# paperplates

A Magazine for *Fifty* Readers

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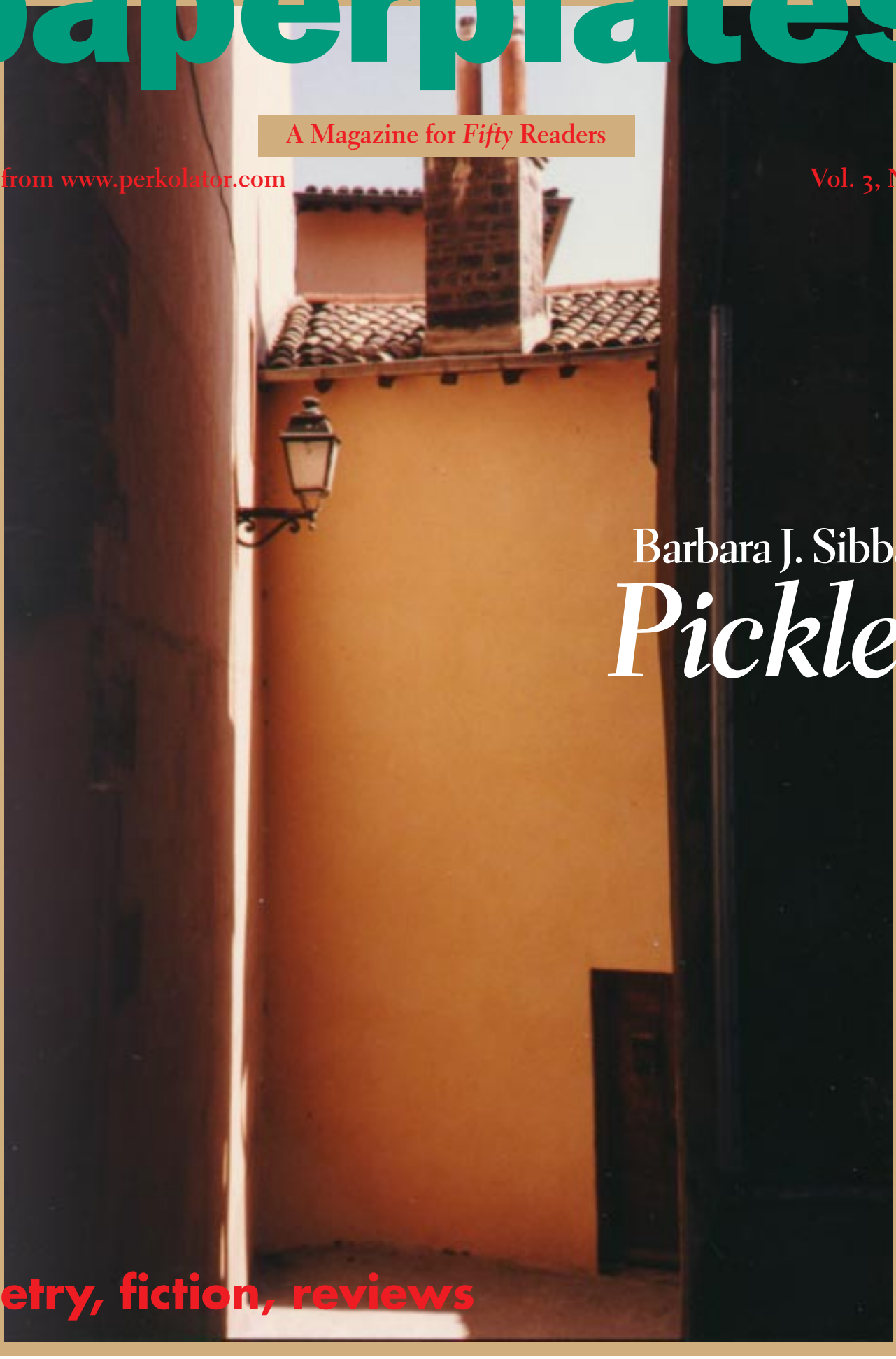

## Barbara J. Sibbald

# *Pickles*

**Poetry, fiction, reviews**

Vol. 3, No. 3


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*Pickles*
—
**She looks for** *her dill pickle recipe, absent-mindedly flicks pages, licks her forefinger, flicks.* Lick. Flick. *Wanda makes pickles every year but Tim says they are too sour, or too salty and he won't eat them.*

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**paperplates**

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*submissions*
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# *All seasons and none*

Magazine editors often seem compelled to find some higher consistency in the choices they have made for a particular issue, even though its composition may be as much a matter of timing as of choice. Disorderly literary magazines like ours, of course, seldom commission stories ("Barbara, can you do pickles?") or have work at hand entirely suited to the current season ("Eric, let's just call it 'June', shall we?"). In fact, the wayward history of this, the least regular of God's periodicals, has made it impossible for us even to hazard one of those dubious thematic issues which turn contributors into contestants and, thanks to an entry fee, uniquely motivated subscribers. No, no, no. This editor rises (mentally) at noon and is forever behind in his correspondence, as becomes all too evident when he is told that such and such a submission was long ago published elsewhere, thank you very much, where on earth have you been? Ah, yes, well. – Or when an author enquires whether such and such a submission, accepted lo! these many years and over which the celebratory champagne has long since evaporated, might possibly be published within her *children's* lifetime?

All I can offer, for the moment, is that we are … improving. (This issue, for instance, was supposed to be out in March. You see?) Any work we've accepted so far has been firmly scheduled to appear in one of the next five issues, the fifth of which will land on your desktop in late 2000 (I mean the year, not the century), give or take a few months. In the meantime, once again I encourage you to let our contributors know of your reaction to their work. Without that, the joy of being published is simply not complete.

***– Bernard Kelly***

## letters

*To the editor,*
I just checked out your new online edition. Very exciting. And it looks beautiful – what fantastic design. It's a great idea, going online. Best of luck.
**Gary Barwin**
**Toronto**

*Poet Gary Barwin's latest collection,* Outside the Hat, *which we hope to review in a future issue, is available in print and online from Coach House Books. See www.chbooks.com/online/outside_the_hat*

*To the editor,*
I was very impressed by the on-line version of *paperplates* – probably one of the best looking small magazines I have come across. Using Acrobat Reader™ is an unconventional choice, but a good one. Getting the entire magazine after a minute's download really is better than clicking page after page: *paperplates* gives the feeling of being a whole magazine, rather than a disjointed and rag-tag collection of sites that happen to share half a Web address. I do find Acrobat a bit awkward to use sometimes, but the sense of unity it brings to the magazine more than makes up for it.
**Donald Hadden**
**Holland**

homeplate

# Meat saga

*"What's a two-kilometre long living thing, feeding on half-rotten potatoes?"*
*"It's the lineup for meat".*
— Old Russian riddle

There is winter, and then … there is Muscovite winter. There is also winter wind, and then … there is Muscovite winter wind. There is the chill factor, and then … there is the Muscovite chill factor.

This definitely sounds like a tiresome, 11 p.m. weather forecast, with those cryptic, foggy satellite pictures as background. But don't go away! That was just an attempt – maybe a weak one – to bring you into the atmosphere, for our story begins at five o'clock, on a winter morning, in downtown Moscow, but outside the Kremlin (an off-limits area we did not want to enter for fear of *tsuris*).

To be more precise, we have just arrived at the front door of an alleged – according to the sign above the entrance – meat shop. Now, you probably wonder, what on earth could we possibly look for at this hour, in this place, at this time of the year! What should I reply to this legitimate query? You know what? Why not ask these two-hundred other people who are lined up, in an orderly fashion, at the shop's still-closed door? Of course, they have come on purpose to buy meat! Nevertheless, some uncertainty still lingers. Will their quest be successful, or will they return empty-handed? Who knows? For it is far too early to make predictions. There are just too many wild variables to be taken into account. And, after all, it is only five o'clock in the morning … .

It is maybe worth mentioning here that the interminable, meandering line-ups for food or other goods/goodies in Russian cities have long gone beyond their original aim. For in the formidable, foremost form of social establishment in the history of humankind, the queue has become a social event; it can be likened to an all-season outdoor club, with free, lifetime membership. Besides the trifling – though often hard to achieve – goal of buying anything, people join this peculiar sort of a fraternity in order to meet other people, to complain about their supervisors (never about the Supreme Supervisor), wives, health, children, apartments, in-laws, cars, lovers; to brag about their supervisors, wives, health, children, apartments, in-laws, cars, lovers; to play chess, cards, backgammon, to knit, to read, to smoke, to sing, to think, or just to do nothing, but be together.

I, personally, know people who started standing in a line without being able to tell a rook from a pawn, who are now grandmasters in chess; I also know people who met their future spouses while standing in queue; I happen to know people (chiefly women) who gave birth while waiting patiently for an elusive pair of Hungarian shoes, Polish sunglasses, or Czech underpants; and, I'm very sorry to say, I also happen to know people (mostly of the older stock) who passed away while in line, never to come back home with their half-pound of butter.

Considering all the above, we can successfully argue that the queue is one of the most vivid, most lasting, and most typical segments of the Russian, and – by extension – of any so-called "socialist" society. Passing the line-up, you can notice representatives from all ethnic, religious, cultural, and age groups waiting patiently, and often hopelessly, for things as trivial as a roll of toilet paper. Often hopelessly, because people joining a line-up do not always know, immediately, the actual aim of that particular gathering. Nevertheless, they do attach themselves to the queue since there is plenty of time and means to find out its purpose afterwards.

In this respect, there is a very well known case of a retiree who was about to become the last appendage of an already impressive line. It seemed to the old pal logical enough to ask the man in front of him what the goal of their common undertaking was, which he politely did.

"Would you mind, please, telling me what they are selling here?"

To which he got a morose reply, "Here, they don't sell anything, yet!"

Without being discouraged, the newcomer went further, "Then, you maybe know whether they are expecting something, and how soon!"

But his immediate senior-in-line was still hardly co-operative. "This I wouldn't know either!"

Therefore, the old fellow went on to address his bothersome questions to the next lined-up person, but failed again in his attempt to get any clues. However, our hero was not the kind to give up easily. Therefore, he went progressively along the line posing the same questions and receiving, to his increasing annoyance, the same vague, if not hostile, answers. Eventually, the self-styled pollster reached the first man standing right at the door of the store, but was granted not a bit more data than before. Highly frustrated by this complete lack of information, the old would-be-queue-man shouted, in a fit of understandable temper,

"If you don't know anything, then why on earth would you waste your time here?"

To which, the proud head of the line eventually gave him a truly sensible – though less obvious – reason: "Well, initially I had stopped here, just in front of the display, to do my laces. As soon as I had them neatly tied, I stood up and prepared to go. Then, to my great surprise, I saw about thirty people who had nicely assembled in a line behind me. Now, you tell me: do I look so stupid as to give up my place when I'm the first in a queue?"

Anyway, one should not imagine a certain line-up as a rigid, military-like formation. The usual queue starts a long time before the subject merchandise is supposed to arrive, and often ends in disappointment, before that happens. Accordingly, we could have a passive line-up, waiting for the goodies' arrival, or an active one, moving forward, although incredibly slowly, toward the magic counter. During the former stage, people group and regroup in a kaleidoscopic pattern, in order to form, join, leave, or move between various interest clusters: the chess players, the cooking recipes exchange, the natural remedies symposium, the soccer kibitzers, the war veterans, the fishermen tales club, the scrabble fans. However, in the latter phase, all these extracurricular activities are completely forgotten. The wonderfully built commonness – which took hours to be achieved – is suddenly overcome by a highly individualistic aim. The sole concern becomes whether there are enough watermelons or toothbrushes, cigarettes or lighters, pencils or suspenders to last till one reaches the selling point.

One may rightfully wonder, how does the transition from the loose, passive stage to the organized, active line, take place? Well, this is where the *fiftywatchers* come into the picture.

What's a *fiftywatcher*? The first individual to start a line-up automatically becomes (unless illiterate, seriously ill, or visually impaired) the first fiftywatcher. The requirements of that position compel him to compile a list of the next forty-nine people who happen to join the queue. Further, the fifty-first individual in the line becomes the second fiftywatcher, and so on … . Any newcomer in the line is supposed to report to the current fiftywatcher, to make sure his/her given name, patronymic (we are in Russia) and surname, correctly spelled, are entered on the list, and to meet the persons who precede and follow him. A fiftywatcher proved to be fraudulent shall immediately face dishonourable discharge from the line.

As you see, the queue – as just another social organization – is governed by minute rules and statutes, which shall be, and indeed are, thoroughly obeyed by its members.

Now, since we have acquired a better perception of the environment with which we are dealing, we can return to the meat shop, which is still closed; and this is because, as we have already seen, it is only 5 a.m. The temperature is just below zero degrees (Celsius), and a faint, pinkish hue on the horizon makes a good bet for a sunny morning.

As the dawn begins to unravel, we can have a better look at the meat-seekers crowd. Thus, a first, age-oriented screening will result in fifty percent of them being either retired people, or look-alikes. A gender-based assessment will result in women outscoring men by far. A relatively standardized headdress, consisting mainly of earmuffed fur hats, seems to be the unisex choice. Worn-out, epaulet-less army coats, hole-ridden sheepskin jackets, all sorts of ragged Siberian parkas (for workers, inmates, or guards) are the main articles of this winter's fashion. Going farther down, we notice a fairly large choice of trousers, from denims to navy uniform pants, and from corduroys to Cossack lowgear, all of them firmly tucked in boots ranging from rubber to hardtoe type, and from cavalry leather to the hunter's kind.

While we were making our observations, the line has grown to about three-hundred meat-hungry Muscovites, an *ad hoc*, non-denominational congregation which gradually comes to life. Thus, the first chess tables are set up, the portable radios tuned amidst heavy static, the torn, greasy playing cards, which have seen many a queue, dealt, the morning newspapers unfolded.

It is now seven o'clock and, despite the constantly dropping temperature, the crowd has grown steadily. There are now about five-hundred people playing their harmonicas, chatting, reading, arm-wrestling, or unwrapping their meagre sandwiches from scraps of old newspapers … . Hot tea steams appealingly from antique, yet reliable, Second World War thermoses. Vodka bottles are steadily passed along the line and emptied industriously, in an almost ritualistic manner; for this is a most popular, Russian brand of non-Olympic winter relay.

Unnoticeably, it is eight o'clock, and the shop's door opens with a prolonged, ugly squeak, which is music to the ears of six-hundred people; six-hundred heads are turning simultaneously – like the troops passing through the Red Square, in front of Lenin's mausoleum, at the Red Army's November parade – toward the store entrance, eager to assess the odds of their bold and risky, yet potentially rewarding, endeavour. Emotion is running high, almost flooding the air. One can sense it, one can smell it, one can breathe it! The messenger, dressed in a heavily stained butcher's gown, is a small, fat man, in his late forties, with an array of metallic teeth, and a voice to match. Will he deliver? Wait and see!

"Comrades, with deep regret, I have to inform you that we did not get the

meat which was supposed to arrive overnight!"

A profound sigh of disappointment emerges from the crowd. But the cleaver bearer proves to be surprisingly clever in manoeuvering the audience.

"Nevertheless, I didn't let things go without fighting, comrades. I called the area manager immediately. And I must tell you that I have some good news, but I also have some bad news! The good news is that we have been assured that this very morning, the meat will be here, and plenty of it. However, the bad news is that, although plenty, it will be less than we usually get. Therefore, as instructed from above, I kindly ask the Jewish people to leave!"

His address finished, the speaker re-enters his still meat-free quarters.

And, "as instructed from above," between thirty and forty people depart quietly, not before making sure that their (mostly Jewish) names are crossed out from the lists. Subsequently, the Jew-trimmed crowd calmly returns to its waiting positions.

It is now ten o'clock. The temperature keeps on dropping, as people make full use of the earflaps. State-bottled vodka eventually prevails over the home-made tea, since the latter has undergone a "hot-to-iced" metamorphosis. And the speed at which these old ladies can knit, while wearing thick gloves, is just amazing (reminds you of a blindfolded, finger-tied Mozart-child, playing piano).

By eleven, we have an updated news bulletin. The announcer, in his trademark apron, takes the stand, while the hardened queue listens anxiously through its freezing ears.

"Comrades, I have just spoken to the area manager. It seems that there are some minor problems with the trucks out there. This will certainly cause slight delays, but you can be sure that this afternoon your patience will be rewarded. Unfortunately, about two-hundred kilograms have been redirected to a party at the Polish Embassy, so we will get less than expected. However, I am positive that you all understand our international obligations toward other socialist countries. That is why I strongly appeal to the Azeris and Kazakhs to go home, for today!"

In response to this fellow's remarkable gift for persuasion, another group of about sixty people duly perform the ritual premiered by the Jews earlier in the morning.

By noon, it is twenty degrees below, and the wind is picking up. Dark, threatening clouds line-up themselves above the Soviet capital. Along with Jews, Azeris, and Kazakhs, the morning sun has headed home (one may rightfully wonder whether this is not another cunning – this time meteorological – Jewish plot; or could it be a scheme concocted by Jews, Azeris, and Kazakhs together, in an *ad hoc*, subversive alliance?).

By two o'clock, it is the turn of Armenians and Georgians to do "the right political thing" by taking their leave; by four-thirty the Balts are gone, followed shortly, at six sharp, by Byelorussians and Ukrainians. And it seems that upon their departure, each ethnic party takes a vicious pleasure in lowering the setting on Moscow's city thermostat, by several degrees.

Finally, it is eight o'clock by Moscow's standard time and – for the store of these people's uninspired choice – it also happens to be closing time. After a long and demanding working day, the pep-talk expert, and part-time butcher, comes out of the meatless meat shop for his last speech. (To fully appreciate his gift for oratory, one should know that he doesn't use any notes.)

"Comrades, brothers, we didn't make it today! The last transport was just about to reach this neighbourhood when it was suddenly requested for a rocket base. Yet, since I have complete confidence in your political maturity, I am sure that you fully agree that the needs of our Red Army, the brave warrant of our sovereignty, our democracy, and our abundant life, take precedence. Therefore, we all should regard today's happening just as a small, insignificant, atypical inconvenience. Comrades, I shall see you tomorrow, and let me tell you that I have received strong assurances that, by next dinner, there will be meat on your table; real, fresh, tender, juicy pork and lamb and chicken and beef for you to choose from. Meanwhile, I hope you and your families will savour a healthy vegetarian supper. As for myself, I've really enjoyed spending this quality time together. Good night, my dear comrades!"

This last address, a genuine masterpiece of political rhetoric, was listened to by a still sizable cluster of three-hundred half-frozen bodies, wrapped in icy snow and blown over by a savage wind. It was an authentic sample of the local weather which, over the years, had forced fairly good drivers – and it is enough to list here the names of Napoleon and Hitler – to shift their gear into reverse, upon facing a chronic shortage of antifreeze on the local market.

Eventually, an angry voice from the snow-entrenched queue gathers the strength to enquire bitterly:

"Meat or no meat, I cannot help wondering for the thousandth time how much longer these bloody Jews will get preferential treatment in our country?"

***– Sorin Finchelstein***

Brian Burke

# Three poems

## woman in a dumpster

she wheels a shopping cart borrowed from safeway
through alleyways & streets
collects bottles & cans
scrap metal & plastic sacks of bottle caps
stacks of hubcaps sent spinning from cars
bundles of old clothes sorted from garbage bins
& heaps of hi-rise refuse

she wears two torn ski jackets
both separate shades of green
with men's trousers beltless
a logger's shirt & thermal longjohns
thick grey work socks
cork boots & a plastic flowered rain cap
plus garden gloves summer & winter
the 6 o'clock news interviews her thanksgiving & easter
words just another flyer from safeway to them

behind the 7-11 on the corner stands a blue metal dumpster
recipient of convenience store waste
neighbour's junk their old carpets & flattened cardboard
positioned near a heating duct or refrigerator motor
warmth generated for an urban nomad
who winters amid these discards
& pulls the metal lid closed when it snows

## the train through northwestern Ontario

the train through northwestern Ontario
stops six times
approaching
the two seasons of least heat

before
someone fills the fields with snow

## missing

missing doesn't mean
the toppling from a wall we take
doesn't mean fire
as we lie beneath a sloping ceiling
so low at one end we raise our legs
press up our feet & lift the roof away
rain

missing doesn't mean stars
sparks that die in a mere billions of years
only short light years from how-far-away
suggesting travel
the challenge of voyage
a few billion years of safety & light
discharges tossed planet to planet
the simple sparking of synapses

no one is or ever will be how-far-away
nor is there a billion years of safety
not above
not in air
not in children or in childhood
only all the woodframe houses burning
orange flames roiling down a sloping ceiling
all the doors locked

Donald Hadden

# Night Groceries

I saw you tonight, Sir John A, at the all-night A&P.
The lump on your bulbous nose guided you down the huge wide aisles of the grocery store,
past cold coffins stuffed full of Chinese style snacks, German American patties, stacks of boil-in-a-bag lasagne,
French haute cuisine Radishes & Groceries.
You ordered about last man Joey, following on your heels with a shopping cart.
I listened to your debate,
And wondered how such a lively dispute is possible over the prices of house paint and butter.
You read the labels carefully, noting the "E" numbers in amusement, looking for country of origin.
You scorned the free trade California lettuce,
You tasted the Canadian cheddar, and asked: Where does the cow now stand?
You poked about in the meat freezer,
What price buffalo meat? I heard you ask the Métis night butcher. And it must be fresh, you demanded.
He answered he'll check in the back, but is certain the buffalo is all long gone.
A butcher with no buffalo, you said to Joey, ought to be hung.
Make it horse.
You threw tins on top of bags, bottles fell with a confederating rattle into the wire basket.
No one else noticed you,
But I thought you easy to spot in your long coat, I followed the long penumbra, trailing behind you under the high ceilings with glowing tubes, watched by the cameras – have they captured your image I wonder, and were they suspicious of that long coat and what it concealed?
I know your face so well; you're in the history books, standing tall among the grey and hairy, the slimy and drunk.
With your gin, you headed to the door, stopping by the cash register.
It was nice to see even the illustrious, like you, pick the wrong line-up – or would you call it a queue?
In front of us, a group of Indians have squatted by the cash register, refusing to pay.
You waited patiently, for awhile. Then you tell em to git, and they git.
Was it only Gin and Buffalo meat you were after? or have you returned to see what is left of the country?
to see if we know the colour of a Canadian boxcar?
how good your likeness on the $10 bill is?
if the streets are still clean, the mail faster, the land bigger, even bigger, the trees still tall and water still clean?
What were you doing tonight, Sir John A, in the all-night A&P?

Barbara J. Sibbald

# Pickles

She looks for her dill pickle recipe, absent-mindedly flicks pages, licks her forefinger, flicks. *Lick. Flick.* Wanda makes pickles every year but Tim says they are too sour, or too salty and he won't eat them. They seem fine to her but she duly lodges his complaints in the margin of the cookbook – *'81, touch more salt, '82, more dill, '83, another clove of garlic, '84 less vinegar* – as she searches for that perfect combination. *Lick, flick.*

She looks for her dill pickle recipe and tries to convince herself that she didn't really miss Tim at her birthday party last night. After all, she tells herself, I've been going out on my own for years. But she keeps remembering the moment after she blew out her thirty-three candles, the moment when she looked up for a familiar face, someone to note her passage of time. She found only a friend of a friend and smiled, but felt cheated. *Flick.*

Tim wouldn't go to her birthday party. She asked him a week ago. He said he didn't like the off-key singing, too-tight strings on pointed hats, candles melting into chocolate icing. He said it embarrassed him.

"It's unseemly for a man of my age."

She's heard it all. All the excuses over the past five years: Meeting a client. Playing hockey. Too tired. Doesn't like what they plan to serve.

Eventually she realized there wasn't much point in arguing, he's so much better at it. It wore her down.

Yesterday she surprised herself by asking him a second time to come to her party.

"I'm just not interested in going," he said.

He doesn't mean to be unkind, Wanda tells herself. He thinks he's being truthful. He encouraged her to go, alone. But he said nothing about her new yellow dress. She deliberately slammed the screen door when she left.

She tries to understand, to justify. He works hard, sometimes sixty hours a week, buying into the law firm. In his spare time he wants to watch hockey, fix his M.G., read his never-ending autobiographies of obscure 19th-century novelists. He doesn't want to spend time with people he doesn't know.

But he should have come to my birthday party, Wanda thinks. I should have insisted on it.

Wanda hears Tim come downstairs, muttering and looks up as he walks into the kitchen.

"I really think you should have come last night," she says. "I went to a lot of trouble for your fortieth birthday. You should have made the effort."

"Have you seen my brown belt?" he asks. "My old brown belt?"

"I spent a whole day cooking moussaka for your friends. Four moussakas, six layers each," she says. "And I had the flu too."

"I left my belt on top of my dresser. Did you move it?" he asks.

*Flick. Flick.*

He walks into the laundry room to rummage through the baskets of dirty clothing.

She slams the cookbook on the table, the salt and pepper shakers rattle. He should have come, she thinks. She jerks the book open and immediately spots the pickle recipe. She ponders the proportions of vinegar and salt. The alum is not a problem, a pinch always makes the pickles crispy. Last year she tried using grape leaves instead, it seemed more natural – What the hell is alum anyway? she wonders – but Tim did not like them. They lacked that definitive crunch that corresponded to his purposeful chomp. He should have been a pickle connoisseur. She imagines a row of different coloured fiesta plates, each containing a solitary dill. Each is slightly different in colour and size, but all have the same texture – like a toad's skin. Of course he would never be caught in public, sniffing and chomping. It's unseemly for a man in my position, he would say, hiking up his pants.

What a pretentious ass, she thinks. And wonders why it's taken her so long to figure it out. Five years.

And now she's thirty-three. She can't put off having a baby too much longer. They'd agreed to wait a few years. Now he is ready. "I don't want to have to deal with teenagers in my retirement," he'd said, grinning. She's waiting to be sure but never is. She's sure she wants a baby, but now she's not sure if he should be the father. She wants to know if he will go to their child's birthday parties.

She clears a slate in her mind, draws a line down the middle and begins to list the pros and cons. (*Reasons to stay. Reasons to leave.*) She's been doing this a lot lately. It's one of the few really constructive things she learned in three years of therapy. She thinks of last night's party and writes under the leave column. (*Unsociable.*) Her best friend Anita had invited, bought, baked, hosted. Wanda appreciates all this effort but it makes her realize that her husband is unwilling or unable to do this for her. But he expects her to do it for him. (*Self-centred.*)

Now he won't talk about it either. (*Uncommunicative.*)

"You used to like to go out," she calls into the laundry room. No response.

They used to go out, she thinks. But that was when they were dating – that mating dance, all showy plumes and false impressions. They drove to the city for movies and expensive meals. They visited friends. She didn't mind that they were always his friends. She was captivated by their ordered lives, their career goals and RRSPs. By their marriages. But mostly by the past they shared.

It's so different from her childhood, her list of addresses. They followed her father, a forestry consultant, from job to job, to other towns in other provinces. Best friends became pen-pals, so many names on a Christmas card list, then watered-down memories. No one shares her past. No one except her parents and they do not want to talk about that. Her mother used to confide her loneliness, then her father was caught "womanizing," as her mother put it. The dust settled with middle age; now they drink triple rums every evening and watch TV.

When Wanda started dating Tim, they used to sit on his sofa and she would ask him question after question about the details of his normal life.

"I warned you," Tim shouts from the damp recesses of soiled clothing.

This is his stock phrase at this point in this particular discussion – number 42, one in a series of 98, she thinks. (*Predictable.*) It dates back to a time on that sofa when he told her he liked a quiet life. It was one of the few fragments

# Movies

Movies frighten me.
It started with King Kong.
Mother warned me not to go
Then Quo Vadis
I saw the lions everywhere
eating up the religious
so I stopped going to services.
Afterwards Midnight Cowboy
made me sit all night
in Central Park
folding my cowboy's hand
into several others.

Then all the cosmic ones,
The Day the Earth Stood Still
Village of the Damned
Frankenstein, Satan's Daughter
and the Omen,
now I just make my own
and say before
I see it, Help, Amen,
Godzilla.

***– B.Z. Niditch***

of information he'd ever volunteered. "It won't always be like that," he'd said, referring to a late night of partying.

But she hadn't expected this, this extreme. He wooed, he won, he withdrew. He just closed down, resumed his old life. He doesn't want a wife, she thinks, just someone to take care of him. (*Selfish.*)

The pro side (*Reasons to stay.*) is blank, she notes, and feels compelled to even things out. He is a nice guy after all. (*Security. Loyalty.*)

He is loyal to her. She knows he won't be caught womanizing. But, she realizes, mostly he's loyal to his friends. Their social life is restricted to these childhood buddies and their insipid wives. These people were the only ones invited to his fortieth birthday party. They meet for dinner and inevitably the men and women separate. The men talk about town politics, the Maple Leafs, courtroom shenanigans and their legendary childhoods. The women talk about their children, vacation plans, antique auctions and the continuing drama of "Coronation Street." Wanda tries to bring up new topics – a book she is reading about women's eating disorders, an experimental treatment for epilepsy she has learned about at work – but they have nothing to say. She doesn't understand the dialect on "Coronation Street."

When Wanda's friends visit he goes to his sister's for the evening. Sometimes he stays overnight, guarding against a chance encounter. (*Paranoid.*) Once, just after their first anniversary, she conjured up some assertiveness and memorized a speech, pointing out that his reclusiveness was unhealthy, unnatural. In his shock he agreed to have Anita and her husband over for dinner. He was polite at first, hanging up coats, offering cocktails, but by dinner he was barely grunting at them. He asked for dessert when they were half-way through the pasta, for coffee when they had barely touched the sorbet. Afterwards he said they were common, uneducated.

"They said 'youse' for Christ's sake," he said.

She tried to stick up for them, tried to chastise him for his boorish behaviour, but it was impossible against his courtroom expertise, his rapid rhetoric. He won as usual. He always has to win, always assumes he knows best. (*Domineering.*)

She struggles to recall an argument she won and thinks of once when he wanted her to quit her job editing medical journals here at this kitchen table.

"You just don't have the time," he said. "There's so much to do around the house. And we don't need the money."

"I like doing it," she said. "I already quit the paper so we'd have more time together."

And she didn't quit. And he still complains about it, about the deadlines, the lengthy phone conversations, the office supply bills, and the time that could be better spent vacuuming the dog's hair off the sofa, or making pickles.

It's five years later and she's still doing the same old contracts. He persuaded her not to take a half-time job. He said she wouldn't have any spare time. She realizes now that he meant time for him.

Of course, I let him get away with it, she thinks. He hasn't changed. I always assumed he knew best. There was never any debate about how things ought to be done: how to cut the green onions perfectly, how to make the bed with taut sheets. How to make love.

She made a pass at him once – squeezed his thigh and whispered in his ear: "Let's go fuck."

"I don't like that kind of talk," he'd said in a stern tone and got up to go to the bathroom.

She was shocked. Her previous lovers had liked these advances. She didn't ask Tim if he objected to the word *fuck* or her initiative – assumed it was both. Now it doesn't matter. He is in control and sex is predictable. (*Passionless.*) She wouldn't dream of starting anything. It's just a Saturday night ritual.

Phase one: Cups right breast on top of nightgown, squeezes gently. Kisses neck.

Phase two: (If she can't defer it with mythically proportioned headaches, unusually frequent bouts of pms.) Hand between her thighs, strokes lightly – too lightly – six to ten times. Kisses her mouth.

Phase three: Pajama bottoms off, carefully folded. He's in. It's over.

## Cut-rate delivery

I circle an ad for a happy man
in a paradise pre-paid: could be me.

I cut on the dotted line, send,
in perforated hopes await

response of the gaudy promised dream,
with clinging stamp-glue aftertaste:

tapioca, gathered by happy slaves,
machete in hand, Caribbean-bound,

scanning the skies, awaiting the free
delivery, and me.

***– Philip Hughes***

She feels like howling at the moon. She finds herself staring at men in department stores, following them down the aisles.

TIM COMES BACK into the kitchen, waving his creased brown belt, looking as pleased as a small boy who has caught a snake.

"It got into the laundry somehow," he says.

"Gee," she says, "I wonder how that happened."

Ignoring her, he threads the belt through his pant loops, doing it up snugly around his waist. He is one of the few people she knows who actually needs a belt to keep his pants up.

"I can't believe you still expect me to come to these parties," he says.

"Some of my friends think you don't exist, that I've just made you up," says Wanda. "You might enjoy it if you'd give it a chance. You could have at least come to your wife's birthday party."

But he has walked over to her pile of dusty pickling cukes and is palming one in his hand.

"Why do you bother making these pickles?"

"Why? … because you like homemade food."

"But you never get them right," he says. "You might as well buy Strubs."

"What? What are you talking about?" Her voice rises. "I'd never have bothered if I'd known you'd settle for Strubs."

"Well if you could get it right it might be different," he says.

"We can't all be perfect like you," she says and instantly regrets the childish phrase. Premature articulation.

He smiles. (*Smug.*) He has won again. He leans down to give her a dry peck on the cheek. She turns so his bristles catch in her fine hair.

"I'm just running down to the auto parts," he says. "I have to pick up that wooden knob for the stick shift."

The screen door bangs. She sits perfectly still at the table. Her face is flushed. After years of lugging heavy parcels, cleaning cobwebby jars, canning in the August heat, now he tells me not to bother. He'd rather have some processed, store-bought pap. (*Hypocrite!*) Asshole, I've married an asshole. (*Asshole!*) She thinks of the days she's spent planning special dinners, French nouveau cuisine with thirty-seven steps and finely chopped ingredients. He says it's okay or nothing special. He marks the cookbooks in neat black printing: AVERAGE.

He prints DUST ME on the furniture; thinks it's a joke.

Five years.

She bounds down her freshly swept basement steps and flings open the cold storage door. Rows of pickles glow green in the half-light. Suspended green globs. No one will eat them. There are a half-dozen or so for each year of their marriage, dated 1981, '82, '83, '84. Each year preserved, looking identical to the year before. And there's a space for this year, 1985.

She doesn't know why she's down there. She stares at the jars then grabs one from 1981, the first year, the best. She deliberately drops the jar on the cold cement floor. Shards of glass pierce the pickles, juice splashes the walls. It thrills her. She drops another, then another, and another until 1981 is gone. (*Inattentive.*)

She scoops up an armful of 1982 and climbs the basement steps, and on up, up to their bedroom. She opens his top drawer where she has carefully arranged his folded underwear and pajamas and ironed handkerchiefs. It took two years to learn to do it the way he liked. She opens a jar and dumps the contents, green juice, garlic, dill weed and pickles, into the drawer. She dumps another jar, and another, placing the dripping jars on top of the hand-polished oak dresser. She grabs his long shoe horn from Mexico and stirs the contents of the drawer, gaily tosses pickles and his Jockeys in the air. (*Obsessive.*)

She returns to the basement and retrieves 1983, taking it up to his desk in the study. She arranges the pickles on top of the clear, gleaming surface until they form a perfectly asymmetrical pattern. Juice drips down over the floor. (*Compulsive.*)

She deposits 1984 in the front seat of the M.G. he has been fixing in their backyard. It has been in his life longer than she has. The pickles and juice form a pool in the leather bucket seat. She lines the roof with empty jars, flicks the lids and sealers like flying saucers onto the dash. (*Unloving.*)

She gathers together this year's dills, jars, salt, vinegar, alum, garlic and sugar. She dumps it all in the centre of the kitchen table. She writes a label, "1985 – incomplete", and places it carefully on top of the pile.

Alexandra Leggat

# A mile a minute

Think of all the lives
fully clothed and functional
that are unlived
of time not taken

It's another portable day
and I'm sitting by the window
wondering where I should take it

Play with my hands like a doll's will you
It helps me think

he cannot continue denying me sleep
running around like this in my head
I even awake to him in dreams
There is no depth in sin
so why not let rules be broken
Wounds are only severed in love
But who will be left laughing
when there is nothing funny about this
at all

I grow like a weed inside
once the warm weather comes

What can I do today that's precious
That will make a good memory
That I can wrap up and send to a friend
What's fresh today?

Where is he when I want him
A stranger's eyes can be
captivating
but it's his words I'd want from
their mouths, his hands
And it's his eyes really because
they never looked away
when I chose not to look back

I think I'll take the second hand off my watch
Little bits of time can be so tedious
Why would I want to keep track of them?
Why do they keep track of them
out there doing so little with life

Where was I?

Oh yes, you came

to borrow milk.

Susan Ioannou

# One word, a world

## *Remembering Kathleen Marshall*

"Exquisite."

That is the word by which I remember Kathleen Marshall. It was her word of highest approval and delight, a word I longed to hear bestowed on my efforts, to validate what I had done and written – a word fiery and transparent in my imagination, like a lead crystal bowl dancing with lights as the syllables turned on her tongue.

How many others remember her, a woman with short brown hair and deep-set, thoughtful eyes? She was never famous in the Toronto sense of the word. In fact, to many in her small home town, two years away in New York had given her far more cachet and glamour than a career as a local writer.

To a child of eight, fame is meaningless. I remember Kay best over forty years ago, when she lived a quiet, art-filled life in Paris, Ontario. I loved her old house, where the living room opened its tall front windows flush with beds of yellow and red tulips. We could swing the pane wide, reach out, and gather a bouquet to brighten the polished dining room table. She loved flowers. As she wrote in an essay, "Epitaph":

> *… every day that the newspaper or radio warn of possible frost, I ravish my garden of almost every possible flower.*
>
> *Because they will be gone so soon, I give the arrangement of the flowers more thought than ever before. When summer tossed flowers broadcast, I gathered them in great baskets and put them in big jugs. Now, I carefully put my flowers in deep water while I look over my cupboard of vases … .*
>
> *An old pottery jug that my grandmother made her hop-yeast in takes with grace any long-stemmed vivid flower. A great bubble of crystal, my great-grandmother's wine decanter that is at least a century old, holds the fragile green and white of nicotiana, while a little cruet of equal age is reserved for only one flower, a thin-stemmed tiny rose.*[1]

1. Kay Tew Marshall, *Sitting on the Curb: Essays Written by Kay Tew Marshall in* The Brantford Expositor *and* The Paris Star *from 1946 to 1959* (Paris, Ontario: privately printed, 1960), p. 170.

Through the living room's two side windows, along the outer edge of the cedared drive, a millrace trickled. When I stayed weekends, hip high in an outsized pair of old rubber boots I splashed through the millrace shallows, trying to catch its small silver fish in a rusty sieve. Once I even found "real" gold – the filigreed corner broken from an antique picture frame.

Standing in the centre of the living room, I could still hear the millrace's steady chatter. Was it carrying on a long conversation with the large cream and rose nudes leaning from high on the opposite wall? Those soft, dreaming women, painted in oil on canvas by Kay's artist-husband, Norm, were my first lesson in art appreciation. Never before had I had seen flesh bared so openly, and admired, without snickers, as beautiful too.

The house at that time had no children, only Kay and Norm and, up the front hall's big white staircase, two elderly ladies who lived on the second floor. The main floor's high-ceilinged rooms felt airy by day, cosy at night, elegant compared to the too-familiar plainness of my suburban home. By the millrace windows stood a Victorian settee upholstered in silky mustard and cream stripes, which I sat on, stiffly, only once. My favourite seat nestled under the nudes in the front corner, a generously pillowed beige divan flanked by shelves thick with books. I remember one evening especially, hunching happily beside Norm and, in the most hideous voices we could muster, hissing and cackling over and over the parts of Shakespeare's three witches from *MacBeth:*

*When shall we three meet again*
*In thunder, lightning, or in rain?*

*When the hurlyburly's done*
*when the battle's lost and won … .*

*Fair is foul, and foul is fair:*
*Hover through the fog and filthy air.*

There were other delights for the senses too. In the room's centre, two pale, thick rugs partly covered the glowing hardwood. How comfortably they led my sinking, stockinged feet toward the far end of the room. There the dark polished table always displayed its bowl or vase of vibrant flowers, and at dinner was laid with white linen and silver, a ceremony at which I was honoured to assist. Throughout the day and evening, the only times I didn't hear the millrace chattering in the background were the interludes when Puccini, Ella Fitzgerald, or Bach revolved on the record player.

I have often thought that a woman's home is like her psyche turned outward. Dirty or compulsively neat, spartan or rococo, a house says something about how at ease a woman is with herself. Slow-spoken, precise, Kay matched her living room, comfortably and casually stylish in dress – always a silk scarf draped with an interesting brooch at her neck. Her love of beautiful things stood out against the practicalities of my suburban Toronto upbringing. Kay was an exotic island I was lucky enough to visit for weekends once or twice a year, or at my parents' house a perfume that lingered, with that magical word "exquisite", when she and Norm came to Toronto on a ballet or theatre trip.

Like a favourite book that lights a dream in a youngster, she gave me a glimpse of something completely new, a world where people took pleasure in beautiful objects, especially if they bore the patina of time, where talking was for enjoyment, not just a call to meals, chores, or bed, and a well turned phrase, like a sip of brandy, could tingle warmth through the fingertips; a world where ideas were as valued in their own right as my mother's smooth rolling pin or my father's sturdy snow shovel; where a record player adjusted a room's temperature, Bach cooling the noon sunshine, or Ella Fitzgerald's curry-red voice burning through the night chill. Kay gave me my first rough notion of civilized living. Until my visits, like a young horse kicking its heels, I had bounded from one day to the next, much without thinking. Making my bed, clearing the table, and other inflictions of parental order, only reined in my fun. Kay's lovely old house, her measured speech, her tasteful dress, the artistic way she arranged a pitcher of flowers showed me that order need not curb pleasure. Indeed, it had a strangely lovely appeal of its own.

However, Kay's influence went beyond my aesthetic awakening. She was also my role model as a writer. She earned her living as a reporter for the *London Free Press*, the *Brantford Expositor*, and (in the years I remember her best) the *Paris Star*, under the pen name "Kay Tew". Her beat was the usual small-town round of council meetings, library events, garden shows, and the rare fire or burglary. But she also enjoyed a free hand in her own weekly column, "Sitting on the Curb", after her death collected and published by friends as a book of the same name. She explored anything that took her fancy, but most often turned her careful eye and wry humour to Ontario history, back-road travels, ballet, books, and the not-so-ordinary people she met. For example, she recounts the story of Sam, the French/Italian hired man on her grandfather's farm, who arrived with only the clothes on his back, "blisters on his hands as big as fifty cent pieces", and a hidden talent for bootlegging.

*During the week Sam's behaviour was utterly irreproachable. His language was refined (except in the back field*

*talking to Jim and Prince), his manners exquisite and his charm undeniable. What's more, he treated the Girls, aged between 45 and 55, as if they were scions of a noble house.*

*When the weekends came it was Sam's privilege to come in early from the fields, take a bath, dress in one of his elegant suits and leave for the weekend. He came home punctually in time for chores on Sunday night, a little tired looking, perhaps; but usually wearing some new and handsome article of apparel … .*

*Sam departed much as he had arrived, on the lumber wagon which was headed for the chopping mill. This time, however, three fine leather suitcases packed with luxurious garments went with him.*

*About six months later we had news of him through a friend of a friend of a friend who had been in Detroit. There he had met Sam who was driving a Buick, wearing a diamond ring and clothes of positive effulgence.*

*Sam, we gathered, was then operating a highly lucrative beat across the Detroit river.*

*Thoughtfully he sent his regards to Grandfather and the Girls, and added that no Yankee cooking could ever come up to Grandmother's.* [2]

As a friend said of Kay, "She was as happy talking to a ditch digger as writing a ballet critique." I especially remember one visit to "the bell lady" in Paris, whose Hansel-and-Gretel cottage tinkled and dinged as we worked our way around several hundred bells crowding table tops, shelves, and every corner of the front rooms.

As a child, I first became aware of Kay's writing as its occasional subject: Susie, the little girl with long, blond hair in the blue velvet dress (a gift from Kay) who at a performance of Swan Lake silenced the tipsy foursome in the row behind by turning around. Kay wrote:

*"I just gave them my* WORST LOOK" *[Susie] said simply.*

*What terrible thing of crossed-eyes and stuck-out tongue constituted Susie's look, I did not enquire. Whatever it was worked … .*

*"Those people," she told me comfortably, "will probably never speak again." … such was the assurance in her voice that I looked down hastily to make sure that beneath the flounce of golden hair at my elbow I couldn't glimpse the sinuous stirring of Medusa's fatal locks.* [3]

The fact that I appeared in this and other columns made writing as much a part of the real world as softball and riding my bike. Until my painful high school years, it never occurred to me that many Canadians preferred hockey to the arts and scorned writing as a foreign land of "browners" and "eggheads".

To me, writing was just another form of play. When I was seven, Kay wrote a book for me, illustrated by Norm, *The End of the Street: Being the Tale of the Rabbit with Wiggly Ears and of Rosamund His Friend.* Of course, I wanted to write stories back. In grade two, when I turned detective author, Kay was my first publisher and agent. She reprinted "The Death of the Murdered Girl" in her column. Afterwards, a friend at Radio Station CKPC in Brantford, Ontario read it over the air. As the years went by and family visitors posed the standard question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?", "A writer" seemed as good an answer as the expected "Teacher" or "Nurse".

Today when I reread Kay's columns, I hear a familiar voice: direct, friendly, talking about life's small moments, or Beauty and Truth, all in the same breath. In my years writing a magazine column [4], I wonder how much of her warm, easy style had rubbed off? I'd be honoured to imagine some did.

Such wonderful gifts children absorb unthinkingly as their natural right. Now, looking back so many years after, I realize my good fortune. However, it was not until my teens that I first began to appreciate Kay's legacy.

I was nineteen and in love and had confided my passions in a series of small, careful poems. But who could read them? A few years earlier, Norm had died of a heart attack.

## Summer and everything

lying on an adequate parkbench
tipsy and glorious and everything sharp,
in patient audience at the river
that I've watched for two long vacation days
waiting for my life to catch up with me,
a frame to swing into focus,
waiting for something
like maybe applause

***– Darryl Whetter***

2. Kay Tew Marshall, *Sitting on the Curb*, pp. 60-62.
3. Kay Tew [Marshall], "Sitting on the Curb", *Paris Star*, June 18, 1953.
4. From 1980-1989 for *Cross-Canada Writers' Quarterly/Magazine*.

Devastated, Kay suffered a stroke that severely damaged her speech. During her long silence I missed those escapes to Paris, the talk, the paintings, and music, and the ballet nights scented with Arpège at Toronto's Royal Alex. Chances to show Kay my "girl-and-her-horse" stories and, later, high-school creative writing passed. When at last she took the train to Toronto I was ecstatic. Now I could share my poems.

As she stood on our doorstep, she looked almost the same: dark hair somewhat greyer, eyes a little more thoughtful, a slight droop to one cheek. She had struggled a long time alone, unwilling to visit old friends until she could speak unhaltingly again. Her talk was even slower than her old, leisurely pace, but clear. After a third Scotch, she looked at me intently and forced her mouth around the difficult syllables: "Ex-quis-ite. Exquisite! Do you know, Susie, how hard I worked, before I could say that again?" The most important word she had reclaimed. Was it the awaited sign for stepping back into the world?

After supper I led her upstairs to my room. Behind the closed door, she sat on the bed as I read my love poems. When I finished, she nodded. Squeezing my hand, she framed the slow, stiff words: "Susie, now you write about your own feelings because you are young. You are still finding out who you are. But one day you will look outside yourself and write about the world. And if you write well enough, the world will look back."

I understood. Kay spoke of a dimension in writing I had not entered, although playing along its fringes. These poems were like opening the sunken windows and pulling the tulips inside for a private bouquet. One day I would learn to open the inside outward, to make the walls leaning down their nudes, the polished table, the striped settee, and the sounds of the millrace, Shakespeare, and Ella Fitzgerald something to share with others. Now those lost years when Norm's death silenced her had passed. She was back. I was glad: she would help me continue my creative adventures …

A week later Kay was dead. A second stroke. With the selfishness of youth, I felt betrayed: so close to setting out afresh, my guide had abandoned me. Later I acknowledged how much she had given already, by her love of the beautiful, her calm, her wry humour, and her devotion to words. I also learned that the writer's journey must be made alone. But such a friend to have started me on my way – that indeed was exquisite.

# Look at me like that

I wish you wouldn't look at me like that
through the passenger glass
After all, I've moved you
four hundred and nine kilometres
I know because I'm dropping you
beside the blue sign leaving just
211 kilometres
to Halifax

Last night you said, "here, this one will do,"
or some such, in your broken
English and I
pulled in and parked beside the
a c a n c y sign
causing your easy hazel eyes to sparkle for several hours
before you fell asleep with your unwashed hair
curling smokily over the side of the beige bed and your
mouth slightly open, somehow smiling.

Look at me like that once more and
I promise before I get to the end of the land to
dream you up a proper name.

# To Walt, from here

If Walt Whitman were here now at
my side
I would glance at him and say, "Walt,
I just don't see things the way you do," and
he would probably rest his gentle hand on
my shoulder or perhaps my knee and
respond, "quite naturally."

***– Brent Rouleau***

FIONA HEATH

# About Sally

WELL NOW, I KNOW SOMETIMES WE FORGET there have been black people in Ontario as long as there have been Europeans. I'm not talking about the natives, I'm talking about the Africans who sailed the whale's road and never saw it.

As we all know – down there in the United States for too many long years they grew fat on the slavery of blacks. And for many years some of the slaves who escaped would come to Canada to walk free and live proud. The story that I need to tell you tonight is a story about slavery and justice and community. It's a good story in some places and a sad story in others. It has some truth in it, though I'll leave it to you to decide on that truth for yourself.

I don't know exactly when the events I'm telling about took place, but I can say it was the 1830s. A slave from Kentucky, by the fine name of Solomon, was sent on a journey. Now he had a decent life as slave's lives went; he was not ill treated, he received some education, and he was a favourite with his master. But that's the problem right there: his master. He didn't want anyone being his master except the good lord above and some days he wasn't even sure he wanted him. Solomon knew he would never marry unless his children were born free, and he was aching to settle down with a good woman and live a quiet life. So when he was sent off by horse to deliver a message, well, he took the opportunity. He rode and rode and rode hard to Buffalo, where he sold the horse and escaped into Canada. It may be he escaped on that wonderful underground railroad but the history books don't tell about that. If you'd like it like that, well then I guess he did.

Here in our fair country, though it wasn't the big noise of Canada then, but the British colony of Upper Canada, slaves had legal protection. But American felons did not. Under a special agreement, they got sent back to where they came from for their punishment. So this master, who I guess didn't like Solomon as much as he had appeared to, had the poor man found guilty of horse-stealing down in Kentucky. As a felon, he could be pursued up here on British soil. And once all the legal papers were shuffled and puffled and made to look right smart, Solomon was arrested and put into jail here in Niagara until he could be sent back.

Now there being lots of other escaped slaves, as well as some forward-thinking whites in the Niagara area, Solomon's plight sure raised a great commotion. The black community said right out in the streets to anyone who'd care to listen that they weren't going to let him be taken. No sir, they would give their own lives to prevent him from going back across that border. They had come to Canada to be free and no one was going to take that away, no one, not on the basis of some little piece of paper. Some of those progressive whites, even the mayor of Niagara

This folktale is adapted from Anna Jameson's account of an 1837 incident in her book *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (first published 1838. McClelland & Stewart, 1990.) Additional information came from two texts on the history of blacks in Canada.

himself, made a petition to the governor to stop this tragedy.

You see, this master, who again didn't like Solomon very much at all as a free man, wasn't taking Solomon back to face the law on horse theft, but was going to make an example of him. Well, everybody knew that meant something right awful – a whipping or a lynching or a burning.

But the governor, he said, in a legal matter of a felon, he couldn't do a thing, not even a good thing if it flew in the face of the crown's law. He had to do his duty. And he did, processing the order for extradition himself.

But bureaucracy, whatever else it is, is slow, and escaped slaves gathered in Niagara from the regions close by. They discussed the matter among themselves, with the women taking as much part as the men. I put that in because back then we might be surprised that the women were involved at all, but of course they were. The women had been through as much hardship as the men in the taking of their freedom and felt the oppression just as keenly.

The people kept watch on the jail day and night. They were unarmed and made it clear they weren't intending any criminal acts. Solomon could stay in jail while they raised the price of a horse. But and this was a big but – if anyone tried to take Solomon over to Lewiston, they would resist at any cost, even their lives. Now I always think of Gandhi when I think about their behaviour and their beliefs, but of course they were before his time.

The legal papers were finally got right and the sheriff and his constables came to carry out the orders. The people, men and women together, as unarmed as they said they'd be, stood in witness as their brother Solomon was brought out in shackles and placed in a cart. I don't imagine they waited quietly but maybe they did, such was their resolution for justice. But once Solomon was in the cart, the watchers began to walk forward, to get between the sheriff and the wagon. They moved quiet but wary, as the sheriff's party had muskets. But they moved and kept on moving closer and closer, and it was the men – as it always is – with the guns that acted first. Well, the people could only stand silent for so long. All the anger and grief against the United States and slavery and Canadian justice couldn't be contained in the face of those men with those weapons. There was a dreadful fight. Pushing and punching and screaming and worse. The constables called for the artillery men to fire on the blacks. This is the sad part – two men were killed and others wounded, and as many as the sheriff could catch were arrested. But Solomon escaped. He wasn't pursued either, which may or may not say something about Canadian justice.

But the important part of the story isn't just Solomon's freedom but the women. You see, it was their idea not to be armed. It was their arguing and crying and insisting that meant no black man carried a weapon. It was the women – well, truth be told, probably not all of them but enough to matter – that said there was to be no violence but they should give their lives if Solomon be taken. And when the scuffle came, the women were fearless, throwing themselves between the black men and the white, trying to prevent the worst fighting. The sheriff, and I bet he didn't forget this too fast, was wrestled to the ground by a woman. It didn't stop the shooting, in the end, but the women gave Solomon time to escape. And no blacks could be accused of killing white men, for they had no weapons except their spirit and their hands.

It was one woman, a young woman of 30 or so I'd guess, who was one of the prime organizers of this successful venture into civil disobedience. She, well I'd like as much to call her Sally, seeing as how no one else thought to hear her name for history's sake. Sally had been a slave in Virginia who run away after hearing she was to be sold. Sally had been happy in Upper Canada, thinking she was free, thinking that black folks had as much right to be here as any European. She was fighting for Solomon the way she fought for her own freedom, not to hurt anyone but so as to keep living life as she chose. But finding out she was mistaken, when the law wouldn't stand up for Solomon, when blacks were arrested for being shot at by the militia, she began to think twice about our fine country. Sally said that since it wasn't to be found in Canada, she would go to the end of the world to find freedom. Now I'd like to hope Sally thought again and realized that she did help save Solomon, and did it bravely and as rightly as she could. But I suspect she was wise enough to know successes like that don't often happen again in the same place. Where Sally went, I don't know, but I like to think she ended up under the hot sun of India, telling her tales until the end of her days.

Luci Dilkus

# Two poems

## Sanctus

Standing at the back and looking
forward
no need for hindsight
I feel the cold
wall against my back
figures
bent
a subtle sway
the rhythm of penitence

one perspective
framed by stained glass
a circle of incense
draws inwards
to a man lost inside
his sacred robes
standing at the back
and looking forward
I view the straight path
then turn my head
gazing outwards
I see the sway of limbs …
my tattered soul a patchwork
of fragility

the man inside the robe
comes and speaks to me
of poetry

## Crossroads

Was it you that passed me
rushing off to work as I tried clinging to your pant leg
to hold you back to spend some time
getting lost inside that hand carved and fitted for hammer and chisel
Was it you
whose threats and daily insults tightened the knot inside my gut
tied a noose around our necks and almost killed us off
a good scout knows his knots
I know your warmth and kindness now
your body frozen in the ground

Was it you that passed me
speeding through a lifetime a life sentence of ten years
is that what marriages last these days
Was that you
who played the opposite role in that life copied from a TV movie
during private screenings perfected the discipline of mutual orgasms
who vowed until death …
I must be dead these many years

Was it you that passed me
suckling on my blood and then my breast
shooting up six feet and then another half
Was that you
who taught me fear like I have never feared before
who made me laugh 'til doubled over I nearly wet my pants
cautiously stepping through adolescence slowly turning away from me
it's good to have a sense of humour

Was it you who passed me
as I glided through a summer's day minding my own thoughts
whose actions and words caught me by surprise
stripping me naked to the bone wanting to receive you
Is that you
the one in a million who understands the way I tie my shoes
with whom I want to share
everything …
Is it?

Judith Hazan

# The Powerless Fallen

So how did it come to be … a twelve-year-old girl, crumpled up like a piece of paper stuffed into the tiny cramped space under the Torah table in an Orthodox synagogue, where female presence had been for centuries relegated to an upper balcony out of the sight and view of the men below? Hiding from the black-bearded Rabbis who circled the table, she curled her slim body into a ball and prepared to be discovered at any moment. The beating of her heart sounded to her ears like the blowing of the Shofar on Rosh Hashona … loud, piercing! Surely they could hear it. She sneaked a look from tightly closed eyes. She could see the bottoms of their black coats and their white stockinged ankles. Their black shoes clumped noisily on the hollow Bimah as they danced around the Torah table in feverish prayer, unaware of the tiny breaths being exhaled beneath them. Surely she would be discovered … a girl, on the bimah, under the torah … it was unthinkable! How would they punish her? She'd be cast out – worse than a *sotah*, a wife accused of adultery! She had visions of herself being stoned in front of the Synagogue, the ancient biblical punishment for blasphemy. She shuddered as she conjured up images of an angry community hurling rocks at her, her parents shamed, her brothers scorned.

Even now, as i think back on that day in my childhood, I cannot believe that I had the guts to do what I did.

I grew up in an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community – insulated from the secular world, protected against the intrusion and influence of television, newspapers, radio, fashion, literature, art, theatre. My world was a world of routines, of roles, of customs. My world was black and white, with little colour. Clothing was conservative, not showy, even my childish body was well covered to not expose any tempting flesh. Long sleeves, long skirts, long stockings, even in summer. Girls were kept together with girls. Boys together with boys. My father worked as a teacher in the Yeshiva. My mother was a typical Orthodox wife, efficient, quiet, dignified in every way. She ran our home on a tight schedule of floor waxing, vacuuming, and cooking. I, the only girl in our family, was born her assistant. My three older brothers attended the Yeshiva and spent all their time studying, except for the odd moment of frivolity when they enjoyed teasing me and pulling my hair.

My family's life centered upon the Synagogue.

The Synagogue was very big and very beautiful. The walls were inset with stained glass depicting images from the Bible. On the main floor, the men sat on long wooden pews with beautifully carved ends, polished to a gleaming shine. The aisles were carpeted in thick red broadloom that led up to the Bimah where

*How are the powerless fallen in the midst of victory!*
*The daughter of Jephtah lies slain upon thy high places*
*I weep for you, my little sister.*
*Very poignant is your story to me, your courage to me is wonderful,*
*Surpassing the courage of men.*
*How are the powerless fallen*
*A terrible sacrifice to a faithless vow.*

***– Phyllis Tribble***

the Holy Ark sat. Here on the Bimah, the Cantor, the Rabbi and the other Holy Men led the services and read from the Torah. The Torah, hand-penned on special kosher parchment, was handled with exaggerated tenderness, for this is where the Hebrew Laws were written. God's actual words were recorded here. The Ark itself, which housed the Torah, was made of deep cherrywood, elaborately carved and polished. Dark red velvet curtains cloaked the doors to the Ark. The Eternal Light guarded the Ark, bathing it in golden rays night and day. Twelve crystal chandeliers lit the Bimah and provided an opulence befitting the home of the Torah.

On the Bimah was a high wooden table draped with wine-coloured velvet that matched the curtains on the Ark. This was where the men placed the Torah scrolls; where they carefully laid the scrolls to read from them. The Rabbis and the other men would hunch over the table on all sides and they'd kiss the Torah and cry over it as they prayed and read. Underneath, the table legs and sides were hidden from view by the velvet drape.

I'd never actually seen any of this close up. In the Orthodox custom, women and girls must be seated separately from the men. Our place was in a balcony, high above the Sanctuary, behind a curtain where we could hear the service but not actually see it, although for us little girls, peeking through the curtains to see the spectacle below was tolerated. And what a spectacle it was! Hundreds of men shoulder to shoulder in black robes and tall black hats, each one bearded with curled *pais*, or earlocks, singing together or chanting the words. At times their chanting would become so intense that they would begin to wail and cry. It at once thrilled and frightened me, but I felt compelled to watch. I'd never experienced passion like this, and I wondered why only men could feel such connection to God. When the men were singing so loudly and crying out so intensely, the women sat silently, tightly banded together on the balcony in blind exclusion. Not looking at each other. Staring at their prayer books. Mouthing the words. But there was no passion exchanged between them.

Most of what I knew then about the Synagogue came from my brothers – Aaron, Moishe and Shlomo. They liked to brag to me about the Torah – how old it was – how tiny and perfect the Hebrew words were, written with painstaking exactness by Rabbis in Eretz Yisrael, how they could look at it any time they liked. They loved to tease me and let me know that I could never, ever have such a privilege. I was just a girl. A silly girl. Skinny and ugly and only good for peeling vegetables and helping Mama clear the table. Most evenings, after dinner, my father and brothers returned to their studies at the Yeshiva. I helped Mama wash the dinner dishes. I learned to dry them carefully, because Mama was very particular. She showed me how to polish the glasses and silverware with newspaper to make them shiny and spot-free. Everything had to be perfect for Mama. Each glass was put away in precise rows inside the gleaming cupboards. Not a speck of lint was tolerated in Mama's kitchen! While we cleaned, Mama told me how important it was to keep a kosher Jewish home. A Jewish wife's duty, she would tell me, was to make a home free of tension and full of sweetness in order to create the right environment for the study of Torah. As women, she told me, we had a most important job to do – to make a home for our husbands and our sons so that they could study and learn and become wise and close to God. And it was our job, as women, to be responsible for the education of our daughters. To make sure that the daughters knew how to make a good home and to cook and to create the proper environment for study.

"Why do WE not need to study, Mama? Why is it only for the men to learn Torah? Are we less than men, Mama? Are we not God's creatures too?"

"Shah! Shah! Esther!" my Mama would say. "We're not the SAME as men, but we're not LESS than men either, just different."

THAT'S NOT WHAT Moishe said. Moishe told me that women are cursed because of what Eve did in the Garden of Eden. Moishe said that the moment Eve misled Adam she brought death to the world and caused man to stumble from God. That's why men and women must be separated, so men are not distracted from loftier purposes.

When my father and brothers returned from their nightly Yeshiva studies, Mama and I would have a large pot of tea and some *mandelbroit*, or honey cake, ready for them on the dining room table. We would all sit around the table, Papa dipping slices of cake into the hot tea and always getting crumbs in his beard. The talk would be excited and loud – each one telling about what they had studied, what they had learned, what new insights the day had brought. No one ever asked me what I had learned or what I had done that day at school. No one ever asked Mama either. We were there to listen and to feel proud of their learning. Sometimes, Papa would smile at Mama and tell her how good the tea was or the cake. And Mama would beam from ear to ear. Many times the talk would be so boring that I would close my eyes for just a minute and think about something I had learned in school. One of my brothers, usually Aaron – the oldest and meanest, took this opportunity to kick me hard in the shins under the table. I learned not to give him the satisfaction of crying out, although the pain would be excruciating. Instead, I'd fix my eyes on him and stare until he looked away.

# Spew

She is sitting in the shade
again of course where else
could support her beauty
the sun becomes too
jealous envious globe of
red and orange
her fingers have more fire
and the Earth is rotating
wildly beneath my feet
around my ears
true stillness never to
descend upon my whirling
cells
compartments of weird
science knowledge of
my foremothers
locked away
next to his heart
on a beach of salty tears
spam-cubes for breakfast
and tofu for lunch
is that a compromise a compromising
of my value system that I've yet to publish
lacking any editor friends
That day we played strip-Snap
in my room
I thought of taking off my
skin first so you could see my
heart was in my stomach
and my blood sometimes runs
thin
Winning was always so easy
I thought the whole game was
a fixed point
of fate on my forehead
to win the empty trophy
of every competition
repetition is easy to
swallow
numbness and sensitivity are
more than interchangeable
while I'm baking in the sun
where I seem to belong
of course where else could support
my notions of nudity
veins cannot be protected
even with SPF 25.

***– Sandra Alland***

"Look at her. Look at Esther staring at me, like that. She's a *golem*, I tell you," Aaron would say.

"Enough!" Papa would bark. "She's a little girl, Aaron. Be a *mensch*."

And Aaron would turn his attention away from me and get back to his explaining and questioning and talking.

At the Girls' Yeshiva I learned mostly about becoming a good wife and mother. But we had Bible class, where I learned about important women in Jewish history. Like Noah's wife, whose good deeds preserved her husband, and Sarah, whom God told Abraham to listen to because she was wise. I learned about Rivkha and Leah, Rachel and Miriam, Esther, Ruth, Bityah bat Pharoah, Yokheved, Hannah, Yael, Naomi, Rahav and others. All of them did something that set them apart from others in their time. All of them were brave or selfless or strong enough to stand up to injustice. But none struck me as deeply as the story of Jephtah's daughter, a story from the *Book of Judges*. The thing that stands out so much to me now in this story is that this brave young woman has no name. She's known simply as Jephtah's daughter. In some tractates, the ancient Rabbis interpreting the story gave her a name – Sheilach, to facilitate the telling. But when I tell the story, I don't use the name Sheilach. I find it insulting to her memory.

Jephtah was a warrior who led the Israelites in battles against the invading Ammonite armies. The Israelites had taken a terrible beating for some eighteen years when Jephtah appeared on the scene. Jephtah tried to negotiate peace with the Ammonites, but to no avail. So Jephtah made a vow to God. If God made him the leader of the Israelites and let him win against the Ammonites, then whatever came out of the door to his house to greet him on his safe return would belong to God and would be sacrificed to Him. Jephtah arrived home from a successful battle against the Ammonites to find his only daughter coming out to meet him. Jephtah was bound by his vow and informed his daughter of what he must do. The daughter understood this and only asked for two months to bewail her maidenhood with her friends. She returned to her father's house at the end of the two months and Jephtah sacrificed her to God. It became an annual custom for Israelite girls to chant dirges for the dead maiden who has no name.

The girls in my class at the Yeshiva acted out a play about Jephtah's daughter. I got to play Jephtah and for my fifteen seconds of fame I got a taste of what it would be like to have the power that men have. I liked being Jephtah, even though I thought he was a stupid man to make such a

foolish vow and even stupider to carry it out.

My parents and brothers came to my school to see the play. Mama thought it was wonderful. Papa said I made a fine Jephtah. You can imagine what my brothers said to me. They didn't stop teasing me for weeks after that. They started calling me "Jep", but not when my parents were around.

Shortly after the Jephtah play, I got the idea to see the Torah for myself. It started out as a dare as to whether I had the nerve to sneak into the Synagogue, go up onto the Bimah, open the velvet curtains, open the cherrywood doors of the Ark, take out one of the Torah scrolls, kiss it as I'd seen the men do, place it on the table, open it up and look at it. But then it changed. It wasn't a test of my bravery. I wanted to see the Torah, to touch it. To be changed by it. I wanted to feel the passion that men experienced, I wanted my soul to fill with the love of God and the Law and to know that I was as worthy of God's love as my brothers.

I wanted the Torah to change my destiny. I didn't want to be an Orthodox wife and wait for some compliment about my honey cake to feel alive. I wanted to feel life the way I saw it through the curtains on the balcony. I wanted my Papa to be proud of me. I wanted to be asked about my studies, what I was learning. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life polishing glasses with old newspapers. The Torah could change my life. I would touch it, God would fill me with wisdom and I would be a different person with a new future.

And so it was that I came to sneak into the Synagogue, cloaked in darkness on a week night when I knew there were no services scheduled, when all the men were studying at the Yeshiva, when my mother had gone to a meeting of the Synagogue Sisterhood to bake for an upcoming wedding. I was left at home to prepare the tea for my father and brothers when they returned from study. That gave me approximately two hours.

I had never walked through the doors of the Sanctuary before. The women's entrance was outside in the lobby and up several flights of stairs to the balcony. The Sanctuary was in complete darkness except for the Eternal Light which burned above the Ark, casting just enough light for me to find my way down the aisle and up onto the Bimah. I felt a rush of adrenaline as I stepped onto the platform. I approached the Ark. I let my fingers caress the thickly carved figurines on the outside edges. They felt oddly warm and soft to my touch. I brushed my face against the thick velvet curtains, relishing the satin texture on my skin. I reached my hands underneath the curtain. I could feel the heavy carved doors of the ark. Just beyond lay the Torah. Suddenly, I heard the creak of the Sanctuary doors. Instantly

# powerless

(Tuesday September 26th 1995)

no power
no lights
no electricity
tonight I type
by candle light

in my mailbox
Ottawa Hydro's
Field Collection Notice
We called but failed
to get an answer

Your Hydro Service
a tick ✔ a checkmark
in the box that reads

Has Been Disconnected

as my cheque for them
was never in the mail

If you wish to continue receiving
service please contact
738-6413 immediately

I would if I could
but Bell disconnected
the phone 3 weeks ago

so I'm in the dark
typing on this old
royal manual typewriter
my fingers striking keys
in harmony with the rain

I've no lights
no electricity
while ironically
lightning flashes
light up the night

Ben Franklin's
decrepit bones
rattle in thunderous
taunting refrains of
"go fly a kite"

***– Warren D. Fulton***

I ducked down behind the Torah table. Voices. The clumping of heavy shoes on dull carpet. MEN! I peeked around the corner. They were coming towards the Bimah. Dozens and dozens of large, bearded MEN, with black coats and tall black hats. The noise was deafening. I grabbed at the skirt of the Torah table and in darkness slid inside, underneath the table. There was a tiny bit of space between the legs and the cross supports. I wedged into the space, my arms and legs cramping instantly. My heart beating wildly, loudly. Tears stinging my eyes. Fear clutching my throat and making breathing laboured and shallow. I gulped at the air silently. Discovery would be disaster. Disgrace to my family. Humiliation beyond my ability to comprehend. This was a sin against God and man. I was here. A GIRL! Just inches beneath THE TORAH, eavesdropping on Holy words between GOD and MEN! *Interloper! Fool! What were you thinking?* I screamed at myself inside. *Calm down. Stop panicking. Breathe. Breathe.* Shooting pains in my legs. I want to scream. Kick out. My shoulders are breaking. It hurts. *Think. Think about Jephtah's daughter. Burned alive as a human sacrifice. Did she cry out?* Numbness mercifully replacing pain. I can't feel my legs or my arms. My neck is twisted forward and my head is pounding as loudly as my heart. The men are praying loudly, coming to a crescendo of prayer. Someone must have gotten ill in the community. They're praying a *Misha Bera* – the prayer for the sick. That's why they're here. Their voices are powerful, loud. My ears are ringing with the intensity of their singing. I'm half tempted to jump from my prison and add the richness of my own voice to their choir. *Madness. Insanity.* And finally, it is over. They are leaving. I hear their footsteps retreating. *Can it be true? Have I been saved? Is it possible I will not bring shame of the worst kind to my family? Thank you, God. Oh, Thank you, God,* I pray silently, waiting until the last voice leaves and all human sounds have disappeared. Carefully I roll out of my jail and lie for a time on the floor of the Bimah, waiting for feeling to return to my bruised appendages. At last I feel the pinpricks of life stirring in my arms and legs and I stand upright pulling myself up through handfuls of velvet draping the table. I take a final look at the Ark. Memorizing every detail of this place. I know I will never see the Torah or touch it. Not me. I no longer even want to.

I turned my back on the darkened Sanctuary and walked stiffly through the Synagogue doors, a gesture I would repeat ten years later with more finality when I left the Orthodox community and began a new life outside its walls. But I've always remembered the sound of those heavy wooden doors closing behind me when I escaped from the Sanctuary that crazy night in my childhood. It echoes in my head, the sound of the powerless fallen.

# Tiananmen anniversary

*Yesterday, the anniversary of the 1989 massacre at Tiananmen Square, a lone woman carrying a big bouquet of flowers approached the Memorial to the People's Heroes … She was within a few feet of the steps when, as she must have known they would, the police moved in to seize her, grabbing the flowers, pushing her head-first into the sidecar of a motorcycle and roaring off. It was all over in a few minutes, barely noticed by the throngs of Chinese and foreign tourists in the square. A pile of yellow chrysanthemum petals on the pavement was the only evidence that anything had happened.*

—Marcus Gee, *The Globe and Mail*, June 5, 1996

A scattering of yellow chrysanthemum petals
sprinkles the black shadow of that springtime
shattered by tanks and guns,
that springtime of fire and chains when
citizens, soldiers, sick and hungry students
watched each other in wary constraint
through the stench of urine and rotting garbage
in the blazing heat of day, while children
danced and sang, acrobats tumbled, and the
square resounded
to the beat of brass bands playing the music of hope.

Suddenly the dance ended
in a spasm of fury in the night,
gunshot, explosions, beatings
and a thousand terrified feet fleeing through flames
down the Avenue of Eternal Peace. Some cowered
behind
the ornate stone lions of the Imperial City,
and the white statue in styrofoam and plaster,
the Goddess of Democracy,
was crushed into the blood and bones
of the people.

And now, seven years later
black clouds of silence
cover smouldering fires.
To remember is to be forgotten
behind bars.
The lights of twenty thousand memorial candles
are extinguished,
and in the darkness,
a trail of yellow chrysanthemum petals
the only light.

***– Joan McGuire***

Eric Hill

# February

**(i)**
I can
    wait …

I can telephone
for a pillow, wait, sleep
shallow, wait …

I could call, gamble
on the numbers being right,
curl my hair behind one ear
and listen … .
My mouth is full of syllables
waiting to be spat out
to fill the awkward
silence.

I could.
I can
    wait …
        … sleep, wait.

**(ii)**
I have to write this
  because the half-moon pulls it out of me
like a tide;
  because graveyards are full of unspoken
words trapped in the history of hearts like amber;
  because I'm learning to spell these things;
  because this is all I have besides sleep;
  because I can't sleep
anymore.

February is far too short.

**(iii)**
February slips in under midnight
like a snow angel
buried for a week
by a January storm.
It slips in, no jacket,
no invitation,
past me waiting for moonlight
(because there is no reason not to).

**(iv)**
Spend the nights this week
in phantom arms, dreaming.
The possible she-and-I
treating the corner
of Bathurst and Bloor
like a still photograph or postcard
from Paris.

Today the sunlight undoes this.
It's too cold for clouds,
they would shatter against
the hard blue sky.

I spend early morning
listening to Rheostatics and others talking
of rock climbing in the deli.
I wish I smoked.
I wish it was springtime
  (… how about you …)
instead of being stuck in February
behind this window
inches thick with frost.
With both my hands, putting
fingertips on glass,
I melt a constellation. Close.
Not quite the City of Light.
  Almost. Cold hands,
  warm coffee cup.
  I finish
without looking up,
hearing a minor chord,
  my heart,
    then silence.

Jessica Argyle

# Withdrawal

I was smoking too much. At work I took unauthorized breaks and headed outside to sneak them. Sometimes I lit up in the staff washroom. When I found myself teetering on a roller chair in the office after everyone had left, using a pencil to disable the smoke detector, I knew it was time to take stock. I decided to stop smoking. Right then and there I made a pledge to formalize the deal with myself. I didn't want to wake up one morning and find my life rotted out by my own hand. I had to face it. The strange thing is that I had never really pondered it before despite slow curls of pity on the faces of colleagues and friends. I felt sorry for them, for their intolerance. It was easier than I thought. I had a pleasant hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach, like losing weight. I kept one cigarette and threw the pack away. On the bus ride home I reached into my pocket to touch it whenever anyone got too close. The bus driver smiled at me. I enjoyed denying the ravings of the body. It felt like an exorcism. The first day passed into a rather euphoric night.

I really was withdrawing. By day three I was floating. My boss said "You can't float forever. Either you smoke again or you stop de-toxing. That's all there is to it." My boss wore charcoal pants with a matching Chanel jacket when she spoke to me. She looked great.

I went to my parents where I would be safe. There were no ashtrays. My father had quit two years ago. Just like that, he said, and without any nagging from my mother. My parents never spoke much at dinner. Just before dessert my mother used to place my father's gilt ashtray in front of him and he would light up. The smoke would cloak the three of us in a gentle mist.

Just before dessert I snuck up to the bathroom for a smoke. The door was open and there he was. My father, caught in the act, yellow smoke high-tailing it out the open window with the pressure from the opening door. I let out a little shriek and he jerked his head back. I dropped my cigarette on the blue tile. We both stared at it. He got up from the toilet seat, threw his butt in and flushed it. We watched it swirl around and around. The toilet gulped just as I bent down to pick up my cigarette. I was about to put it in my pocket when he said, "Oh just light it, for God's sake." Too late. It was paralysed in my hand. He flipped the lid back on the seat and motioned me to the throne. I thought he was going to leave but he took out his pack, lit two cigarettes and handed one to me. He smiled and said, "You're too old to give me a lecture and I'm too old to listen." I wasn't used to us being on the same side. It seemed unnatural, made my stomach drop. What he didn't say was, "Your mother and I are thinking of splitting up." What he did

say was, "I'm thinking of leaving your mother." I sat on the beige plush and tried to smoke in this new information.

I didn't know what to say and so I did this one distinct thing: I blew a smoke ring at him leaning against the window sill. It wafted about his nose and got pulled out the window in a long dreamy oval. And then he said, "Your mother won't mind. She's drifting, stopped caring about a lot of things." My father spoke of my mother in softly spinning nostalgia, the music of movie endings. So I took in his secret, in deep inhalations, gathering strength for the long march down the carpeted stairs back to the dinner table. He released twin tunnels of smoke from his nostrils and threw his head back before he left. Then he left.

"Mom, this pie looks great." High treason on my face.

My father and I never let our eyes meet over the blue and white china, my mother's bobbing silver streaked head. She stopped dying her hair about five years ago; gone were the plastic mitts gobbed with brown muck, the fouled towel. Trickery just to look normal. There was no doubt about it, my mother had arrested the long slide down into caricature. She stopped just short of looking like a female impersonator. I watched the cigarette packet outlined and then recede in the blue of his breast pocket as he moved along the table picking up dishes, condiments, clearing up. My father liked secrets.

"You never liked pumpkin pie before." She looked from me to my father. From opposite ends of the table my father and I did this one identical thing: we looked away from her.

My mother offered to drive me home. She didn't go to the bathroom to put on lipstick. That was another new thing, no more powder or lipstick, no checking in the rearview mirror and dabbing at the corners of her mouth. "We're off" and slammed the stick out of park. She was an aggressive driver, looked for trouble on the road. Whatever her secret frustrations were she let the road put right. She didn't put much stock in my decision to go to college but she sure insisted on me getting a driver's licence, one of the few things she was passionate about. I remember getting dumped by Jimmy Whittaker in my last year of high school. I didn't make it to supper one week. On the seventh day I was listening to sad rock songs in my room with the headphones on when she opened the door a wedge and tossed me the keys to her car. Those were the two places in which she believed, (a) her home and (b) her car. She took long winding trips and came home with things like one notepad or a fridge magnet. Once home she was calm, generous even. No booze no men no hobbies and she never smoked. I wanted another cigarette. I asked her to let me off downtown because I couldn't stand the idea of being alone in my apartment. She let me out and disappeared in a great gust. Through the exhaust I saw a store that sold cigarettes. I lit one up right away and gave the rest of the pack to a beggar. I was determined to stop.

I WENT SHOPPING downtown to be among crowds of active people. I bought bright colored shorts and sports stuff that I couldn't afford and never wore. But the stores were full of people in matching ensembles and suits snatching at coordinating accessories before elbowing off to make money.

People need to layer themselves before they are willing to deal with each other.

I threw the clothes on the bed and tried them on in front of the mirror turning this way and that, standing on my toes to make my legs longer. You only have to sit in a cafe for ten minutes to see that people have to be demented to pair up and deaf to stay involved and I would wear sunglasses all the time if it didn't look so pretentious.

It rained so heavily the next week that I wondered if it

# Reunion

Mine was the original body,
buried twenty years ago
under a slagheap of unrequited love.

I was the covetous one.
But you were always looking
to the next conquest, paying
no heed to the eroding landscape.

Years later, it seemed odd
you were so unprepared
for the seismic scale and force
of your marriage's collapse.

At the reunion, your absence
seemed to shake the room
when the hermetic seal
on the high school yearbook
was broken by a picture
of you and me – arm in arm,
broad smiles – at the senior prom.

For a long moment,
I actually missed you.

***– Jim Harries***

would ever stop. I didn't hear from either of my parents and I imagined water seeping into the foundation of my mother's house, rotting the walls. It was logical to worry, I told myself. The house was built on filled-in swampland and they had problems with seepage in the past. TV images of canoes floating down main street flickered through my head. My mother would be one of the stubborn ones who wouldn't leave, she would sit out on the porch on a plastic patio chair arms folded and close herself in on the top floor if anyone came around to convince her of the dangers of staying put. My mother believed in staying put.

I DIDN'T WORRY about my parents for an entire day. We had a company meeting when I left my body. I floated up around the ceiling and looked at all the heads facing the same direction and when I saw my own I got scared and then irritated. I saw my head turn toward the guy sitting next to me and heard myself say, "Oh shit, I've left my body again." I don't know why I said *again*, I thought this was the first time. I had to re-enter my body or it would die and so I came back down. I was angry at being stuck in that room and as the day wore on I got more and more irritated. After the meeting I went to the staff washroom to be alone but it looked so bleak that I didn't linger. Back at my desk I turned the ringer down and let the voice mail record the warblers. I faked a call and left early.

My timing was off. I arrived at the bus stop at the height of rush hour traffic. The bus was packed. I stood next to a giant baby carriage impossible to pass. Another baby screeched, its face deep purple. The light changed from red to green and the bus didn't move. A large blonde girl got on with a bad transfer and began to argue with the driver. A woman wearing a rabbit jacket leaned into me and the smell of wet chemicals made me gag. A man with thin grey hair was seething. He lit into the woman with the lousy transfer: "Get off the bus." I was standing over him, he was so short. His scalp had formed a peninsula, his hair was moving further and further from the mainland. It would soon become an island. I laughed and then I wondered if my teeth were yellow. I calculated the cash in my purse against the price of a taxi. No, I might need cigarettes. The seated passengers didn't dare look up, afraid of the woman with the baby. She hoarded her child like a shield, daring everyone to look at it. That night I crashed.

When I called my mother I didn't ask if she was alone and she didn't tell me. She told me that my voice had gotten higher since I quit smoking. "You sound better without them. There's lots of things in life that aren't worth the bother." Her voice only filtered through for an instant before it trailed off.

I never remember what she says until much later.

I couldn't stand the house closing in on me so I decided to go to a bar. I made myself up carefully although I was not in the habit of going out. There was a comedy place a few blocks from me and I thought, Why not? I won't be noticed there, lots of people go out alone.

# Cutbacks

Crowded into a room
with seven little beds
we must constantly divest
ourselves of possessions
and hold back fear
of the others prying
into our notebooks and
listening to what we say
in our sleep.

We will not have any
time alone and we
will always be out
being private in public.

The slotted windows in our hive
look into the old buildings
where each student
used to have a cell
long and narrow,
like a coffin,
but with a glorious,
heavy door.

***– Heather Tisdale-Nisbet***

Brenda Donald

# *Early* Bird

Alec McGregor looked down at his wife's coffin. He would miss her. They'd had a good life together. But mostly he was relieved. The last six months had been painful for Mary, and now she was at peace.

The funeral was on a cold, wet Sunday morning. There was only a small turnout. Irene Schmidt attended, of course. She never missed a funeral, and she was the McGregors' closest neighbour. Poor Alec, she thought. He was still a good-looking man, tall, gaunt and white-haired, standing beside the coffin in his dark suit. Men usually died first, they had no endurance, but once in a while a funeral created a brand-new widower, up for grabs. Irene's own husband had died three years ago and she was eager to replace him. Alec would need a good woman. He needed to get out more, he was practically a hermit. But she'd change that. They would do things together, go to church, go shopping …

Mary's sister Shirley stood beside Alec. She was a plump pretty woman, normally happy, but crying now. She was no stranger to funerals, having outlived three husbands, but she'd been very fond of her sister. Through her tears she noticed that awful Irene Schmidt across the grave. A harsh, scrawny, religious woman. There was something creepy about the way she was staring at Alec. Shirley had a flash of intuition, a sudden vision. *Alec in a shopping mall, shuffling along three steps behind Irene, burdened down with packages. Then Alec in a women's clothing store, standing outside the fitting rooms, an expression of profound misery on his face.*

Oh, Mary wouldn't like that, she thought. Shirley began to cry harder as the coffin was lowered into the ground.

Irene gloated over Shirley's tears. Yes that's it, cry, you little hussy, she thought. You with your three husbands, it's good to see you suffer for a change.

After the funeral, Irene made coffee while she planned policy for her new marriage. At least there wouldn't be any of that nasty, messy sex to worry about. She'd had enough of that with her first husband, the brute. But Alec must be past that by now, he was over seventy years old. And if he did have any dirty thoughts on his mind, she'd soon straighten him out. Yes sir, he'd toe the line!

How long should she wait before making her move? Public opinion and common decency required that she give him at least a brief mourning period. And there was no rush, she wasn't afraid of anybody claim-jumping. Surely they all understood that it was her turn, and Alec was her neighbour, after all.

Still, they weren't getting any younger. And there was no point in taking chances. Alec must be cold after the funeral. Maybe he'd like a nice, hot cup of coffee. Irene stood up decisively.

After the funeral, Alec invited Shirley back to the house. They had things to discuss. The will, Mary's clothes and jewelry, all kinds of things. He wasn't a man to put things off.

They sat at the kitchen table. Alec poured them both a drink of scotch, neat. Good scotch doesn't need ice or mix. The first sip made his eyes burn, and once the tears started they just kept coming.

The poor man, Shirley thought. She patted his knee. She left her hand there until his tears stopped.

Irene approached the house through the back lane instead of from the road. People in small towns were such gossips. She tapped on the screen door, but there was no response. The inside door was open and she could see into the kitchen, but nobody was there.

What was that sound? Oh, he was crying his heart out, the poor man. Sobbing and moaning. She couldn't intrude on his grief. She tiptoed back down the steps.

Shirley slid her hand up his leg. Something came to life under her hand. "Oh my," she said.

Alec wasn't a man to sit and ponder things. Thought was followed immediately by action. He took Shirley's arm and led her into the bedroom. There was no such thing as sex education classes when he was young, and his father had been too bashful to have one of those father-son talks with him. What Alec knew about sex he learned from watching the livestock. Though limited, his knowledge was practical. It had got him through forty years of married life with no complaints.

To Shirley's delight, Alec immediately rolled her into her favorite position and entered her from behind. He had a long, knobby prick, thank God. At her age, after three husbands and four children, size did matter! And he knew how to use it. For over fifteen minutes now he'd been sliding it into her with long, slow strokes, driving her to orgasm after orgasm. He was wheezing a bit, but still going strong.

Irene couldn't leave without at least seeing that Alec was all right. She walked around the side and looked in the bedroom window. *And couldn't believe what she saw. They were naked on the bed. Shirley on her hands and knees, big disgusting breasts hanging down. Sobbing and moaning, holding onto the bedpost for dear life. And Alec behind her, panting and wheezing, screwing her like a dog.*

"God damn her," Irene whispered fiercely. "God damn her soul to hell." Alec was lost to her now. Shirley had her hooks in him, and no man outlived Shirley. The wanton seductress! From the sounds Alec was making, he didn't have long to live, the old fool.

Through half closed eyes, Shirley watched Irene peeking in the window. "Go crawl back under your rock, you black witch," she muttered. Behind her, she felt Alec start to come. She let out a triumphant cry that made Irene cringe. Irene turned and stomped away.

"I saved him, Mary, I saved him," Shirley whispered.

# Hometown

Some things stay the same
others don't
pretty simple
either/or

I remember the old town hall
when it was a town
and it had a town hall
two-storey building
white paint
red trim
three entrances
facing the bandstand in the square
(with its white paint and red trim)
concrete steps and iron railings
(black) leading up to each

I remember going with Dad
when he paid the property tax

Then the town downtown
swallowed us up
town hall reduced to
post office
then even that taken away
left-hand door remodelled away
covered by siding (still white)
the stairs stayed
somebody drew in a door
bare outline
(black)

***– Paul Karan***

# *Brotherkeeper*

**John G. Baillieul** on a tale of dispossession

***I Know This Much Is True***
Wally Lamb
HarperCollins 1998.

In Wally Lamb's latest novel, everyone is dispossessed, in realms both seen and unseen. Characters have lost hope, love and faith, not to mention hands, legs, and thumbs.

Lamb's protagonist and narrator, Dominick Birdsey, has lost everything dear to him: his mother, his wife, his baby daughter, and his career as a high school teacher. Dominick's anguish is further compounded as his brother, Thomas, slowly loses his mind over the years. Thomas, who has suffered from paranoid schizophrenia since his early teens, has the schizophrenic's common obsessive interest in God and martyrdom, conspiracy, and alien life forms. These obsessions eventually lead him into the public library during the preliminary stages of *Desert Storm* where he proceeds to cut off his hand in a biblically inspired protest against the "unholy" war.

What follows is the 40-year-old Dominick's meltdown. In his fight to protect and care for his mentally ill brother, whom he simultaneously loves, loathes, and envies, he is forced to face not just his own inner demons but the entire series of horrors that have plagued the Birdsey family over the years. After Dominick decides on Thomas's behalf not to have his hand reattached – "'I'll just rip it off again,' my brother warned. 'Do you think a few stitches are going to keep me from doing what I have to do? I have a pact with the Lord God Almighty'" – Thomas is demoted from the state hospital (where he has spent much of his time over the years) to a maximum-security, prison-like forensic facility that "houses most of the front-page boys: the vet from Mystic who mistook his family for the Vietcong, the kid at Wesleyan who brought his .22-caliber semi-automatic to class."

Meanwhile, Dominick has been trying to put the other pieces of his unhappy past to rest – by attempting to recover emotionally from his divorce from Dessa, the woman he still deeply cares for, and working things out with Joy, his current live-in girlfriend, a twice-divorced 25-year-old who is employed at the local fitness club and whose life – like Dominick's – is in a shambles.

Happily, this isn't the half of it. Also running through the story is Dominick's search to get a translation of the memoir written by his Italian grandfather (and namesake) as a gift for his dying mother. The memoir is first lost, then found, then eventually shared with the reader in its entirety.

The memoir is, in fact, an interesting and compelling story within a story. The "History of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, a Great Man From Humble Beginnings" begins two-thirds of the way through a novel that is already full to bursting with disastrous activity, appearing just when Dominick has hit emotional and financial rock bottom. Indeed, it is a tribute to Lamb's ability to create realistic characters that the reader winds up feeling sorry for this hateful and bitter patriarch, even as we detest him.

Unfortunately, *I Know This Much Is True* is too long and somewhat blowzy – there should be an enforceable limit to how many psychotherapy sessions can be included in one novel – yet it never struggles with anything

## Man made

Skreeeeeeeeee!
Unrelenting,
unforgiving,
it holds my balls in a vice,
in tune to the fingernail,
slowly
arcing its way
along the smooth surface.
A sweet inversion of notes
contracting and releasing
in relation to the jaggedness
of dead cells.
Reality
rises vertically into greyness.
Through red milky stone,
the reflection,
a death mask;
so cool and shimmering.
It's always the face
that captivates.
Hollow cheeked,
translucent complexion,
so white;
someone in the last throes
of what was once known
as the beautiful disease.
Eyes,
reduced to dark orbs,
bisect the skull
so like an insect's.
All beautifully enthroned
upon a frail,
elongated pedestal.
I can't help stopping,
to stare,
to caress.

***– Gavan Gibson***

but life's most important questions. How do you deal with an abusive stepfather who, nevertheless, was always there for you when you needed him? How do you live with unsettled issues that die with the dead? And in Lamb's realistic world, being aided by a guardian angel is not an option.

Lamb's book, like a Dostoyevsky novel, probes the deepest depths of human misery. In Lamb's view, it is not just the present that can be terrifying, that can give one nightmares and ruin one's chances for happiness, it is also the past, specifically the ghosts of dysfunctional family members, that can torment one greatly.

About the death of his 3-week-old daughter, Dominick says: *Life didn't have to make sense, I'd concluded: that was the big joke. Get it? You could have a brother who stuck metal clips in his hair to deflect enemy signals from Cuba, and a biological father who, in 33 years, had never shown his face, and a baby dead in her bassinet … and none of it meant a … thing. Life was a whoopee cushion, a chair yanked away just as you were having a seat. What was that old Army song?* We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here.

And though Dominick has a bit of the nihilist in him right to the end, he nevertheless also learns through his struggles with himself and his family that one must learn to forgive – as difficult as it can be at times – and thus put the demons of the past to rest if one is to live happily. He also discovers in his therapy sessions with Dr. Patel that you can love someone even if you hate how they live their life.

Francis Bacon once said that "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." *I Know This Much Is True* is one of those few. ●

# precinct fourteen

it was a long night for us, starting out at
your apartment with your roommate's
coworkers coming over and making

margaritas until two in the morning,
but of course we then decided that the
best thing to do would be to go out

and so off to the blue note we went,
found some interesting people to talk
to, closed the bar, i think that was the

first time i ever did that, closed a late-
night bar, i mean, and at four-thirty you
drove me home down milwaukee ave

and i know it angles, and you can see
the traffic light for oncoming traffic
as easily as you can see your own light,

but i'm sure the light was green, and not
red like the cops said, when they pulled
you over. you could have been in big

trouble that night, no insurance, no city
registration sticker, a michigan driver's
license when you'd lived in illinois for

over a year now, a cracked windshield,
running a red light, probably intoxicated.
so they brought us to the station at five a.m.,

and all they did was write you a ticket,
and they gave me a business card, said if we
had any problems to give them a call.

you drove me home, and the cops met
us there, too, hitting on me again, and
although we both agreed that the night

was a lot of fun, even with the involvement
of the fourteenth precinct, i still believe
that damn light wasn't even red.

***– Janet Kuypers***

# *Kitty Hawk hobbyist*

**Tim Conley** on Jeanette Winterson's latest

***The World and Other Places***
*Jeanette Winterson*
Alfred A. Knopf
228 pages, $29.95

During the last decade, you could drop the name Jeanette Winterson into a literary discussion and watch the forces either rally or scatter. More arrogant than the usual complacent British writer, sexually frank, and generally uncompromising in her fairly strong opinions, Winterson tended to polarize the surrounding hacks and poetasters. Many commentators, divided between the legions of sycophancy and those of calumny, lost sight of her *writing* altogether. A catty "profile" in the February 1995 issue of *Vanity Fair* (!) decided that, postmodern icon or no, Winterson had gotten too big for her britches. Wondering whether the author of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (her first novel, published in 1985) mightn't herself be as zealous and evangelical as its principal character is taught to be, the improbably named Flammetta Rocco asked, "Isn't there a danger that an empty, sterile, self-centered quality steals into your life when the thing you love most in your life is your work?" Such smarmy pseudo-psychoanalysis was typical of the weak reader's response to the difficulties found in Winterson's books.

How wonderfully, though, in spite of the detractors, Jeanette Winterson can *write*. The clarity of wit in *Oranges*, the expanse of feeling in *Written on the Body* make it impossible to close one of these novels and blithely turn to anything else: Winterson's scrutiny of language and character inspire our own. The books close, we open.

*The World and Other Places* gathers together seventeen short fictions published in various magazines (one in *Elle*, one in *Esquire*, none in *Vanity Fair*) over the years. Most of these pieces are dramatic monologues, the sort of thing Winterson excels at in her novels. What a disappointment, however, that there are not more surprises here. "Atlantic Crossing" appears to be a preliminary sketch for the television drama series *Great Moments in Aviation*. "The Poetics of Sex" is a short riff from the complicated full orchestral score of *Art & Lies*. "Psalms", the charming vignette about the evangelical qualities of a pet tortoise, has the exact tone and method of Winterson's first novel. "Turn of the World" is a travelogue of four imaginary islands based upon the four elements ("Fyr, Hydor, Aeros, Erde"); amusing though it may be, there is an unfortunate and feeble echo of the Borgesian in it: originality, or its illusion, is necessary for this kind of thing.

The least remarkable pieces in this collection, "Holy Matrimony" and the title story, are, for Winterson, too easy. Her writing thrives on risk, as represented by the cover's image: an outstretched figure leaping into the void. – Or is it flying? Flying does recur often in Winterson's works, both as metaphor and as action. Perhaps Winterson does not give herself enough runway for take-off in the short story form. Instead of the graceful and ironically stunt-filled performances in *The Passion* and other novels, here we witness only the jaunty hops of a Kitty Hawk hobbyist.

Still, I admire some of her leaps of faith. The territory of "The Green Man" is familiar enough – the dream-troubled middle-class gets tapped again – but the shaping of a man for the protagonist proves to be an experiment in imagination and sympathy for the author and, in turn, for the reader: "Normal male to Norman Mailer: Please tell me how." It ain't easy being green, after all. And although it may wade somewhat into sentimental waters, "The 24-Hour Dog" is an odd pleasure to read, because its prose somehow balances the anxiety of the independent narrator faced by the heavy love of a pet with the exuberance and great dogness of the dog himself. It begins:

> *He was soft as rainwater. On that first night I took him across a field mined with pheasants that flew up in our faces when we fussed them out. The vertical explosion of a trod pheasant is shock enough when you know it. I knew it and it still skitters me. What could he know at two months old, head like a question mark?*

Ultimately, the dog – "a universe of play" – exhausts the narrator and leaves her life as abruptly as he entered it. The story suggests a lot about Winterson's conception of the artist, for her narrator claims to "live in the space between chaos and shape", able to see "the beauty of newly created worlds, a form that is not random." Keeping him beyond the twenty-four hours she does would pitch the narrator's "intensity" against that of the relentlessly loving dog. And yet the narrator mentions having a "partner": Has the artist only so many selves? Is there a quantum theory of passion, of fidelity? No wonder the dog has a "head like a question mark". By contrast, on the line of "cute", the story "O'Brien's First Christmas" drifts to the wrong side, seeming little more than a commissioned seasonal piece.

An absence to be noted: "The Architect of Unrest", which appeared in *Granta* ten years ago, was a rather appealing little meditation on the buildings of London and "what lies beyond their walls, within their hollows". I was sorry not to find it in *The World and Other Places* and wonder why it was excluded. The collection's title, which I like, is nonetheless misleading. These stories are just little satellites or islands like Fyr, Hydor, Aeros, and Erde. All the same, any book by Winterson is a guarantee that some moments of redemption – try a first line like "This morning I noticed there was one room missing" – will be found within. For deeper revelations, there are the novels. ●

# *Recent & recommended*

## Recent offerings from *paperplates* contributors

***Bonding with Gravity***
*Colleen Flood*
watershedBooks
ISBN 1-894205-05-7

Zesty, witty, and candid, Colleen Flood is a poet who dares to praise – of all things – imperfection. In this, her debut book, she glories and groans at the complex roles of a woman's life: mother, daughter, wife, and especially friend. The title poem explores a lifelong friendship between two women passing through those roles, leaving us reassured that the examined life is certainly the one worth living, and the well-crafted poem the one worth reading.

**– Molly Peacock**

***The Afterlife***
*Robert Boates*
Seraphim Editions
ISBN 0-9699639-4-7

Robert Boates writes powerfully about his experience of starting over after a severe brain injury. Minute by minute and, most importantly, poem by poem he details his own painful second coming. With a few precise words Boates uncovers the vulnerability and yearning at the heart of every human life. These are poems to wake you up in the small hours.

**– Bernardette Rule**

***$O_2$***
***Solo fiddle***
*Oliver Schroer*
Big Dog Music

Vibrations travelling through air. Vibrations created by scraping horsehair across five strings. Vibrations that convey meaning. Vibrations that express a complex architecture. Vibrations that go into your ears and change the way you feel. My fingers do a little dance over the strings of my fiddle, and as if by magic, something of myself is communicated to you. And after all of these years of playing, it does still feel like magic.

**– Oliver Schroer**

***Felix Roth***
*Cary Fagan*
Stoddart
ISBN 0-7737-6049-0

A richly satisfying, over-the-top account of a young writer's trip to New York city, Torontonian Cary Fagan's lucky seventh book of adult fiction is a blast from start to finish. […] In its geographical niche – somewhere between Catcher in the Rye and Goodbye, Columbus – Felix Roth offers an irresistible tour of literary heroes and villains, seen in their native habitat. Our guide is the author-to-be, who, in his own words, was "too young and full of belief in myself" to see beyond the next bend. We should all be so burdened.

**– Nancy Wigston, The Toronto Star**

***At the Edge***
***A Book of Risky Stories***
*Dan Yashinsky*
Ragweed
ISBN 0-921556-74-8

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**– Dan Yashinsky**

# Contributors

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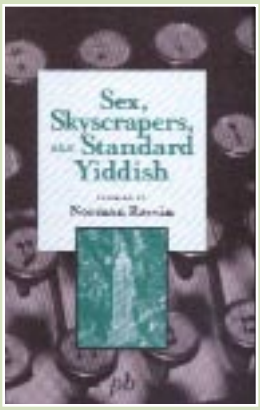


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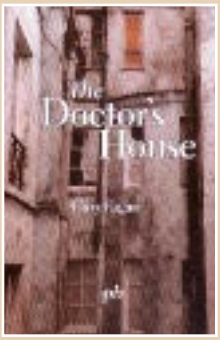


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