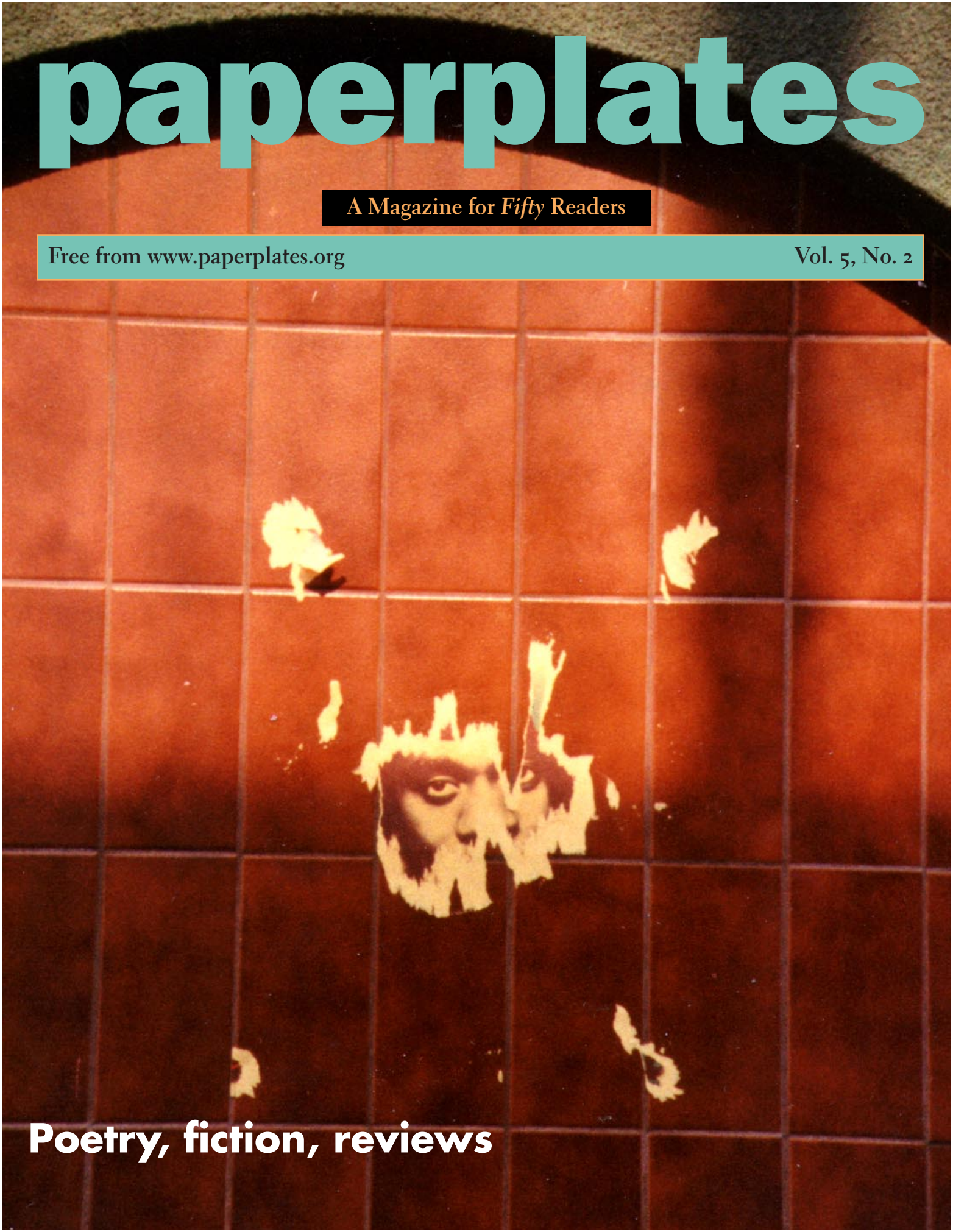
paperplates

A Magazine for *Fifty* Readers

Free from www.paperplates.org Vol. 5, No. 2



Poetry, fiction, reviews

Vol. 5, No. 2

10 **Ian Ayres**
Fresh grave
—
a final thought blossoms
in your embalmed brain
like a daisy bearing pollen
to a dark cold cell

21 **A.S. Penne**
Syncopation
—
It's what she *used to feel when the two of them walked onto a dance floor, a current running between them as they moved from the shadows onto the light-spattered hardwood.*

32 **David Bezmozgis**
An Animal to the Memory
—
I never liked *Associated and had few friends. By the sixth grade I wanted to leave and go to a public school, but my parents refused. […] As far as they were concerned, I wasn't leaving Hebrew school until I learned what it was to be a Jew*

39 **John Curry**
The Medina Wall
—
They'd arrived *in darkness the night before after five glorious weeks on the still snow-packed Atlas slopes. But down here on the flats it was hot. Very hot.*

5 ***We had one too, but the wheels fell off*** Mag Mawhinney
8 ***A splash of orange / distance / Mad woman bending light*** Rick Smith
9 ***Where we going?*** Paul Alan Fahey
10 ***sunflower*** Lea Littlewolfe
The nature of loving D'Arcy Le Roux
11 ***Mortals in Paradise*** William C. Brisick
16 ***Highway Driving*** Tej Gidda
19 ***One martini in Harvard Square*** Michelle M. Maihiot
25 ***A second before a walk in the …*** Scott Shay
26 ***Ed's Garage*** Don McLellan
31 ***For my uncle who wept every time he sliced a papaya in half*** Virgil Suarez
36 ***The Agent*** Michael Therrien
46 Reviews by Gordon Dueck, Andrew Loman, and Antje M. Rauwerd
51 Contributors

Cover photo: Bernard Kelly

paperplates

publisher & editor
Bernard Kelly

layout & production
Perkolator {Kommunikation}
www.perkolator.com

reviews editor
Tim Conley

fiction editor
Bethany Gibson

poetry editor
Suzanne Hancock

contributing editors
Maja Bannerman, Colleen Flood, Gil Gauvreau, Michael Kelly, Dan Yashinsky

guiding light
Alice Kane

coordinates
paperplates
19 Kenwood Ave
Toronto, Ontario M6C 2R8
Tel: 416-651-2551
Fax: 416-651-2910
magazine@paperplates.org
www.paperplates.org

ISSN 1183-3742

submissions
We welcome submissions. For our guidelines, send a stamped self-addressed envelope to the address above, or write to *guidelines@paperplates.org*; or pick them up at our website
We cannot be held responsible for unsolicited material.

From the editor

Last night a raccoon crept into my bedroom from the deck. I heard the floorboards creak just as I was putting down my toothbrush and, puzzled by the noise, entered expecting to see that something had fallen or slid out of place. The shadowy mass turning rumpishly round at my approach and tiptoeing out was so unwanted a sight I followed it, as if to claim the door hadn't been open, the way hadn't been clear. But, of course, they had. This week we've been under such a strain from heat, humidity, and smog that shutting ourselves in, even (or especially) for sleep, has become a struggle, to be delayed until the very last unairconditioned minute. Hence the open door. Hence, too, the inspection, the door now locked, around and underneath the bed, which a few moments later I performed again, this time with broom handle extended. Not too practical a method, obviously, (how would the imagined second intruder escape?), but reassuring enough, in the end.

This morning Joan Bodger, the "old woman steeped in stories", died. She went to B.C. a few months ago, to do just that. A teacher, a tour guide, a therapist, and a storyteller, she knew her own life inside out, had assumed a mastery over it, recounting its beauty and grimness in various ways, behind the podium and through her books. "Royal Progress" [Vol. 3, No. 1] – a wryly detailed account of her family's road trip in 1936 from New London, Connecticut, to Astoria, Oregon, aboard an "orangey brown" Ford – I first heard during a performance at a local theatre. I can still remember her lisping that final phrase – "Going West" – drawing it out, so that we would understand its larger meaning.

I was fortunate to find myself welcomed on occasion into this life – once, rather memorably, for a dinner at her favourite restaurant, where she complimented me by introducing two of her closest friends, unabashedly eager to make me a match with the youngest of them. (I eventually forgave her for this.) She also sought my help with a computer in which the chapters of her autobiography, *A Crack in the Teacup*, so carefully arranged, sometimes broke rank. I can't say there was much help given (I shook the printer cables, I tightened the connectors), but Joan never showed any disappointment. She seemed, again, intent upon helping me, would always insist that I bill her for my time. I'm sorry now, of course, that I didn't spend more of it with her (and of the unbillable kind).

– Bernard Kelly

homeplate

We had one too, but the wheels fell off

Call me a fool, but I think there's a pecking order in camping circles. This I discovered on a long-awaited motorhome trip my husband and I took to the Yukon and Skagway, Alaska.

In one particular campsite, I noticed the campers in tents were at the bottom of the layered hillside, the Class C's, like ours, and perhaps the odd Class B, were on the next level, but on top sat the Class A's, which came complete with boats on trailers or expensive vehicles in tow, fancy folding chairs and pedigreed dogs. One unit even had two small satellite dishes attached to the park's picnic table.

Pointing to the dishes, I said, "Now, that's over-kill." Then I noticed a huge motorhome with a piece jutting out and added, "Hey, Vern, look at that one with the side car."

"It's called a slide-out," laughed Vern. "Oh, my God, look at that outfit. The car he's towing with his 40-footer costs more than our motorhome and 1984 Volkswagen we're towing, combined."

Yeah," I agreed, "but I'll bet he won't drive on those wonderful back roads like we do and that's where all the interesting stuff is."

At a Watson Lake campsite, we were assigned a spot right next to a beautiful 40-footer. The owner told us he had declined the spot we were assigned because of a huge mud puddle. And I thought that was part of camping. Silly me.

As we sat down to dinner, Vern said, "Look at what's in the window next door."

"What window?" I asked. "All I see is a blue wall."

"Look up farther," he said.

In the second storey of that diesel motel was a table lamp. "A lamp, for Pete's sake! I've got to get me one of those," I whined, as I glanced up at our flickering ceiling light with the plastic cover that falls off in thunderstorms.

Later, Vern chatted awhile with the diesel driver and it turns out he's a self-made man, didn't even go to high school. (I have to give him credit for his entrepreneurial skills.) He said his rig cost $175,000 with all the bells and whistles and he even got $30,000 off because he paid cash!

"Whoop-de-do," I said, when Vern brought me the news. "We had one too, but the wheels fell off." My jealous side was definitely beginning to show.

"It has a washer and dryer, built-in generator, two air-conditioners and is equipped to be self-sufficient for ten days in the wilderness," explained Vern.

Laughingly, I asked, "Did you tell him we could do one better? We've packed twelve pairs of underpants."

The next morning, we went for our usual walk and stopped to chat briefly with an RV*er* standing in front of a monstrous motorhome in one of the best spots in the park. He was trying to fold a collapsible ladder. He said, "My old ladder couldn't reach the top of my rig and I saw a painter using one of these. So I went out and bought one."

"Isn't that neat?" I said. "And it fits into the hold real nice."

As we walked away, Vern explained, "I think they call it a basement, not a hold."

"Whatever," I said, looking back to see the guy wrestling with the screws and bolts. It probably took him all morning to figure out that little toy.

Returning from our walk, we rounded the backside of the diesel motel and Vern said, "Look at that beautiful mural on his rig: two Siberian tigers."

By this time, I was hungry and a little testy. "We've got a mural too," I said, pointing to the fish decal all covered with dust on the rear of our 1980 classic.

Later that day, we stopped at a park in Fort Nelson and our spot was so uneven, when we sat down for dinner, our soup ran over the edge of the bowl, but only on one side. Meanwhile, we watched an RV*er* from Michigan pull into a nice flat spot. He had mesh over the headlights of the car he was towing and a pad over its windshield. "Pussy," I said. "Talk about pampering."

Well, we found out later that the Alaska Highway certainly isn't like a California turnpike and the guy from Michigan knew what he was doing all along. Not only did we get three stone chips on the windshield of the motorhome, but we also got two chips on the car's windshield, plus two broken headlights. A lesson learned.

As a matter of fact, I was learning a lot on this trip. It seemed the bigger the RV, the smaller the owner's dog, usually some yappy little mutt with a rhinestone-studded collar on a spring-loaded leash. By contrast, in one campsite, a beaten-up station wagon rolled in carrying two people, a Shar-pei, a Black Lab and a Golden Retriever. They all slept in a pup tent.

It was near Stewart Crossing, Yukon, when I had to choke on my sarcastic remark: "We had one too, but the wheels fell off". Just as we were approaching a narrow bridge, our RV's right, dual wheels and half the axle took a side trip into the weeds without us. Luckily, an adjacent road acted as a runaway lane and we grinded to a halt on the remainder of the axle and the bottom edge of the side panel. Fighting more mosquitoes than in a Viet Nam

swamp, we went off in search of the wheels and found them smoking about 50 metres back. We were 150 kilometres from assistance, so we loaded up our rusty Volkswagon with all our valuables, including a 14-inch TV, and left our motorhome behind, with no worries about someone wanting our spot.

It's a long story, but we ended up staying an extra week in a campsite near Dawson City till the RV parts came from Edmonton. One thing's for sure, we didn't have to worry about the pecking order for the public washrooms because we were alone in that park most of the time. Anyway, the whole fiasco, including the towing bill, cost us just about as much as the motorhome. But looking at the good side, we weren't injured and we now know more about Dawson City than a Robert Service disciple.

In a campsite in Skagway, Alaska, we were sandwiched between two 36- footers, one towing a Tracker, the other a Jeep Convertible. We felt like we were in a trapper's cabin between two skyscrapers. Vern grabbed the camera and went out to take a picture of three diesel trucks with their steel running boards glistening in the sun. They were parked, at an angle, in front of huge fifth wheels, which made it look like the lot of a dealership at a weekend show. In a favoured spot, near trees and far from road noises, was another 40-footer. It had a humungous satellite dish hooked to a portable wooden patio, complete with dining set, sitting in front of its side door.

"He's got more windows in that rig than we have in our house, for God's sake," said Vern. He was beginning to turn a dull shade of green, now making us matching bookends.

It was also in Skagway where a huge diesel motorhome next door idled for so long I thought I was Dennis Weaver in a re-make of *Duel,* but I dared not complain. After all, we were the runt of the litter in that park. My head was buzzing when Vern came back from checking out the shower and said, "Would you believe it? It's a pay shower and I don't have any American change. Plus, there's no toilet paper in the bathroom. After paying $48.00 for a two-night stay, the Americans got me again."

But it was on our return trip to Watson Lake when I felt like a queen owning our battered Class C. We were just coming out of the information centre when an elderly couple from Florida slowly emerged from their very dirty Caravan. They were towing what was left of a trailer. Only the floor, drain valves from the holding tanks, the axle, and wheels, remained. Perhaps they stood their ground for a parking spot and came out the loser. Will they have a story to tell their grandchildren, or what?

Anyway, we left our own story at Watson Lake's famous "Sign Post Forest". We used the ragged piece of fibreglass fender that broke off during our accident and nailed it to a post. On it, I scribbled our name and address, along with the inscription: "We travelled the Alaska Highway in 2001 and left our mark at Stewart Crossing." Hopefully, someone will get a chuckle over it.

In Dease Lake, we watched a supercab truck and very long fifth wheel pull into camp. He had the pick of several flat sites, but still shunted four times to get it right in the one he chose. He got out of the truck twice to check his level, even though his wife read it as the sweet spot. Now, how much effort does it take to push a button on a hydraulic stabilizer? Our rig rocks like a boat on high seas when we towel off after a shower. To prevent that, Vern would have to get down on bended knees to wind up both our car jacks and, with his luck, one side of the RV would be higher than the other, making us walk inside like side hill gougers.

Traveling south on the Cassiar Highway, near Hazelton, we came across an RV*er* who was probably fed up with people and pecking orders. He had come to the end of the trail. Right in the middle of forest and mountains, with nary a soul for company, there it was: an old, snub-nosed bus with a smoking chimney in the middle. There was a lean-to on the side, a winter's supply of wood stacked beneath and an old car at the ready. Vern and I both noticed it at the same time, looked at each other and laughed.

"Do they still have squatter's rights in northern B.C.?" I asked.

"One thing's for sure, if he's told to move on, he can," said Vern.

Later that day, we decided to stop in Burns Lake at a KOA campsite, perched on a hill, with at least an eight per cent grade entrance. We unhitched the car and went to investigate some of the interesting spots the girl told us about at the info centre. After all, she had given us enough brochures to start a travel agency. On the way, we came upon at least three lovely campsites on flat ground, two by lakesides.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Vern, "and we would have to choose the one on a hill with no scenery."

We then went off to see agate and opal beds 7 kilometres into the forest, which we never did find because the narrow trail led us nowhere but up.

"You go on ahead, Vern, and tell me if it levels out. I don't mind roots and rocks, but this is mountain climbing. It's more hazardous coming down," I said, banging my rocks together to warn bears we were coming through. After two kilometres of sweating and swatting mosquitoes, we made it back to the car and hardly a stone's throw down the road, I saw a black bear sneak into the bushes a little too up close and personal for my liking.

Back at camp, we were just sitting down for a game of *Yahtzee* after dinner when a huge diesel rolled through

the dusk, pulling a fifth wheel I thought would never end. "What the hell is that?" I asked.

"It's a horse trailer with living quarters," replied Vern.

"What? But it's all one unit."

"Yes, they've been using them for years," explained Vern.

"Where does he think he's going to park it in this small park? Oh, my God, he's pulling into the site just back of us and I like to keep the window open at night. Don't tell me I've got to smell horse dung all night?"

I hadn't gotten the words out of my mouth, when I heard rumbling.

"Here she comes," said Vern. "I thought I saw train tracks just up the road."

I started to laugh. "I wonder how many times it comes through each night?"

"We haven't heard the whistle yet," said Vern.

I think it was about 6 A.M. when it rumbled past again. No matter, I like trains, but I'm glad we missed the White Pass train trip because of our accident delay. When I saw how the train track hangs over the canyon coming out of Skagway, I said, "Driving the RV the last 10 kilometres into town is enough, thank you. I ain't going on that train. Why is it that man has to go where the mountain goats go?" I leaned close to Vern every time he pulled over to let a big rig go by and tried not to imagine falling over the edge. "It's absolutely awesome. The scenery reminds me of pictures I've seen of the lush mountains in South America; but one slip and it would take a week of free-falling to reach bottom." We were so high, I was tempted to plant a flag and repeat those famous words: "One small step for man …"

Yes, we had experienced many wonderful sights on this trip, including glaciers near Stewart, B.C. and grizzlies in their natural habitat at Hyder, Alaska; but it was in Skagway where I really started to wonder about this camping thing. Now, I must admit that we've come a long way since the gold rush days; but do we really have the nerve to say, with all our modern motorhomes and conveniences, that we're roughing it? Can we really call it camping? I don't think so. Those tough pioneers of 1896 would laugh, I'm sure; but do you suppose they had a pecking order on the Chilkoot Trail?

– Mag Mawhinney

A splash of orange

A splash of orange
slanders a black sky
and the wren heads for cover.
The wren is a recurrent figure.
She has a beak
and she can crack small things.
She has an eye
for lateral moments.
There are facts
that blur the line
between
the garden and the natural world.
And there are crows. They
lift off from the limbs
in the orange grove out back
and under cover of that sweet air
they land like WW II bombers
inside the garden.
Inside we wait for hunger.
Outside we wait for movement.
We want what is inside to go away.
We want what is outside
to be prey. On this morning,
fortune is with us.
The crows won't even play
on this turf.
There is big work
in other parts.
And wren
has a throat
reserved for cricket
and song.
It is cricket and song
that lead her
under moonlight
over stone.

distance

for m.t. with respect to Reverdy

Tracks slice through Belgium
without me.
Nearing Paris:
communication wire,
imperfect parallels,
the same sun,
cows leaning against posts, etc.

I'm 80 miles east of Needles now,
aimed at the mountains,
thinking of thunder
and the backs of your knees;
thinking of you
unrolling your dark stockings
while Hurricane Belle
beats Long Island to death.

Mariachi music moves across the desert
like locusts.
Spanish newscasts swarm around my ears.
The radio &
the wind;
it's the only way to stay awake.
Tracks hum alongside me,
tracks tracing the curvature,
tracks gathering the first heat.

Mad woman bending light

(*after the photographer Christina Fernandez*)

I picture you holding a Leica,
snapping the shutter
and there is bowed light.
You are balanced on the last narrow step
above some tomb in Mexico.
Maybe you are bending that light all by yourself
or, are you just putting a little english on God's curve?

And who is holding you up
while you lean into that
darkest space,
coaxing light,
teetering on the thinnest
the narro-
west of
steps?
There are arched gates, they
open away from you,
tempt you off balance
like a dark valentine
and now the light is at the back of you:
a Spanish girl
bending light like a mad woman,
teetering on the edge with
eyes wide
seeing it all without blinking.
I picture you never blinking
at all.

– Rick Smith

Paul Alan Fahey

Where we going?

Chicago, 1975

Billy gave last call while the rest of us guys, left in too much of a stupor to move, lined the back of the bar and stared ahead, desperate not to leave without a partner, seeing the long week stretch ahead of us, watching while others paired off and abandoned us holding nothing but a warm bottle of Coors Light.

I closed my eyes and wondered if I could possibly sleep like this while the bartender closed shop, switched off the lights and went home, when an older guy, maybe late thirties, early forties, came up to me, thrust his hand down the front of my Levis, and with his arm around my shoulder, led me out to the snow-covered pavement and his car parked near an alley behind Broadway's.

We were driving around Lincoln Park when he told me he was a professor, sociology I think. But he wouldn't name the university. All the time, one hand on the wheel, the other switching radio stations until he found something he liked. Barry Manilow's "I Write the Songs."

He looked over at me and said, "That's my song, you know." I didn't know. I thought Manilow wrote his own stuff. They all sounded the same to me. I had a good ear, sang in the church choir, the high school glee club, for chrissakes.

But then he explained. "My song for now. I choose a new one when it suits me. I'm a man of many moods, kid." And then, "That Barry sure can sing, huh kid?"

Somehow I couldn't see this guy in class lecturing on Durkheim and Karl Marx, all the while humming Barry's tunes in his head.

"My place or yours, kid. This is getting old."

We passed the new annex to DePaul off Seminary, and I thought of my place, the one I shared with John, a nice but very straight guy. Don't get me wrong. I liked him a lot. He was very progressive for the times, but he had this one rigid rule: "No guys stay over. You never know who you're bringing home these days."

So I told him his place would be fine.

He reached over, grabbed my crotch then patted my knee. "Okee-dokee, hon."

And I thought, Jesus, this guy better be worth it.

He turned onto Lake Shore Drive and headed north.

I awoke some time later. Lightly snowing and I had no memory of where I was.

"Where we going?" I asked him.

"My place, kid."

I closed my eyes, thought about my unwritten lesson plans for the week, the daycare centre off Wilson where I worked as a preschool teacher. The master's paper looming over my head like Damocles' sword. The things I should be doing instead of riding all night with this loser, heading north to his place just to get off. The guy better be worth it.

We passed the Skokie exit and I asked him again, "Where we going?"

"My place. Madison, Double yew, eye."

Christ. Wisconsin. I knew it was somewhere north of Chicago. I suddenly had visions of checkpoints, gates going up and down, officials stamping passports. Geography was never my strong point. Obviously he didn't shit where he ate. Come to think of it, this guy must eat in Afghanistan.

But this exercise in visual imagery was getting me nowhere. Christ, I'd made my bed. So I decided to settle back, resting my head against his shoulder.

The snow pelted the windshield. I listened to the *whoosh*, *whoosh* of the wipers and drifted back to sleep.

It was all kind of exciting.

What the hell, I'd never been to Madison.

Fresh grave

for Chelsea

a final thought blossoms
in your embalmed brain
like a daisy bearing pollen
to a dark cold cell

death makes fools of us all

and our telepathic line goes dead
as I kneel at your fragrant
clown-coloured heap
of carnations roses lilies

– Ian Ayres

sunflower

below the birdfeeder they pop out,
two-leaf overnighters, then four-leafing like mad.
if I lie on the earth near them
in the July heat
I can see them grow, in fractions of a
millimetre per hour.
the plants are so cocky, reaching for sun
like spurt-growth teenagers.
the stems arch and twist to satisfy solar tropism.
if icy moons circled Earth, in the manner of Jupiter,
would my sunflowers bend to frozen worlds?
at night the communal dogs lie on the shorter
prodigies – avoiding the taller, more intimidating.
natural canine selection in action.
I thin out the skinny-stemmed and white-stemmed,
selective breeding granting extra advantage to the
robust and selfish-of-water-and-minerals.
and you, My Lover, come home before I favour
your elimination,
before the sunflowers bloom tall, yellow,
dangerous.

– Lea Littlewolfe

The nature of loving

Love sick in Sioux Narrows
among the creeping freedom of insects
on leave from winter's cell,
and the cracked horizon of ever green
in jagged clear-cut of the sky.
Sick along the placid lake water
of clear Ontario summers,
with a mild hangover resting on me,
but I still feel assembled out here.
Nights the fire spits a miniature chaos
in the pitch black space of none and every,
and across the pit is something I love
of flesh and blood
expelled from the common noise
of squared cityscape
to this finer pasture.
There is a freedom in loving
away from the city's landscape:
the oppressive coat of constant din
where love is too small
among the traffic jams and bustle,
economic doomsday every day.
But out here
there is an assemblage of a new machine:
a creation of nature in loving:
as tough as bone and wood,
as fragile as flesh and insect,
as vast as the heart and the clear water.

– D'Arcy Le Roux

William C. Brisick

Mortals in Paradise

"Oh, just look at it, Clifford. Did you ever see anything so green? And the beaches – as pure and white as I'd imagined them."

He had given his wife the window seat, the better to appreciate their first glimpse of Hawaii. Clifford craned his neck forward, saw the interior floor of Diamond Head, the story of its name and other historical tidbits coming via the captain's commentary. "I never realized that it has an inside, that it's a volcano."

Her eyes remained glued to the window. "We're going to find out so much that we didn't know about this place. Paradise: I can see why they call it that."

"It sure doesn't look like Springfield, does it?"

By way of response she clutched his hand, entwined fingers, leaned back to give him a better view. "It took us a lifetime, and I think we're going to have the trip of a lifetime," she said. With his head tilted forward, the Waikiki skyline passing before him, it was easy for Dorothy to plant a kiss on her husband's cheek, one loud enough for fellow passengers to hear. "And if we like it enough, as I'm certain we will, we'll just keep coming back, won't we? Now that you're retired we can come any time we want."

"Well, let's see what we think of it first." A growing stiffness in his neck forced him back to an upright position.

To their surprise the hotel assigned to them by Hawaiian Holidays was close to the slopes of the fabled Diamond Head, removed from the congestion of Waikiki. Dorothy couldn't contain a gasp of pleasure as the van pulled into the Polynesian Shores' small, circular drive. Though her senses were taken with the fragrance of hibiscus, orchids, hydrangea and passionflower, along with the view of the beach through the open-air lobby, she also noticed the annoyed look on the van driver's face – Yoshi: he had regaled them with stories and banter on the ride in – when Clifford, after watching him deposit the bags at the front desk, offered a *thank you* in lieu of a tip.

"Oh, darling, come here," she said moments later. They were in their second-floor room; she'd been the first to step onto the balcony, look out at the Pacific, dotted with sailboats and surfers, an infinity of blue, feast for their mid-western eyes.

"Ah yes," he said, deciding that more descriptive words couldn't do it justice.

It was late afternoon; the flight had consumed ten hours. Clifford, who'd tried to figure out the time in Missouri but gave it up, was set to propose a short nap before dinner. But now standing next to his wife, feeling invigorated by the sea air, the view, he acquiesced to her suggestion that they "change into something comfortable and take a walk along this lovely beach."

The "comfortable" consisted of shorts, t-shirt and bare feet, the latter prompting a questioning look from Clifford until his wife's teasing laugh put all doubts aside. And he had to admit that the warm water (72 *degrees*, the sign at the front desk said) felt refreshing as its foamy line curled around ankles and toes.

"How white we are," Dorothy commented; the comparison between them and the other beach-goers was inevitable. "I want to get some colour to show to the people at

home. Let them know we've been in Hawaii."

"I'm sure I'll burn," he replied. "Remind me to get sunscreen later."

He would use it, and so his feet, legs, arms, *et al.* would remain snow-white. But he hoped his wife's skin, which showed none of the slackness of his, would turn golden and brown. He pictured the reactions of Bradley, Carol and spouses: "Mom, just look at your colour! You're gorgeous."

And she was, with or without the tan. At least he thought so. It wasn't just the nine-year difference in age; she, with her well-maintained figure, her hazel eyes that had lost none of their gleam, had always been "gorgeous."

She sighed with contentment, snuggled her hand on the inside of his upper arm. "Did you ever think retirement could be as magnificent as this?"

"Well, we're at the beginning of it, a long way to go."

"After thirty-three years at Proctor & Gamble you can at last reap the benefits of that hard work."

"You and I can, you mean. There are no benefits to be had without you, my darling." A spill of wave caught them off-guard, churned water up to their knees. "Yow-eeee!" she cried, and they made for shallow water.

He had worked hard. So had she: the teaching career interrupted only by the arrival of the children. Yes, they were entitled to the benefits. Which is what this trip was all about.

"I've got a wonderful idea," he said, his voice so bright and quick that it startled her.

"What's your wonderful idea?" Her fingers dug sharply into his arm, enough to make it hurt. She looked at him, face on the edge of a laugh, streaked brown hair trailing in the wind.

"I think we should go back to the room, immerse ourselves in a hot shower, put on our best duds, go down to that ocean terrace restaurant and have a wonderful meal beneath the stars, after which we'll return to the room and … well … we'll see what'll happen after that."

Again she squeezed his arm, again it hurt. "And to heck with jet lag, right? I promise not to yawn, how 'bout you?"

"Nary a one."

She released her grip, rubbed her other hand across the front of his T-shirt, stretched up and kissed him.

THEY WORE THE his-and-her Hawaiian shirts that daughter-in-law Eleanor had bought for them at Nordstrom's in Springfield. "You should have these for starters," she'd said, presenting the flowery, bright blue and white prints, as bold a design as Clifford had seen. But on the terrace, his white slacks and shoes a match for her skirt and flats, their outfits suited admirably, and seated on the rattan chairs, faces turned to the fiery red sunset, this one over ocean rather than monotonous flatland, they quickly discovered that Paradise was taking surprisingly little time to get used to. The Mai-Tais, garnished with pineapple slice and cherry, hastened the process.

Only when the menus came did the conversation give way, their thoughtful murmurings accompanying the long list of choices. Clifford had quickly turned to the last page where he learned that the Mai-Tais, heavy on fruit juice and easily consumed, cost $8.95 each. He wouldn't suggest a second round; Dorothy, he guessed, would stop at one. Yet a moment later, she, draining her glass, said: "They were good. Shall we have another?"

"I'll pass. Let's have wine with dinner."

The menu, *à la carte*, showed prices he could not have imagined in Springfield. Clifford came close to verbalizing his shock but didn't. Dorothy may not have taken notice of them. "What are you in the mood for?" he asked.

"I'm tempted by the lobster."

$26.50, the menu said. No, she probably hadn't noticed the prices. "I'm sure it's very good here," he commented.

"And shall we get some appetizers? The calamari looks interesting."

On the wine list, its thick pages enclosed in an embossed velvet cover, he scanned prices rather than labels, found that the cheapest bottle was $22 and settled for that. He made a show of looking at the menu again, though he'd already decided. "I'm going to have the chicken wings."

"That's all?"

"I'm not that hungry."

"It's not a very exciting choice." She watched him rearrange his knife and fork. "Is it because it's the cheapest entrée on the menu?"

He was about to say no but she cut him off. "I'm going to have another Mai-Tai." Seeing the surprise in his eyes: "Because I want one. Will you join me?"

"No."

Dorothy looked out at the water, the surf's gentle rhythm a counterpoint to the tension that had come upon them. "It's our vacation, Clifford, we can't let money get in the way of enjoying it."

"We are going to enjoy it. But don't call it a vacation. I'm retired, you mustn't forget that. This is our life now, not a vacation from it."

"Our life, exactly, and we've earned the right to it. I taught school, you worked at P&G; why shouldn't we live it to the hilt?"

"With the money we have at our disposal, I don't think we can live anything 'to the hilt.'"

The Mai-Tai ordered, she fell into silence, a rather perverse one, he thought, the drink-to-come serving to substantiate her position. And that may have been the case.

"You're sure you won't have one?" she asked, and then,

after his shake of the head, "Do you want to share mine?"

"No." Quick and sharp. It was his turn to look at the water, although the dinner-cruise boat far out, the two surfers close in, were lost on him.

"You can never relax and enjoy yourself, Clifford." The words came in a thoughtful though more conciliatory tone. "You're always on guard. I'm glad your children recognized that; they live their lives differently, have a different attitude about money too."

"If I hadn't taken good care of our finances, they might not be in the position they're in. So frivolous with their spending."

"I didn't use that term. They're not frivolous."

"It depends on how you interpret the word."

"Well, we all know how you interpret it. For you it's frivolous for anyone to have a good time, if it's costing anything, that is. I guess I have to be grateful I got you to take me to Hawaii." She took a healthy sip of the Mai-Tai, felt the impulse to smack her lips and did. "But I hope you're not going to ruin our vacation, our trip, call it what you like."

"Nothing is going to be ruined."

The plate of calamari came. "Can you enjoy these? I'm sure they're excellent."

"Of course I can enjoy them. And let's just drop the subject, shall we? I didn't come four-thousand miles to argue with you."

"We weren't arguing. I was simply trying to get you to relax for once in your life."

"For once in my life? Come on, Dorothy … ." Watching her attack the fried strips of calamari, he knew that he'd better start on one of his own, and he'd do well to enjoy it.

"These are excellent," she said, the invitation tendered.

He picked one up, bit into it, his muttered "hummmph" a grudging acknowledgment. When the wine arrived in its iced bucket, Dorothy's questioning look, moving from him to the bottle and back, opened the way to another comment, one that, in the presence of the wine steward, they resisted.

But the damage had been done. He felt it, saw it in her eyes, the gaiety of the afternoon now transmuted into a dull stillness. The impression was reinforced by their talk; the words that had come so easily now sounded belaboured, none of them possessing the spontaneity, the magic of that earlier give-and-take. Despite their promises he yawned, more than once. She saw, made no comment. Later she yawned too.

He sensed how tired she was as they made their way out of the restaurant and waited for the elevator. Tired in body, but more than that. She would have made love; the prospect, having been broached, would have been honoured. But he was sure she didn't want to. He was sure he didn't, either. "Let's concentrate on getting a good night's sleep, that above anything else," he pointedly said.

"It's all right, you know," she brushed fingers on his arm.

"I know. But we've got a full day tomorrow." Not quite that: an afternoon excursion to the Arizona Memorial was all.

The queen-sized bed allowed them plenty of room to find their own "spot." Which they did. Within minutes they were asleep.

Clifford awoke in the dark. Pitch-dark – they had drawn the curtains across the patio door. He had trouble locating the digital clock; *4:32*, it finally said. About nine-thirty in the morning in Springfield? – about right.

He caught the aspirated sound of Dorothy's breathing. Not a snore, certainly not, but nothing that he had heard before. They were in Hawaii; the air was more humid here. Or maybe it had something to do with the Mai-Tais. Or maybe just the fact that she was finishing her fifty-seventh year. When you get to that age, as he well knew, your body has the right to emit, discharge noises that long ago you would have associated with a grizzled, a feathery-frail grandparent. They were on the cusp of that latest stage: two weeks before their departure Eleanor and Bradley announced the pregnancy. "Grandma and Grandpa": the names would take some getting used to.

But how did he get started on that train of thought? Oh, yes, the sound of Dorothy's breathing. Its steadiness echoed the steady rhythm of their words only hours before, he and she getting dressed up, managing to look "spiffy" as he'd said, until the unexpected turn in the evening.

Would Dorothy put it behind her? His eyes, accustomed now to the dark, took in the long hair, the rise and fall of her beneath the light, the Hawaiian covers. Of course she would. She'd been doing that for thirty-four years.

Clifford slipped out of his side of the sheet, placed feet firmly on the floor and rose – slowly. He'd perfected that move, having for so long done it differently and paid the price: something not in balance, in sync; a nerve, a muscle, a joint not up to the suddenness of early morning. At best he'd feel twinges, at worst some real hurts; they might last for a day, several days.

He got to the bathroom, closed the door and blinked against the fluorescent light. After the welcome relief he turned out the light before opening the door again, then struggled through the more difficult task of finding shorts, t-shirt and … shoes? No, this was Hawaii: *No Shoes Allowed*.

Dorothy had taken charge of the room key and where it was he didn't know. But he had to get out. Get out of the room, go somewhere in the dark, get under the night sky, the same that had closed down over them, chicken wings and lobster growing cold on the terrace.

Entering the lobby, no one behind the desk, no one in

sight, he had a choice: the streets, the apartments and vintage houses they'd passed coming in; or the beach. "No choice at all: it's the beach." Dorothy's imagined voice filtering down from their second-floor bedroom. "I took a walk at sunrise," he heard himself later saying to his surprised wife, awakening and not finding him there.

On the beach he looked for a sign of dawn, saw only the dark, seamless sky. He also looked for the North Star, which, he knew, had shone last night over Missouri too. A beacon, a rudder; he would find it, and feel right at home.

The waves lapped at him as before. He couldn't see them very well; the mix of night and morning hadn't as yet found itself, the result an occlusion wherein objects, movement too, seemed not as they were. The surf looked stronger, but it might have been his imagination. At five o'clock in the morning, alone in a far-off place, you can imagine all sorts of things.

But this "far-off place" was real. The dreams they'd dreamt, Dorothy and he, however vague in earlier years, had been fulfilled. He felt it, in the soft tropical sand giving way beneath his feet, in the on-shore wind that caressed rather than chafed, in the moon peeking behind clouds, sharper and brighter than anything they might see in Springfield. And the air, redolent of flowers whose names Dorothy knew. The proverbs he was fond of quoting to the children: *Think of the Future*, *A Penny Saved is a Penny Earned*, *Put it Away for a Rainy Day* – they'd come to fruition. The "rainy day," "the future," is now; Dorothy didn't say that last night but she surely must have thought it.

Clifford peered into the darkness, searched for a sign of light, a tint of red. But where was east, the rising sun? On the other side of the island, no doubt.

His breathing felt laboured. But then he'd never been much of a walker. Not an athlete, either. *Couch Potato:* when he'd first heard the term he immediately identified with it.

How long would his "future" be? If he knew the answer he could have been more explicit in the discussion with Dorothy – we need this much, we need that. His shortness of breath, the twitches and creaks and aches where joints formed, not to mention the larger mystery, that cavernous middle of his chest, fed by presumably free-flowing arteries and managing its tireless pumping: for how long would all of it continue to work?

Not a subject he and she should get into. Especially not here, not now.

The beach had narrowed, its space impinged on by rocks that might block his path around the promontory of Diamond Head, its volcanic mass looming above. On the map he'd seen a lighthouse, but perhaps it lay farther around the point.

Could he change his ways? After sixty-six years? For isn't that what Dorothy wanted him to do? When you're used to doing things for so long and in a certain way can you just put them aside, say to hell with it, the future be damned? Though Dorothy, the image of her face before him, hadn't asked him to do that.

A wave that he hadn't seen, hadn't expected, broke on him, the white water pulling, pushing at knees and thighs. He staggered, almost went down. Fear rippled through him as he hurried up the beach. Focus on where you are and what you're doing, the here and now, he told himself. But the farther away from the surf he got, the more it seemed to find him, the line of water licking at feet and ankles, a predator nosing in on its target.

He freed himself of it. And in a safer spot, removed from the quick thrust of wave, he paused, looked around, and again saw the face of his wife.

One more time his eyes searched the night sky. Find the Big Dipper; that'll get you to the North Star. But clouds had blown in; he could see a few points of light, nothing more.

He felt the fatigue creep through his limbs, not used to this walk, this hour. He wouldn't attempt the walk back, at least not yet. He would rest a few minutes, then set a good pace and before he knew it be back in the bedroom, to climb in beside a still-sleeping Dorothy.

He sat down beside a black-faced boulder that a millennium ago might have been ejected from a then active volcanic Diamond Head. He faced beachward, protected from the wind, the surf. Before closing his eyes, and even afterwards, he saw the image of Dorothy. He would do whatever she wished, whatever she thought best. Because never, never again, did he want to see the light go out of her eyes.

When Dorothy awoke at five-twenty and saw the empty place beside her, her first thought was that Clifford had gone down for breakfast. Then, after discovering that the dining room wasn't open, she guessed that he'd taken a walk. It wasn't like him to show initiative toward things physical, but good that he did. On the beach she had her choice, east or west. She chose east, toward Diamond Head, the route they'd taken earlier.

She had been hard on him last night. The words, their glibness fuelled by the drinks, came much too thoughtlessly, and the silences, the long looks out to sea, showed how much she'd hurt him. She would apologize if it came to that, but they'd do well to bury the discussion: they had ten Hawaii days ahead of them.

The sky hinted at a paler light, the sun edging up toward the horizon. But that would be on the windward side of the island, the mountains, Diamond Head among them, occluding, at least for a while, its entry here.

Why hadn't he awakened me? she wondered. Told me he was going out for a walk? I would have gone with him; the quiet moments together would have helped heal the wounds from last night.

Dorothy caught a heavy spill of white water that seemed to come out of nowhere, the placid and constant ocean showing another face. It might have hit him as it had hit her: she thought of calling his name, but the beach was deserted and the night was dark and with the wind blowing so hard her voice would not have carried.

She began to run. Not fast – she wasn't capable of that. Ten, twenty yards. With each stride the thought pounded into her brain: she was going the wrong way; Clifford had walked west not east. Or maybe he hadn't walked at all. She stopped, turned, started in the other direction, then reversed herself.

Ten minutes later she arrived at the place where the beach narrowed to a clutter of large boulders and there saw the figure hunched behind one of them. She saw enough of the feet, his shorts, the familiar grey at the back of his head. "Clifford." The sound stirred him.

They had gone only a few paces toward the hotel when she began to cry. As he had never heard her cry before. Long intakes of breath, sobs that resisted his surprised, consoling words, the hand that he placed on her shoulder, the other along the side of her face.

"I was all right, I was never in any danger," he was telling her.

"I know, I know," she got that much out.

He waited.

She composed herself; blurred images took shape: tightly drawn skin around ankles and legs, the blue-purple veins that seemed as fragile as the limbs they were supposed to nourish. And with them the bottoms of feet, the stubs of toes. All of it so white.

To give expression to it would have started the tears again.

Instead: another image, just as true, and kindlier: "You were curled up," she said, the words bringing it into focus, "you were curled up so tightly, you looked … you looked just like a baby."

The picture presented, he chose to let it go. He turned to the water, brightening now with dawn, poised to receive another day of Hawaiian sunshine.

Tej Gidda

Highway Driving

"I drank two litres of the stuff the other day, and then I sucked on an ice cube for half an hour," he said, upending the water bottle into his mouth. He gurgled the stuff before he swallowed it. "But I was still damn thirsty." He poured out the rest of the water into the gutter.

"Drink it, drink it," I said, sitting on the curb. I waved my hands in the air. "I mean, if it weren't worth drinking, no one would bother. If it weren't worth making, no one would drink it. That's all there is to it."

Donnie-H stood above me. He twirled his key chain, which had one key on the end of it, the most important key of all. Across the street was the reason that key was so important. "Cut the curbs out from under us," said Donnie-H, "and we all trip over the air. We all trip over the air and then we fall in the water and either we drink or we drown. There's no way around it."

"There's one way," I said, and pulled out the little bottle from my back pocket. It had been sitting there for the better part of the afternoon, soaking up the heat and all our words. It was sickly to the touch. I touched it properly. It was very sick indeed. I turned the cap. A smell came out of it. I placed it to my nose and sniffed. A wave went through me. I held the bottle up to my friend Donnie-H. "There's one way, that's for sure."

But Donnie-H shook his head, waved it away. "Not yet. It's not quitting time yet."

I shrugged and put the bottle to my side. I also put the cap back on the top of it. There was no sense in arguing. I took a look at the car across the street. It was my friend's car, and it had five coats of paint and some steel underneath all that. There were two doors and the windows never rolled up because the car never rolled in the rain. It approached a top speed of waving arms and screaming voices; the speedometer didn't work, and that was just as well. We took the beast over a tight narrow hill once, and we caught more air than we knew what to do with. Neither me nor Donnie-H had ever been on a plane. After that day, it didn't matter. A few months later, they came in with some industrial equipment, the heavy-duty kind, and they pasted that hill until it was still a hill but flat anyway. It was the only way to describe it. The pavement, the road, dipped up and then it dipped down, so there was a feeling of incline and decline there. It could be felt in the bones and the beginnings of that roller coaster feeling. But there wasn't a jump, no thrust into space, no departure from the ground to be temporary quirks of the sky. It wasn't the same anymore.

We never forgave them.

Five days later, we found a construction site on the other side of town. It was a sickly place. Everyone was working. We walked past the thing again and again until all the work was done for the day and the construction workers went home. They must have thought us pretty strange to keep scoping them out. They must have wondered why. It was okay, though, because they never bothered to report us. They'd worked too hard to bother. So me and Donnie-H took some stones and we crushed every piece of glass in the yard. We got good at the targeting. I wasn't even wearing my glasses. I never wear my glasses anymore.

Anyway, it was a good car.

But then it was quitting time.

The people started to come out of the buildings. They were playing leapfrog. It was a weird thing to do in their suits and briefcases, but they were doing it anyway. I shook my head. Donnie-H was right above me, whistling at nothing for no damn reason. I kicked at the road, kept one eye open to make sure my foot wouldn't get run over. I shook my head. It was a sickly feeling. I was trying to get rid of it. And I was trying to get away from the sensation that maybe I wasn't seeing things clearly, that maybe they weren't all playing leapfrog. When it finally came into focus, I was disappointed. I had always thought that rich working people played games no matter where they were.

They were all walking calmly. Sometimes, they bumped into each other or shuffled around immobile figures. But it certainly wasn't leapfrog.

"Tush," I said, because I had heard that word on television and it sounded like such a wonderful thing to say. Donnie-H shrugged. I tried to get his attention. "Double humbug. There's got to be something stronger than hot days in summer."

Donnie-H nodded. "Sure, Arctic evenings on a waffle cone." He laughed for a second. "It's quitting time all right. I'm still thirsty. Nothing ever helps this." He started to sound like he was whining, so I offered him up the bottle. He drank back a mouthful and handed the thing back to me. I watched his face so that I could register his reaction. At first, he didn't do anything except swallow. When Donnie-H swallowed something, he didn't have an expression on his face. He was blank. When Donnie-H was in pain, he didn't have an expression on his face. He was blank. When Donnie-H was confused, no expression. Just blank. Donnie-H got a look on his face when he was eating a burrito or spitting at a cat or exchanging vows with a girlie magazine; but otherwise, he was pretty cold and calm. I used to laugh at the strange appearances on his appearance; but then I got used to it, and I think I got kind of cold too. It was more than I could handle, really. But at least I understood why he liked to talk about the Arctic so much.

I scratched my head, there in the street.

I was confused. I was thirsty.

I'd never figured out the waffle cone bit.

"Try some," said my friend, trying to sound like a host. He was blank.

I always thought that I should have understood the waffle cone bit. I never got it through my head. I tried all the time. I stayed up for minutes at a time in analysis. But then he hit the accelerator and it was all in the past, like my mother used to say before she became a futurist. I never figured that out. But it wasn't as much a mystery as the waffle cone that my friend Donnie-H preferred.

I took the bottle and gave it a squeeze into my mouth. The stuff inside wasn't cold. It was fiery hot. It didn't go down like water because it didn't have the same chemical consistency. I felt something gagging within me, didn't know what it was, knew that I would look foolish if it were heard in the rest of things. I took it a bit easier, decreased the input angle. That helped, but it didn't finish the run. I could hear the stuff squealing in delight for the open spaces of the race. It was all just a race, really, to get into one side of me and take turns with my personality. I didn't care. That was the whole point. Sitting there, on a curb, in the middle of the summer, in the hottest day imaginable, with an afternoon crowd of honkies quitting for their home. That was the point. I giggled and turned over the bottle to my friend. He laughed. We sang for a bit, not too long. But really, it was just whistling, the old-fashioned way.

"Smokes," said Donnie-H, taking another drink. The level of liquid in the bottle had fallen to the two-thirds mark already, and we'd scarcely gotten to the point of making its acquaintance. "And stacks. In the job part of town, that's all they care about. I wish I had a stack right now. It'd be better than a smoke. That's for sure."

Donnie-H had given up smoking the day he'd discovered the waffle cone. There was a correlation there. I knew it. Instead, I nodded. It seemed to make sense. He always did. Especially when the car were kicking up dirt and that dirt were swirling all around and you could see rainbows in the water that was trapped in the muck. The car flew around and around, donuts for all the world to see; but only the abandoned lot and the dead factory overhead really bore witness. And then we shacked up with the windows until our aim were perfect and the doves had a place to rest if they needed it.

Donnie-H didn't smoke anymore. It was all he had to say. He wanted stacks. I nodded my head, took another drink. Half the bottle was gone. The stream of quitting time was getting bigger. All those brothers and sisters were shaking for the bus, flashing passes. Some were going for cars. The cool crowd was hailing cabs, only it never worked like it did in the idiot papers, where the yellow and black were stacked higher than the curb by three and ready for the quitters by four. It never worked that easy. Between all those rows of waiting, the car was sitting, and its five coats of paint were all black.

"There's no gasoline in the car," said Donnie-H. He shook his head, disgusted. "Well, enough to get to a pump. Not much further than that."

It took courage to admit a mistake. I practiced admitting mistakes until it were so easy that I didn't have to struggle with it anymore. Before I went to sleep, I admitted my wrongdoings until I felt vaguely sorry for them. It made me apologetic in appearance to everyone who met me. It was the one most important thing anyone took from a meeting with

me: how wrong I could be and how freely I admitted it.

"Yes, I'm sorry," I told my friend, as though it were my fault. It wasn't. But it could have been. That was all that mattered to me. Donnie-H brightened immediately at my words, which made them worth it immensely. I grinned and took another drink. I knew the coast off the shore of France. The sunken one. I'd scuba dived there in a recent memory, with that wonderful tart from the grocery store. The one who'd never liked me, but loved to swim more than the lovely idea of disliking me. Anyway, the coast off the shore of France had been saturated with drowning sailors, and it hadn't been a very good party. That was as good as my dreams ever got. I made the mistake of admitting to my mother that my dreams were atrocious. I apologized for those words for three weeks. Two days after I'd finished, I took up smoking. Three days after that, Donnie-H bought his first pack of smokes. He had been under age at the time, but it didn't matter. Now he was quit. And I was still going. Things hadn't changed all that much for me, I noticed, as I drank an eighth of the bottle. And they weren't getting better at all.

Donnie-H took another slug and then dodged across the traffic to the other side of the street. He was running, or sort of dancing, but he wasn't making much sense at all. He waved his hands like a madman, and I thought he was a chicken. He had left the bottle with me, at least. That meant that I would be finishing it. I didn't complain. I was a good turkey. We were all breathing about it, too, passing it up and about and high and through the screw. Donnie-H got to the other side of the street. He was the hammer. He went to one of the waiting cabs and pried open its fuel hatch: but he was very low and in the street and no one was looking there except for the passing motorists, and they didn't give a damn about hardware. They didn't give a damn about anything as long as they were moving. Donnie-H had the hatch pried, and he was watching the sideview mirror, because that was the thing that could get him caught. But the driver was scoping the sidewalk for customers, and he didn't realize that the cab crowd was the one that came out at the beginning of the quitting rush. He was waiting for smokes, maybe. He was dying for stacks, though. And that's what Donnie-H was counting on.

Donnie-H had a small draft tap in his jacket, and brought it out. He stuck the tube part of it in the fuel slot and sucked until I could see him spitting out the first dregs of gasoline. Then he turned the stream into the container and let the juice flow. Always, he kept an eye on the driver, the sweetheart on the corner, the hooker a half a mile away, and the bus driver with a running total at Casino Tender. I laughed, and then I whistled, but I made sure to make sure that my feet were still surely on my legs. A few cars dodged in close to be funny, but there weren't too many really hilarious people at quitting time. That was why we waited out with them all and sucked back the juices and the fumes and that's also why we started with two litres of water.

When Donnie-H had what he needed, he closed up the hatch and snuck back across the road; only, he wasn't sneaking, he was running full tilt and throwing up his arms as though a nearby wind could pick him up and send him to the stars. He was a funny sight, and I whistled a particular tune for no particular song to appease him. When he got back, he showed me his catch, and he smiled wide. "Got it!" Then he saw that the bottle in my hand was empty. "Bastard," he breathed. He looked cross, maybe angry, or also perhaps he didn't like the taste of gasoline in his mouth. I knew at that point that I could have been more considerate and saved a spot. I shrugged instead, because I wasn't a very considerate person when I was all over the place and in no one location at any given time. I shrugged again because I didn't understand myself. So I got to my feet and clapped my friend on the shoulder and thought about being addicted to being addicted. I felt hot. I felt cold. I knew that my habits were interfering with being on one side of the issue or the other, because they prevented me from knowing that issues actually existed. The quitting time people knew what was going on. I was up, cold, over and alone compared to them, and very little meant anything to me that wasn't painted on a car. I kicked a used up butt into the gutter, wished I had a smoke.

"Or a stack," noted Donnie-H. He clapped me on the shoulder, trying to make me feel bad. But he knew I would feel bad, and that's why he did it in the first place. I apologized and he laughed, and then he said, "That's okay, I would have done it too. But I would have worn better socks." He looked down at my feet and sighed. I shook my head all over the place, up and high, automatically at the glass across the road just in case there were someone spying on me by looking into it and back up and over me. I shrugged. It felt wild.

"Now you just have to go back across," I noted to my friend. Donnie-H's face fell. I ran out into traffic, tenderly, with my baby, and threw the bottle into the air. I threw it high enough that I could make it to the other side before it landed. I was surprised when it landed two feet ahead of me no more than an instant later. I thought to myself: time sucked. It always sucked and then it sucked the life out of people who only wanted nice summer days and nice things to do during them. I let the thought get to my lips, but it didn't make it through, because playing in traffic was one thing while playing in traffic and talking was completely another.

"It's cool to be cornered," shouted Donnie-H, panting as he jumped a few paces ahead and a car smacked its horn. "Then no one blames you when you're down. Because you

don't have anywhere to go anyway. What a ghost."

"What are you doing tomorrow?" I asked him, trying to break from the tradition of my common sense. We were all going crazy in those days. The time was slipping, too. It was driving us nuts by driving itself away. Everywhere I looked, the same thing was happening. I shrugged. But I was dancing in traffic and I couldn't sing very well and simple talking was suicide unless it were a question instead. I got to the other side a few paces later, and then Donnie-H appeared next to me. People were yelling from the street and honking their horns; but they were moving too fast to slow down too much. We got away with it all. But we wouldn't get away with it forever. I faced my friend. He knew it too. He was looking at it in the mouth. He understood just like I did. That's why we were friends. We went to his car and put in the gasoline. Then we got in through the windows, because the doors didn't open. The engine hummed to life. Donnie-H screeched the car into traffic, and we got a spot.

THE NEXT SECOND, we were getting up to speed on the nature of cars. We were weaving, dodging, and Donnie-H knew what he was doing because he knew what he was doing. Seventy times, we came close to clipping something or someone. But it was better to almost clip something or someone than it was to almost hit someone or something. That was the key. We were ordered violence and we were in a car to boot. The sun was coming down and it was so damn hot and we were going so fast and we wanted to go faster. Me and Donnie-H often discussed why we picked such moments to get going. We used to think it was because of the bottle that we'd drank, since that usually had something to do with everything. But there was another issue, too. This one really existed, and I knew it.

Donnie-H turned a corner hard and we were in the home stretch. Ahead of us, the on- ramp was coming. He veered onto it. "Damn sober drivers. Likely to kill someone," he noted. He was chewing on the bottle cap, it was perpendicular between his upper and lower teeth. He was screeching like a fool. I was grinning. Then we were on the highway. Donnie-H dropped his bottle cap onto the floor and we sang like madmen. I tried to roll up my window and laughed and sang and then I saw the guard rails and the white bars and the other cars and I got scared for a second that one day it was all going to end and we were going to go for a quiet Sunday drive instead of all this. Donnie-H knew what I was thinking. He hammered the accelerator. We shot out into the sun, and it was burning everywhere. I thought it was a disaster. It seemed like one. There we were, and the wind was taking us towards the best turn of all, the one that jumped and sent us flying. I threw my arms around in circles and pretended that I was cruising. But the only image remaining of me was myself in the pedestrian days, literally.

I stuck my hand out through the window and figured that it was five feet too short to touch the next car to me. I thought of that coast off the shore of France. I was going to never go there one day. I made a promise to myself and got hooked. Two seconds later, I apologized to myself and then did the same to Donnie-H because of the first one in the first place. I was cold, over, alone and full of things, meaning and habit. I was comfortable. I was freakin gone back by the rear boards and hoping that guardrails couldn't handle our weight: I really hoped that guardrails couldn't hold our weight. What was the point?

We cruised like that for half an hour, until we were so far away from the urban hell that we were out of the traffic and going fast just meant going in a straight line. It wasn't the real mechanism, so Donnie-H slowed down and our hearts stopped pounding and I thought that maybe things were getting too clear again. I mentioned this to my friend, and his first instinct was to step on the gas. But that didn't last too long.

He took the next exit and we were in suburban hell. Out there in the world was the other type of hell, too, but I wasn't too sure that it wasn't too good to be hell. Who knew? I wondered. The suburban road was quiet. We were driving slowly. Donnie-H stopped at a red light. He looked at me. "We need some more."

I nodded. "We always need more. When are we gonna

One martini in Harvard Square

has shaved chocolate rimming the glass
like a balsam Christmas wreath.
The ice soaks. It jingles and chatters.
When she kisses me, my rude tongue
lingers like a boorish uncle on Christmas Day.

And it's in there – the taste inky
like a tattoo. Cold.
My tongue is a chilled sponge in an ice bath;
her mouth cold and dark; inside an igloo.

She stirs in slow currents; on an icy sea
the olive sets like Titanic.
My mind is made up;
I tap my credit card like a wireless operator –
Mayday! Mayday!

– Michelle M. Maihiot

need less?" I shook my head. "What I mean to say is: let's get some smokes." Donnie-H made as though to protest. "I know, I know, you quit all that time ago. But you don't remember why and I don't remember why I started or why I keep going. So why bother quitting when you could just keep going? If the farmer quit after he milked his first cow, we'd have no cheese. Where would France be then?"

"Who cares about France?"

"I never told you, but I care about France," I replied. I got serious in the shade of the red light, which was no shade at all. "There's a place there I gotta go. I'm not sure I can make it there if I live like this. My mother warned me against this kind of thing."

"What do you think she's doing right now?"

"Swimming," I whispered. "She's swimming."

The light turned and Donnie-H screamed into motion. He'd already forgotten the conversation. It was fine with me. Soon, we came to a big lot, one of those abandoned jobs that got higher and tighter the longer they were deserted. There was a big dirt area behind it, and we were both looking at it. I shrugged. I was starting to come down, and everything was getting clear. But we didn't have another bottle. All we had were six litres of water, and even that would be warm.

Donnie-H revved the engine. "We going in?" He rearranged his grip on the steering wheel. "I got a wafer in the waffle this time. What do you say to that?"

I thought about grocery stores a lot. I thought of that wonderful aisle where everything was sour but half of it was sweet. I had that taste in my mouth. The waters were blue there, not clear. When you looked up, you could see the sun. But not before you saw the waves.

"Let's go in," I said to Donnie-H, turning my head in expectant circles.

A. S. Penne

Syncopation

Beside the phone is an early photo of Amy at three, maybe four years of age. It shows a young child in profile, the white handset almost as big as her small head, a red plastic barrette clipped to the side of her blonde hair. Arlene took the photo on one of the first occasions that her daughter answered the telephone, when the machine was still something of a mystery to the child. In the photo Amy's lips are slightly parted as she listens intently to the person at the other end of the line. She has not yet understood how it is that she can hear the words of a person who is so distant.

The same telephone rings now. Arlene lifts the receiver to her ear but frowns as she hears static on the line. The phone has been dropped by her or by Amy so many times that it only works sporadically. She jiggles the phone's cord, trying to fix it in a certain position, make the crackling disappear.

"Hello?" she asks when the noise stops.

"Happy birthday," says Geoff's disembodied voice.

Last she'd heard, Geoff was on the other side of the country. It's been a long time and she wonders why he's calling now, knowing well enough that the birthday is just an excuse.

"Well, thank you," she says anyway. She feels a prickle of anticipation, like the beginnings of a rising fever, an old sensation.

It's what she used to feel when the two of them walked onto a dance floor, a current running between them as they moved from the shadows onto the light-spattered hardwood. Loud music racing through her veins, muscles responding with small, uncontrolled jerks until she found the rhythm. With him.

Here – now – Arlene can't tell if her anticipation comes from gladness or from vanity. She wishes she could say it was only from gladness.

She waits for his invitation to dance. And when nothing happens, she steps into the small silence of emptiness at his end of the phone line. Do you want to dance?

But she doesn't want to sidestep him like she used to do and she says, "I heard through the grapevine that you would never talk to me again so I assumed there was no point in calling you."

"Yeah, well," he mutters.

Those murky shadows beyond the strobe-lit floors, the way the first strains of a familiar song nudged at them, their boiling urgency. Now it's there again, that feeling of wanting to explode beyond the self. And the feeling of needing to stifle it.

"Look, Arlene," he begins. "I still have very strong feelings so I guess it really depends on what day you get me."

She closes her eyes, remembers his hand on the small of her back, how he was such a strong lead.

"I understand that, Geoff," she says, and she does. "But I think it's sad we can't be friends after all we've been through."

"There's still a lot of ugly stuff around your decision to leave."

She pushes away a hot instinct to return the blame, fumbles to stay in step.

"How are you?" she asks. She has forgotten, until it's out there, what he always answers to that question. For a split second she hopes he will stay inside the boundaries, skirt the truth.

"Terrible."

Stupid of her. "Are you in Montreal?"

"Yes."

"I thought you liked it there. I thought that's where you wanted to be."

"I did."

Another lull before she says: "You're not making friends then?"

"Yeah, but it's not the same as having the friends you've known all your life."

DURING ONE OF their last quarrels, Geoff had called his friends a bunch of hypocritical no-minds, stuck in their ways and not going anywhere, and Arlene had asked why he maintained his relationships with them if he felt that way. He told her then it was none of her affair and who was she to talk anyway, having only one, maybe two, friends in the whole world.

Before all that, though, they'd been like fine-tuned musicians wedded to their instruments, spinning and stepping beneath the lights. They'd made such pretty harmony together, hot and steamy and nowhere near the real world. When they danced, it was obvious that they belonged together.

Arlene thinks they must have grown beyond the basic steps, wanting something more from each other. And so they'd ended up walking along the river dike on a grey November day, a day so cold that after an hour she wanted to go home. But Geoff urged her on.

"Just a little further. Sit on that log over there."

A few minutes later he slid off the log and knelt in the sand, as if to get out of the wind. He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out some foil-wrapped chocolate in the shape of a bear. "For you," he said.

She leaned over and kissed his forehead, putting the bear into her own pocket for later. "Thanks, sweetie!"

"No, eat it now!" He was so insistent that she bit off the bear's ears then offered it to him. He nibbled at the paws and gave it back, watching as she chewed the head off. The bear was hollow; a piece of paper nestled inside.

The words were written in careful calligraphy. "I couldn't bear it if you said no … ." She read them, then looked at his deep brown eyes with her own blank ones.

"No to what?" she asked, feeling the way the hairs on her neck lifted as she spoke. Her nose began to run and she sniffed loudly, wanting to get out of the cold quickly now. But he stayed on his knees, took her hand in his.

"Will you marry me?"

She could tell, later when she replayed the scene in her memory, how carefully he'd planned the whole thing. She knew that she should have been touched but what she really felt was embarrassed. For Geoff and all his fantasies about the way things should be done.

But she'd hoped that marriage would be a continuation of those close nights on the dance floors, his large hand pressed against the heat of her skin, her ribs rising to the light brush of his fingers.

Pure synchronicity.

AS IF NOTHING has changed, Arlene feels herself bending again with Geoff's dips. "But you still like the job?" she persists. "And I heard they're paying for your courses – that's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but having worked in the field for eighteen years, listening to professors tell me how it is doesn't cut it, you know? I mean it's really a lot of bullshit, just a paper chase. And they're only giving me credit for one year transfer."

"That's all you were going to get here."

"No, they said two years."

"No," she argues with conviction: "I remember it was only one." And then in the pause she sees his pout – the furrowed brow and sulky mouth – and she softens: "Or maybe one and a half, was it?"

"Maybe. But they're only giving me one here. It's the shits."

The same old lead.

They'd been so good together. Better than good. So many perspiring nights spent on the polished hardwood, marking time with their arms and legs. As if by turning faster and faster they could make the problems disappear.

Now Arlene wants to slow it down. "Does this phone call mean it's okay to write?" she asks.

He waits a moment and she wonders if he is thinking about whether he wants her to write or about the letters she and Amy have already sent him. Letters he never answered; letters he told a mutual friend were mere tokens. Tokens of what? she had wondered. Of affection? Isn't it okay to have affection for someone once loved?

SHE'D MADE HIM wait for her answer. Not so she could think about it but because the proposal made her numb. For a whole afternoon and night he followed her from room to room, quietly, carefully, waiting for her response. In the end she couldn't stand to see him want something so desperately and she said yes.

What she'd thought was, Geoff wants a partner; Amy needs a father.

But it felt like the weight of the world. Like Atlas with the globe on his shoulders, standing in the void between heaven and hell.

His silence this time is so long that Arlene finds herself listening to the music in the room behind him.

"I guess you can write if you want," Geoff says finally. She concentrates on the song instead of the coldness in his answer. She is surprised to hear, in the swell and fade of guitar riffs, a distinct twang.

"Are you still at the same address?" she thinks to ask before he can add the "but".

"No. I've moved." He hesitates. "You could send it to the office and I'll get it there."

She remembers how he loved to talk about himself and the memory makes her wonder about that last request. Would getting a letter from a woman at his place of work impress his co-workers? Would he let them know it was from his ex-wife, find a way to suggest that she wanted him back? Or tell them what a nag she had been, always on his case about being such a slob around the house?

Or maybe there's someone he'd like to make jealous. Maybe that's what this out-of-the-blue phone call is about. Maybe there's someone new; someone who has him thinking about his past love affairs, particularly the big one – the marriage – and he's scared. Scared it could all happen again. The dance of love.

One night Arlene had gone dancing without Geoff. She went to a bachelorette party at a country-and-western bar and came home late and sloppy with too much drink. But she wanted to teach him the two-step learned from the leather- and bourbon-smelling men at the tavern so she placed his hands on the bony curve of her hips, pulling his own flat pelvis towards her and pressing up against him. She lifted her bloodshot eyes to his, giggling as she tried to demonstrate the syncopated movement of the feet, but after two failed attempts, Geoff pulled away from her.

"Is this what you did all night – rubbed up against hicks?"

"No, sweetie. C'mon – I'll try again."

"I don't want to learn a bloody cowboy dance! I don't even like that excuse for music!"

He'd stomped away in a tantrum of childish proportion and Arlene had felt sorry for herself at the time. But when Amy came into the room a few minutes later, wakened by Geoff's loud voice, Arlene took the small body in her arms and began to twirl around the living room with her daughter instead of her husband. And in the middle of that dance she heard a door slam down the hallway.

Now she feels sorry for Geoff. Sorry that he cannot move beyond the hurt he clings to; sorry that he won't get on with his life. She thinks maybe she should've ended their dance after that failed two-step.

"But don't forget," Geoff's voice calls to her again. "You probably won't get a letter back."

"Okay," she answers. And as soon she says it, she knows it's not okay. Why does she still let him lead? Is she trying to resurrect a partnership? Or does she just want one last dance? She leans against the wall, sits this one out.

They stood on the edge between sets, feeling the crazy race of their heartbeats, the dampness on their skin.

Fallen apart.

In the wake of the next silence, Arlene feels the way her pulse idles gently beneath her skin, dry and cold. She feels the space between them, feels herself stepping away from him, the way she did in their last year together. It was the only way she could stay with him then: to have her mind somewhere else.

Sometimes Geoff could be persuaded to skip the dancing and then they'd go out as a threesome, taking Amy to the movies or a baseball game. But it seemed to Arlene that Geoff's personality changed then. He became harsh and more authoritative, as if he saw himself as a figurehead, the archetypal father. He checked Amy's behaviour constantly, demanding an unrealistic maturity as though her childishness might somehow reflect on him.

"It's okay," she'd whisper to Amy when the child was upset. "Dad's just tired today."

"Don't be so hard on her," she told Geoff. "She's just a kid."

But the day they took Amy to see Bambi, the five-year-old burst into loud wails when the young stag on the screen was felled by a hunter. Without hesitation, Geoff leaned across Arlene in the dark theater and slapped the child's leg. "Stop being such a stupid, silly little girl!" he hissed.

She held the small body on her lap the whole way home, the silence in the car piercing.

Everything coming apart.

That night Arlene sat in the dark living room listening to music because she couldn't sleep beside the warm body of a man who was so cold.

A nasal singer croons in her ear and Arlene strains to hear it. An electric fiddle winds into the melody. Country and western music at Geoff's house? Is he trying to let her know he's changed partners or just make a point?

"– darlin' jussss' fer old time's sake …" Arlene tries to focus on the vocalist but Geoff's tone pulls her back.

"– I really don't know why you married me in the first place, Arlene," she hears him say and she nods in agreement.

He is talking about everything that went wrong again, going over all the details like a broken recording. "… and

the way you played me afterwards. What was that all about for you, anyway?"

The quickening tempo.

At first Arlene had held on to the special memories: skating at midnight, the rink quiet after the Zamboni slid through the boards, the peculiar smell of ozone tickling her nostrils. Walking through the snow to get a video on a sub-zero night and falling asleep on Geoff's chest while he watched a ridiculous horror film. Hiking the West Coast Trail in a summer storm. Moving together across the light-spattered floor, the sweaty release after the closeness, like the release after sex.

But slowly, like a tango, their dance had grown into a rage. Arlene began to balk at her husband's childish ways, the ridiculous obsession about his appearance and the fussing over his hair or the cut of a shirt. Eventually the constant need for attention made her turn away with a mocking sneer. And when one night he forced other dancers to clear a space so he could show off at centre floor, she wanted to walk away.

But didn't.

Thinking about that performance, especially her part in it, Arlene squirms with shame. She doesn't like who she was with Geoff. She doesn't like who he wanted her to be or what she let herself become. It had never before occurred to her that dancing could be a form of abuse, swirling and carrying her away from the truth.

She sees again the five-year-old Amy at the window, hugging the stuffed rabbit given by Geoff and waving goodbye as Arlene folds herself and her dress into the car. Both mother and child trying to ignore the fact that Arlene is going out for a fourth consecutive night.

"Three's a crowd," Geoff had said.

And always, at least once during those evenings on the dance floor, a vision of the little face with her rabbit would come to mind, haunting and sad, and then Arlene would have to twirl faster and harder to remind herself to feel good about having a night out.

The rabbit in trade for the mother.

The door opens and Amy comes in. Arlene watches her daughter drop a backpack on the floor, her jacket on a chair and a folded piece of paper in Arlene's lap before heading to the bathroom.

"Don't you have anything to say?" Geoff grumbles in her ear. "What about Amy? Don't you feel bad about what happened to her?"

Arlene breathes deeply as she unfolds the piece of paper, a permission slip from school. "I guess I don't see the point now," she replies.

"What do you mean?"

Arlene puts her palm to her forehead and shakes her head.

Geoff keeps going. "If you wanted out, all you had to do …"

"Who are you talking to?" Amy whispers as she pads back into the room in her socks.

Arlene mouths Geoff's name, but Amy only looks at her dumbly, unable to interpret.

"Neil Morton?" Amy frowns.

No, Arlene shakes her head. Her lips exaggerate the shape of his name: *Geoff*.

"Jack Benson?" Amy's lips curl in a sneer. Names of men Arlene has dated halfheartedly this past year; men too interested for her interest.

Arlene puts her palm over the telephone mouthpiece and whispers loudly: "Geoff!"

Amy is thirteen soon. She understands a lot more than Geoff; certainly more than he gave her credit for. She understands, for instance, why he belittled her for being like he was, a timid, shy, unathletic child. And she understands that he held it against her that she wasn't of his blood.

But now the girl's eyes open wide with amazement. "Really?" she asks as she sits beside Arlene and huddles close. She stares alternately at her mother and the phone, incredulous.

Arlene puts her arm around Amy's shoulders and pulls her daughter to her side. Amy leans into her awkwardly, submitting to the rough hug, then lifts Arlene's hand back over her head and holds it in her lap.

A shudder crawls up Arlene's spine. Damned rabbit.

Behind Geoff, Arlene can hear the crooning voice building to a finale: "Turn back the hands of time …"

"Are you coming home for Christmas?" she asks suddenly.

Amy waves her hand in front of Arlene's face. "Tell him we can go skiing!" she whispers.

"I don't know. I don't know if I can," he says.

"Je-est – fer old times sake!" the singer finishes with an upswing.

"You'll probably be able to ski." Arlene is looking out the window as she says this, feeling the dark mountains and the cold sharp in the air. "It was supposed to snow on the mountains this week. It hasn't yet, but it's very cold out there."

April at Whistler, skiing the white, white glare of snow in shorts and t-shirts, the juice of an orange dribbling down Geoff's beard and nobody on the run ahead of them. As if the mountain was all theirs.

And Amy's bleat behind them on the slope, afraid of the height, afraid of falling, afraid to trust.

"Don't be such a baby!" Geoff's sneer echoing off the glacier. Arlene's hard climb back up the slope to soothe the child's panic. "Don't coddle her, Arlene! Christ, she's never going to

learn anything with you around!"

And afterward, at dinner, Arlene trying to bring the family back together, throwing questions at both of them to keep the silence at bay, filling the room with talk as she filled their plates. "More salad, Amy? Wasn't that a wonderful last run this afternoon? Didn't she improve, Geoff? Maybe tomorrow you can teach her to parallel turn. That'd be good, eh, Amy? Two rolls, sweetie?"

"Tell him my last letter came back," Amy whispers loudly. "Ask him why."

Arlene looks at her daughter's earnest face and sees again Geoff's last visit: the dog barking hysterically at his unannounced arrival, her own exhaustion after a day of teaching, Amy trying to corner Geoff's attention, Geoff wanting only Arlene's attention and none of Amy's or the dog's, Arlene wanting to be quiet after talking to all those kids during the day, Geoff wanting to discuss financial issues resulting from the separation, Arlene refusing to discuss the division of the house bought with her inheritance.

"Can I talk to him?" Amy holds out her hand towards the receiver.

Arlene looks into her daughter's eyes, sees the blatant need.

"So … ," Geoff sighs in her ear.

Arlene nods at Amy but looks away. Amy moves closer, puts a hand on her mother's arm, waiting.

"So … ," Arlene speaks into the mouthpiece.

The background music stops altogether and Arlene can feel a huge emptiness gathering.

"Please!" Amy's anxious face looms in front of her.

Arlene holds up a finger, asking Amy to wait. The girl stands up, paces the length of the room, then comes back, stands above Arlene with arms crossed.

"Okay," Arlene says. She searches for some remorse, but can't find any. There is, instead, a sort of breathless victory, like the end of a fast jive when he'd swing her round and pull her back.

This time Arlene pulls back. This dance is over.

Amy puts her hand over her mom's on the receiver and Arlene raises her eyes to her daughter once again. Behind Amy she sees the photo of that small child with the big telephone, listening; waiting.

"Hang on a sec," Arlene says and relinquishes the handset. But when Amy takes it, Arlene drops her hand onto the phone's cradle, slides her thumb over the reset button and holds it there. Three seconds, four maybe.

"Hello?" Amy's voice is tight, almost a squeak. "Hello … ?" Arlene watches from the side as Amy's throat seems to swallow. When she turns back to her mother, the girl's eyes have narrowed into thin lines. "He hung up! Didn't he want to talk to me? At all?"

Arlene holds out her hand to her daughter's hurt.

"What a turd!" Amy spits out the word. She throws the receiver onto the linoleum floor and flings herself from the room. Arlene stares at the phone as it lies there, dead, but she can hear no more static.

She sits for a minute, maybe longer, then gets up and goes to the front door. When she opens it, the blast of arctic air feels familiar.

When the music stopped they'd step out into the night air and the coolness spilling over her sweat-dampened skin would make her tremble.

Like she does now.

A second before a walk in the …

Big fat Buddha bellied rain
Bursting like rockets
On the hood of my car

Me sitting porch worn
Like the chipped leper chair;
In a sphere of screen
And wicker.

Pounding like thuds
Of liquor drawn fists
Or bats against piñatas,

Dam busted sky
Throwing heavy confetti
Through its gauzy walls.

Perimeter lost;
Elemental bombs,
Bust past wire
And Hit me.

Half soaked now
With nature's fret,
The inspired thing to do

Would be to bust right out of here
Like the Sundance Kid,

Throw myself at that gatling sky.

– Scott Shay

Don McLellan

Ed's Garage

There were, by design, exactly one dozen members in the Dodge Car Club. The organization's constitution forbade more; demand ensured there were never less. *Wanna-be*s (which included, for a time, the lad O'Donnell) had to vie for an infrequent vacancy, the names of the hopefuls noted on a *Big Girls* calendar at the rear of Ed Levine's garage.

It was in that weathered structure, leaning dangerously to the east when a westerly blew, to the west as an easterly howled, a retreat reeking of unhealthy levels of toxic carbons and cat piss, that the club's teenaged members convened. It was there as well, illuminated by a single incandescent bulb, the Dodge's overworked engine resting agreeably, that the winner of the much-anticipated Sunday draw was announced.

The club worked like this: each member had use of the car for half a day per week. The vehicle was to be picked up at 8 a.m. and returned by 4 p.m., when a second member took possession until midnight. Unscheduled a.m. motorings were permitted at significant cost to the applicant (all such monies benefiting the club's party fund), but only if the request garnered everyone's approval. Due to rivalries amongst the membership, to feuds of forgotten origin, this was rare.

Not returning the Dodge for the next shift, or doing so without a full tank of premium gasoline, resulted in unrestrained shitkickings. Transgressors were spared if mechanical difficulties or heart failure could be verified. This, also, was rare.

A draw was held on the evening of the Sabbath, when the auto was not in service, to determine who would have the car for the daylight hours of the following Sunday, a bonus slot. Though not mandatory, attendance at this weekly event was never anything less than perfect. The get-together, held year-round, weather be damned, was the only opportunity for members to carry out repairs and apply a coat of wax to the object of their devotion. Refreshments and assorted intoxicants lent the evening a surreal air.

The first order of business at the Sunday meet was a draw to determine shifts for the upcoming week. Because the membership was exclusively male, as such groupings were in those days, Friday and Saturday nights, prime mating hours, were coveted. Swapping shifts, however, was permitted (*see Rule #18, second paragraph*).

The process was simple: names were scribbled on the back of a matchbook and dropped into an empty oil can. The most junior member selected names and announced the shifts, it being believed this would minimize schemes of deception. As this story will demonstrate, it didn't.

Neighbours could testify (but rarely dared) that the weekly conference was a raucous affair. No doubt due to the unpredictable consequences of mixing beer or hard spirits with hemp, fisticuffs often spilled into the alley, inviting a look-see from Constable Toby McManus.

"The lads are up to something," the policeman had informed his rookie ride-along, the grass-green Patrolman Patrick Mahoney. "The fumes seeping through the cracks of that lowly greasepit are not spewed from exhaust pipes."

Though the veteran policeman could not run the length of a city block and remain standing (he suffered from an undisciplined appetite, accounting for the

sobriquet *Constable Tubby*), it was seen that he was partnered with someone who could. The chief, a boyhood friend, excused him from the annual fitness review, as the constable's experience and uncommonly keen eye – he had been a decorated sharpshooter with the Highland Dragoons, after all – proved invaluable.

No one knew better than Constable McManus the whereabouts of chop shop and bootlegger, poker den and brothel, the most lucrative hours of bookie joint and drug emporium. Suspect, sinner, and saint fled at the sound of his approaching siren, fearing most of all a kiss from his foot-long hickory stick.

At the time this tale is set, Constable McManus is just a few years shy of retirement. Like others of his generation, he is pained by the nastiness of the modern-day delinquent. *The Huns*, as he referred to all young males in his jurisdiction, were poised to run amok. Armageddon, he feared, was nigh. The constable's sonorous trumpeting about the need for harsh measures was a commonly heard chorus in the stationhouse.

None of which served to solve the mystery presently playing upon his thoughts. For what the policeman didn't know, and what he was determined to discover before handing in his shield, was the nature of, and the attraction to, those smoky garage sittings. He had heard the Dodge exercised some persuasive influence on the resolve of the female heart, that once aboard that wheezing, oil-spewing machine a lass was incapable of combating the operator's advances.

"Horsefeathers," he said.

Constable McManus had, however, witnessed some of the neighbourhood's most refined and shapeliest colleens drive off with club members. He had two daughters of his own, both at dangerous ages, and though he resided in what those who lived there considered a more respectable address, he was quietly anxious for their chastity.

"It's all fairytale, Mahoney, you young fool," the senior policeman stated flatly.

Nevertheless, he decided to canvass the populace.

Mr. Samuel Moran – his son Bruce, a former club member, was currently serving six months for a botched gas station heist – was equally bamboozled. The constable located him strolling Seaforth Drive with his Missus.

"Damned if I can figure out what's goin' on," Mr. Moran confided. "My boy talked about nothing else."

Margaret Hollingsworth, whose kitchen window afforded an unobstructed view of the garage entrance, was willing to talk to Constable McManus off the record – "but," insisted the devotee of the TV program *Perry Mason*, "I'll say nothing in open court!"

"You should hear the language those assholes use!" she complained. "Can't you book the little cocksuckers?"

Ed Levine's father Dwayne was found enjoying a cup of coffee and a slice of apple pie in Bud's Grill.

"My little Edward was dropped on his head as a runt," Mr. Levine told them, his eyes puddling. "Doesn't know the times table, can barely recite a nursery rhyme, but that boy can bring dead machines back to life …"

Mr. Levine was a widower and the recipient of a workers' compensation pension. No one remembers a time when there wasn't a car in his yard up on blocks, a kind of lawn ornament. Those who had observed him flinging heavy engine parts around or stumbling home from the Kingsway Pub viewed with suspicion his claim of an irreparable lower disc.

Few car club members knew – as young O'Donnell did, living across the alley – that Mr. Levine routinely took the Dodge out after midnight. He also disappeared with it on those occasions when a member was ill and the car idled. He was something of a philanthropist with the housewives and often loitered in the Shop Eazy parking lot, offering free deliveries.

Boys everywhere love two things, Dwayne Levine philosophized: girls and cars. His sobs had been reduced to a snivel with a second complimentary serving of pie.

"If we had what these young fellas have today," he opined, "World War Two never would have happened!"

ONCE BACK ON patrol the constable's chattering young partner aired another possibility.

"I say the club's a front for some kind of gangland activity," voiced the rookie, who at that stage of his career couldn't distinguish a throng of thugs from a symposium of Mormons. "Maybe one of us should go undercover, whaddya think?"

"Spit it out, Mahoney! Before they scale the walls!"

"One of us – me, I guess – could pose as a potential buyer," the young policeman proposed. "I could ask to see the vehicle up close. Maybe get inside the garage without a search warrant."

The constable feared for the future, knowing the likes of Mahoney represented the next generation of law enforcement, although he concurred the search warrant was the most damaging invention since the right to silence.

"People in this part of town," he reminded his partner, "distrust strangers with crewcuts and the physique of a footballer. Besides," he added, "perhaps you hadn't noticed: the Dodge isn't for sale."

McManus allowed himself a moment to despair, then barked: "An Indian shaman said the Creator gave us two eyes, two ears and one mouth. He reminds you of this, Mahoney, so that you might observe and listen twice as much as you talk.

The key to this particular mystery, the veteran cop explained, was understanding the power that seemingly

unremarkable vehicle exercised over its acned enthusiasts. Other teens of this persuasion desired the sleek, powerfully charged new shapes rolling off the assembly lines, the cars with flamboyant fins and angry mufflers and dazzling metallic sheens. Automobiles with lean, elegant lines and fierce animal names.

The policeman, because he believed in keeping a written record of his thoughts, drew up a list in his patrolman's log of what he had learned about the '52 Dodge. The car's bubble-shaped, much-dented blue body, he noted, was proudly the opposite of all that was current. It was a three-speed V-6 with a temperamental clutch, uncooperative gears, arthritic doors and fatigued radials. These hormone-happy greaseballs worshipped a machine that struggled to maintain the speed limit, that an old woman would be proud to own for the weekly jaunt to church.

"Maybe we should step up our patrols," Mahoney interrupted. "You know, park up the alley and cut the lights when those boys are having one of their pow-wows."

And so it was that on Sunday evenings thereafter their cruiser could be observed tucked in behind a billowing arbor of juniper at the head of the alley, lights dimmed, polished metal chassis impossible not to notice gleaming under moonlight.

There was, everyone in the neighbourhood soon learned, a pair of contentious silhouettes within: one, Patrolman Patrick Mahoney, who represented our tomorrows, youthfully eager and blissfully ignorant; the other, Constable McManus, representing our past, wearied by the futility of it all, fearful that others were not more so.

The constable's thoughts during these stakeouts often drifted to a lake somewhere, the policeman in a skiff with a hearty lunch and some fishing tackle, the afternoon devoted not to the capture of felons but the arrest of an imaginary rainbow trout. In McManus's wandering reverie, the only resistance offered was the tug of a gentle current.

O'Donnell's association with the membership was fortuitous and came when he was a year this side of the legal driving age. One morning on his way to school he happened to notice Ed Levine stacking beer bottles in the alley.

"Don't want them empties, Ed?"

Though stooped, the club president, once unfolded, was a strapping fellow. His hair was generously Brylcreamed and carefully coiffed in the style of the times. Like the other fellows in the club he favoured tight jeans and pointed black shoes buffed to a fine gloss. The more clean-cut crowd at school considered Ed and his hotrod pals first-class dorks, which of course they were. The intensity of the former's dislike accounted for O'Donnell's attraction to the latter.

"Finders keepers," Ed said.

Removing the empties progressed to cleaning out the garage after meetings and washing the car following its last shift of the week. Soon O'Donnell was sweeping the floor of roaches and soaking spare parts in gasoline. Ed reimbursed him with a couple of dollars per week in empties and the privilege of entering his name on the club's waiting list.

Initially, this opportunity interested O'Donnell not at all. In time he could think of nothing else.

As clubhouse waterboy, his presence at assemblies was at first resented. Eventually, though, the membership grew accustomed to his freckled face and sometimes the fellas would allow him a chug from their bottles. A liberal few permitted the occasional hit of hemp.

His responsibilities included collecting dues and facilitating the two weekly draws. Hourly on meeting nights, he would run up the alley and spy on McManus. The head of the young policeman was usually buried between sports pages while the senior officer, when not snoozing, squinted over a notebook or gazed contemplatively at the stars.

The boy enhanced his standing with club members by circling in behind the cruiser one dark, blustery eve, ducking the shafts of light falling from the neat row of houses lining the alley, and expertly deflating a tire with Ernie Cleary's hunting knife.

That summer puberty took hold. His temperature soared. It was as if O'Donnell was seized by a virus. The tales the members told of their conquests suddenly had a special interest for him. The boy began reaching for himself under the sheets. The membership called it *hitchhiking to heaven*.

In the beginning, he, too, did not believe the Dodge possessed powers rendering the most stubborn of vixens vulnerable. But as O'Donnell matured he began to note the undeniable affection females expressed toward the operator of the car once they had climbed into its roomy interior. It seemed that when a girl was reclining on its lumpy upholstery something happened to catholic convictions, something eerily chromosomal. Once that car was parked in a remote locale garments were hastily shed and its occupants consentingly joined.

Even the membership was bewitched. Lean an ear against the wall of Ed Levine's garage and listen:

"I'd been trying to get her attention forever," testified Len Baxter of Sandra Gibson, a straw-haired senior renowned for her muscular calves. "Offered her a ride home one day and she starts disrobing before we're outta the school zone!"

Vincent Sardalucci figured the car's powers of seduction were connected to the exhaust emissions. He had a painfully detailed theory that because of his limited English remained incomprehensible.

"All I do was say, 'Hey, you need lift?' and she say, 'Why

not?' I think, 'Okay, chickie!' "

The Sicilian beauty Nicole Passolini, she with the painted, full-lipped pout, with eyes the colour of a high sky, after having accepted Vince's offer of a ride, was, it was whispered, with child.

Randy Dunning believed that years earlier a jazz musician smoked a powerful reefer in the Dodge. A serious fan of science-fiction, he theorized that the fumes were likely trapped inside the car's ventilation system. "Once the gals inhale the imprisoned smoke," Randy speculated, "they flip."

He pulled from the pockets of his jean jacket a pair of pink panties that until the previous Friday night had warmed the shapely buttocks of 11B's Kathy Fuller. When an item of female underclothing was captured it would be groped and sniffed, fondled and fingered by the membership before being hoisted like a championship pennant to a beam in the musty reaches of the clubhouse.

The only souvenir not so displayed was a black callgirl's alluring lace garter. It dangled seductively from the Dodge's rearview mirror, where, with the windows rolled down and the accelerator to the floor, it flapped in the breeze like the Union Jack. This exotic laurel was something for the members to aspire to, a glimpse of the possible.

On an insufferably muggy summer night that July, the curtains hanging limp at his open bedroom window, O'Donnell decided to be the next member of the Dodge Car Club. Like all ambitions this one was easier declared than accomplished.

Here was his dilemma: According to the rules, new members could not be voted into the fraternity until a standing member had exited. Constable McManus had recently collared Lonnie Davidson descending from a window not his own with a shirtful of silverware. Everyone assumed he would soon be joining Bruce Moran at the prison farm. If so, Lonnie would be expelled from the club not because he couldn't make it to meetings but because he was stupid enough to get nabbed – *Rule # 25*.

Those on the waiting list were aware of Lonnie's troubles and had already begun their lobbying. The membership was being showered with everything from discount admissions at strip clubs to switchblades from Tijuana.

To gauge the support for his membership bid O'Donnell took an informal poll at the next meeting. Although his name was well down the list, his position as clubhouse serf afforded him a kind of honorary status. Most agreed he deserved the nod. Boldly flattening the cop car tires was most frequently cited as the reason.

The three members planning to vote for friends had to be encouraged to reconsider. At first O'Donnell mulled over the conventional approaches: bribery and threats. But he had nothing substantial to offer if he chose the first and would be easily punched out were he to attempt the second.

And then it came to him. Everybody in the club wanted the Dodge on Sundays as well as a weekly shift complementing their schedules. Danny Livingstone, Garry Shutt and Paul Cranston were the three who had no intention of offering their support. O'Donnell approached the problem in a manner consistent with the traditions of the club.

Though it would have meant his ability to reproduce had he been discovered, the plan was remarkably easy. The boy collected names in his usual fashion, circling the garage with an empty oil can. With the exception of the conspiring trio, no one appeared to notice the scrap of paper he'd so dexterously palmed. Danny Livingstone, Garry Shut and Paul Cranston, in that order, won the next three Sunday bonus draws.

There was one more obstacle to overcome: O'Donnell couldn't drive. *Rule #5* stated membership would not be considered unless the applicant possessed a legal driving certificate. Lonnie Davidson would be going away soon. The boy had to teach himself quick.

He took advantage of Dodge downtime to familiarize himself with the machine. Whenever the car slumbered he sat behind its wheel practicing the smooth shifting of gears, learner's manual resting in his lap, the glossy, air-brushed wantonness of Ed Levine's calendar girls an exhortation to his aspirations.

"How long before I'm in?"

"Depends, kid," said Pete Dombrowski. "Maybe never." Pete had dropped by the clubhouse to replace a gasket. O'Donnell held a light.

"What's your guess? Ballpark."

Dombrowski slammed the hood and wiped his hands. "Members decide by secret ballot. List don't mean fuck-all."

"Getting' my licence soon," O'Donnell reminded him.

Pete slid in behind the wheel and fired up the car. The engine roared to life.

"Don't go celebratin' yet, squirt."

Soon he had mastered the clutch and was parking the car in the alley for its weekly cleansing. Then he was stealing runs around the block, peeling rubber through the neighbourhood. After only a few weeks he was taking spins around Stanley Park, once venturing as far as the ferry terminal at Horseshoe Bay.

Mr. Levine was usually waiting for him when he returned. They had this unspoken agreement. The senior Levine wouldn't inform the membership of the boy's unauthorized excursions if O'Donnell remained silent about his afternoon liaisons with a certain housewife.

Pressure to influence the outcome of the draw was especially intense the first Sunday in May, as *Car and Driver*

magazine invited all interested associations to enter a vehicle in the *Spring Festival* gala. The winner that particular Sunday had the privilege of powering the Dodge along the flower and bunting-bedecked parade route. It was an opportunity to mingle with the fez-capped Shriners and fool with their bagpipes.

Beauty queens from surrounding municipalities were distributed in the various automobiles and floats, where, attired in snug-hugging bathing outfits and smelling of newfangled lotions and perfumes, they would wave like royalty and blow kisses to fairgoers. Drivers were expected to see the girls home afterwards.

The previous year Ed had won – a sure fix, many members figured, as it was his third consecutive victory. The club president subsequently bedded Miss *Home & Garden*, an onyx-eyed filly with glazed lips and a bosom embellished with Kleenex. A photo of the lovebirds was published in *The Shopping Sentinel*, a copy of which was posted in the clubhouse gallery and promptly defaced. The graffiti was most unkind.

O'Donnell passed his driver's test on the first try. The membership allowed him to take the road test on the Dodge. His manner had been confident, his parallel park masterful. That same week, failed cat burglar Lonnie Davidson was sentenced to six months. A vote followed. It was unanimous: O'Donnell was in.

The others began approaching him in the weeks leading up to the *Spring Festival* draw. Most showed up at his house unannounced or called late at night, each believing he was the only one to think such a thought. O'Donnell saw no reason to dissuade anyone from believing otherwise.

"Just wanted to congratulate you," Ed Levine, the first, perjured. "Like *All-Star Wrestling*?" From ringside seats they saw Gene Kiniski battle Killer Kowalski. Perspiration reached them in the first row.

Pete Dumbrowski offered a hooker.

"She'll go down on you," he promised. "She don't, I will."

Some of the members were cheapskates. Len Worthington proffered a pack of smokes and a flip-top lighter. Dave Manwaring slipped him a couple of discount coupons for *Wally's Burgers* and a much-abused skin mag. O'Donnell's chuckwagon and fries were scrumptious. He swapped the magazine – the gals perversely voluminous – for a package of chocolate *Ding Dongs*.

Vincent Sardalucci, recently wed and already the father of twin boys, wanted to set him up with his sister, the one with the moustache. Otto Schultz promised retribution if he didn't win the draw. His exact words were: "Read your history book, little man. We know how to hurt."

The ambience in the clubhouse the evening of the *Spring Festival* draw was celebratory. Beer chilled in the cooler; generously rolled joints circled amongst the assemblage. The radio pounded out the Top Ten. All wore clean t-shirts.

"Okay," Ed Levine said. "It's time."

The radio was killed. Members dropped their entries into the oil can. O'Donnell's, as tradition called for, went in last. The club president held the oil can above his head and gave it a prolonged shaking. He passed it to the boy.

"Ed wins again," someone hissed, "he dies."

"Ladies and gentlemen," O'Donnell began, reaching inside, eyeing each supplicant …

Members crossed fingers and nibbled hangnails. They squeezed crosses, mouthed prayers, stroked lucky charms.

"The winner of the Spring Festival draw this year is …"

It was so quiet inside Ed's garage you could hear air escaping a flat.

For the winner of the Dodge Car Club draw the experience was everything the previous attendees had said it would be. Five leggy beauties piled into the vehicle for the languorous cruise along the parade route.

Miss *Brake & Muffler* was instantly besotted with the club's appreciative representative. Later that same evening, the smoke from the barbecue pits dissipating, the last notes from the bandstand fading, the couple took a spin up Little Mountain. There, under a draping laurel vine, foreign-flagged ships anchored in the harbor below, a magnanimous Miss *Brake & Muffler* shared with our boy the qualities that had earned her that coveted title.

Sadly, but perhaps also inevitably, it was the club's final involvement with the festival. Adulthood beckoning, the membership soon disbanded. Ed's garage, like the remnants of any declining empire, encouraged by the cumulative efforts of resident termites, flopped over one gusty afternoon in a cloud of dust.

Because he didn't know what else to do, Ed applied to the military. Because its brass didn't know any better, he was accepted. Mr. Levine ran off with Mrs. Schultz, providing son Otto with a more worthy recipient than O'Donnell of his people's special skills.

Like pontiffs and presidents, the boy changed his route to school. Eventually he stopped attending classes altogether. No one seems to know what happened to the Dodge. Like Miss *Brake & Muffler* it just up and vanished, its powers exhausted, its once-noble presence devoured by rust.

Constable McManus retired to a place not unlike the lake of his imaginings. On torpid summer afternoons, his rowboat drifting in the reeds, he often wondered about that car and the ruffians who deified it. He went on to an old folks' home and then his grave without learning more, to

his last breath believing civilization at its end.

Years later a Police Museum was built at the rear of the stationhouse. A call went out for exhibits. The constable's widow was invited to submit items of interest. She donated her late husband's many citations, his oft-used billyclub and, because he always wrote everything down at the end of each shift, his logbooks, by this time unopened for almost two decades.

Sergeant Patrick Mahoney went by the house to collect the historic property. He stayed for tea. Curiously, he had inherited McManus's fears, regularly reminding his own rookie ride-along – a dim thing named Carmichael – that present-day hooligans were like no other. Rap, he lectured the greenhorn, was their anthem, crack the final poison. He wanted to admonish the Widow McManus regarding his concerns, but when he glanced up from his Orange Pekoe he discovered her dozing.

On the return trip downtown, the belongings beside him on the front seat, the policeman paused at a traffic light. A rogue wind wafted in through an open window, ruffling the pages of one of the logbooks. The policeman's eyes happened to fall upon an entry. The words, when he understood their significance, made him chuckle. Not at his late partner but – for he had also inherited some of the man's sagacity – at himself.

"Huns advancing," McManus had written so very long ago. "We haven't much time."

For my uncle who wept every time he sliced a papaya in half

Was it the idea of separation,
the way the onyx seeds hung
on like a useless chandelier's
teardrop, glass reflections
of your exiled life in Miami?

Was it how dull the knives
had become, or the soft
music from a neighbour's yard,
a year in which the downpours
drowned your tomato crop?

Was it the pale yellow of flesh
that reminded you of a woman's
breasts you had once touched,
cupped in your hand like a glass
pitcher, warm to the touch, supple?

Was it the hard rind that prevents
so much damage over the years,
like these scars from falling off
rooftops where you worked
tarring and tiling?

Was it the reminder of uselessness,
how once you cut something in half,
you can't put it back together again,
how once you remove a boy from home,
no other island will do? What was it?

– Virgil Suarez

David Bezmozgis

An Animal to the Memory

In 1988 I was in the seventh grade at *Associated Hebrew Day School* in Toronto. It was a private school and the only reason I was able to attend was because of the special arrangements made for the poor Russian Jews. Eight years after arriving in Toronto, my father was still working as a weightlifting trainer and massage therapist at an Italian community centre and my mother was doing only slightly better as a mechanical engineer at a struggling conveyor-belt company. I never liked *Associated* and had few friends. By the sixth grade I wanted to leave and go to a public school, but my parents refused. It wasn't for nothing that they'd left the Soviet Union. In Canada I would get what I could never have gotten in Latvia. As far as they were concerned, I wasn't leaving Hebrew school until I learned what it was to be a Jew.

To make up for being poor, I was big. Inheriting my father's physique, I was one of the biggest kids at school. Every night I did one hundred push-ups before bed and another hundred first thing in the morning. At twelve, I could also already perform fifteen consecutive pull-ups. And, by the seventh grade, I had learned enough about being a Jew to imagine that if the Holocaust happened again, my father and I would be among the people selected to go to the right. I wasn't so sure about my mother. Because she was overweight, I rehearsed myself for the possibility of her death.

That April, before Passover, I put Jerry Ackerman in the hospital. Every Tuesday and Thursday, on his way to the Italian community centre, my father would drop me off at school in his red 1970 Volvo. On Friday, after swim, Jerry Ackerman said something about Solly Birnbaum's small hairless penis and Solly started to cry. Solly was the goalie on my hockey team. Jerry Ackerman and I had never been friends.

"Ackerman, if I had your tweezer-dick I wouldn't talk."

"Why are you looking at my dick, gaylord?"

"Ackerman thought he had a pubic hair until he pissed out of it!"

"Fuck you, Berman, and that red shitbox your father drives."

In Rabbi Gurvich's office, Dr. Ackerman said that I had banged Jerry's head so hard against the wall that I had given him a concussion. Dr. Ackerman said that Jerry vomited three times that night and that they'd had to drive him to the hospital at two in the morning. Dr. Ackerman asked, "What kind of sick person, what kind of animal would do this?" When I refused to answer, my mother apologized to Dr. and Mrs. Ackerman and also to Jerry.

This wasn't the first time my mother and I had been called to Gurvich's office. Over the course of that year, I had been called into Gurvich's office five or six times. I had a very short temper and, with the right kind of provocation, would not hesitate to hit someone in the face. A month before I gave Jerry Ackerman his concussion, I'd gotten into a fight during lunch with two eighth-graders. Because of kosher laws, the school forbade bringing meat for lunch. The Canadian kids brought peanut butter or tuna-fish, but I – and most of the other Russian students – would invariably arrive at school with smoked Hungarian salami, Polish bologna, roast turkey. With clear Soviet logic, our mothers couldn't comprehend how someone would choose to eat

peanuts in a country that didn't know what it meant to have a shortage of smoked meat. And so, I was already sensitive about my lunch when the two kids from eighth grade passed by my table and asked me how I liked my pork sandwich.

At *Associated*, we had two principals, Rabbi Gurvich and Mr. Soble. Rabbi Gurvich was the disciplinarian and, unless you were sent to his office, was rarely seen. He was an imposing man. Dark, brooding, unsmiling, Gurvich also possessed a gruff seismic voice that invested everything he said with authority. Mr. Soble was older and milder. He was a Holocaust survivor and, that year, had published his memoirs. His book was called *Dachau Prisoner 89013* and had a picture of him on the front cover as a young man in his concentration camp pajamas. Everyone was encouraged to buy Mr. Soble's book, and most of us did. We ordered in advance and the book arrived in April, just in time for Holocaust Remembrance Day. Mr. Soble came by and signed every copy with the traditional Holocaust imperative: *Yizkor; al tishkach! – Remember; don't forget!*

Holocaust Remembrance Day – which we called Holocaust Day for short – was one of a series of occasions that punctuated the school year. The year's passage was marked by holidays beginning with Rosh Hashana in September and ending with Israeli Independence Day in May. For Channukah, the school provided jelly donuts and Art Class was spent making Maccabi swords and shields out of paper maché; for Purim, everyone dressed up in costume and a pageant was organized at which we all cheered and celebrated the hanging of evil Hamman and his ten evil sons; for Passover, every class held a preparatory seder and we boarded buses for a field trip to the matzah bakery; for Israeli Independence Day, we dressed in blue and white and marched around the schoolyard waving flags and singing the Hatikvah, our national anthem.

Holocaust Day was different. Preparations were made days in advance. It was the one thing Rabbi Gurvich oversaw personally. The long basement hallway, from the gymnasium to the pool, was converted into a Holocaust museum. Out of storage came the pictures pasted on bristol-board. There were photocopies of Jewish passports, there were archival photos of Jews in cattlecars, starving Jews in ghettos, naked Ukranian Jews waiting at the edge of an open trench, Jews with their hands on barbed wire waiting to be liberated, ovens, schematic drawings of the gas chambers, pictures of empty cans of Zyklon B. Other bristol-boards had Yiddish songs written in the ghettos, in the camps. We had crayon drawings done by children in Theresienstadt. We had a big map of Europe with different coloured pins and accurate statistics. Mr. Soble donated his Dachau pajamas; someone's grandmother contributed a jacket with a yellow Star on it. There were also sculptures. A woman kneeling with a baby in her arms in bronze. A tin reproduction of the gates of Birkenau with the words *Arbeit Mach Frei*. Sculptures of flaming Stars of David, sculptures of piles of shoes, sculptures of sad bearded Polish rabbis. In the centre of the hallway was a large menorah, and all along the walls were smaller memorial candles – one candle each for every European country. On Holocaust Day, the fluorescents were extinguished and we moved through the basement by dim candlelight.

I was suspended for two days after my fight with Jerry Ackerman. Sparing words, Gurvich made it clear that this was never to happen again. The next time he saw me in his office would be the last. To hit someone's head against a wall – did I ever think what that could do? If I got so much as within ten feet of Ackerman, he didn't want to say what would happen. He asked me if I understood. My mother said I understood. He asked me if I had anything to say. I knew that what I had to say was not what he wanted to hear. For my two days at home, I fantasized about killing both Ackerman and Gurvich.

I returned to school the week of Holocaust Day. I avoided Ackerman and his friends. With the exception of swim-and-gym, we didn't have any of the same classes. In the mornings I saw him grinning and saying things about me as I got my books from my locker; at lunch I made sure to eat at the other end of the cafeteria; at recess, if he was playing, then I abstained from tennis-ball soccer.

For Holocaust Day we were called down into the basement by grades. The hallway was long and, arranged in orderly columns, an entire grade could fit into the basement at one time. After Gurvich made the announcement over the intercom, we followed our teachers down. We were quiet on the way and silent once we got there. Some people started crying before we got down into the basement, others started to cry when we reached the dimness and saw the photos on the walls. As we filed in, Gurvich stood waiting for us beside the menorah. When everyone was in the basement, the double doors were closed behind us and we waited for Gurvich to start. Because the hallway was extremely reverberant, Gurvich's deliberate pause was filled with the intermittent echo of stifled sobs, and because there were no windows and the pool was so close, the basement was stuffy and smelled of chlorine.

Gurvich began the service by telling us about the six million, about the vicious Nazis, about our history of oppression. His heavy voice occupied the entire space, and when he intoned the *Keil Maleh Rachamim*, the prayer for the dead, I felt his voice reach into me, down into that place where my grandmother said I had that thing called my "Jewish soul". Gurvich sang: *Keil maleh rachamim, shochen meromim,*

hamtzeh menuchah nechonah al kanfey ha shechinah – O God, full of compassion, who dwells on high, grant true rest upon the wings of the Divine Presence. And when he sang this, his harsh baritone filled with grief so that it was no longer his own; his voice belonged to the six million. Every syllable that came out of his mouth was important. The sounds he made were the product of a long tradition of Jewish mourning. I didn't understand how it was possible for Gurvich not to cry when his voice sounded the way it did.

After Gurvich said the Kaddish, we slowly made our way through the memorial. I stopped by photos of the Warsaw ghetto during the uprising and then beside a portrait of Mordecai Anilewicz, the leader of the ghetto resistance. I noticed Ackerman behind me. He was with two friends and I turned around to look.

"What are you looking at, assface?"

I turned away. It was hard for me not to hit him. I concentrated on moving down the hallway. I felt a shove from behind and lost my balance. I managed to catch myself along the wall. My hand landed safely on top of a child's crayon drawing, but my foot accidentally knocked over the Czech memorial candle. Everybody in the hallway froze at the sound of breaking glass. I turned around and saw Ackerman snickering. Matthew Wise, Ackerman's best friend, stood between me and Ackerman. Wise was bigger than Ackerman, and I was sure he was the one who had pushed me. Instinctively, I lunged at Wise and tackled him to the ground. I was on top and choking him when Gurvich grabbed the back of my shirt and tried to pulled me off. Even as Gurvich pulled me away I held onto Wise's throat. And when Gurvich finally yanked me clear, I saw that Wise was still on the floor, trembling.

While the rest of my class finished going through the memorial, I waited upstairs in Gurvich's office. I waited, also, until the sixth grade went down to the memorial, before Gurvich returned. When he walked into his office, he didn't sit down, and, without looking at me, he told me to get up out of my goddamn chair and go back downstairs. I was not to touch anything, I was not to move, I was to stay there until he came.

Back in the basement I waited for Gurvich by the menorah. I didn't know where else to stand. I didn't know where in the memorial my presence would be the least offensive to Gurvich. I stood in one place beside a picture of Jews looking out of their bunks, and somehow I felt that my standing there would anger Gurvich. I moved over to the sculptures and felt the same way.

I was tracing the ironwork on the menorah when Gurvich pushed the double-doors open and entered. Very deliberately, as if he didn't know what to say first, Gurvich walked over to where I stood. I took my hands off the menorah.

"How is it that all of this doesn't mean anything to you, Berman? Can you tell me that?"

"It means something."

"It means something? It means something when you jump on another Jew in this place, on Holocaust Day? This is how you demonstrate it means something?"

He raised his voice.

"It means something when you act like an animal to the memory of everyone who died?"

"What about Wise? He was the one that started it."

"Wise had to go home because of what you did, so don't ask me about Wise. Wise wasn't the one choking another Jew at a memorial for the Holocaust."

I didn't say anything. Gurvich tugged at his beard.

"Look around this, Berman, what do you see?"

I looked.

"The Holocaust."

"And does this make you feel anything?"

"Yes."

"Yes? It does?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you. I don't believe you feel anything."

He put his hand on my shoulder. He leaned in closer.

"Berman, a Nazi wouldn't do here what you did today. Don't tell me about how you feel."

"I'm not a Nazi."

"No, you're not a Nazi? What are you?"

"I'm a Jew," I said quietly.

"What?"

"A Jew."

"I can't hear you."

"I'm a Jew."

"Why so quiet, Berman? It's just us here. Don't be so ashamed to say it."

"I'm a Jew," I said into my shoes.

He turned me around by my shoulder. I may have been strong for my age, but when he gripped me I understood that mine was a boy's shoulder and that his was a man's hand. He put his face very close to mine and made me look at him. I could smell his beard. I felt I was going to cry.

"So that my uncles hear you in Treblinka!" he commanded.

He tightened his grip on my shoulder until he saw it hurt. I was convinced he was going to hit me. The last thing I wanted to do was start crying, so I started crying.

"I'm a Jew!" I shouted into his face.

My voice echoed off the walls, and off the sculptures and the pictures and the candles. I had screamed it in his face wishing to kill him, but he only nodded his head. He kept

his hand on my shoulder and waited until I really started to sob. He kept his hand on my shoulder, nodded his head and kept looking at me. My shoulder shuddered under his hand and I couldn't stop myself from making crying noises. Finally, Gurvich took his hand off me and backed away a half step. As soon as he did, I wanted him to put his hand back. I was standing in the middle of the hallway, shaking. I wanted to sit down on the floor, or lean against a wall, something. Anything but stand in the middle of that hallway while Gurvich nodded his rabbinical head at me. When he was done nodding, he turned away and opened the double-doors leading up to the stairs. Halfway out, before closing the doors and leaving me alone in the basement, Gurvich looked back to where I hadn't moved.

"Now, Berman," he said, "now maybe you know what it is to be a Jew."

Michael Therrien

The Agent

Mara wrote at her glass-top desk. *Dear Mr. Ferrick: given the current state of the economy …*

She shook her head, felt her chestnut-brown hair brush her neck. "No," she told the empty den which also served as her office. "That's no good. He'll get really upset if I write that and I'll never hear the end of it." Mara considered what to write as she chewed on her pen.

Dear Jay. Yeah, that was better. The friendly, personal approach. *As one of the longest represented writers of the Mara Literary Agency I find it difficult to … .* Yeah, that would be received much better, she told herself, although the thought did not sit well with her.

Mara finished her letter to Jay Ferrick and sealed it in one of her light-blue *Mara Literary Services* engraved envelopes. She was not happy about having to write it. She never particularly enjoyed dumping her clients, but when the quality of their work continually diminished in an increasingly more competitive market, well, she simply couldn't afford to spend any more of her time trying to sell it.

Business. It's just business, Mara convinced herself.

Mara shrugged into her winter coat and boots, grabbed the letter and walked out into the cold December morning to put the envelope inside her mailbox. She lifted the thin metal lid, its frozen hinges squeaking in protest, and gently placed the envelope inside the box, where her hand lingered on the envelope as she briefly reconsidered her decision to drop Jay Ferrick from her stable of writers. She shook her head, confirming her decision, and closed the lid. It snapped shut with a finality that sealed Jay Ferrick's fate. Mara watched her white breath float toward the winter sky. It was done and it was for the best. She smiled to herself, oddly comforted by the biting wind. This is what the weather should be like when you have to make tough decisions, the setting used to convey mood, she thought as she made her way back to the house.

After sweeping the dusting of snow off her front porch Mara went into the house, removed her heavy coat and clunky boots and headed to the kitchen to fix herself a pot of comforting, relaxing, lemon tea. She needed lemon tea today. Mara looked at the kitchen clock. It was 10:45. Her husband would be home shortly.

Forty minutes later Mara heard the Jeep pull into the driveway. She put down her pen and defensively picked up her rose-printed teacup. She listened to heavy footsteps crunching in the snow.

Any minute now and he would enter.

Sighing, Mara got up from her desk and went to her favourite chair, a lime-green stuffed and patched old relic dating back to the days when her parents had owned their farmhouse. She turned it so that she faced the door. Mara shivered as a gust of sub-zero wind rattled the windows. A man entered the house and quickly slammed the door behind him, intent on keeping the cold out. The loud noise made Mara jump in her chair.

Mara sipped her tea, relishing its warmth and the subtle lemon taste. She looked at the tall man with the red hat and matching red scarf as he stood on the rug, brushing

non-existent snowflakes from his shoulders. She smiled at him, her lips concealed behind the teacup. Some day, she thought, I'm going to write about this.

Her husband mumbled something about the cold. He looked up and smiled perfunctorily at Mara when he noticed her sitting in the chair. "Damn cold out there this morning," he repeated, shaking off his coat with a series of shoulder shrugs and arm contortions. He began to rifle through the mail he had picked up.

Mara sat, quietly sipping her tea, her fingers painfully tight around the tea cup.

"Damn bills. I sure wish that you could sell some of my work so that we could … ." His eyes flashed upon the envelope with his name freshly typed on it and he smiled. "What's this? A cheque?" he asked Mara, his eyebrows raised.

Mara smiled back a thin smile. Her eyes were fixed on her husband's puzzled eyes as he ripped open the envelope with cold, clumsy red fingers. She watched his face comically scrunch up as he read and tried to understand what she had written.

"What's this?" he repeated, still smiling uncertainly.

Mara remained silent.

"What *is* this?" he repeated again, his tone changing registers. He shook the letter at Mara.

"It's just what it says, Jay. I can't be your agent any more," Mara whispered.

Jay's smile faltered, struggling to stay on a face that was frowning more and more. "Are you serious? This is a joke, isn't it?" he continued to wave the ensnared letter at arm's length in Mara's direction. His legs were unwilling to take a step closer.

"Honey, look. I have other clients now and I can sell their work. You know … I try just as hard, harder as a matter of fact, to sell yours, but frankly –"

"Frankly, what?"

"Well, frankly, it just isn't as good as what others are writing."

Jay was silent. He remained in the doorway, giving Mara the impression that he was suddenly afraid to step onto the wooden floor, as if realizing for the first time that maybe the solidity of his world was in fact just a sham, *a chimera*, Mara thought.

"What the hell are you saying, Mara?" Jay asked, the smile completely gone from his face.

"Just what the letter says, Jay. I'm letting you go, Honey. Try and get yourself another agent, if you think that someone will –"

"You bitch!" he shouted, the words coming out with such force that his red hat slid off to one side of his head. It remained anchored in place by a red ear.

"Jay, don't –"

"How *dare* you to do this to me! Do you know who I am?" he asked, his cheeks flushed red with humiliation or the cold morning air, Mara could not tell which.

"Don't be that way, Jay. This is just business, nothing personal. I just don't have the time anymore to peddle –"

"I was your first writer!" Jay spat out. "I started you on your *career* as an agent!" he screamed, firing the words out as if they were bullets. "You and your fucking B.A. in English Lit!" Mara said nothing, knowing there would be more words and insults. She felt as if she were reading someone's first play, predicting every bad line. She looked at her husband as he stood on the beige entrance rug, his red knitted scarf – Christmas '97 present – wrapped loosely around his neck. With his red hat still perched precariously on the side of his head, he made Mara think of a jester painted by Picasso in his pink period. Mara looked at her husband and she could not tell if she was going to laugh or cry. If he didn't remove the damn hat and scarf soon, she thought, she might do both.

"I … I can't believe this!" Jay sputtered.

"Oh, come on, Jay! Get over it!" Mara said, lowering her teacup. "You've spent more time this year getting drunk than you have writing. And what you've written really isn't worth the paper that it's printed on. You remember that last story you wrote? About Stephen King getting caught in one of his own nightmarish stories? Christ! And to top it all off, ol' Stevie gets rescued by none other than Tom Wolfe! Jay! Come on!" Mara looked into her husband's grey eyes and knew that she should stop. Right now. She knew that the next words would hurt him even more, but they slipped past her lips before she could hold them back. "It's not even very *intelligent*, much less imaginative and well-written. Jay, it's not even Canadian literature!" It was unfortunate, but this was the only way that Jay, poor stupid old Jay, would ever understand.

"I see," he whispered, taking off his hat in defeat. It was a start, thought Mara. Now she might only cry.

"How long have you wanted to dump me?" he asked softly.

"Jay, just forget it. Don't do this to us. Don't do it to yourself. It doesn't have to end this way." Mara looked into her empty cup. She would soon have to leave the comfort and security of her chair to get herself a refill. Business first, though. She watched as her husband mechanically untied his boots and placed them neatly on the rug, one beside the other, off to the left corner, as he always did. He stuffed his red hat inside his coat sleeve and then hung the coat up on the brass coat rack by the door, all very deliberate acts that told Mara that her husband was taking the news badly.

"I was your first writer, Mara," he told his ex-agent matter-of-factly as he walked by her chair on his way into the

kitchen. Mara winced. Those words went deep, as Jay knew they would.

"Tea's made," she called out in a shaky voice. Jay did not reply, but Mara heard the cups rattle in the cupboard as he reached for one.

After a few moments Jay walked back into the bright sun-filled den and sat down at his cluttered desk, placing a chipped Quebec Nordiques ceramic cup on a stack of unfinished manuscripts. He swivelled his chair around to face Mara. His black hair had been flattened by both hat and sweat, and his appearance reminded Mara of the Three Stooges' Moe. She had to look away, the urge to laugh or cry welling up again.

"I'm sorry, Jay," Mara managed to say.

Jay looked at her and shook his head. "What about your legal obligations to represent me?"

"There *are* no obligations, Jay," she replied, with a shake of the head.

"What about my contract?"

"You never wanted one drawn up, remember? You said you didn't want to get tied up with me in case a *real* agent happened along."

"But … there's still an unwritten contract, an agreement between a writer and his –"

"No, Jay," Mara interrupted. "I'm sorry. It's over," she added flatly.

Jay looked at his wife and suddenly realized that he had more at stake than losing a literary agent.

"What do you mean, *it's over*?" he asked. Jay stared at his wife and all he could see were her blond bangs above the cup.

Mara felt Jay staring at her, but she would not meet his eyes. Her teacup felt so smooth and cool in her hands. She looked at Jay. "I mean us, as a couple. We're through. Before you say anything, I've already contacted a lawyer."

Jay's cheeks, which had only now returned to their natural colour, turned beet-red again.

"So! This is what this is all about, then," he accused, pointing at the crumpled letter from *Mara Literary Services*, which he had flung onto his desk.

"No. But I don't think that I could still represent you fairly as my ex-husband, even if I wanted to. Which I don't."

Minutes passed in silence as Jay and Mara looked at each other, two angry dogs sizing up their strengths and weaknesses, each finding only indifference and fatigue reflected in the other's eyes.

"Is there someone else?" Jay suddenly asked.

"Yes, there is," Mara replied.

"I knew it! Who is he?"

"That's none of your business, really." Mara tried to tear her eyes away from Jay's. The pain in them was too much for her to bear. No one should show that much of himself to the world. No one. Not even poor, stupid Jay.

Mara's soon to be ex-husband sipped at his tea and seemed to smile at the floor as he considered her reply. "No, no, no," Jay finally said, shaking his head. "It *is* my business, dammit!"

Mara weighed the consequences of her words. "You're right, Jay, it is your business."

"Well, then. Who is he?" he demanded again.

"It's Charlene. She's the new writer I was telling you about a couple of months ago?" Jay was silent. "We've been meeting on and off. We think that we have a future together."

Jay slumped in his chair, his chest sinking as if all the air were being slowly and painfully sucked out of him. "A *woman*?" he asked incredulously.

"A woman," Mara confirmed.

"But … you're married! To a man! To me! I … I never knew," Jay whined, trying to find the words that would express his confusion.

"I didn't know myself. Until I met Charlene."

"I never knew," Jay repeated as if he had not heard Mara.

Silence.

"When are you moving out?" he asked, still in shock, but feeling the need to hear himself talk, to at least ask the question, however much it tore at him.

Mara clutched her cup tighter. She breathed in sharply as she prepared the next volley of words. "I'm not. You are," she said, her eyes narrowing slightly.

Jay thought about his wife's, his ex-wife's, answer and smiled. This absurd day would be one to remember. God, he needed a drink. He put his cup down without looking to see where or what the cup would stain, and he laughed bitterly. "Now, let me see if I've got this straight. First of all, I lose my agent. Then, I lose my wife, *to another woman*, mind you … and now you're telling me that I'm losing my house, too. Right? Is this basically what's happened to me in the last half hour? Have I missed anything else?"

"No, you're right, basically," Mara said, wishing that Charlene was with her now.

Jay shook his head. "What can I say?" he asked. "What can I do?"

Mara studied Jay's face for a moment and then replied, "Get yourself a lawyer, Jay. Get yourself a good lawyer."

John Curry

The Medina Wall

"Comment ça va? Hablo Español? Deutsche? Must be English? You American, buddy?"

The thin-framed Moroccan pressed near the Western men.

He had shiny black hair and a faint moustache shading his upper lip. They felt his hot breath from where they stood inside the cool shadow, cast by the towering medina wall. The colour of wheat at harvest, the ancient barrier circumscribed the white-washed old city.

"Not speak, huh?"

Thom glanced at the Aussie, who was pinching his left ear lobe. Like a catcher signalling his pitcher, they'd learned to communicate in a private language composed of gesture, which now confirmed that the one before them could be dealt with. Six weeks backpacking through Morocco had provided experience to negotiate the street hustle, and they'd avoided several mishaps through this often-used technique.

"How can I help you, friend?" Thom said, offering his hand to the slight Moroccan, who grasped it with his right hand, covering their clasp with his left as an oyster its pearl.

"Have you journeyed far to visit our medina?"

"Been reading about it for months," Thom said, dog-eared guidebook in hand.

"Just off the trek up Mount Toubkal," the Aussie added.

"I will show you this medina."

"How much for the two of us, student price?" the Aussie asked. He retrieved a small money exchanger from his pocket and prepared his index finger for input. Robert was proud of his frugality and had boasted to Thom of spending a mere *nine-hundred and twenty-two* US *dollars and fifty-seven* US *cents* during his trip overland from Sydney, across Asia, destination London. Now, on his return, he was determined to spend even less travelling south through Africa. Robert was by no means cheap. On his pencil-etched spreadsheet, filling the back flap of his torn, leather-bound journal, he kept a charity column in which he marked donations daily.

Dressed in a pressed white-cotton robe, the guide took a moment to answer, as if remembering lines to a difficult monologue. "How much? How much would one pay to view a sacred sight? Would you like to discover the secrets of the grandest medina on earth? I will show you what no other guide can, jewels of the old city. Come with me now, enter the maze of Morocco."

"Thirty-five dirhams ought to do it, friend?" Thom said, lured by the guide's lyrical English.

Robert punched the figure into his exchanger and communicated the appropriateness of the sum through a casual, almost dainty, scratch to the bridge of his prominent, freckled nose. He watched the American haggle, amused by the change.

According to the timer on Robert's yellow diver's watch, they'd met *fifty-three days, two hours, and thirty-four minutes* earlier on the ferry in Gibraltar, where in the spring of 1985 Robert had pegged Thom as another Reagan-obsessed, spoiled Yank, travelling on Daddy's dime, completing the final leg of the Grand Tour by sneaking a peek at Arab-Africa on a day trip across the Mediterranean – that short enticing distance separating

the ease of Europe from the exoticness of Africa. When Thom announced that he too was solo, travelling south to the Atlas mountains for the rugged spring hike up Mount Toubkal, their trekking partnership was formed.

Unlike the well-travelled Aussie who'd encountered the Third World hustle during earlier continent-hopping tours, Thom had been shaken by this culture. His country-club upbringing had not prepared him for the harassment he received on the street. Early on, he'd equated the abrasive hustlers to gnats "buzzing about, pestering you all day, sucking blood." It was not until the isolated Atlas mountains in the south, where he spent time with the indigenous Berbers, that he relaxed and began to enjoy the country's biblical beauty. He found the gentle farming families to his liking. They were polite, hard-working, trustworthy, like the working-class folk he'd hired for his grandfather's prosperous retail business, *Quail Clothing*, in Nashville. He'd even befriended an Arab, living in the small town at the mountain's base, and they'd exchanged addresses, Thom promising to send the boy his favorite Springsteen tapes upon his return to the States. This made Thom feel good, altruistic, humble.

On this day though, his last on Moroccan soil, the intense desert sun flushing an already sunburnt face, Thomas Cook from Nashville, Tennessee, was a different man. He'd adapted to a ridiculously difficult culture and could back the claim up with evidence: his parents had packed him off to as many boarding schools in as many countries as a child could endure by age sixteen. Under Robert's spartan travelling style, the country had forced him to rely on a newly discovered creativity to manage each day. By nightfall, he would be returning to Spanish soil, having conquered Morocco and its highest peak.

"Ninety dirhams, no less," the guide said.

Thom glanced at Robert, whose speedy index finger had translated a total. They spoke through Robert's flash of puckered dimples.

"Fifty. Our limit," Thom said. He watched the guide plow dirt into a mound with his foot, digesting the offer.

"Fifty," Thom repeated. "It's a fair price."

"Seventy-five, not a centime less."

The guide moved forward, dwarfed by the tall men. From a pocket inside his pristine robe, he retrieved a half-used Gitane cigarette and lit it. "Enough bullshit? Okay? No more *I'm a poor student, I've climbed your highest mountain*. I've heard this all before. This is my vocation. You insult me," he said, taking a dramatic pause, inhaling. "I'm the finest guide in the medina. I'll take you in for sixty-five dirhams. My best offer. A decision now. My prayers are soon."

"Sixty and we'll go with you," Thom said, pumping the guide's hand with a firm, eager shake.

"Excellent, friend."

"We want to see the tannery and as many sights as possible," Robert insisted.

Thom sucked in his stomach to gain access to the cotton moneybelt, hidden beneath the waist of his jeans. He handed the guide the country's colourful bills.

"You'll not be disappointed," the guide said. "I'll show you the authentic Morocco. Come this way … follow me."

Thom glanced back at the wide, French-style boulevards where dull-coloured European cars raced about. Arab men and women dressed in cheap, polyester Western clothes commuted to jobs and appointments as in any poor, downtown section of an American city. Thom hesitated, drawn to remain outside the ancient city's walls as if he belonged only in the stark yet familiar Western world.

The cheerful Australian strode to the wall; slung over his lanky frame, a navy-blue daypack displayed the Australian flag, boldly centred on the outer flap. Thom had developed an unusual closeness with this radical, a person he knew for a brief period, and would have disparaged as a burnout hippy rather than befriended in the States. Each night they'd played backgammon, smoking hashish and cigarettes. They'd argued politics, Robert the liberal (*Reagan's evil-empire rhetoric could ignite the third world war and will devastate both countries' economies*), Thom more conservative (*Reagan's peace-through-strength principle will force the Soviets to negotiate an end to the Cold War*). Despite their political contrasts, Thom enjoyed the friendship, learning the condensed history of Australia according to Robert, as he answered the Aussie's probings into his Southern upbringing, dispelling numerous stereotypes the Aussie had formed after reading *The Complete Faulkner*.

They entered the medina through a slender keyhole arch that had gold lines accenting its Moorish design; it was the only entrance through the tan walls that crinkled from nature's wear like an Impressionist painting in need of restoration. The sights, smells, and sounds began as if rehearsed or part of a show revealed when one steps inside the red- and white-striped tent at the county fair. Spices, mint tea, and incense joined in a tangy twist of such pungency that Thom had trouble deciding whether it was repulsive or not.

Walking in queue-straight paths, Moroccans dressed in traditional clothing: formless women wore the black sheet-like *haik* with veils, their dark eyes the sole feature revealed to the world. Some men dressed in white robes accented with golden yellow turbans, others in the hooded, camel-wool *djelabah*.

Several pairs of men were engrossed in conversation, arms interlocked. A few yards ahead, the guide seemed to be skipping as he sang in a beautiful voice to the melody of

a religious song Thom had heard repeated over mosque loudspeakers.

"Welcome to Morocco, Tommy-boy," Robert whispered.

The straight corridor they were following began to twist.

Between white row houses, an elaborate system of beaded and weaved rugs hung at varying levels, creating a tunnel. It grew dark. A steady breeze cooled the passage way, causing the beads to clatter. Bronze and silver bells nailed to blue doors rang softly. The guide marched at a swift pace, turning down corridors at angles, sometimes obtuse, often acute. Robert gave up on being able to retrace their entrance route. The guide had spoken truth; the medina was indeed a tangle, and they must rely on the Moroccan to lead them out.

They began a series of steps that took them downhill, then sideways, and eventually up to rows of shops. The first had spices stacked in colours of the rainbow, gathered in pyramid shapes. Next door, copper and silver jewelry crowded the counter and wall space, a glare reflecting out. Up a stall were weaved baskets, hundreds, in various sizes and shapes, each accented in bold winter colours. Across the narrow corridor stood a meat shop; goat heads and the remaining severed limbs hung on thick hooks as blood dripped to the wood counter below, stained black through years of absorption.

"We have journeyed to the centre of the medina," the guide said. He spun around, his arms stretched out, his palms upward.

When he stopped, he pointed to a shop with a hand-painted name in Arabic and French. "I recommend this one for the least expensive leather and woodwork."

"We're much more interested in the sights," Robert explained, "especially the historic tannery."

"You not shop?"

"Some, yes, of course, but I thought you understood."

The guide giggled, took a short hop next to them, and grabbed hold of their wrists.

"You must see the tannery, a fine sight indeed. But we shop now."

"And the church, I mean … we'd sure like to see that old mosque," Thom said.

The guide released his grip and stepped back. "You're forbidden from that mosque. You wish to visit one. Go to the fucking tourist mosque next to the King's palace."

As they wove through shops, Thom was pleased by the luxurious treatment the owners afforded them, as if Robert and he were purchasing a fine automobile or expensive jewelry. The guide would introduce them, transferring their care to the shop's owner. Mint tea would be served, and the proprietor would patiently and thoroughly describe his endless wares. Robert couldn't comprehend the guide's tantrum. What the bloody hell was that display about? The weather was possibly the catalyst.

They'd arrived in darkness the night before after five glorious weeks on the still snow-packed Atlas slopes. But down here on the flats it was hot. Very hot. On the bus over from the pension this morning, he'd noticed that the locals seemed unusually irritable. One mate started yelling at another, spit flying. Thom caught a gob on his cheek. Several women joined in, a riotous cacophony until an older man – who seemed religious by his dress – spoke up, as though giving a scolding, and the yelling ceased.

The guide seemed restless with the paucity of purchasing by his clients, and at regular intervals he would locate a cigarette stub from inside his robe, light it and remind the men of the bargain prices before them. For his sister, Thom bought a pine jewelry box with aqua shells embedded in the wood and a copper bracelet for himself, which soon turned the skin around his wrist rusty-green. Robert had yet to purchase an item, preferring to wait for something small and useful that would fit into his rucksack without wreaking havoc on his rigid organizational design, an understandable anxiety since the scant space would be his home away from "Auz" for the next twenty-one months of global sightseeing.

The smell approached slowly. As they drew near, it became overwhelming, a definitively dead stench paired with some sort of chemical potpourri. To filter the pungent odour, Robert wrapped a blue bandanna around his face, bandit-style. Thom wrinkled up his nose displaying a piggy-like facial distortion, which Robert found promising, making a mental note to add it to their gesture lexicon.

"What is the problem, friends?" The guide seemed amused.

"One hell of a smell you got here," Thom complained.

"You insisted on the tannery. Tell me, what should skinned animals, their hides soaking overnight in acid, combined with strong Moroccan dyes, smell like?"

The guide started up a spiral staircase, like that of an East Coast lighthouse which afforded glimpses of colour across the lower rooftops. Above, they crept along a narrow ledge from which they could see that the largest medina in the world was fiercely protected by the venerable Moorish wall. So tightly built no traces of the narrow corridors – packed with citizens scurrying about – could be detected below.

Filling a square courtyard, the tannery was found at work, hundreds of circular vats containing red, yellow, and blue dyes. The shirtless labourers wore white cotton pants rolled above their knees. The men darted from vat to vat, using their feet and toes to submerge the hides, roll them a

bit, and retrieve them for drying. Marked by a lifetime in dye, their limbs were a shade darker than the rest of their bodies.

From the tourists' perch, the workers resembled bees at work on a elaborate honeycomb. Stretched out over the sea of rooftops was evidence of the meticulously slow tanning process: hides rested from their ordeal in various stages of drying, causing pastel shades of the primary red, yellow, and blue, which created, like dying leaves, a vibrant, ever-changing environmental art.

Thom slid off his day pack, retrieved his heavily dented camera, and studied the composition of a shot. He could almost determine the size and shape of the carcasses' former selves, and as he lingered over the leathery faces of men stretching hides, he wondered if his great-grandparents, living on a Scottish isle a century before, had laboured as intensely on their craft, thick wool sweaters, before passing the trade on to his grandfather, who sailed to America alone and soon transformed the Old World trade into the multi-regional *Quail Clothing*, the timeless khaki and pastel button-down dress of Southern university preps.

"You must pay for photos." The guide seemed bored with the repetition of the line and this sight.

"Why do you continue with this?" Thom snapped, surprised at the rush of anger he'd learned to suppress.

"You steal their souls. And during this time. Shameless. Pay three dirhams for each photograph. You talk about fair, be fair then."

Each time Thom believed he'd figured out the cultural etiquette, he'd violate some mysterious rule, as he had playing junior golf. He reluctantly handed the guide the correct change. As the Moroccan pocketed it, the mosques' loudspeakers sounded the familiar whine, and the guide turned to Mecca, sank to his knees and performed his bowing prayers. Thom studied the small man at his ritual. He almost snapped a shot but thought better of it. Still, here they were in the centre of an ancient city, behind the soaring medina wall, and at last the Aussie and he were being exposed to the daily rhythm of the country, its people.

The guide ushered them through a passage so dark Thom couldn't see his hand before his face. They emerged in a corridor that began a new circuit of shops. Ahead stood a group of older French tourists, five guides encircling them. The shops were bustling with activity: deals were being voiced, mint tea was pouring, and money was exchanging at a rapid rate. Young Moroccan boys roamed. Hair crewcut to avoid lice, they resembled bald-headed vultures scavenging for scraps on the medina floor. If the filthy boys wearing torn clothing got near the French, their guides would merely clap, the boys darting away. Thom saw that the guides formed a halo of safety, creating an invisible boundary that kept the unpleasantness of the medina away from the garrulous tourists, who wore brightly coloured casual wear, like hunters wearing orange, alerting all to use caution with those who had paid and were protected.

A fit blond woman finishing a bowl of couscous glanced down at a small boy, no more than five, gazing up at her with pale brown eyes. She smiled, handing the boy her bowl, and giggled as the child scooped the remaining grain into his mouth, his eyes all the while flickering about, patrolling for dangers. Thom flinched as a guide's fists battered the boy from behind for crossing the invisible line. The boy curled, taking the beating like a dog. His back properly bruised, he scampered away, curiously grinning as though a full belly and stinging pain existed simultaneously.

Yes, he'd been mistaken! Thom got charged by the sudden illumination as though he had discovered some unknown, unmapped territory. Damn-it if the Aussie and he were on nothing more than a simulated tourist route, specifically designed to keep them from the authentic. Despite their philosophy (*the artful traveller journeyed ruggedly with the down-trodden, so as to absorb the culture, gliding through the streets like ghosts, unnoticed*) they could not break through here. The medina culture was protected, kept not only from the hideous tour bus vacationers (who, the Moroccans had learned, would come to view the wall under the guise of appreciation, yet destroy what had meaning, doing nothing to alleviate the misery), but from them as well – hardened, sympathetic Third World travellers.

American Express, Visa, and Mastercard decals were displayed on the door. The guide knocked in a complicated sequence and then opened the door by the sweep of his arm. They passed through a foyer crowded with black-framed, Arabic writings, which looked to be certificates or awards, crouched under a low archway, and drifted through black and white string beads. They stood before an enormous hall that had a high, inset ceiling with ornate designs painted in pink and yellow pastels.

"Welcome to my shop!"

Thom scanned the room for the source of the voice. The marble floor was bare except for a thin green line marking a large rectangle in the room's centre. Neatly stacked carpets were pressed against the walls, stretching to the ceiling. There was laughter, deep and sinister.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome," the voice beckoned.

From behind one such stack appeared a block of a man. Dressed in a suit, navy-blue with grey pinstripes, he carried a leather clipboard and had a sparkling gold pen lodged above his ear. His oval face took shape from a well-groomed goatee.

He embraced the guide in a tight hug. The guide spoke

in Arabic, frequently gesturing at them. The large man listened, his eyes never straying from the guide. He periodically scratched the side of his thick neck or rotated the gold band on his little finger. When he replied in a gentle voice, the guide listened.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. My name is Sud, proprietor of this shop. Welcome to Morocco, where the desert and sea greet and the secrets of our lush land are buried like Spanish treasure. This afternoon we will discover the rugs of our indigenous people, and learn about them through their craft."

The guide slipped behind them and squatted, his calves supporting his weight. He began smoking, as if he had only a vestigial interest in the display before him.

"Gentlemen, if you'll permit me, I would like to show my carpets. Hand-stitched from Atlas mountain wool. They will last a lifetime and appreciate like art. We have many and all created by the Berbers. You know them?"

"We spent time with them in the mountains," Thom answered.

"I understand you have travelled our country extensively? Climbed Mount Toubkal? Why the lengthy stay in Morocco?"

"The challenge of the highest peak in North Africa," Robert said.

"You challenged and conquered … ."

Sud motioned them to follow. He moved in a slow, majestic gait. Robert imagined his confidence came from joy of work and pride of product that allowed him to make a fine living in a poor country. Sud waited for them to sit on red pillows. Straining, he lowered himself onto a yellow one, which had a scoop fitting his husky trunk.

Breathing heavily he said, "Shall we begin?"

Thom and Robert nodded, and Sud clapped his hands rapidly as if snapping at flies. Like an actor heading for his mark, a young boy appeared holding a silver tray that carried a silver teapot with corresponding cups, saucers, and teaspoons. With care, without spilling, the boy served mint tea. Thom thought his purple cap, matching bib and white robe gave his appearance a religious quality.

Sud clapped his hands twice and two older boys positioned themselves near the stacks. Unlike the young boy, the adolescents wore tight-fitting Levi jeans, suede cowboy boots, and white T-shirts that had Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" cover photo screened on front. In imitation of "The Boss," their curly black hair was cut short above the ears, climbing on top, dangling in back.

They faced Sud, who selected a carpet with a glance. With the agility and strength of athletes, the boys lifted and unfurled it, a snap sounding as the edges flushed against the rectangle's green lines.

"A tiny village in the second range of the Atlas is where this exquisite carpet was made. Notice the black bordering; this is unique, coat of arms if you will. A vivid turquoise and grey weave, there are subtle traditional patterns within the dominant one. Understand, these artisans use the tiniest stitches, adding to its durability. Please, you may touch it," Sud said, tapping Robert's hand for encouragement.

"How much is this one?" Thom asked.

"Dollars?"

"Yes but student price," Robert cautioned.

Behind them, the guide grunted, punching the cement wall with his shoe's sole, the smack echoing through the room.

"I understand your dilemma. I too travel, to Europe each winter, and have the same problem after one week away. Let's suggest under one-hundred, American."

The muscular boys had to remove the larger carpets, creating a new column, to reach the cheaper ones, which were smaller yet equally ornate. They unfurled one after another without repeating similarities in design or colour combinations.

The small boy entered carrying a leather book that had an orange feather poking out, marking a spot. Sud opened to the marker before handing the album to Robert, as Thom leaned in to view a photo depicting a husband and wife smiling next to the rotund Sud and a twenty-foot high, bound carpet.

"From Baltimore, in Mary's land."

Beneath the image was an American Express carbon copy and shipping invoice with the couple's signature, proving receipt. Thom flipped through the book, which was filled with similar pictures and purchasing evidence. Simply from viewing each photograph, Sud could recall the city and country of former clients. It was impressive, Thom acknowledged. He'd do well in the US.

"You know Morocco. This is a lifetime purchase. The best we have to offer, a modest price."

"Unfortunately, I'm travelling overland to Australia and have barely enough to reach my home. I'm sorry," Robert said.

"Don't be. I'm delighted you've had this experience. As you travel, please tell others about our country."

"May I take a picture? I'll pay for it," Thom said.

Sud waved away Thom's attempt to hand him a few centimes.

"Why do you allow this?" the guide squealed, rushing forward? "You're unbelievable," he hollered near Thom's face. "Fucking American." He whirled, his spotless robe trailing him, like a superhero charging from the room.

"Where the hell does he think he's off to?" Thom asked.

"He must go now," Sud said calmly, as if expecting the

situation, as if this was repetition not exception.

"This is dead wrong," Robert appealed. "You know that."

"He got pissed off when I asked to visit the old mosque," Thom said.

"This guide would not take you to a medina mosque … . Gentlemen, you are quite sure you do not want to purchase one of my carpets."

Thom looked at Robert. The sign received had not been used: Two powerful coughs followed by a sneeze into a red bandanna, which translated as "Any ideas?"

The owner clapped his hands; the small boy scampered out. In Arabic, Sud spoke to the child as if imparting a difficult lesson.

"This boy will lead you out a different way? Tip him well."

"Guide!" the small boy chirped.

Outside, under the reed canopy, the temperature was cool, the light diffuse. The new guide stopped suddenly, yanking back a dusty drape which concealed a steep set of steps. Climbing to the top, they entered an unusual corridor in which weary-faced men and women were transporting wares to the tourist area. Enormous copper pots, bundles of colourful yarn, and shellacked wood crafts were piled high on the sweat-drenched backs of donkeys. Veiled women balanced stacks of woven baskets on their heads, their movement slow, continuous.

"What do you think?" Thom whispered.

"So damn young."

"Guide!"

They were exiting the tourist medina and entering the section of the maze they'd longed to explore. Soon they passed rows of shops in disrepair, the white paint peeling and faded grey, the shop names in Arabic. Dragged to the side of the corridor, a dead dog lay decaying. Men and boys sat outside shops smoking hashish cigarettes, their gargoyle stares chilling the Western men as they passed.

Wind funneled through the corridor, ruffling their hair when a pack of boys charged from an alley. The young hustlers tugged on the men's day packs, squawking in Arabic. Robert and Thom flung the boys off, swinging their packs like clubs to prevent further attack. The guide hollered as if to demand that his peers respect him as a legitimate guide. After taking a moment during which the inexperienced hustlers seemed to gauge the situation, they moved on to the tourist section and greater profits.

"Guide!"

Robert stroked his money-exchanger's leather pouch like a rabbit's foot to bring them luck. The guide seemed more determined, marching ahead, periodically glancing over his shoulder to ensure his clients were near. At the end of the corridor, Thom spotted an illumination that grew until soon they had stepped across a line dividing shadow from daylight. Trails of white jet smoke streaked the blue sky, as though to welcome them back to the modern world.

The boy bounced up and down, pointing frantically to the wide road that reached a dead end at the medina wall.

Silver in the rock sparkled.

"Guide!"

The stone mosque was simple, like a chapel, no loudspeaker atop its minaret to sound the cacophonous whine for prayer. The gentle breeze and absolute silence seduced them. Robert sat in the middle of the red-and-brown cobblestone street, stretching his arms behind him for support, angling his face to receive the sun's warmth. Thom investigated the plain mosque, thrilled to capture photographs of the authentic sight that couldn't be described in his guidebook.

Several minutes of calm passed before they heard a word.

It was Arabic.

In the shadow of the corridor, a pack of older boys stood, watching.

"Où est la sortie?" Robert stood, grasping the guide's slender brown arm.

"Guide!"

The Moroccans galloped, frothing at the mouth as they charged the Westerners, peeling off on arrival, encircling the pair. Their yells smothered the cries of the tiny guide, who stood stroking the wall.

"You are lost in the medina without a proper guide," said the tallest Moroccan. He had dark circles under deep-set eyes. His band tugged at Robert's and Thom's daypacks, taunting them with slaps to their sunburnt faces.

"An Aussie," the leader said, studying the flag egregiously displayed on Robert's pack.

"We have a guide," Robert said, pointing to the boy, who leaned against the wall.

"You think you're tough, motherfucker?" the leader snapped, building his rage as he looked not at Robert, but into the eyes of his devoted followers. "You dare enter the medina during Ramadan? You know Ramadan? Answer me!"

"No."

"A month of fasting, prayer. No eating, drinking, sunrise to sunset. Only for Muslims. Tough Moroccans."

Thom searched Robert's face for a gesture, some signal of what to do next, but the Aussie failed to speak.

"No guide, you take pictures of that mosque, during Ramadan!"

The leader smiled at his band before snapping a jab that connected with Robert's nose, blood spurting out, the crack of bone lingering.

"Stop!" Thom heard himself yell, clenching his fists for

the first time in Morocco. He took a moment to study the leader's crooked jaw when a blow from behind sent him to the medina floor. Covering his face to block the staccato kicks, he saw the reflection through his split fingers as the thin blade punctured him.

Robert fought back, knocking the leader to a knee before the knife sliced the Aussie's neck, his white T-shirt absorbing red.

Thom could hear feet scrambling. Then silence. He struggled to prop himself to an elbow.

Carried through the breeze was a pained: "Guide!"

Where the afternoon sun struck the wall at an angle, Thom could see deep cracks, nooks and crannies. Layers of paint failed to camouflage the sea decay. The wall lacked beauty, the mosque significance. Thom spotted the young boy, the warm sunlight kissing the crown of his dark head. He stood in a partition, a local's exit blending into the medina wall. Thom felt himself floating to his feet, joining the boy at the wall. They spoke easily in Arabic, the young guide leading Thom through the partition, asking if he'd like to spend the afternoon with the other boys, playing football on the beach, fanned by the cool winds of the sea.

Virginity fetish

Gordon Dueck on a modern meditation by a close observer

The Geometry of Love: Space, Time, Mystery and Meaning in an Ordinary Church
Margaret Visser
HarperCollins
322 pages, $22.95

When this book came out in hardcover (it's now available in paperback), one reviewer mentioned in passing that it was a meditation in the tradition of Henry Adam's *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1904). It is true that Visser and Adams share a fondness for ancient churches; they also have this thing about holy virgins. But sometimes a virgin is not what she seems.

Adam's St. Mary was immaculate coming and going, as Catholic doctrine dictates. Yet she was also, according to his way of thinking, a fertility symbol, and that's putting it much too mildly: a Spencerian (as in Herbert, the Social Darwinist) superwench is more like it. Then there's Visser's celibate subject, early Christian martyr St. Agnes, who worked as a prostitute. Well, *worked* is the wrong verb. When she refused to pay homage to Roman gods, thirteen-year-old Agnes was thrown into a brothel, where, to her keepers' dismay, she continued to pray to her God. He for His part smote anyone who dared compromise her integrity. She was murdered but remained intact, or so hagiography – with which Visser eventually takes issue – claims.

The most impassioned of Gilded Age anti-modernists, Adams romanticized the agrarian past. Civilization began to degenerate, he argued, after the twelfth century, with the rise of cities and scholastic reason and the decline of the cult of Mary. From that moment, Western religion lost its soul, its feminine capacity for love. A Brahmin of New England and scion of two presidents, Adams was the product of a culture that had replaced the masculine Calvinism of the Puritans with a kinder, gentler theology whose tenets were said at the same time to correspond with natural law. Thus his "inverted Social Darwinism" (as critic Edward Saveth referred to it), which was as much a pessimistic reading of the meaning of history as an appreciation of medieval spirituality and the ideal of femininity.

Visser focuses but little on Mary and only to put Agnes' story, and the fetishization of virginity, into historical context. "Modern women often find [the Virgin] irritating," she writes; Visser herself appears to have ambivalent feelings about a woman who did "not seem to have achieved much – apart from bearing and bringing up God, that is." Still, as a Catholic relapsed, and one whose religiosity is informed by a mystic's sensibility, she is prepared to accept paradox for the sake of faith. Insofar as they are both comfortable embracing doctrinal contradictions (and willing to add paradoxes of their own), she and Adams are birds of a feather. But her Mary was a "very Jewish girl" whose Magnificat was "Old-Testament-inspired." Adams wrote that "in spite of [Mary's] origin, she disliked Jews, and rarely neglected a chance to mistreat them." Adams' anti-Semitism was typical of the anti-modernists, as was his distaste for the suffragette movement. The New Woman was the anti-Madonna, representing everything that was wrong about modern times just as the Madonna was the apotheosis of everything that was right about the middle ages.

Visser's interpretation is informed by feminist scholarship. She does not bother to take Adams' interpretations or prejudices to task, nor even to acknowledge him; indeed, although her endnotes and bibliography are extensive, there's very little in the way of historiographical discussion in *The Geometry of Love*. The two are worth comparing, however, in order to show how differently historians a century apart (she is a classicist by training, and he was the last of the great "amateur historians") ply their trade. Eschewing the grand narrative, Visser prefers thick description: the spinning out of insights from the close observation of seemingly ordinary things. As readers will recognize from her earlier work, she owes a debt to the methodology of Geertzian anthropology, although she has never, to my knowledge, made the connection explicitly. Best known for the Canadian best-seller *Much Depends on Dinner: The Extraordinary History and Mythology, Allure and Obsessions, Perils and Taboos of an Ordinary Meal* (1986), wherein she deconstructed the elements of a single typical North American supper and brought to bear the entire history of food along the way, Visser continued to mine that vein with *Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* a few years later (1991).

Her subject this time is the church of St. Agnes Outside the Walls, or Sant' Agnese fuori le Mura, in Rome. I've left the impression that a saint is her focus. That is not the case. The church, not its namesake, is what the book is all about. Or rather, Visser explores how a worshipper experiences the spaces of this church and, by

extension, how all worshippers experience churches everywhere (this too is Geertzian, this extrapolation from particulars to universals). Her book "looks at things more or less in the order in which they present themselves to people moving through the building, beginning with what they see when they walk into it. Chronology does not … provide the underlying structure of this book; it is the church itself, as it stands today, that shapes the account. Churches are laid out with a certain trajectory of the soul in mind. I have chosen to trust this ancient and intentional order."

Agnes' story is not discussed until the latter chapters, if only because her tomb is the last stop on Visser's tour, the pilgrim's endpoint. The starting point of *Geometry* is a chapter entitled "Threshold," and it describes how one enters Sant' Agnese fuori le Mura: via stone steps that descend into a series of catacombs. What a shock of recognition! Well do I remember the dread I felt when my mother first led me, like Dante but wearing a bonnet and a polka-dot skirt, into the depths beneath Bergthal First Mennonite, leaving the Cossack hordes swirling in frustration overhead.

Okay, maybe Visser's church isn't so ordinary after all, and can't be made to stand in for all churches everywhere. Some particulars are less easily universalized; rare phenomena such as catacombs are special, as is St. Agnes' ancient provenance. (How many churches can be said to have been built in the sixth century? How many the site of a saint's burial?) Yet we, even the iconoclastic anabaptists among us, follow her gladly, if somewhat blindly – there are no maps, illustrations, or photographs provided – through the semi-darkness because she is a knowledgeable guide. (By the way, early Christians were sometimes buried in catacombs but they didn't hide from persecutors in them, because, as Visser explains, they were too narrow, too smelly, and far from secretly located.) Each architectural part – from threshold to narthex, nave to altar and apse, chapel to crypt, tower, and tomb – comprises a chapter, each section of the building mirroring the progress of Christ's Passion; each chapter likewise explicates in thematic fashion the early history of Christianity and Saint Agnes' part in it.

Her approach necessarily eclectic, Visser has admitted to borrowing from religious history, classics, theology, anthropology, art history, iconography, hagiography, and folklore; one could add philology to the mix (nave = ship, narthex = fennel stalk, et cetera = I could go on). Some reviewers have found the book surprisingly tedious, in part because of the way it is structured. This is a meditation first and foremost, however, and as such cannot help containing digressions that at times seem more important to author than to audience.

How significant is the figure of Agnes to the author? It depends on how one defines the terms of sainthood. In Visser's opinion, as against received wisdom, the martyr had in all likelihood been raped before she was murdered. And this, far from rendering her unworthy of canonization, makes her an even greater Christian heroine, a saint with whom modern women can identify. In Visser's words: "It is perhaps only now that we can honestly look at the virgin martyrs as representatives of female heroism. An insistence on literal virginity (as opposed to integrity of mind and soul) as essential to female heroism is no longer acceptable … The application of 'shame culture' to women, which has persisted for nearly two thousand years after Christ's coming, is increasingly revealed for the outrage that it is." Old Henry Adams, the inverted Social Darwinist, took hagiography at face value so that he might cling to the ancient prejudices therein encoded. Visser is right to assert that the traditions of Christianity are capable of evolution. ●

Confidence men

Andrew Loman on a novel of ideas by a "latter-day phrenologist"

Doctor Swarthmore
Alexander Scala
Porcupine's Quill
130 pages, $18.95

At the dawn of the twentieth century, as Alexander Scala imagines it in his witty first novel, reason and faith are vying for the confidence of small-town Indiana. Doctor Swarthmore, nominally the protagonist, is a doctor of divinity trying to make a buck off an apocalyptic vision he may or may not have had, promising his readers the Kingdom of Heaven, and soon. His rival is a doctor of medicine, Henry Wexler Beecham, who parlays a medical "miracle" – he correctly diagnoses a case of botulism – into a career on the lyceum stage. Their success is measured by the commitment to their respective projects of the novel's third character, Alexander Hamilton Blount, a salesman who wants to get out of the door-to-door racket and into publishing. The conclusion, of course, is foregone: Beecham prevails.

A novel on the theme of science and superstition inevitably faces the spectre of exhaustion. Can we tolerate another *Inherit the Wind*, another staged debate between another Clarence Darrow, another William Jennings Bryan? Scala hyper-caffeinates the theme by introducing the third term implicit in

Blount. The contest between his doctors turns on confidence, understood economically: which theory of knowledge – the religious or the scientific – will win in the marketplace (forgive the cliché) of ideas? The truth claims of religion and science are moot; the novel asks instead which epistemology will better address the millennial anxiety of Indiana, and thereby make the better commodity. Science wins out not because it has a better grip on reality but because it offers the consolations of optimism: it's not the end times but "The First Century of Man," as Beecham titles his lecture. Reason and faith are in competition for the spirit of capitalism: Scala invites us to return to the various works in the monkey-trials genre in this light, and read the many literary Darrows and Bryans foremost as rhetoricians or, if you like, as confidence men.

This is the book's preeminent virtue: it's smart. Dr. Swarthmore is postmodern in the best sense: it's written in the shadow of Jean-Francois Lyotard, aware of not only its own status as narrative (the point where most postmodern fiction stops) but that of other discourses as well. The highlight of the book is Beecham's lecture, where the medical doctor waxes eschatological and prophesies an apocalyptic battle between science and death: as Blount tells Swarthmore, "what [Beecham]'s telling them in his lectures is more or less the same thing as you're telling them in your pamphlet – I know it doesn't seem that way, if you don't study the matter, but it's true." Blount is right. What's more, in describing the lead-up to this scientific apocalypse, Beecham makes clear the links between science and empire, predicting a "single grand universal republic" "under the aegis of the Anglo-Saxon race" (Scala knows that 1900 was the dawn of American empire, alluding in passing to "the country's recent acquisition of a few millions of unblessed coloured folk in out-of-the-way places like Cuba and the Philippines," the legacy of the Spanish-American War). Science is as ideologically invested, Scala suggests, as any other form of knowledge. See Ian Hacking bristle.

Among the many pleasures *Dr. Swarthmore* affords is a virtuosity of style that rarely lets slip a wrong note. Here's an example, Scala describing Blount's oleaginous penetration of the domestic sphere:

> Once he had been specified by the person in the doorway, Blount cast out his line of talk and reeled himself into the house after it – a patter of kitchen or barnyard gossip that led to the moment in which it was the most natural and graceful thing in the world that he should open his cardboard suitcase and produce something pertinent to the conversation: a can of stove enamel, a box of *Rough on Rats*, a set of suspenders, a specific for hog cholera; or perhaps a brochure, illustrated with steel engravings, that described the Vesuvius line of phonographs – it was several of these phonographs, with some sewing machines, cream separators and other bulky stock, that he kept under the tarpaulin in the wagon.

Here content and form conspire: Scala need not quote Blount's patter directly because the prose itself is a comparable line of talk; Scala reels his reader through a paragraph which, for all its hesitations and dashes, is a single sentence. Blount, one gathers, never risks coming to a full stop until he has catalogued his entire stock, including the cream separators.

Several factors may unjustly limit *Dr. Swarthmore*'s share of the literary market. To begin with, it's unfashionable, a novel of ideas in a marketplace dominated by various stripes of sentimental fiction. And as a novel of ideas, it's not concerned with psychological nuance, that fetish of too much fiction. Scala sketches in his characters like a latter-day phrenologist: their personalities are written on their bodies. A photograph of Swarthmore's face, Scala tells us, discloses both "vulnerability and credulity" and "truculence and pride of intellect," a combination which more or less describes the man. Beecham "carrie[s] with him […] an air of secular confidence," and not much else. Blount is "an entity that seem[s] provisional and indeterminate" until he tries to sell something, when, like a Hoosier Zelig, he lets his clients dictate his character. This serves the book's purposes, but the unornamented characters may be unappealing to those for whom psychological complexity is the *sine qua non* of literary fiction.

Moreover, Scala is a former New Yorker publishing in Ontario, and although he has deferred to Canadian conventions of spelling, he has not similarly domesticated his subject matter. His novel is filled with allusions to American writers, from Puritan sermonizers like Edward Taylor to giants of the canon like Hawthorne and Melville to late nineteenth-century utopians like Edward Bellamy. The book is a gumbo of Americana, but not the kind of Americana most Canadians will recognize, raised as we are on lazy anti-American clichés and an anxiously nationalist educational curriculum. Not many of his readers will appreciate the ironies encoded in the characters' names, for instance: few will recognize that Alexander Hamilton Blount is named after America's first Secretary of the Treasury; still fewer will recognize the aptness of naming Swarthmore's cupidinous son, the Reverend Eliot Brattle Swarthmore, after Thomas Brattle. Some portion of the book's pleasures will therefore be closed to some larger portion of its readers. Perhaps the Canadian swine will still eat the pearls, but it might be

the better part of valour for Scala's publisher, Ontario-based The Porcupine's Quill, to focus its efforts to hawk the book on cognoscenti south of the border. Scala deserves readers. ●

poetry@arbitrary.ca

Antje M. Rauwerda on cultivated language

harvest: a book of signifiers
ROB MCLENNAN
Talonbooks
125 pages

Mclennan's "harvest" is the language he chooses to use in his poetry, the somewhat disparate selection of poems (about trips across Canada, weddings, and salt) and the first sequence in the collection ("harvest: 12 gardening poems"). His title suggests that he also seeks to investigate the nature of the "signifier," questioning its stability by presenting us with surprising contexts, objects and people (signifieds) to connect with it. Semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure writes that "the bond between signifier and signified is arbitrary." According to Saussure, the words we use to refer to things only have meaning because we understand them in a specific context. Change the context, or change the word even a little, and the meaning is different.

If showing the arbitrariness of words is mclennan's objective, poems like "saskatoon" are both successful and puzzling. "saskatoon" is not really about place but rather about the poet's experience. (You could argue that many of the poems about places are really about mclennan's inner geography … and that the poems about *other people's* inner geography – like "the landscape in you: an improvisation" – wind up being about how mclennan's inner geography is affected by theirs.) The frustration of readers' expectations in "saskatoon" *does* suggest a separation between what signifies and what is signified (the place name does not title a poem about place). However, if we are indeed working within Saussure's formulation, we could also assume that place names are arbitrary and, without context, meaningless and that there is therefore no need to be euphemistic about them or to omit them in lines like "saskatoon['s]" "amazing, all the beautiful girls in the world/ live in _____" or "_____ is the furthest north ive ever been."

Despite his contradictory evocation of semiotics, mclennan's stated objectives are more general than his title suggests. He is interested in his own rationale: "the whole point of poetry/ is to make instinctive moves." But these instinctive moves are sometimes cryptically personal. On the one hand, he argues that "it doesnt matter if the poem makes sense" but on the other acknowledges the problem of introspection:

WHAT DOESN'T SATISFY IS WHAT HAD,
AT THE OFFSET,
seemd to make perfect sense. stringing
words off one against another into
sequiturs & related babble. am i

making any sense to you, in that west
from this east?

It seems that instead of semiotic questions he is grappling with what makes meaning and whether or how he can communicate.

Despite his interest in meaning and inner landscapes, mclennan is best when he deals with images to which a reader can attach an external context (for instance, the references to shorelines, Atlantis, and Biblical revenge in "the book of salt"). He is also extremely effective when his words make visual images on the page. Small-scale examples are: " / more than just a sidebar", "around her A frame house", and "two freckles on my stomach/ like an umlaut/ turning bellybuttön." Larger scale concretism often works really well, too, particularly in poems about train travel. (mclennan's repeated references to trains suggest that this collection describes, at least in part, his participation in the 1998 Via Rail Great Canadian Literature Tour.) The jumbled, offset lines in "deflamatory" look as though they were written on a rocking train and "or when the rain undresses" looks as though the words are spattered quivering on the page like raindrops on a train's window as it picks up speed.

mclennan refers to Canadian and American poets, perhaps to show the history behind his own experiments. He explicitly mentions Creeley, Heighton, Ginsberg, Blaser, Irvine, Layton, Purdy, and Pratt. Like Birney in "from Swindon to London by Britrail aloud," mclennan uses onomatopoeia ("*swishhhhhhhh clackclack*"); like e.e. cummings, he uses only the lower-case. mclennan also uses abbreviated words that are all his own. His phonetic endings omit the "e" in words like "calld", "passd", "dresst", "troubld", "robbd", and "askd." These spellings look archaic (which gives an appealing "Farmer's Almanac" effect in the gardening poems and a discomfitingly medieval one elsewhere). However, after a while these phonetic spellings seem gimmicky ("thot," for example, is annoying – and isn't "staind" a band?). Leaving out apostrophes is lauded on the book's jacket as a denial of "ownership," but mclennan also uses contractions like "ill" as

puns. His "dont" would be especially great if a French meaning were alluded to (as it is in the more effective "dangeroux"). Another useful technique (which mclennan regrettably overuses) is the opening, but not closing, of brackets to signal the unexpected continuities which echo the continuities of the landscape-like experiences he observes.

mclennan's big experiment is his use of periods. In lines like "she says go, & now,/ & please, but wont say why. say why" he leaves one space rather than two after the period. In combination with the absence of capitalisation, the effect is to minimise the finality of the period, making it more like a comma. In combination with abbreviations and ampersands, this use of punctuation makes mclennan's work read like an inventory with the periods introducing the next item on the list:

> hard pits on the manitoba plain,
> a path at the quarry
> outside warren. sweet
> & sour berries
>
> & a fine introduction to the west.
> we picked

Or:

> christmas trees plastic
> & packaged in cardboard, no
> nettles daily vacuumed, or poking thru socks.
> until i was seven, the trek
> w/ saw and sled
> to the back bush for winter green

Each idea is connected to the next by the period; the periods show not separation but how ideas affect and modify each other. They also give the illusion of sentences, but are actually more like places to pause briefly in order to orient oneself before continuing – they are the grammatical equivalent of a Motel 6 on one of the many journeys mclennan describes in his "postcard" and "letter" poems.

The periods have rich potential if one weds the geographical emphasis of the collection with semiotics, for they work almost like the "dot" in internet addresses. Web addresses give us fictional, nebulous locations. The "geography" only makes sense because we are aware of the context. Signifying words are completely arbitrary but punctuation is arbitrary, too; we only understand "."s and "@"s and ":\\"s because of context. For mclennan too, geography is seemingly arbitrary, and both the words and punctuation to describe it can adapt to mean new things. In the end, the collection brings you to the inner landscape of a Canadian poet interested in how words mean; its signifier could be <poetry@arbitrary.ca>. ●

Contributors

Ian Ayres writes that he "was a test-tube baby of London, England." His work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Global Tapestry Journal*, and *Cover Magazine*. He lives in Paris.

Former Torontonian **David Bezmozgis** is a documentary director and writer. He now lives in California.

Bill Brisick has been writing for twenty years. His articles and reviews have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers. He currently works in the field of college textbooks.

John Curry is an adjunct professor at Santa Monica College. His fiction has appeared in *Short Stories BiMonthly*, *The Prose Menagerie*, *Renaissance Online Magazine*, and *Entre Nous*.

Paul Alan Fahey is a learning disabilities specialist at Allan Hancock College in SantaMaria, CA. He has published stories in *Potpourri*, *Artisan*, *The Palo Alto Review*, *The Macguffin* and in other literary magazines.

Lea Littlewolfe lives in Île-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan. Her work has appeared in the anthologies *Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape* (Polestar) and *Wrestling with the Angel: Women Reclaiming their Lives* (Red Deer Press). She is the author of *The Unwilling Bestiary* (Winnipeg Art Gallery/Turnstone Press).

Michelle M. Maihiot has been published in several periodicals including *Sojourner* and *Midwest Poetry Review*. She lives in Massachusetts with her partner and their 6 cats.

A S Penne lives and works in Sechelt, BC. Her creative nonfiction and fiction have appeared in *NeWest Review*, *Pottersfield Portfolio*, *Prairie Fire*,and *The Antigonish Review* as well as in U.K. and American anthologies. She teaches English and creative writing.

Rick Smith is a clinical psychologist. He and his wife Erika direct "Back in the Saddle", a residential treatment program for brain-damaged adults, located in Apple Valley, CA. He is the author of *The Wren Notebook* (Lummox Press).

Virgil Suarez is the author of four novels, a short story collection, and five poetry collections. He teaches Creative Writing and Latino/a and Caribbean Literature at Florida State University

Michael Therrien has published poetry and fiction in *The Light Inside*, *Homegrown Niagara*, and *b+a New Fiction*.

paperplates

5:2