ..."

"Yes, I know, I'm the milkman. I know! Look, this is me. My name is Carl and I'm a milkman and I hate milk. Love it or leave it."

ON A CRISP fall morning, Carl the milkman who hated milk up and quit his job and moved to Des Moines to become a cabbage farmer. Carl had always liked a good head of cabbage and felt proud to say that's what he did with himself. And Shanana who was never meant to be a man enrolled herself in an egg-cooking course so that someday, maybe, she would be able to cook breakfast when she met that real man who camps and wouldn't care that she had an accident at birth. And that very same morning, Ernest started baking his own pot pies spiced just the way he liked them – some oregano, garlic, and just a hint of chili pepper – and Paulina sat alone in the kitchen with small tears trickling down her face, staring out the window and wondering where all the years had gone.

Clare not so clear

MICHAEL KELLY on a new life of the “worker-poet”

John Clare – A Biography

JONATHAN BATE

Farrar, Straus and Giroux / Picador
648 pp. \$56.00

A BRIEF OUTLINE of John Clare’s life seems to support the inscription on his gravestone: “A poet is born not made.” He was born in the village of Helpston, Northamptonshire, in 1793, had little formal education and became a casual agricultural labourer like his father. He had a wife and seven children and spent the last 23 years of his life in the Northampton lunatic asylum, where he died in 1864. Despite these unpromising circumstances, he wrote over three and a half thousand poems and had four volumes of poetry published during his lifetime. How did someone with such a background become a successful poet? What was the connection between his literary talents and his madness? These are the two main issues that Bate examines in his biography.

Clare’s own *Memoirs*, written when he was in his twenties, provide the main source of information about his childhood. He seems to have had a typical rural upbringing. The family was poor, as were most of their neighbours. Many of the games that he and the other village children played would still be familiar to children today. Although he did well at school, his education was

frequently interrupted when extra labour was needed on the local farms.

Although there was little positive support for his attempts to educate himself, there was little deliberate discouragement. As he grew up, he gradually reduced his social life, preferring reading by the fireside to playing football on a Sunday afternoon. Yet there is no evidence that he was seriously bullied or ostracized for being different. The other children seem to have accepted him on his own terms. Throughout his life, he had no difficulty in forming lasting friendships, despite his eccentricities.

Since documentary evidence on Clare’s early life is limited, Bate supplements it with a survey of the general political and economic situation. A key influence on the topics of Clare’s poems was the enclosure movement. When Clare was born, farming in central England was based on the open-field system. The cultivated land around a village was divided into two or three large fields. Although the land was privately owned, each farmer’s property was scattered in strips throughout these fields. The system had been in use for at least a thousand years but was too inefficient to support the growing population. During the first half of the 19th century, most of this land was enclosed; each owner’s holdings were consolidated into a single unit and surrounded by hedges.

CLARE KEPT UP with his self-education and in 1818 decided to try to realize his long-standing ambition of becoming a published poet. After a few setbacks and delays, his manuscripts reached the London publisher John Taylor, who published Clare’s first book in 1820.

Given his background, Clare’s accomplishments are quite remarkable. However, he was very fortunate in several ways and his career as a poet was not typical. First, his timing was favourable. When he began to look for

a publisher, the interest in poetry among the general public was very high because of the popularity of Byron. Publishers were also eager to find an English equivalent to Burns, the Scottish “worker-poet.” Secondly, although other worker-poets also benefited from this demand, none attracted the same level of support as Clare. He quickly built up a large group of supporters who provided advice on his poems and financial help.

For a worker-poet, Clare’s life is surprisingly well documented. He kept all the correspondence he received and bound the letters in home-made books. When efforts were made to restore Clare’s reputation, the raw materials were readily available in three substantial collections. In Clare’s case, it would be true to say that a *published* poet is made not born.

Bate makes good use of these documents in his chapters on the publication of the four volumes of poetry between 1820 and 1835, where he describes in great detail the progress from first drafts to final versions. What stands out is the amount of collaboration involved and the extent to which Clare came to depend on his supporters, for advice and inspiration. He used to write a large number of poems intensively over a short period and then send the unrevised drafts to Taylor. Since Clare was often short of money, they would sometimes be written on odd scraps of paper or in home-made ink. Taylor had first to transcribe them and correct the punctuation and spelling. These were considered to be normal practices for publishers and printers at the time. However, the help given by Taylor and others often went much further and included replacing dialect words with standard English, correcting the grammar, changing the word order, suggesting deletions and insertions. Longer poems were often omitted; even in shorter poems, sections might be deleted to save space. The long-running

controversy about whether or not to use Clare's original punctuation and spelling is only part of a larger problem of identifying what was Clare's own work.

Bate's detailed analysis of a large selection of the poems makes it clear that Clare was a genuine poet, not just someone with a knack for rhyming. His topics range well beyond the rural and reflect the depth of his reading in the classics, philosophy, religion and politics. He played an active role in the development of the poems and would not automatically accept the suggested amendments. He was particularly annoyed by attempts to improve his grammar, claiming that grammatical rules were a restriction on his freedom to express himself. Grammar was a weak point in Clare's education. It had not been taught in the village school and Clare was either unable or unwilling to master it in his self-education. On the whole, Clare benefited from this collaboration. The correspondence shows that he enjoyed discussing detailed technical points. It also helped him to develop his skills more quickly. His language became simpler and more personal in the later volumes. He relied less on the ornate language of poets like Milton and more on the vernacular.

Clare was well read in contemporary poets and had knowledgeable views about them. He felt that Keats's used too many classical allusions and that his descriptions of nature showed a lack of first-hand knowledge of the countryside. One of the attractions of Clare's poetry for the general public was its vivid, accurate descriptions of the countryside and what it felt like to experience these sights. However, in a letter to Taylor, who published both writers, Keats commented on Clare's tendency to use description for its own sake ("Description prevailed too much over sentiment") and his inability to know when to stop. One of Clare's weaknesses was his obsession with listing every

bird and flower he saw. This became a commercial issue with the later volumes. A collection of purely descriptive poems would be difficult to sell, because there would be too much similarity with the earlier volumes.

THESE CHAPTERS ARE as much literary criticism as biography and give a good introduction to Clare's poetry. However, a biography must assess the life as well as the work. Here, Bate is less successful.

The result is a reliable narrative of Clare's life but a loose, indecisive analysis and evaluation of his behaviour, especially the relation between his poetry and his mental illness. Cause and effect relations are not clearly established. Sometimes, Bate assumes that Clare's madness was the unavoidable consequence of his writing poetry. In a general assessment of Clare, he concludes that "the compulsion to be a poet may have made him mad, but if he had not been a poet he would not have been John Clare and would have no joy." Elsewhere, he reverses the causality and suggests that madness was a determinant of the quality of Clare's poetry, arguing that there is "a thin partition between the delusions of madness and the highest reaches of the imaginative vision."

In literary criticism, the merits of the poetry do not depend on what kind of person Clare was or how he lived his life. But a biography does need to consider how far Clare was responsible for the way his life turned out and how much was due to circumstances beyond his control. To do this, an assessment of his mental health is needed. It was most likely the result of a complex interaction between inherited qualities and his environment. Clare's state of mind determined his behaviour, which was often impractical and had an adverse effect on his circumstances. These conditions then led to a further decline in his mental health.

ONE OF THE puzzling aspects of Clare's life was his inability to take greater advantage of the success and support he achieved after 1820. He remained a casual agricultural labourer, even though he had several opportunities to better himself as a gardener, a job more suited to his physique (he was five feet tall and of slender build) and his knowledge of natural history. Despite considerable financial support, his family always lived in poverty. The interest from the trust fund set up by Lord Radstock and annuities donated by two local aristocrats gave him a regular annual income that was greater than the average wage of an agricultural labourer. He also received many occasional gifts in money or kind. With this financial base, he should have been able to support his seven children, wife and two parents at a reasonable standard of living for a working class family. Part of the problem was his inability to manage money. He did not lead a particularly dissolute life, but he had a weakness for beer and books and was often in debt to local booksellers. The main problem, however, was his failure to earn much of an income through his own efforts.

One reason why Clare failed to make a more tolerable life for himself and his family was his unrealistic aim of earning a living as a writer. This had been his ambition even before 1820. Writing poetry was not just a pastime or a source of consolation but a way of escaping from his economic hardships. Even in the late 1820's, when the demand for poetry had declined, he persisted with this goal and tried other forms of writing, including a novel, a collection of folk songs, and magazine articles. Most of these projects were soon abandoned and those which were successful brought in little money.

Bate's even-handed approach makes it difficult to decide how far Clare was responsible for this state of affairs. He is careful to include all sides of an issue,

but rarely attempts to compare and evaluate them. Since the conflicting arguments are often presented at different places in the book, there appear to be a lot of inconsistencies. These could be at least partly resolved if they were put into their proper context. For example, what was the relation between Clare's mental health and poetry writing? Clare said that as a young man he found that writing poems helped to ease his mind. "I wrote because it pleased me in sorrow." Later, we are told that his friends were concerned about the possible harmful effects of his concentrated way of writing poems. "Too much poetry" was the medical reason given for his first breakdown. After he was committed, though, the asylum encouraged him to write and one of the stewards preserved and transcribed over 800 of his poems. The problem seems to have been, not poetry itself, but Clare's compulsive approach to it, which was itself the consequence of his mental state. Even when he was working in the fields with other labourers, he would sometimes have to stop and sit beneath a hedge to write down a poem. Poetry was a "troublesome but pleasant companion." The same outcome would probably have occurred if Clare had applied his talents to any of his other interests.

THE ONE POINT on which Bate has a firm view is the type of illness; he argues that Clare was a manic-depressive and gives detailed supporting evidence. Judging from the number of statements he makes about its severity, he also tends to believe that Clare's illness was not serious. He was institutionalized only because he could not receive adequate care at home. Clare was relatively fortunate in his treatment. The asylum was well-run and used the latest, humane methods of treatment. Clare was classed as a low-risk patient and given a great deal of freedom. He was allowed to walk into Northampton

every day, where he was generally known and respected as the Northamptonshire poet. Even so, his attacks became more severe as he got older.

Twenty-three years is a long time to be institutionalized for a minor illness. Bate's assessment of its severity is based on his view that Clare always retained his self-identity and cannot be called truly insane. However, this overlooks an awkward feature of Clare's behaviour in the asylum. Because of his reputation, Clare received many visitors, who would often comment later on his claims to be a famous person, like Shakespeare, Byron or Nelson. If they tried to remind him of who he really was, he would firmly insist that he could be these other people as well as himself, "the same person with different names." Were these genuine delusions? A fellow inmate, William Jerom, who knew Clare for twenty years, said that Clare used to do this as a joke. Should we believe normal people who met Clare for a few hours or a long-term acquaintance with mental problems? Bate thinks that both men were "damaged but fundamentally sane." Then again, perhaps Jerom was simply trying to defend his friend. Later, Bate says, ambiguously, that this was Clare's way of claiming that his poetry was as good as theirs. Does he mean that Clare was deliberately exaggerating to get his point across or is he trying to find an explanation for Clare's delusion? This is typical of Bate's approach: he examines all the possible explanations but reaches no conclusion.

The same tentativeness is present in the discussion of the causes of Clare's illness. Again, all the relevant factors are covered comprehensively, but no firm decision is taken. Possible causes range from specific incidents such as a severe blow to the head when Clare was a teenager, through the long-term effects of an inadequate diet consisting mainly of cereals and root vegetables

with few meat or dairy products, to more general factors like alienation. The sense of being a perpetual outsider, brought about by the enclosures, is vividly described in Clare's poems: "I dreaded walking where there was no path." On the other hand, why did the support of his friends and the local respect for him as a poet not act as a counterweight? Perhaps the alienation was inherited and not the product of Clare's environment.

THE READER WHO is willing to tackle the issue of responsibility faces a further problem: there are no real villains in this biography. No one wants to harm or take advantage of Clare. Any injury done is unintentional or unavoidable. Disagreements frequently occur and sometimes lead to a breakdown in relations, but these are soon restored. At times, he appears to be an innocent child surrounded by well-meaning adults. How do you assign responsibility to such a person for his actions? Although Clare does seem to have been exceptionally fortunate in his associations, Bate has a tendency to give people the benefit of the doubt. The fact that Clare's wife never visited him in the asylum is significant, because we know very little about her views on their marriage or his writings. Yet Bate's comments on her behaviour are brief and mild.

Bate sensibly avoids attempts at long-distance psychoanalysis, but he could afford to risk some speculation because his work has such a sound factual base. His cautious approach does not allow him to realize the full potential of this material. We get a reliable account of the events in his life and a very useful discussion of the poetry, but a slightly blurred picture of Clare as an individual. A more forceful analysis is needed to sharpen the image. ●

Der Nod in Florenz

BRENDA KEBLE on a villa to let

Lives of the Artists

ROBERT CLARK

HarperCollins

330 pp

AN AMERICAN COUPLE, Mary and Alex, profiting from the sale of dotcom shares, a veritable windfall (it's the 90s), have bought a villa overlooking Florence. While the villa is being renovated, they invite their friend Tom to join them (actually, he invites himself). Their new neighbour up on the hill, Wright Turner, is a renowned diarist — he always seems to know someone who knew someone famous. Alex is a painter in search of a subject. Mary, a writer, is on a similar search. Tom himself is vaguer still and not quite ready to “come out” (until he's intercepted by the Vidalesque Turner).

Mediocre books are dangerous influences. If all novels were as thuddingly dialogical as this one, I found myself thinking, it would be as well to let the Novel die. The conversations between characters are maddeningly banal (we're not spared even hello's and goodbye's), a matter, perhaps, of achieving verisimilitude at the cost of readerly disenchantment. Each character is provided with an epiphany, and each epiphany is unconvincing — may not, in fact, be anything more than an attempt by the author to make these dispirited characters *move*. Wright Turner, though derivative, is the best drawn character — but then he is sentimentalized, turned into the very sort of

invalid he warned us against.

Some faults could easily have been excised at the galley stage: the endless iteration of the starchy construction “cannot but,” for instance, or the amateurish avoidance of the verb “say.” In one passage, Tom and Mary are identified, over and over, by name, when “he” and “she” (since they're alone) would have been more suitable. Other faults are more embedded. What to make of the conceit, scarcely intimated before being dropped, that some of Mary's novel, *Villa Donatello*, has been transplanted into the text we're reading? A tease? A forgotten opportunity? Clark's hand points to irony, but there's no irony to be seen.

I WOULD GUESS that something of what Clark intended is to be detected in the opening and closing sections, so determinedly cinematic, omniscient. The opening allows us (forces us?) to intrude into Alex and Mary's pre-villa apartment. It suggests that we are about to read a novel in which the characters are rather tightly constrained by their roles, as carefully defined as the latter must be. A bit of James or Eliot, then. A bit of Forster. All of it very up to date and satirical. Not much of this comes through, unfortunately. What we get instead is a good deal of stalling, as if the inertia brought on by the Florentine heat were affecting everyone's progress, including ours. It's not that nothing happens. The plot does grind on, pulling Alex and Mary apart, pushing Tom forward, utterly deflating poor old Wright. Not smooth or brilliant, any of this. Not all that efficient, either. And when the camera, lifted on its versatile crane, takes us to the closing scene, where we're shown how the characters first met, it may be that Clark feels he's giving us an explanation, a key, to what went before. In truth, the scene merely

serves to confirm our impression that, as characters, these three were dead at birth and had no *Lives* to speak of. ●

Spree fall

KARL BUCHNER on the shopping-list school of criticism

The Polysyllabic Spree

NICK HORNBY

Believer Books

155 pp.

THIS COLLECTION brings together the original series of regular columns Hornby wrote for *The Believer*. Together, they form a chummy monologue not so much about reading books as about consuming them, which is to say buying and sampling rather than earnestly attempting to explore them. Which is to say, a pub lunch rather than a four-course meal.

The columns are bold and a little coarse and all the more amusing because of it. Hornby plays the duffer, trying to balance what he buys with what he reads. Some books on the “bought” list never get read. Sometimes he cheats and reads books he's been given. Odd gaps appear in his reading. Odder yet are his “discoveries.” Poor chap, one thinks, is he truly so benighted? Well, yes and no. Hornby reviews books elsewhere with all the cunning one would expect of a very successful author. Here, however, he adopts the stance of a not particularly scrupulous blogger, weighing in with casual opinion and even the odd prejudice or two.

He cites the comment that alternative medicine, when it works, ceases

to be alternative and is simply medicine. Then he applies this truism to literature and film:

Maybe a literary novel is just a novel that doesn't really work, and an art film merely a film that people don't want to see.

One might ask whether the adjectives "literary" and "art" are quite as delimiting as "alternative" certainly is. And how did they become, except by sleight of hand, synonyms for "failure"? Hornby, unburdened by such considerations, goes on to say:

Usually books have gone out of print for a reason, and that reason is they're no good or, at least, of marginal interest.

Here again, one wonders at the apparent equation of success and value. Doubtless, somebody with Hornby's sales figures safely in hand would find it hard not to be satisfied by the commercial verdict. His novels, and the films made from them, have entertained thousands and thousands of people. Not for him the starveling's diet provided by "marginal interest."

But even the well-nourished have their moments of hunger. Chekhov wrote to Gorky:

[Tolstoy] was full of praise for you, and said you were a "splendid writer".

He likes your "The Fair" and "In the Steppe" but not "Mawa".

Hornby adds, with a sudden spurt of fellow-feeling:

You just know that there's only three words in this letter Gorky would have registered, and that he spent the rest of the day too depressed to get out of bed. ●

Mame loshe

GORDON DUECK on a history of the National Yiddish Book Center

*Outwitting History:
The Amazing Adventures of a
Man Who Saved a Million
Yiddish Books*

AARON LANSKY
Algonquin Books
317 pages, \$24.95 US

The great Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich was delivering a lecture in Finland when the Nazis invaded his native Poland. The lecture saved his life. He made his way to New York, where he opened his doors to new students. Many thought his work was hopeless – especially since half of the world's Yiddish speakers had been killed in the Holocaust. Asked why he persevered, Weinreich answered simply: "Because Yiddish has magic, it will outwit history."

YIDDISH IS STILL alive as a spoken language, having survived the steepest of odds. Yet, as the title above also suggests, the Ashkenazic mother tongue as literature was revived only through the intervention of a very few selfless, tireless – and, I think it fair to say, obsessive – individuals.

Aaron Lansky has arguably done as much or more for the cause as anybody in the last half-century, though he was born only in 1955. He is not a Holocaust survivor like Max Weinreich but a thoroughly Americanized, third-generation Jew who stumbled upon what became his passion in life mostly out of youthful

curiosity. *Outwitting History* is the first-person recollection of his quixotic mission – the founding of a National Yiddish Book Center – from its beginnings in the late 1970s, when he was a graduate student at McGill University, to its fruition in the late 1990s.

Whereas scholars and teachers such as Weinreich had had to contend with the murderous aftermath of European anti-Semitism, the main obstacle facing Lansky and his generation of like-minded cohorts was apathy, the uncomprehending carelessness that is the result of successful assimilation into the American mainstream. In a section entitled "On The Road," he describes driving his scruffy crew in a beat-up truck to a chi-chi address on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The doorman curtly directed them to the freight elevator. Upstairs, in their recently deceased great-aunt's apartment, some young people were divvying up the estate, "drinking white wine out of antique crystal." "If you get the rug, then I want *both* lamps!" cried one cousin. "Clearly no one thought their aunt's Yiddish books were worth very much," Lansky recalls,

because they left us to empty her bookcase while they continued quarreling in the next room. The irony was that their aunt's library included some extraordinary volumes that one day could be worth more than all the furniture and *tshatshkes* [knickknacks] combined. There were, for example, at least a dozen art books, including Avrom Sutzkever's *Sibir (Siberia)*, a large-format volume of poetry based on the author's childhood in exile, powerfully illustrated by his friend Marc Chagall. No matter. The cousins studiously ignored us until we were ready to leave, and then, as we stood balancing our heavily laden handtrucks by the elevator, a new argument broke out as to who should get the receipt so they could claim the books as a write-off on their taxes.

DEFTLY AND colourfully, in a style aptly redolent of the word-sketches mastered by Yiddish writers a century ago, Lansky relates how hundreds and thousands of volumes at a time were salvaged from dumpsters, from buildings set for demolition, from underfunded libraries culling their collections, from the damp warehouses of superannuated publishers and newspapers going out of business, as well as from the homes of elderly Jews whose descendants were unable to appreciate this aspect of their heritage because they could not speak, let alone read, the language of their forebears. These latter are the most affecting of Lansky's anecdotes. Despite the urgency of the situation and the need for speed, he learned early on that it would not do to simply show up at an old folks' home and commence hauling. Time had to be set aside for "ritual[s] of cultural transmission":

The visit to Mr. Temmelman was my first and last trip alone. After that, I tried whenever possible to travel in a team of three: two to do the shlepping and the third to be the Designated Eater. The latter was the really hard job: While the others carried boxes, you had to sit with the host at the kitchen table, listening to stories, sipping endless glasses of tea, and valiantly working your way through a week's worth of dishes cooked "special," just for you – gefilte fish and khareyn (horseradish), kasha varnishkes, blintzes and sour cream, potato latkes, and lokshn kugl ... Eventually we devised an "emergency kit" that we carried with us on every trip: an old Boy Scout knapsack packed with Ben Gay ointment and Ace bandages for the shleppers, and, for the Designated Eater, a roll of Tums, a jar of salted Japanese umeboshi plums (great after too much sugar), a canteen of water, and six packets of Alka-Seltzer.

Apart from the everlasting gratitude of *zeydas* (grandfathers) and *bubbies* (grandmothers) everywhere – and I

mean everywhere, from New York to Montreal, from Cuba to Ukraine – Lansky's work went largely unappreciated by those in a position to subsidize it. One would expect a project such as his to be worthy of monetary support from Jewish philanthropic organizations. Certainly this was Lansky's expectation. But it turned out that the bureaucracy of *tzedeka* (righteous giving) was as ponderous as any other. Moreover, "for many Jewish philanthropists, Yiddish was worse than dead; it was a specter, an unwelcome reminder of the immigrant culture they had worked so hard to forget."

He lived a vagabond's life on a pauper's salary, relying almost entirely on a devoted staff of *zamlers* (volunteer collectors) until major external funding came from an unexpected source. In 1989, he was nominated for and won the MacArthur "genius" Fellowship, worth \$250,000. This money, together with the recognition it symbolized, provided the impetus that eventuated in the establishment of a permanent home for the adopted orphans of Yiddishkeit in 1997. Located not in New York City, but in Amherst, Massachusetts (Lansky's home state), the National Yiddish Book Center is run not as a museum but as a library. Because many of the books are rare and in delicate condition, however, they are generally made available through electronic means rather than in hard-copy form (the process of digitization continues). Meanwhile, the NYBC has become "one of the largest and fastest-growing Jewish cultural groups in the world," and "one of the most visited Jewish tourist destinations in America."

OUTWITTING HISTORY is a story with a happy ending: formerly maligned, Yiddish has become "hip." Still, I wonder how long this trend can sustain itself. This is not to prophesy the imminent demise of the *mame loshe*

(mother tongue). It is merely to point out that the only Jews for whom Yiddish truly is a living thing, the language of hearth and home, are the Chasidim. They, who represent the fastest growing sector of the world Jewish population, are also written Yiddish's staunchest opponents. This apparent paradox is easily explained: Yiddish literature, as a movement, was largely a product of late nineteenth-century modernism, and generally expressive of cultural and political – i.e., secular – modes of thought. By contrast, Chasidic groups define themselves in religious terms, not in terms of culture, and are dead set against the modernization and/or secularization of Jewish identity. So, at the risk of coming off sounding like a kill-joy: it may be only a matter of time before the NYBC does in fact become a museum, rather than a functioning library, a repository of books admired for their historical value but rarely read – because the Jews who could conceivably read the entirety of its contents, won't. ●

Contributors

PAUL AHERN is a writer and actor currently living in Boston. He has performed in more than 30 stage productions. A former police officer, he is currently at work on a screenplay based on that experience.

CAROLYN JOYCE BROWN is an Ottawa writer-editor who runs a scientific publishing operation and observes the daily reality of relationships and the work world as a hobby.

LISA FERBER's short stories have appeared in various publications and literary websites:

CAROL HOENIG's essays and short stories have been published in a wide variety of magazines. [www.CarolHoenig.com]

J. F. JOHNSTONE has published poetry in *Jones Av.*, *Bleach*, *The Hart House Review*, *The UC Review* and *Acta Victoriana*. He is the editor of the Toronto-based *Misunderstandings Magazine*.

CATHALYNN LABONTÉ-SMITH is a technical writer and freelance journalist.

OWEN LAUKKANEN's work has appeared in *The Pluralist* and *Write Away*.

TIM LEHNERT lives in Cranston, Rhode Island. His short fiction and critical essays have appeared in *Prairie Fire*, *Antigonish Review*, *Fugue*, and *Nassau Review*.

KELLY ANN MALONE has published in York University's School of Women's Studies *Journal*, the Library of Congress 9/11 website, *Rearview Quarterly*, *Penwood Review*, *Wesleyan Advocate Magazine*, and many others.

DAVE MCINTYRE's fiction and essays have appeared in *Fiddlehead*, *Pottersfield Portfolio*, *Metro Today*, and *Maximum Rock 'N' Roll*. [www.davemcintyre.ca]

RAYMOND NAKAMURA's work has appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the *Nikkei Voice*.

ASHOK NIYOGI has been published in numerous magazines (print and on-line). He is the author of three books of poetry.

RICHARD NORMAN has published poetry in *Antigonish Review* and *Fiddlehead*.

STEPHEN OLIVER is the author of twelve titles of poetry. His work has appeared in *3 AM Magazine*, *Big Bridge*, *Milk Magazine*, *Aught*, *Word for/Word*, *Paumanok Review*, *Critique Review*, *Sidereality*. He lives in Sydney.

MICHAEL ROTTMAN has published work in *Grain*, *existere*, and *In 2 Print*.



paperplates

6:3