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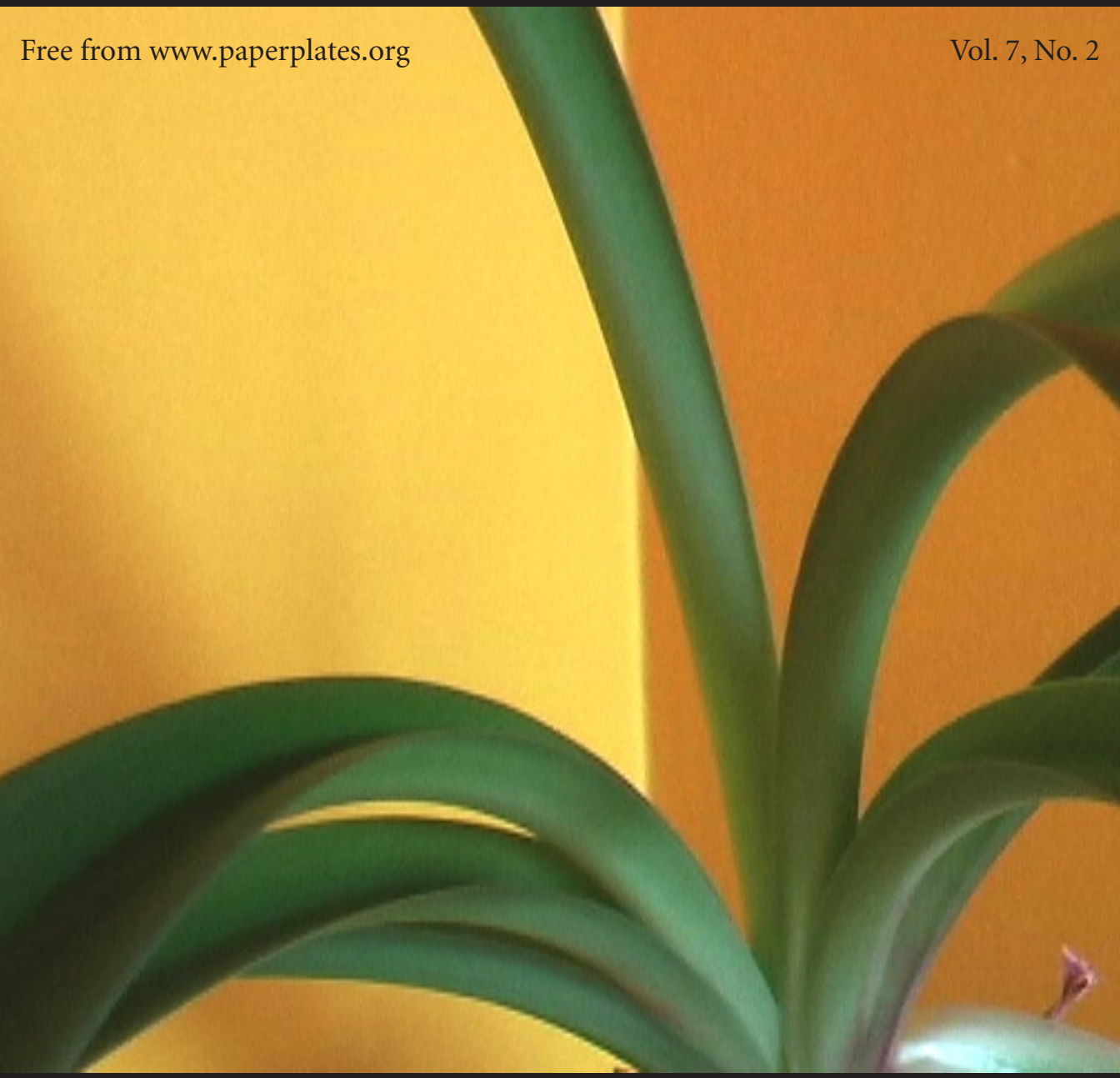

Essays, poetry, fiction, reviews

Contributors

Corrina Austin works as a school librarian and writes novels, poetry, short stories, and book reviews. She lives in St Thomas, Ontario.

John James B. Ford has published his work in *Grey Borders, Papertiger, QWERTY, Carousel,* and *Prairie Fire*, as well as through Broken Jaw Press.

Stacey May Fowles is a writer based in Toronto. Her writing has appeared in *Fireweed, subTERRAIN, Kiss Machine* and *Hive*. You can find her at www.staceymayfowles.com

Sean Howard lives in the Nova Scotia fishing village of Main-à-Dieu, and is an adjunct professor of political science at Cape Breton University. His poetry and fiction have been published in *Another Toronto Quarterly, The Breath, Ascent, stonestone, paperplates, Geist, Other Voices, existere, Quills, 4AM Poetry Review* (USA) and *zafusy* (UK).

Valerie McDonald has had two short stories published in *Storyteller Magazine* and several non-fiction pieces in *Hospital Quarterly, Impact,* and *TESL Talk*.

Michael Meagher, born in Ottawa, splits the year between British Columbia and Nova Scotia. He usually spends eight months landscaping and the remainder travelling, writing, and occasionally working. His poetry has appeared in several journals and anthologies, including *Kootenay Carnival, Misunderstandings Magazine, Bywords,* and *Ygdrasil*.

Fred Meissner's work has appeared in *Pierian Springs,* the *Alberta Poetry Yearbook, Online, Daybreak, Egorag 15, Voices from the Yellow House, Ascent Aspirations, Electro-Twaddle, Armada Quarterly,* and *Ripe Magazine*. He lives in Elmira, Ontario.

A. Mary Murphy is the author of *Shattered Fanatics* (BuschekBooks). She teaches English and Creative Writing at the University of Winnipeg.

Elizabeth Peirce lives, writes, and teaches university English classes in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Her writing has appeared in the *Coast*, the *Vagrant Revue of New Fiction*, and in two books of historical fiction based on Nova Scotia's piratical past.

Gary L. Pierluigi writes fiction as well as poetry and has taught numerous creative-writing classes. He travels a lot – on trains, which he recommends to any like-minded poet who has the time.

Mark Sampson's short stories have appeared in a number of publications, including *Pottersfield Portfolio* and *Another Toronto Quarterly*.

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[USE AS DIRECTED]

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PUBLISHER/EDITOR
Bernard Kelly

REVIEWS EDITOR
Tim Conley

FICTION EDITOR
Brenda Keble

POETRY EDITOR
Karen Belanger

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COORDINATES
paperplates
19 Kenwood Ave
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M6C 2R8 Canada

magazine@paperplates.org
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Loot bags

MADAME, THE DITZY FRENCH IMMERSION TEACHER, patted Anna's head. "Bonne fête, Anna."

Fête. I'd nearly forgotten that I was hosting a birthday party the next day. My almost-six-year-old skipped beside me across the schoolyard to wait for her oldest sister, Madeleine, to emerge from the big school.

"Can we get loot bag stuff today, Mom?"

My breath caught in my throat. "We'll see." I had to get home first to see if Natalie was all right. She had probably returned home from her overnight visit by now.

"But Mom! My party's tomorrow!"

"We'll get them." I waved at Madeleine to join us.

Anna chattered on. "Sarah's coming but Brittany doesn't know yet because she has gymnastics."

I realized that I had no clue how many children were actually coming. I'd jotted notes on scraps of paper when their parents had called, but I hadn't kept a list. As I followed my two daughters across the school yard, that morning's interview with the doctor replayed in my mind.

"You have to understand," he had said, "she might die at any time." I swallowed. "But. Dr. Wyse said …"

Dr. Fraser looked away. He was the staff doctor who had called me in that morning. "To review the biopsy of the bone marrow aspirate," he'd said. I'd asked if I could wait until my husband, Bruce, returned from Ottawa.

"I think you should come today."

He wouldn't look at me. "The aspirate shows that Natalie's marrow is ninety per cent blast cells. Sometimes they multiply so quickly they flood the brain and cause a stroke."

A stroke? In my nine year old daughter? "But she's not home. She's at my dad's house in the country with my sister and her new baby." I had a vision of Natalie's lively face contorting with a massive stroke, dying in the car on the highway beside my newborn niece. "Dr. Wyse said she heard about a phase one therapy. She said she'd tell us about it when she gets back next week."

He had sighed. "Dr. Wyse is very … optimistic. She's an excellent clinician, but she never gives up hope."

He was right. Dr. Wyse was optimistic. It's what we loved about her. Throughout the two and half years of Natalie's treatment for leukemia, she had always been hopeful. After every setback she outlined our options in blunt point form, scribbling, *Marrow normal, marrow abnormal* with arrows pointing to lists of medications. Since the first relapse, one of the options she had presented was possibility of no chemo. No cure. But she always stressed the hope lying between the lines of the scribbled lists. Gently, she had led us to believe that hope could be transformed from hope for cure to hope for more time together.

"But what can we do?" I needed a plan.

All he'd said was, "Enjoy the time you have. I'm so very sorry."

On the sidewalk in front of the school, my eldest daughter, Madeleine, pushed past a group of mothers leaning on strollers.

Carmen, who had a child in Natalie's class, stepped away from the group. "How's she doing? I heard she was home."

I shrugged. I just couldn't tell anyone until I'd talked to Bruce. "She's at my dad's in the country with my sister and her new baby."

Carmen smiled. "That's great news!" She leaned closer. "Maybe not?" she asked softly.

"I'll talk to you next week. I'm not quite sure what's going on."

Carmen gave me a quick hug and said, "I'm going to drop off some books on tape that I know Natalie would love."

"She'd like that, thanks."

Madeleine tugged at my arm as I turned away from my friend, "What's for lunch?"

I had no idea. I hadn't thought about food

for months. Our neighbours and friends like Carmen had been providing meals almost every day, but since my sister had arrived to spend her maternity leave with us, she and I had shared the cooking. I scanned our quiet street, looking for Barb's green hatchback. The girls raced ahead and pounded up the concrete steps to our front porch to peer in the window.

"They're not here," Anna said.

I fumbled with my keys and shoved the door open, my hands shaking. I imagined my sister, stuck in traffic with Natalie slumped dead across my wailing infant niece. Would she stop right there or drive on home to call – who? Me? The ambulance? The undertaker? Who do you call when someone dies?

Anna pushed past me. "You have to hurry back to school, Maddie. Me and mom are going to get loot bags."

"Can I come?" Maddie pleaded.

"You have school this afternoon," I said. "And I didn't say we were going for sure."

"You promised!" Anna wailed.

I opened the fridge and pulled out some sliced ham, a block of cheese and a bag of baby carrots.

The phone rang and Anna blurted her customary greeting into the receiver, "Hello-it's-Anna-speaking." She paused. "Hi! We thought you'd be home by now."

"Give it to me," I hissed.

"How's Catherine?" She twisted away from me. "Ah, that's cute. Did the dog lick her?"

"Anna! Let me talk!"

She waved a hand to silence me. "Can I talk to Papa?"

I yanked the phone from her. "Barb?"

My sister sounded tired. "Sorry we're so late," she said. "Catherine was really fussy and I couldn't get her to nurse."

"How's Nat?"

"She's a bit tired. Oh, and she said her lip feels numb."

I froze. "Her lip?"

"Her bottom lip. She said it feels funny."

My chest tightened with fear. "I need to see her."

"That's why I called. We'll leave as soon as I feed Catherine again and we've had some lunch."

"Can I talk to Natalie?" I took a deep breath.

Barb called her to the telephone. I could hear Natalie's merry laugh in the background.

"Hi Mom," she said. "You should see Catherine's face when the dog licks her! It's so funny!"

She sounded fine. "What's this about your lip?"

"This morning it felt kind of weird, like that time the dentist put freezing in it."

"And now?"

"It's okay. I have to go have lunch. Papa made leek and potato soup for me."

"Okay, sweetie, see you soon!" I pulled a bag of bread from the pantry.

"Oh, mom, guess what? Papa and I picked lots of rhubarb. Can you make me some rhubarb cake?"

"Sure, I will. I'll make it if you help me ice Anna's birthday cake. She wants yellow icing with a blue horse." Balancing the phone against my shoulder, I slapped together a ham and cheese sandwich and sliced it in half.

"And a purple mane," Anna yelled into the phone.

"Okay," Natalie said. "I'll draw it while Papa makes lunch. Bye!"

What would I do without Natalie to design cakes for me? She was my artist. At nine, she was the one I relied on to decorate birthday cakes, apply Hallowe'en make-up and make gift cards. And she was the peacemaker between her two warring sisters.

Somehow I fed the girls, did the dishes and got Madeleine back to school on time. As we left the schoolyard, Anna asked, "Now can we go?"

"Go where?"

"To the Candy Cave for my loot bag stuff!"

I guessed that Barb and Natalie would be on the road. It took exactly an hour to drive from my father's house in the country to our front door in downtown Toronto. Unless Natalie … . Anna's blue eyes pleaded through ragged bangs.

"Couldn't we wait until Dad gets home? I'm worried about Nat and I want to be here when she gets home."

Anna stomped a foot. "We never do anything because of Natalie!"

I stopped in front of our house. "Anna, I know it's hard for you, but Natalie's really sick. She might not get better."

"She looks a lot better now that she's home."

I smiled sadly. "She does, doesn't she? But the doctor said the leukemia has come back and … she might die."

Anna scuffed her sandal on the sidewalk, rubbing at the hopscotch she had made with Natalie the day before. "There could be a miracle you know."

Tears filled my eyes. I didn't believe in miracles any more, but Anna was so determined to be hopeful. "There could be."

"Well, if she dies or if she gets better, at least we'll be able to do stuff again."

I sighed and hugged my youngest daughter. She adored Natalie and had been trying very hard to be patient, but there was so much she hadn't been able to do – no swimming lessons, no dance class, no visits to malls or crowded places. The highlight of her week had become Friday night pizza and a movie in Natalie's room at the hospital. For a brief moment Anna nestled her cheek against my chest as I stroked her hair. Then she wriggled away.

"Please can we go? I'll choose fast mom. And if we drive we'll get back before Auntie Barb."

"Dad took the car to the airport this morning when he went to Ottawa."

Anna hopped along the hopscotch and spun around when she reached the last square. "I know! We can ride our bikes."

"Okay. If you don't take too long choosing the candy."

"Thank you, Mom!"

She raced along the narrow walkway into the backyard. I followed and yanked her pink bicycle from the tangle of scooters and bikes beside the back deck. My old black Raleigh looked grimy and rusted after a winter outside.

"Damn! Two flats."

Anna was already perched on her little bicycle, with her purple helmet fastened under her chin. "Pump them up."

Tears stung my eyes. "I don't know where the pump is and I can never get the bloody thing fastened on properly."

"It's okay, Mom. You could just run beside me."

Run. I hadn't had any exercise in nearly a year, except for the few times I'd forced myself to walk up to the eighth floor of the hospital when Natalie was an in-patient.

Anna smiled. "You can do it."

I blinked back tears. It was her birthday. And it was my birthday too. Anna, I always told her, was my best birthday present ever, born at home on a sunny afternoon on my thirty-fifth birthday. "Okay, I guess we need loot bags for our birthday party, don't we?"

She wheeled her bicycle through the gate and called back, "You can choose some candy too, Mom."

I JOGGED ALONG AFTER HER. It was strange to be outside on such a blissfully warm, sunny day, after spending months in the hospital. Everything was so bright and new. My neighbour's roses had survived the harsh winter to cover the wall of his three-storey house with hundreds of crimson buds. Would Natalie see them in bloom? I ran faster to catch Anna, gulping the light fragrance with my ragged breath, so fresh after the stale antiseptic air of the hospital.

Leaving the clinic that morning, I had walked past parents waiting with bald toddlers, teenagers

in jaunty bandanas and children in bright cloth hats. Natalie's chemo nurse was scanning names on a large white board but when I approached, she whirled into the treatment room. Amina's mother was waiting in line to register. We had chatted together the day before while Natalie recovered from her bone marrow aspirate and Amina had her chemo. But this morning she seemed fascinated by her appointment book.

No one would look at me. My red eyes gave me away: I'd received bad news in a clinic that was built on bad news. No one wanted to know that something else had gone wrong. That was the unspoken rule. One soul-wrenching blow at diagnosis and then steady on to cure. Death was only whispered about in the corridors of a ward where one in five children died.

I had left the floor without speaking to anyone. For the last time? No. We'd go back next week and talk to Dr. Wyse and she'd tell us about a new drug or a new clinical trial.

I ran faster, to catch Anna before she turned the last corner. Gasping, I rubbed at a sharp stitch in my side before locking the tiny pink bike to a pole outside the Candy Cave. In twenty minutes Natalie and Barb would be back.

"Okay, Anna, go for it," I said, handing her a red plastic basket.

My youngest daughter is a careful shopper. When we buy shoes, she tries dozens of pairs, searching for the perfect fit and up-to-the-minute style. She considers loot bag purchases in the same careful way, weighing the merits of cute gummy bears over squirm-inducing gummy worms. But that day she was decisive.

"You get twenty Dubble Bubble, Mom. I'll get caramels 'cause I know you like them."

"Are there twenty guests?"

I didn't remember making that many invitations. How would I know who to phone if Natalie died? Would they show up with shiny gift bags as the undertaker carried her body out of the house?

"No, fourteen, but we need loot bags for me, Nat, Madeleine, you, Dad and Auntie Barb." She held up a finger for each person. "That's twenty. Catherine's too little."

Anna counted caramels as I grabbed handfuls of paper-wrapped gum. She added red Twizzlers and a bag of sour keys to the basket and then pointed to the toys.

"Can we get twisty necklaces?" The plastic chokers were the current fad.

"They're $1.99 each." I said, squinting at the price label. "Times twenty, that's a lot."

"Well, Madeleine doesn't wear jewellery and I won't get one for you or Dad or Auntie Barb. But Nat likes them."

Natalie. Was she home yet? "Sure, go ahead."

I approved gold-wrapped chocolate coins but vetoed candy baby soothers at $2.99 each. "Okay, we've got to go."

Anna turned away from the fruit-scented cat tattoos without protest and hoisted the basket onto the counter. "Thanks, Mom!"

ON THE WAY HOME, ANNA'S lean bare legs were a blur as she sped along on the sidewalk. I staggered behind, smashing two plastic bags of candy against my aching legs, my chest burning. Were they home? Had the ambulance arrived with paramedics to pound at Natalie's chest? We had a DNR order on her chart at the hospital. *Do Not Resuscitate.* Do not prolong her suffering. I'd seen it happen in the hospital when a ten-year-old boy had gone into cardiac arrest. The team rushed in, turned on the lights and started pounding at him as his father stood in the doorway sobbing. But paramedics wouldn't know that we didn't want Natalie to die that way.

"Come on, Mom, you can do it," Anna called, pausing at the top of our street.

I stopped, wheezing air into my lungs. Our house was still a block and a half away but I thought I saw people gathered outside.

"Let's go. You're doing great, Mom!"

I felt as though a giant hand was pressing me back as I ran. My legs moved in slow motion, my heart pounded and I couldn't fill my lungs. Maybe I would die, running to my daughter's side.

People were gathered under the maple tree in front of our house. Were they curious neighbours, talking about how the ambulance had taken Natalie away? I stopped, pressing my thudding heart.

"It's Nat," called Anna. "They're home."

Anna pedaled ahead, threw her bike down and flopped under the tree beside Natalie and my sister, Barb.

I wanted to crumple to the sidewalk and weep with relief. Instead I wiped my tears with the handle of the plastic bag, took a deep breath and followed after Anna. Natalie was lounging against the trunk of the tree in her favourite blue overalls and turquoise hat, holding little Catherine in her arms.

"Hi, Mom!" Natalie grinned. "We just got home. Dad's here too. His case finished early."

"Sorry we're late," my sister said.

"How's your lip?" I asked.

"Fine," Natalie said. "Can we make the cakes? I picked lots of rhubarb with Papa. And I drew a flying horse for your cake, Anna. Want to see it?"

Behind me, Bruce called from the porch, "Surprise! We finished early. Where have you two been?"

I smiled and held up the two plastic bags. "Loot bags." ■

– Valerie McDonald

Mouldy socks and *The Three Bears*

AS WITH GOLDILOCKS, MY BEAR ENCOUNTERS ARE always too cold or too hot.

When I was a kid, my dad took me backpacking in California (a state officially symbolized by a grizzly), at Yosemite (a Native word for grizzly), following trail markers of Smoky (a cartoon grizzly), through an area long devoid of grizzlies. Nevertheless, I lay awake all night waiting for Ursus Horribilis to appear and eat my father, an event that my childish mind expected to be both heartbreaking and cool to watch. Instead, we encountered a black bear so used to campers that he could light a barbecue grill and make sign language for "Please, no onions on the hot dogs, folks; they give me wind."

Recently, while hiking the Kootenays, the first blood-curdling growl came from a distant chainsaw; the second came from my girlfriend's stomach; however, the third came from a cave guarding the only escape off the rock ledge we were scaling. Perhaps, I should start at the beginning.

Landing in Castlegar, I sucked in mountain air and gawked at an elk herd grazing just beyond the runway. A black flyrod case hung on my right arm while a brunette flight attendant hung on my left. (Some days are definitely better than others.) We drove a rental car past a cliff-hugging caravan of big horn sheep to the Slocan River. Highway 6 shot us north through the narrow valley cradling this gently looping, translucent-green glacial melt. Arrived in Passmore at lunchtime. Three stout Russian Doukhobor sisters served us borscht and rye bread. They were seamstresses, specializing in wedding dresses and coffin linings. Not as eclectic as it may seem. When the pacifist Christian Doukhobors fled Czarist persecution to Canada a century ago

with the help of Leo Tolstoy, they came espousing communal landholding and withholding of communal data, like marriages and deaths, from the government. Our sewing siblings also explained how female forebears had fished the Slocan using only their headscarves. Back on the road, we soon stopped for gas at a co-op near Vallican. Unexpectedly, a glitter-and-rainbow van lurched down the forested hillside, jolted over the concrete embankment, and pulled up to a pump. The scraggly-bearded driver hopped out in tie-dyed shirt and overalls. I asked him curiously, "Why didn't you use the road?"He answered matter-of-factly, "I don't have a license." To those who know the Slocan's history, this almost makes sense. In 1846, The Oregon Treaty extended the 49th parallel border to the Pacific. Slocan area residents, of course, were neither consulted nor considered. Yet their lives were forever changed. Relatives and trading partners along the North and South Columbia River were arbitrarily divided into Canadians and Americans. Strangers beyond the uncrossable Eastern and Western mountains became their countrymen and overseers. Furthermore, the Columbia River highway, which allowed BC surveyor Gilbert Malcolm Sproat to describe the Kootenays as nearly "the most accessible region in the province," was blocked off. The Slocan literally became a backwater. Ever since, residents have had a tendency to take legislation from afar with a grain of salt (or even a pinch of marijuana). Thus, when hordes of draft-dodging American hippies showed up in the 1970s, establishing communes and fishing the Slocan with willows, few eyebrows were raised. Slocanites are a law-abiding people, but there is some confusion in the valley as to whose laws they are abiding. Local ways often prevail. In Winlaw, we had dinner at the Hungry Wolf Café. Ate too much, too fast. After this big bad wolfing, what could be more appropriate than for us little pigs to retire to a straw house? Actually, it was a dome-shaped straw-bale-construction house and things got totally inappropriate. The owner was a fortyish Scandinavian free spirit. She wore Daisy Duke shorts and a bikini top, behind which her unbridled she-appendages galloped like wild horses as she bounced around before us and sprawled across her unmade bed. The advertised B & B turned out to be the room she occupied, where we were enthusiastically informed the three of us could share everything. Driving away, I pondered kinky stuff B & B could stand for, while my airline honey harangued me in her native French for taking 1.6 seconds too long rejecting the threesome concept.

Our road veered sharply upward. Cedar, fir, hemlock, and pine punctuated a left-side view of the valley floor receding to dizzying depths. A hairpin turn offered near-fatal panorama of a timber mill operating far below. Slocan Lake then appeared. This stringbean-shaped pool is 28 miles of bull trout and kokanee, surrounded by maples and cottonwoods, wedged between the granite flanks of the Selkirk Mountains.

The jagged Valhalla Range lies to the West with the undulating Slocan Range to the East. My mind slipped into a state akin to worship. In Silverton, we rented a cabin. The immaculate log home, owned by Swiss "healing-crystal-importers," housed the cast of *Snow Falling on Cedars* during filming. A fitting location for an Anglo-Asian tragedy. In 1942, politicians chose this valley to hide away over 7,000 Japanese Canadians who had been herded into livestock pens at Vancouver's agricultural exhibition lot after having their possessions confiscated. Here, future environmentalist David Suzuki saw tall trees through a child's eyes. Here, Dr. Hiroshi Kamitakahara healed patients and fished with a bamboo rod.

Here, they waited for their country to decide they were no longer a wartime security threat and for jealous neighbors to decide they were no longer a hard-times economic threat. My heart slipped into a state akin to shame.

The next day, I went angling in New Denver. Straddling a gravel bar, I worked my graphite rod back and forth, pushing a hand-tied sculpin farther and farther over the chilly abyss. My sinking line repeatedly pierced the realm where monsters be, but leviathans of the deep paid no heed. Over 200 metres down, miners once lost a boxcar full of silver. I figured if I were lucky enough to snag a bar of bullion, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans would likely make me throw it back. Prospectors also fished this spot – with dynamite. I decided to retain a little dignity and go with a dry fly instead. Good call. I unrolled my floating line down the shallows like a reptilian tongue, but instead of snatching an insect, planted a black stonefly between thick bulrushes and a dead log, like pizza delivery to the home of Mr. & Mrs. Kokanee. Several catches later, I paused for a bite myself. On this particular day, I was practising the highest form of angling: catch and release into a skillet full of butter. Drank one Kokanee Beer for each kokanee salmon to maintain essential carb/protein balance. Right away, a slightly overcooked fish on the edge of the pan spoke. No, really. I bent down next to his charred body (sort of like that scene in *The English Patient*), as he confided a longing for his lost Pacific cousins beyond those Columbia River dams. Now, two things occurred to me hunched over listening to that frying fish: 1) my hair smells kind of funny when it catches fire and 2) we should probably give rivers more of the protection they give us.

From Doukhobors fleeing political persecution to suburbanites fleeing spousal criticism, rivers have always offered refuge. Plus, from East Coast Celts to West Coast Natives, we're descended from people who listen to rivers, so why not a talking fish? Somewhere back in the mists of time, Native fishermen paddled into this remote valley and called it "Slocan" or "place of bull trout." I, too, had ventured in and reported a fair amount of bull. Nevertheless, I write this in earnest: police cars gather and news copters circle when urban freeways snarl up for minutes, so maybe it isn't extreme to note the long-term blockage of the arterial waterways draining our continent or even to hope that someday these emerald currents will flow again unhindered to the sea.

At sunrise, mademoiselle and I stood on the Slocan Lake shore. Shining waters lapped against our boots. On the opposite side, an ancient aboriginal painting adorns the sheer rock face ascending from the glossy deep: thick red ochre portrays an enraged bear accosting two people. History would soon repeat itself. We set off along Carpenter Creek to Sandon. This ghost town lies in a crevasse prone to wildfire in summer, avalanche in winter, and a minute or two of sun each day. Still, thousands once lived here. Why? Because silver-bearing galena ore was thrust up on the site 140 million years ago. Then American Jack Seaton and Frenchman Eli Carpenter stumbled onto it in 1891. The bonanza was on; the partnership was off.

From Sandon, we hiked up Idaho Peak. A weathered forestry watchtower creaked in the summit wind while mountain ranges wrinkled away as far as the eye could see. I was awestruck. In such a place, the myth of human importance erodes faster than any structure. Coming back down into thick brush, we heard heart-stopping bear sounds – some bogus, some real. One thing I've learned from bears is to keep my distance from other large predators, which we did. (By the way, you can learn a lot from bears. Ursine biologist Greg Risdahl tells me that they adapt not just winter hibernation but also summer snoozes to their environment. Sleeping by nature's rhythms can help people too. Remember *early to bed, early to rise, makes you healthy, wealthy, and wise*? Think about it. Natural lighting fights infection and depression, dawn rising promotes early bird productivity rather than night owl consumption, and sunrise watching fosters a spiritual sense of one's niche in the world. Yes, only geeks

go to bed early, but healthy, wealthy, wise geeks can seem pretty hip. Risdahl also points out that bear and human teeth reveal natural diet. Molars and premolars are for grinding grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and seeds, not milled flour, fruit juices, veggie bars, soy milks, and oil blends. Waste not, want not. Canines and incisors are for tearing lean meat such as venison or trout, not fat-packed sausage or pre-ground hamburger. Bears who trade forageable fare for human-processed garbage suffer ill health. Ditto for people. In Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Count Bezukhov credits his transformed vitality to meeting a man so close to nature he is part of it. We're all part of nature and we're all omnivores. Meat lovers attempting to live as carnivores risk stroke and heart disease; vegetarians attempting to live as herbivores risk atrophy and diabetes. Respecting nature means embracing its blueprint and accepting our place in it.) We spent the rest of the afternoon trekking across ridges and ravines to an ethereal blue glacier. Sat too long by the glowing ice field, till dusk began to fall. Alas, the dumbest word in all of wilderness travel – shortcut – was uttered and agreed upon. Leaping from boulder to boulder, checkerboard style, we advanced down an old rockslide, barely arresting our momentum at a precipice. Peering over the edge, I watched a steady stream of gravel trickling into oblivion, like the blood draining from my face. We crawled sideways along the lethal drop-off, reaching another dead end. Our only way out was back up the long descent, with an alpine night fast approaching. As we turned to face this lone, dismal option, a previously unseen hole in the rocks transformed gloom into horror. A territorial growl began as a low rumble. I was quite sure my lovely companion would smell tasty to a bear; I only hoped my hiking socks would neutralize the appeal. Looking around for ideas, I saw nothing but fresh berry-laden scat. *Grrrrrrr!* I trembled visibly and whined softly, "O *ursus* … O Jesus … oh, help us!" If I'd been cad enough to try out-running the agile Kimberly-Marie, I couldn't have. If I'd been chivalrous enough to lay down my life, she'd simply have been left on that stone pantry-shelf for a later meal. There was nothing to do but inch our way up to and beyond the den mouth. With each noise, we froze. Otherwise, we moved at approximately the speed of tree growth in a desperate attempt to give the grizzly no particular motion worthy of a charge. After what seemed like only a year or two, we were safely away. No buts about it, I was really bummed. Guess when it comes to grizzlies, hindsight is always better than … ■

– Lyn Fox

The pick of the litter

ON WINTER DAYS, THE SNOW COVERS THE CANS AND bottles along sidewalks and in slush-glutted gutters, making the forager's task difficult. Unlike the creatures of the forest, the trash-picker cannot hibernate through this lean period of the year, awaiting the promise of spring orgies of discarded aluminum and glass. Instead, she must rely on her native ingenuity to survive, always keeping a copy of local garbage pick-up dates close at hand.

Friday mornings, the picker stuffs her pockets with plastic bags and empties her large packsack. There is a momentary pause as she considers the merits and drawbacks of riding her bicycle. She will arrive on California Street more quickly on a bike, but the handlebars can accommodate only two full bags, and the ride home will be awkward. She decides to foot it.

It is a crisp, clear morning just after New Year's – enough time for the excesses of Christmas to have made the houses of suburbia uncomfortably crowded. It is only a matter of time before last year's delights hit the sidewalks as this year's trash. When the inhabitants start to suffocate in

their own purchases, it's time to watch for signs of desperation – wholesale flinging that suggests the erstwhile consumer has started cutting the fingers from the lifeboat.

At first glance, California Street looks unpromising. A smattering of green recycling bins flanks the roadway, along with the usual assortment of bulging black bags and heavy-duty bins on wheels – the cavalry of garbage cans. No naked trash has been set on the curb; absent are the tantalizing end table, punctured lampshade or hulking antique television set, once the pride of the Nixon era, now consigned, like Nixon, to the boneyard. The quiet drinker in the corner house has clearly had enough of the festivities – a dozen Colt 45 empties join his usual dozen Budweiser cans in the green bin, along with some dead soldiers of Captain Morgan's brigade.

Exposed furniture may attract the eye, but as the picker soon discovers, it is the number and shape of the black bags that help in the detection of real gems.

Trash-picking generally, and bag-sorting especially, is an art that encompasses the five senses. One can often surmise the approximate contents of a bag by its shape: does it bulge roundly like a beanbag, suggesting wet or soft contents that one should definitely avoid, or do sharp edges protrude from its sides, sometimes piercing the plastic? One can usually consider the latter a safe (or safer) bet in terms of coming into contact with real filth (one's olfactory sense is also a useful guide here). Is the bag seated alone or in the company of others? A group of six or more oddly shaped bags often suggests a move or major housecleaning, both excellent situations for the trash-picker. Does the bag rattle or make discouraging slopping sounds? How heavy is it? The wise picker will take all of these factors into consideration.

Having found a suitably pointy and inoffensive-smelling bag, the picker commences unpacking; for those thick-skinned souls who do not fear the horrified or pitying glances of passersby, this task may be done at the scene of the potential haul. For those for whom disgrace is an issue, bags may be collected after dark and hauled home in the trunk of one's car. The curbside sort is useful in that any true trash may be left on site after the sifting is complete, while the picker who drags the kill back to her lair must often wait for next week's collection to dispose of any undesirables found in the mix.

The cardboard box is generally the picker's friend. More easily opened than the bag, and more easily stacked, the box is also less likely to contain foulness than its plastic comrade. Books, magazines, CDs, dishes, toys and cutlery are likely to be boxed prior to disposal. The box's only drawback is its permeability; there is nothing more depressing than opening a rain-soaked box full of ruined books. No matter how trashy the novel found inside a mouldering box, such a method of disposal seems somehow an assault on the innocent, a crime against knowledge.

The bag or box opened, the picker surveys her quarry. At this point, it may be well to offer a few caveats to the novice. It is difficult not to be judgmental when faced with a large haul of perfectly useful items thrown away with apparent carelessness, but this is only one of several possible emotions that may present themselves. Depending on the picker and the magnitude of the item picked, feelings may range from puzzlement to righteous indignation to outright disbelief. As a picking novice, I passed through each of these stages as I pulled not one, not two, but four cellphones from one particularly rich trove, along with their chargers, a portable television set, an MP3 player, a dictaphone and a set of speakers, all in perfect working order.

Keep an ear open for the rattle of coins in the usual places: coat pockets, briefcases and small containers. In two hauls, this picker collected over thirty-seven dollars in small change.

Storage is always a problem for the serious picker and is likely the main reason the item

ended up at the curb in the first place. There are two ways to address the problem. The first entails selectivity, keeping a tight rein on one's natural hoarding instinct and harvesting only that which can be used immediately. This mindset requires discipline, the ability to pass up tempting finds if one already has them at home rather than stockpiling more, thus effectively turning one's basement into a Good Will depot. The second approach is to view oneself as a kind of second-hand Santa Claus and find good homes for salvaged items before they begin to pile up. On finding, last week, several boxes stuffed with children's books and toys, this picker decided that becoming a halfway house for these sad refugees until a willing daycare could be found entailed far less mental anguish than watching them go to the landfill.

Of course, many trash finds may wind up as one-of-a-kind gifts for open-minded friends and family. To itemize the current holdings in my basement: two large boxes of Lego are earmarked for dear friends about to become first-time parents. A stack of ornate picture frames awaits delivery to a photographer friend. Dog-lovers of my acquaintance may choose from an assortment of Nerf balls, leashes and equipment bags. Hardback mystery novels line my bookshelves, waiting for a rainy day or a cold virus.

Some finds tell a story. It is not uncommon to find downhill ski sets and crutches thrown out at the same time. A pipe and a Ziplock bag of marijuana found just before Christmas suggest either an imminent visit from nosy relatives or an early New Year's resolution. On the newest of the discarded cellphones, I discovered photos of the family mastiff whose pet carrier (also trashed) had clearly been outgrown. At this point in the proceedings, I began to worry that, with so many doggie items uncovered so far, it was only a matter of time before I found the dog itself in one of the bags.

Should one have moral qualms about sorting through other people's trash? Not in this picker's opinion. Ours is a time-honoured tradition, immortalized in the pages of Dickens and in Betty's Smith's beloved *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,* where feisty urchins scour the streets for tin and copper to sell to the junk man. Trash-picking is a healthy response to wastefulness of North American society for whom shopping has become the ultimate distraction – the freeways disgorging autos filled with mall junk *en route* to becoming next month's landfill are the conduits of this waste. It is a conscience-shrivelling spectacle that only the sedated can contemplate with any degree of composure. The trash-picker, like the earthworm, wrests goodness from what others view as just plain dirt. Both are reclaimers and recyclers, and both deserve thanks rather than disdain.

The trash picker trudges home under the weight of today's fresh picks. A nested set of three heavy plastic mixing bowls have gone into her packsack, and in each hand she carries a bag full of empties destined for the redemption centre where cans, if not souls, may be turned in for cash. She will likely donate the money to a worthy cause. For this picker, satisfaction comes from the work itself, not the pay. ■

– Elizabeth Peirce

flying visit (all we saw)

david susuki, three
hours in sydney, "what
we do to the earth, we do
to ourselves." plane lifting,
steady roar, applause
pouring into the
night

– Sean Howard

FRED MEISSNER

Mother-in-law: a biography (unauthorized)

1

"Well, you can't thread a moving needle" was my soon-to-be mother-in-law's aphoristic response in her accented English to our announcement that we were pregnant and about to get married.

I felt immediate admiration for this woman who I would soon be calling "mom."

2

Even though many of her stories take place in Romania, she is German and will correct you if you say otherwise. Her roots are firmly embedded in the chaos of a war-torn Europe. She comes from good peasant stock. She has that Old World knack for telling stories of the past, stories she tells over and over again like the strange mythic tales of Hesiod, the repetition making myth a part of our collective unconsciousness.

Sometimes, while she tells us one of her stories, I find myself nodding knowingly.

3

When she was very young, she watched her mother die. She'll tell you that her mother suffered from an inexplicable illness that confined her to her bed where she sipped, continuously, opium tea. One quiet night, her mother called her into the bedroom, held her close awhile, and died.

She said her screams brought the other tenants in the building running.

4

After her mother's death, she became the mother of the house – she tried her best to care for her father and for her older brother. Sometimes her father slipped away into sudden fits of anger and depression and he would send her from the house, afraid that he might kill her. Sometimes her brother beat her if he caught her doing things he thought she ought not to do – smoking cigarettes, staying out too late, talking to boys.

She will tell you that she has no use for men.

5

Her first (of seven) was such a difficult birth she thought that she would die or he would die before the end, but the midwife there said that the frog that she had put into the water basin had not drowned – everything would be alright – keep bearing down. The midwife, it turned out, was right. She doesn't talk a lot about the man who helped create this child. Her silence, I like to think, locks away a dusty memory that, possibly, might resemble love.

When pressed, she will tell you that this man, like so many others, perished in the war.

6

I met her brother once when he was visiting from Windsor, a quiet, diabetic man. They didn't talk a lot, but she brought him water glasses full of rye, lightly coloured with ginger ale and ice. Eventually, the diabetes killed him. In the war (as she tells it) he had a commander who was going to take the troop on a suicide mission, but something "happened" to that commander (something that her brother never talks about) and the mission never went.

Some men, I suppose, lived somehow through all that madness.

7

She remembers that her brother came home one day on leave and when he visited, he found her pregnant and without a man, and he beat her black and blue. She also tells of the times when as children, she slept together in the same bed as her brother, and he'd fart and pull the covers over her head.

She laughs when she tells you this, love floating in her laughter like the bubbles from her boiling pea soup.

8

After her brother's funeral, she slept like an exhausted child in the back of the car on the drive back from Windsor. She was seventy years old. I don't remember seeing her cry, but her sorrow, like interminable waves from a sea of tears, rolled and crashed on the shores of our perception.

We kept watch for her, alone out there in all of that sadness.

9

After the war, she met a man who had a daughter but no wife; she had a son but no husband. Conveniently, they married. Two children later, they sailed for Canada. Four children after that, he had his first stroke. He was in his mid-thirties, but was like a child himself. We have a crumpled black-and-white photo of him poised, mid-stride, among some trees, smiling sheepishly. After he died, she will explain, her life was very hard.

I realize that I lose something in the transcription.

10

We make fun of her sometimes. She likes to read the *People* magazine that Terry brings her once a week or so. She'll say, "Ach, that Jerry Sprinkler," or "I don't like Bruce Willie," or "that Shannon Stone plays such dirty parts," or "Patrick Shvantsig, he's good looking." I have a feeling that she makes some of these little blunders on purpose. When we leave, she sometimes lets me kiss her on her soft, soft wrinkled cheek; she tells her daughter that she loves her.

One time, recently, Terry cried when we left her mother's place; I think I understand what she was feeling.

Monday April 15

okay
so I've missed a few days

being human
I tend not to live up to my own or anybody else's expectations

it's not that things of beauty haven't been encountered in the space between these entries it's not that I couldn't have made time to write them down it's not that miracles haven't been playing peek-a-boo all around me-a kind of run on sentence of amazing creation

(where do I go from here?)

it's this being human
it's this knowledge of this human-ness
and the possibility of beauty

and the potential for miracles
this looking for deep structure in the linguistics of existence
but if I could just drop the fancy language drop all flowery modifiers
look beyond the ing of being
and just simply
b

if I could lose the syntax of this person the capacity for diminutives and superlatives if I could get around all that or out of that or away from that I'm sure that like the trees and the birds and the squirrels I'd escape my notion of a grammar for miracles and live in the monosyllabic miracle of the here and now

given all of that-

I got up to pee at 5:15 a.m.
and peeked out back window
to be hit full force
by light of full moon

still and shining in dark sky
light as loud as Hallelujah chorus
in Handel's *Messiah*

I basked in that light awhile
felt the strength of its presence
felt that presence felt by countless others on this planet felt that connection to all things
to the source of that light
and that light's source
and so on

then I felt I had to
p
so I let go of everything

STACEY MAY FOWLES

hannah

"... IT'S THE HEAT," FINN SAYS.

Which is funny because the climate is considerably less manic here, less drastic, less extreme like the people and their lack of panic every day. It's always cool here so the heat can't be the reason. It's probably the fact that I'm standing over him day in and day out, a little match girl begging for attention like coins, a girl with bad skin to match her bad temperament and her bad posture. He can't tell me it's just the heat that makes him ridiculously impossible to be around except when we're fucking, which is rare right now because I can't be touched without getting all panicked and fidgety. I never come anyway.

So it can't be the heat.

I imagine I am bohemian, which is ridiculous because my daddy co-signed on everything and I can't handle my weed. I wanted to have a collection of vintage vinyl in my goldenrod and muted lime loft apartment., but I don't own a record player and my landlord insists on standard issue eggshell sanatorium white for my overpriced shoebox cell. I was the centre of something once, but now I have lost my sheen and my temporary stardom. When I daydream I fantasize that someone would steal me away and make me interesting, like those two kidnapped teenage girls made over on the cover of *People* magazine. I'm sure they got their own cosmetic contracts as soon as they were released from the trunk of that car.

I am broke. I am average. There is a piece of me missing.

And it's named Morgan.

Yesterday I watched transfixed as a homeless man shoplifted a can of processed ham from the shelf of the Granville Street 7-11. He looked up at me as he stuffed it into the pocket of his heavy grey overcoat and shot me a yellowed checkerboard grin. And I thought to myself as I averted my gaze into my styrofoam coffee cup and tore open a sugar packet, "What the fuck am I doing here?"

Thank Heaven for 7-11, the sugar packet read.

Every day I wake up in this town I wake up early and I ask myself, "What the fuck am I doing here?"

Despite what the glossy travel brochures say this town is full of junkies, skinny people with hollow faces, seething desperation. And then there are mountains and water and packed skyscapes and skyscrapers beyond anything I have ever seen. Mothers with pocked skin like sandpaper and outdated shag haircuts telling their Ritalin-ridden children, "Mommy's a recovering addict, honey." All the pretty soya milk and butter girls, their flesh curving, puckering, fighting to escape blinding fluorescent bikinis as they skip stones on salt water, water I had never before tasted.

My apartment building is full of miserable single men in their late thirties, clutching their laundry, too nervous to look me in the eye when I say hello in the elevator.

In downtown Vancouver everything's in hyper-contrast, over-exposed like bad highschool art-class photographs, while the uniform grey of constant rain makes the blacks and whites of emotional chaos completely disappear.

There is this very real feeling that I don't belong in the aromatherapy, herbal remedy wilderness that is this shiny glass exoskeletal town. They all said, "Oh it's so beautiful there," but the beautiful ugliness of it all only makes me feel uglier. Perhaps this is because my version of beauty was always the dirty aging kind, like too much dust on a leather-bound Faustian tome. I suppose I actually thought this town would detoxify me, clean me out like a colonic, but so far I've just managed to smoke more, eat less, and break out in an anxiety rash. It's so antiseptically clean here, so smog-free, it's making me sick.

Morgan said it would take me a mere two weeks for me to freak out and blow all my money on the first flight east. It's been eight weeks, and almost all of my money is blown on things other than a plane ticket, but her prediction was not without merit. My form of freaking out made me start investing in the art of baking peach and blueberry pies for Finn, and devising the most effective method of cleaning the scum from an already immaculately clean bathtub. When my mother found out about my sudden domesticity during a long-distance call across time zones she worried to the point of tears and begged me to do what Morgan figured I would do anyway.

"I'll send you air mail from Europe honey. *Air mail,*" Morgan said to me on the phone during the first call I had gotten from her after three long weeks of being out west. She said it as if she didn't realize that she didn't need to go to Europe, as if she didn't know Montreal was already far enough away for me to receive *air mail*. She said it as if my life was mundane enough that a piece of cardstock with the Eiffel tower printed on it would bring me more than a day's worth of meaning.

A terminally blond girl at one of my many unsuccessful job interviews said, "People from the east always hate it here. They go back as soon as the rainy season hits."

"I thought we were in the rainy season already."

She laughed as if the thought of my inevitable failure and disappointment amused her beyond belief.

(Morgan predicted this. I hate her for that.)

When Finn went west before me six months ago I was left in Montreal smoking a cigarette, holding a suddenly adopted potted plant, standing on a street corner in the snow while the car pulled away. Like I was in some bad eighties teen movie, some John Hughes manufactured joke made just for me.

The city where we now live together (in separate apartments, much to my disappointment) is full of crazed narcotic faces and shiny glass skyscrapers, each one appearing to be eaten out, gnawed at, exposed like prisoners stripped and deloused before an eternity of entrapment. Beyond those transparent towers are majestic mountains capped in heavy clouds, an infinity of reflections back and forth in the buildings like a fun house in an amusement park.

The rain never came when I was there in February to decide whether leaving the frozen east behind was the right decision in my post-educational career crisis. I wondered

if the temporary skies were a clear invitation, asking me to run west despite everything. Of course those same skies opened wide the very day I arrived to stay, and all the open dumpsters breathed a heavy, greasy sigh to mock me. All these strange glass towers and all this rain and waiting, every day, for a man who doesn't love me to get home late from work and eat a slice of blueberry pie.

I remember reading Henry David Thoreau's phrase *we go westward as into the future* when I was making lofty escape plans and imagining a life with Finn by the ocean. I had these completely unrealistic dreams of coming out west and being better, cleaner, needing to be secluded and nurtured by some vast ideal of west coast comfort after the heart had clearly stopped beating on my past life. As much as it has been mythologized by Thoreau and cowboy frontier fiction, the west has its own brand of ugliness that is only emphasized by the suffocating beauty of the landscape.

When we dream of it we remember the heroes and forget the villains.

When I came west I wanted – no – *was going to be* the girl at the Sunday farmers market who just had an orgasm in a sun drenched four-poster bed a few hours before. I wanted to be the iconic girl (who doesn't exist), the kind in Varga's drawings of pin-up princesses who wear silk panties and play with kittens all day long, the kind of girl that you can tell never wears a bra under that lemon yellow dress, the one that exposes the upper portion of her left breast as she leans in to examine some vine-ripened tomatoes. You just know she's got vanilla scented candles and a magazine rack full of art periodicals in her studio apartment with huge bay windows, exposed brick and a view of the ocean. Men buy her stuff. She grows fresh herbs on her kitchen windowsill. She gets out of bed when she wants without the piercing guilt that she is disappointing someone.

When I imagined myself in silk panties examining tomatoes I of course didn't factor in my own personal poverty, lack of orgasms and genetic penchant for depression.

My bachelor apartment looks out over rows and rows of other apartments, each of their inhabitants dreaming their dreams of the west, dreaming that one day they will finally see the ocean and loathing me because my building is the reason they cannot.

Sometimes I watch beautiful Finn sleep in that dopey, open-mouthed way he does and I realize that he is the only real reason I can pinpoint when faced with the question of why I am here, a fact that I have been desperately avoiding. He occasionally lets me have what he calls "my juvenile lesbian tendencies" and takes me for sushi when its my only solace, but he can't tell me he loves me, refuses to cohabitate with me despite the fact that I followed him here and now eat free samples at the upscale supermarket to save money.

It is true that his home has become mine, a fact that stretches him beyond his limits, but I push them because my tiny one-room apartment feels like a prison, a prison I pay for and decorate with a past I yearn to dive back into. I am consumed by a loneliness so large it won't be assuaged with fifties love ballads or extended bubble baths or baking pies.

"… it's the heat," he says, scratching at his thinning hair and staring at the television as Alex Trebec reveals the double jeopardy question.

So I know, now more than I ever have, that it can't just be the heat. I know this because there is no heat.

There is no warmth here at all.

I will make it through the year, and I know that Morgan would argue with me, primarily because Morgan always argues with me, especially now in her newfound wisdom of an older boyfriend and world-travelling on his dime. Fuck her and her postcards from Paris. Like Finn she can't say *I love you* either, and I would have done anything to hear those words come out of her overly painted red mouth. Not that she'd ever admit it but I used to be her mother, holding her head in my lap while she cried and bled and complained about her victimhood. Now I'm just another name on her international mailing list.

All I can do not to suffer the inevitable is numb myself to the truth until every last fidgeting doubt shuffles away on reluctant feet, out the exit door of my already cramped skull.

– from the novel *Be Good* (Tightrope Books)

MIKE MEAGHER

I was poetry

I was lost in Zarathustra's words
when I left to smoke in the rain.
He was lost in Nietzsche's biography,
a prune-whipped horse.

(Nietzsche was fated
to normal insanity.)

I saw humanity out of the corner of my eye
when from the smoky words
poetry wet and died.

He thought I was a beardless caveman,
an armless amputee
picking flowers between the sand.

"Words, they're just smoke,"
I wanted him to say. "An F,
it's merely a blind note."

He stroked his beard with his tears,
a dead sympathy
when he kept mute
and continued talking with the other students.
He was conscious
like Nietzsche was of his misogyny
'cause of a bitch mother.

I was poetry
He was humanity
or maybe humanity lost.

WHEN I WAS AT SCHOOL, I THOUGHT ABOUT SEX. AT HOME, SEX. WHEN I HAD TO THINK ABOUT something else, like math or driving or food, I hurried along to get back to sex. I had sex alone. The best, however, was the sex I had in my sleep.

"It's not really clear through Blake's poetry whether it is innocence or experience that leads one closer to the Divine, or at least which one has the upper hand in all mortal souls," I said to Ms. Jacobs in one dream. We were alone at her desk after school.

The upper hand in all mortal souls! I was pretty sure that was the most eloquent thing ever to come out of my mouth.

"These pretty petals fall so softly from your lips," Ms. Jacobs said.

"Their fragrance is for you alone," I said.

"You know Verbal," Ms. Jacobs said, taking her earrings off and putting them in her top drawer. "Nothing pleases me more than a bright young student of mine putting everything on the line like that." She sat on the edge of her desk, her sheer-white cotton skirt sliding up her tanned thighs.

"What you have said," she murmured, slowly rubbing her legs, "is poetry in and of itself. Your words are stuffed with a music of their own, a music which imparts deeper meaning than the words themselves. Come here, my pet."

JOHN-JAMES FORD

Good work!

I approached, tractor-beam-wise, homing in to the stiff presence of her nipples, nipples that taunted me from beneath the silk of her blouse. She smelled womanly, together; I let her take off my shirt.

"Do you understand, baby?" Ms. Jacobs asked. "You are writing poetry about poetry, and for this you should be rewarded." She reached between her thighs, and my knees went soft. Two of her fingers moved inside her, and she moaned.

She came, and a geyser of her clean, honeyed nectar sprayed all over me. Then in one motion, panting, she pulled something from her vagina.

It was a stamp.

She reached up and stamped GOOD WORK! onto my lips. She then guided my hands up her skirt.

"Um, Ms. Jacobs," I said, "do you think I have a concrete thesis … I … ahh …"

She undid my belt, and hitched her skirt up over her waist, exposing her thick bush of brown hair, musky dew dropping, an invitation into the pink.

"Call me Jugs, baby," Ms. Jacobs said, reclining on the desk. I ripped open her blouse, buttons popping everywhere, and was stunned by the immediacy of her tits. Jugs pulled me on top of her.

"This is lovely," I said, pecking at a nipple. She guided my erection into a squishy and electric warmth. I came instantly.

When I looked up apologetically at Jugs, I was horrified to see Gertie's face instead.

"Nice going, Herbie," she said, winking. "And this concludes your lesson on the two contrary states of the human soul."

– from the novel *Bonk on the Head* (Nightwood Editions)

MIKE MEAGHER

Sex and metaphysics

SEX AND METAPHYSICS LIES ON 247 NELSON STREET. NELSON, RUNNING EAST TO WEST, intersects with both Kant Avenue and Edwin Street. The two run parallel to one another, Edwin resting one block east of Kant. Unlike most cinemas in these parts, which showcase few foreign and independent films, *Sex* was supposed to be, according to one acquaintance, an underground warehouse.

On foot, cigarette between fingers, I approached the intersection of Kant and Nelson, where read a billboard with an arrow pointing east: *Sex and metaphysics, the best in cult, classics, independents, foreign, etc.* On the board was painted a Moulin Rouge lady, wearing starred pantyhose, feathered jacket, and cherry-red lipstick; a younger woman, holding a dance pose, bare-breasted, curved back, with contorted, winged arms, looked upward with confused, innocent eyes, seeming forced yet, above all, beautiful; and a third lady, painted above the other two, a crazy-eyed Negress wearing an afro, mouth open, sharp teeth showing, looked to be screaming a scream that says *torture*.

I apprehensively followed the arrow. I walked slowly down Nelson, the buildings' addresses gradually nearing 247. If only, I thought to myself, these numbers would decrease eternally: 251, 249, 248.5, 248.25, 248.125, etc. This would be hell, though: a waiting, a ceaseless anxiety! Although, I might finally figure the mathematical impossibility of 247 Nelson and then walk back to my apartment. What if 247 Nelson, *Sex,* never entered the life of my mind? What if the cinema did exist, but toppled to the ground or went up in flames? Nonsense! I live on earth and this is life. 247 was approaching.

Working retail as a teenager, I would always, making my way up the sidewalk running alongside the strip mall, long for T & M's closure. The doors, unfortunately, were always open. Déjà vu hit me as a 22-year old labourer. The factory's doors, much to my disappointment, were always unlocked as I arrived for my evening shift. At 24, passing 249 Nelson, I hoped, as the preceding dreamy, "non-existential" (How else am I to put it? Everyone seems to throw around the term these days, in baseball and in finance: existence precedes essence, is all one needs to know) ideas were implausible, that, although still nearly impossible, yet more plausible, – I hoped that the doors to *Sex* were locked.

You might be wondering what caused this reluctance. A cigarette always goes well before something. I was standing outside 249. New situations terrify me: new stores, new people, new arrangements. Moreover, the billboard suggested pornographic ways: What kinda shit was my beatnik amigo into? Was *Sex and metaphysics* a brothel? Was it a pornographic cinema? Alone, never could I enter into such a cinema.

Keep in mind that fear and furthermore anxiety often bear irrationality. "Fear," logic said somewhere in the back of my mind, "sometimes gives birth to beauty."

"Fuck it," I said, pitching away my cigarette, "let this fear-tackling represent all situations, all courageous actions, let this represent my life of bravery henceforth."

As I walked towards the door, my heart was allowed to beat twenty or thirty times. In front of me stood a metal yellow door, painted with precise pink writing:

Monday-Thursday:	1-9
Friday-Saturday:	1-10
Sunday:	Closed

My god, this place is seedy! This surely is illegitimate. What basement, what rancid chamber of sex does this door separate me from? That perfect pink print! How perfect! How inviting for the flesh! The perfect pink that covers up dirty couches! My heart began to pound faster as I considered the entry into the other world, whatever I really supposed it to be. How long had I been staring at the closed door? Three seconds? A minute and a half? Longer? It was time. If I stood here any longer, I'd appear sick.

I took off abruptly, walking quickly with head down, fumbling with a cigarette. A cigarette always goes well after something. Up Kant, heading northwards: I knew there I'd be safe. Did anyone see me? Am I now the local pervert? What time is it? 5:46.

There, there. Phew. Heading north up Kant. Now I can go on to other things. *Here* was my justification: like the victim of suicide, I once read (with which I disagree to a large extent, really), who must take her life because the pain overrides its coping mechanisms, I had no choice but to walk away. I'm a dreamer, I suffer like Hamlet. I can, really, when truly confronted, act upon nothing. But that's neither here nor there; although everything is always *here* and always *there* for the obsessive.

Maybe it was the wrong cinema? Could this video warehouse in actual fact be further up the road? Was this yellow door an advertisement? I'll take right at Fern Court Road from Kant, then head south on Edwin, west on Nelson. I know this noble cinema is between Edwin and Kant on Nelson. If I don't pass another cinema on Nelson from Edwin before I reach this yellow door, this yellow door must be the *Sex and metaphysics.* Action: this is the devil that makes me vulnerable; the devil that requires me to rip me out of myself, spewing myself into that terrible other world unknown. I can bypass action for a few minutes, anyways. First, I'll call Jay.

Before I called Jay from the payphone I tossed away my cigarette and lit up another. Self-consciousness of my deep sharp voice (a self-consciousness that comes and goes), and the general vulnerability of being in conversation, albeit with a friend, made me decide to light up a fresh cigarette beforehand. Besides, whether in conversation or while reading or what have you, a cigarette always goes well with something.

When the mind is absolutely intent upon something, all other thoughts, both those conscious and those unwilled, are put to rest: before connecting, I fumbled through my pockets for loose change and through my memory, for a quick moment, for Jay's number:

"Hey, buddy."

"Hey, what's up?"

"Not much, man."

"What're ya up to?"

"Not much, just workin' on a few things."

"Listen, that video store, it's *Sex and metaphysics*, right?"

"Yeah, man, it's awesome, you should go to that one."

"It's on Kant and Nelson, yeah?"

"Yeah, it's right on the corner."

"I went down Nelson just now: does it wear a yellow door?"

"Um, yeah. Yeah, it does, it's right on the corner."

"'Cause I went by but didn't go in. It just looked like some cellar door, so I thought maybe it was further down Nelson or something."

"No, that's the one."

"I walked right by the door because it looked kinda iffy, or private, or something."

"No, that's the one. The owner's really cool, it's the best in the city, I'll bet. D'ya still have the card?"

"Yeah, yeah. I just wanted to make sure I wasn't gettin' into anything sticky."

"Yeah, it's the one, the owner lives in it, I think, there's a bed in the back, he hardly makes profit."

"Alright, I'll take off there, I guess."

"Alright, man, gimme a call tomorrow, bring back the card."

"Alright, I'll g–"

"What's the movie again?"

"*Popocatepetl.*"

"Oh yeah, that's right. I never remember 'cause I can't pronounce it. Anyways, see ya later, man."

"Okay. Thanks, eh? for the card."

"Yeah, no problem. See ya."

"Bye bye."

That was pretty easy, I thought. Although there was no real need to worry: I've had a fragile moment or two in his presence, and he never freaked. I was still smoking my cigarette, pleased with myself. Approaching Fern, it was fortunate I was already handling a cigarette, because I like to turn corners with cigarette in hand: maybe to serve as clutch for a terrific unseen situation; maybe to appear fashionable; most likely a habit. Nothing extraordinary had ever happened while rounding a corner ... this day was no different.

Ah! Fern Court! the most beautiful and vivacious street in the city! It is so open, paved with massively wide interlock walkway, manyfolds – say, ten – wider than the other sidewalks that cut through the city. Unlike Kant, with its bland yellow buildings of the same height, Fern holds one-storey apartments of rustic semblance, almost European in style, and tall glass structures that seem to stretch to the clouds. The horizon shows in the distance and here, given the width of the street, the sky opens up and appears as it is: infinite. In the middle of the court stands a copper figure: almost cubist in form, it curves sharply like a corkscrew, three open wood boxes attached to

the screw: overpowering, reaching several storeys upward. Even on cloudy days, without strong light, the faces, the laughter, indescribably, seem crisper. No cars pass through Fern: hassle-free, free to dance and stumble across the walk as one pleases – this must explain the pleasant atmosphere, I thought. Cars. Flags of Quebec, Saskatchewan, U.S.A., and Canada – she left me for another man – flap, atop tall grey poles, behind the copper form. No cars – no Karen – no cars: this explains the pleasantness.

Twenty paces ahead a man was setting up with flute in hand and a case on the ground. This laughter, this joy, I thought, that seems to be thrown from building to building: how can this be when men and women beg for change – "three pennies'll do" – amongst unresponsive eyes? Ignorance and laughter march through here unaffected. Really, this scene is grotesque!

We separated after four years, Karen and I. I grew less fond of her: my spirit left her side well before we split: of this I'm certain. She left me for another man and I collapsed. Now, four months later, I don't blame her.

The street performer began to blow into the flute. Passing, I dropped a little change into his case. He gave me a thankful nod. Suddenly, a note struck me, and then another and another: it seemed to pull at my heart. Blasted, beautiful melancholy! I took to the nearest bench, still fifteen paces beyond.

Although felt in heart differently, song wears no tongue: eternally vernacular, it carries through air, reaching ears black, white, yellow, and red, of man and of woman.

Music: ah! music: although universal, it is, beyond language, perhaps not just here, indescribable. However is one to put the song, the felt heart from song, into a string of words? How noble is the portrait of a gem made manifest? Is it old Plotinus that comes to mind? One is to say not what a thing is, but what a thing isn't?

Neither ugliness
nor, I would think,
finitude
comes to surface

But how, oh, how, I thought sitting on the bench close by, as these messy, obsessive thoughts were half-turning the music to static, am I to sort this thing out?

Beauty! oh beauty!
Eternally, I presume,
this heart houses
vagabond song
This, by god, seems as fair.

Take my hand, come back with me to this tune; here, open your hand – here is flute – and hold these notes, and make my spirit dance for you. The sound is smooth like churned butter; the tone is melancholic yet shows no absolute collapse. My heart has skipped, my hair's on end, my neck shivers: like the polluted inlet that draws seaward, clear and diluting, so has my heart gone to sea.

Wonderful! ecstatic! but how am I to rest? I pleaded. I could give you adjectives, for song and of heart, but they seem insubstantial. Beauty, Beauty rings my thoughts: vague Ideas, only vague Forms.

Resemblance to this classic rock song, to this folk singer: this is what I can give. But signalling to Miranda's song and Cohen and Godspeed shows only my failure.

This, this I can tell you: I seemed to follow the traveller, pillow behind rocking feet and pack beside case; I could somehow follow the contours of his heart.

The song ended: sadness had been taken, like gentle gentle wind. So smooth was the melody, the transition of melancholy towards solace went unnoticed; the first notes held tears, and the last were bone-dry. Like the transition from past to present, where nothing, as separatist, wears the label of not-past or not-present, not once was there a division cutting through song that wore neither sadness nor relief.

I followed him through his journey: now all was silent. Dumbfounded, I wanted to cry with him, at least talk with him of life, philosophy and poetry, and the spirit. So badly I wanted to approach him; I could see him seeing me out of the corner of his eye: no one had heard his song through. So badly, ever so badly, yet evidently the desire – more than desire, a longing, a pulling, tearing at the heart – was not strong enough. It was not that I couldn't let go my fear – for to pluck, delicately, willingly, fear from one's consciousness is saved for those ancient, enlightened minds – but that courage failed me; or, rather, I failed courage. For the brave man is the one who does not dispose of fear but acts through and despite fear. Some day, some day, I thought, a feeling of worthlessness growing within: how, by god, is it that the lover of the idea of spontaneity – yes! a somehow lover of spontaneity – can never really look towards spontaneity? There is no spontaneity in mind: the mind, closed as it is, only exercises spontaneity through an act of will, a manifestation of will. One is only spontaneous when the fear is embraced, and the will is disclosed through action.

Well well, I thought, feeling now relatively lonely and low. This, mind you, does not take away from the beauty of the song, for it had its wonderful moment, a moment that seemed to, in a sense, last forever. The eternity of a single note, of less.

Leslie. Old school pal. Took law. Justice, an old string bean. Justification. Justification. An old story comes to mind: tide out, a Chinese calligrapher takes to the sand along ocean's edge. Hours later, the sea takes away his art. Hey, man, I thought, I own all these feelings: they are mine alone. Action is futile. I am strong enough to keep my feelings, not yet wise enough to control ...

Really, though! Really! I thought to myself, as if to say, "Stop fuckin' kidding yourself; it is from cowardice that you close yourself."

Somehow, I figure to be a writer, yet find excuse after excuse – drunkenness – to not create; and I find reason after reason to drink – the torture and guilt and anxiety of not creating.

Unproductive, am I really a writer? I questioned myself, or, similar to my inactivity as a lover of spontaneity, does, again, contradiction blossom?

Must the sea of thoughts be serene for the artist to depress obligation? Creation is deeply personal; notepads of creation are attachments; creation behind locked doors is wasted ...

These last words, by god, man, headed by thoughts like of some Buddhist's whore, are betrayal. Profoundly personal is the artist's creation, yet, above all, the divine

weaves through during ...

I thought, sitting for a moment, a sudden and inexplicable happiness rising within, a quick-like-gunshot rush like a hit of cocaine: Ah! Really, really, the divine's in me, I've felt it always: whether held or to be disclosed, publicly or otherwise. It is in me: I can see, I can feel it.

Ha! What a few minutes can do to a man! Good, I feel good for the first time in: has it been hours since I've felt satisfaction, save those moments of temporary bliss? How long since I turned into Fern Court? I wondered. My ass was numb. It seemed ages – it was nearly 6:30 – since I approached the great yellow door. Had I no watch, only the setting sun would have told me it was not yet early morning.

His delicate notes took me from my sadness of Karen; toward the anxiety, the definite feeling of uselessness that accompanies unsatisfied obsession; left me consumed by a feeling of worthlessness from social angst.

Although the path in which my mind had walked these last minutes had a definite time of travel, my mind saw differently, a path stretched to forever, holding numerous side routes. The substance of the mind, an eternity within a second ... each second that the tissue of the mind passes holds five thousand epics.

Worthlessness has gotten lost somewhere, behind the unconscious, lurking for now until it feels its appearance apt. Worthlessness, though, I thought, is a gem relative to the pains of love. Worthlessness, for one, had taken me from the foremost pain; worthlessness had somehow, in not an insignificant way, satisfied me.

I'm satisfied, if there's ever such a word. Not that I'm not obsessed, I thought, but here and now less than I'll ever be, given the circumstances. The obsession is never satisfied, but, like a bucket of water that's emptied, a few drops remain. Take a cloth to the bucket's insides and you'll still find moisture. What better time to move than now?

Without another moment's thought, I took to walking. This was my only chance: icicles may soon have dripped from eavestroughs. From a blizzard of a winter, snow stood tall on rooftops.

Now dozens of paces from the flute-player – maybe I should've given more money, I thought: but never should a donation be made given the talent of the street performer or beggar. "This is how I decide," I once overheard. It made me sick of stomach ... I don't often give money, only rarely and with randomness. The first day downtown, nearly two years ago, I lost ten on an evening walk. "I made less than minimum wage, today," I thought – I heard song in the distance behind me. For a second, I thought of turning. Wait, I thought: how ridiculous would that look? A master holds only one masterpiece if lucky, besides. If this, but not his last, were his epic, like the legs that arrive with body at its destination, the mind, dreamy and lost, unawares, I would again be crossing my legs on the bench fifteen paces from his case.

I own no toque. I always walk the streets with a hood. Edwin was near. I stopped to light a cigarette, although I saw nothing but what was in front. These numerous abrupt stops have never caused collision.

When retracing footsteps, I never fail to mumble to myself, something like, "Oh,

I forgot ..." at the moment of sudden change in direction, as though I were actually turning to go fetch something and not literally retracing my steps because, as with a day three weeks ago, I had reached step 576 on my 24th birthday and 576 is the result of 24 multiplied by itself. Talking to oneself actually seems more insane to these little urban puppets that we dare call human than such a sudden change in direction.

I was approaching Edwin. Twelve paces: bottles of beer I drink before becoming quite well intoxicated. Six: contorted friends' faces two weeks ago while I drank twenty-six rum shots in one and one-half hours. Drawing deep on the cigarette, I turned south onto the desert that goes by Edwin.

Now around the corner, I swiped my cigarette by my pants several times to knock the cherry off. A habit I picked up from a fellow landscaper last summer. I worked gardening at the rich part of town: putting out cigarettes on boot's bottom and putting them into the pocket of my workpants: this habit, picked up because filters were asked not to litter the roads, I carried with me several weeks after the layoff. I placed the nearly full cigarette behind my ear. When I think of it, I'll always save an unfinished cigarette.

My lungs, taking in tobacco smoke at such a great rate these last couple of hours, were almost numb to the tobacco smoke: similar to the smoking of a herbal cigarette, whereby the lungs seem unaffected, as though the smoke were unable to travel such great lengths no matter how strong and deep the draw. Yet given the amount of smoke that had passed through the lungs these last hours, there rested, somehow, indescribably, a harshness within the lungs. There is like a minute spot of pink on the organ that is always open to tobacco smoke: smoke three, reader, without a complementing drop of alcohol, in fifteen minutes, and you will see.

On Edwin, I observed, there is nothing quite to speak of: beige buildings, there are one or two with painted grey areas several blocks ahead. This one-directional road is one of only a few in the area that access the highway. A sort of highway extension, cars pass through here like lemmings. Cars wear no character. Horns and brakes are as good as dead. There is a dentist – DR. SMYTH, written in black letters – and a large empty room in which still hangs on its door a broken pizzeria sign. Most of the remaining buildings, quite ugly and several storeys high, house few tenants. Few people walk through here: there is usually no reason for it. It is not much more than an access point for vehicles. Whereas along Kant, like a vibrant city centre housing, although sadly, prostitutes and beggars, as well as bookstores and musicians and cafes, the artist is stimulated with ideas and characters and dirt and life with great force, whereby the mind is fueled, Edwin, like the world of patterns of suburbia, whereby the mind and the senses are numb from exterior inactivity, gives one to searching, rather, psychological slaving, over the possession of one puny sight or thought.

Approaching Nelson, I took the partially smoked cigarette from behind my ear. I've always preferred the taste of a stale or previously-lit and stubbed cigarette. Had the cigarette not been earlier drawn and put out, I might have taken one tiny draw around the corner before replacing it behind my ear until later. Given the state of my poor lungs, I felt I could not bear to finish the whole stick, but as its aroma, oddly, smelled lovely, a smoker's lovely, like the envious smoker, walking by a pack of smokers before

morning work, who's recently took to the patch, who would exchange a ten and a fresh cake straight from a Parisian bakery for half a cigarette, I figured I must take at least a few more draws.

I held in the smoke as I walked around the corner, right onto Nelson. I worked away at the cigarette, following the split-second uncertainty as to whether the cigarette would (it evidently wouldn't) this time come to use.

My lungs by this time felt sick. Although I knew I needn't fear entering a brothel now, I still felt slightly nervous. As I said, new situations and new places terrify me. I felt not terrified but rather timid. Rarely do I get the opportunity to smoke a worn cigarette, I thought, so I figured to take it to the filter. My lungs must be black as the night sky, I thought. 239: I never thought how much the movie rental would be. Nervous, I tried to draw deeply as possible into my failing lungs: my lungs weak with sickness, taking the ever-tiniest draws, the paper seemed to burn no longer. I felt pathetic now, continuing, almost frantically, the cigarette, nearly fruitlessly, like the shut-down iron triathlete, collapsed and crawling but a centimetre in ten minutes, eighty feet from her goal.

245: the great yellow door, very near, reached the corner of my unsearching eye. 247: destiny, maybe irrelevantly, came into mind. I mustered up the strength for one last pathetic draw, then pitched the cigarette end to the sidewalk. I stood by the yellow door. My heart beat several times before, accompanied by a weak cough, I took a deep breath. I reached for the knob.

THE LARGE DOOR WAS RELATIVELY HEAVY, although I got it open with a little muscle. Once inside, I was surprised at what I saw. The stairwell leading up towards the room was unnaturally clean; the walls, ceiling, and stairs were white enough to blind weak eyes. As I walked the stairs, my nervousness gave way to awe, similar to the first-time drug user who stands alone in the middle of an empty room, at first apprehensively taking in the room with new eyes, then, with feet quicker and quicker and arms wide out, moving in circles so as to leave no corner untouched. I took my eyes to left and to right and to ceiling, until, with few stairs in front, I nearly lost balance. The stairwell gave an appearance of plastic wrap or that sterile look of a dentist's office. Why, I thought to myself, they must do a clean between every entrant. Hardly had I entered the room when a young man, eyes on the floor, walked briskly by me toward the stairs.

The main room, which held shelves of videos, appeared no less clean. A table holding a cash register stood at the far wall directly in front of me. Plain-looking shelves spanning the perimeter of the store held video cases. Directly to the right looked to be a small room with a tiny bed. In the middle of the room, beside a single shelf, hung a painting: the piece, background coloured ivory-white, of a tall slender stick figure, coloured light peach, had its big lips red and disproportionate and its eyes blue like the ocean, similar to a Picasso.

I had no great use for browsing. I had only one goal in mind: to leave the store with *Popocatepetl* in hand. Although I figured it most fit to make a brief attempt at browsing before coming up with the title. To my surprise the movies were organized not by title but by director's names. I had not even a vague idea who the director was: Lyndel was the

only director I recognized while searching through the cases. The room was too warm and I had no place to hang my coat. I felt a drop of sweat land on my hip from my underarm. I thought it best to get it over with quickly, before my face showed signs of perspiration. As I walked towards the table, the man, well, a man, yet, cleanly-shaven and looking hardly a half-decade my senior, continued at his paper. I noticed that he, although lost in the leaves of a newspaper, sensed my approach. Two or three paces before I gained the counter, he put down his paper.

"Hi."

"How's it goin'? What can I help ya with?"

I knew they had the movie in stock, but to avoid any sort of explanation or complication, I decided I ought to start anew, as though ignorant: "I was just wondering if you had this movie, you probably don't have it, it's called, um, *Popocatepetl*."

"Yeah, we should, I'll go to the back. It's on VHS, though."

"Yeah, that's okay."

He left toward the back room, fairly hidden, with its door tucked away a few paces from the table whereby I stood. He opened the store, apparently, from his own collection. It shouldn't be hard to find, then, I thought; it shouldn't take twenty seconds.

I unbuttoned my coat half way. Sort of anxious, I began to hum, ever so quietly, an unknown tune which I cannot recall. He seemed to be taking longer than I had imagined. Bored, I unconsciously seeped further and further toward the back of my mind. The physical surroundings were receding.

"Here it is: do you have a membership?"

"Yeah, not with me, though."

"What name's the account under?"

"Fern."

"Jack? Leslie?"

"Jay."

"Okay, d'ya have a driver's license or photo ID?"

"Yeah."

"This says Philip O'Reilly."

"I'm Phil O'Reilly; Jay Fern's my father."

He gave me a confused look.

"I was born Philip Fern; my father's out of the picture for the most part. I'm with my mother now; I take care of her. Her maiden name's O'Reilly."

"But ..."

"He's not totally outta the picture; just sort of. I see him when he's not on business. He's usually on business, though."

"No ..."

"*Po*–" I heard the man say, snapping me out of my unconsciousness. "Here it is: *Popocatepetl*."

"Oh, you do have it," I said, acting surprised, although I was almost certain all along they did carry it. My surprise seemed to represent my arrival back to a more tangible reality. I had planned from the beginning to act somewhat surprised when it turned up.

"Yeah, do you have a membership?"

"No, my friend does."

"Do you have a credit card?"

"Yeah," I said, reaching into my pockets.

"Yours?"

"No, but ..."

"We need yours."

"I don't have one."

"Well ..."

"I heard something about a fifty dollar deposit, though."

"What your friend's name?"

"It's under Ron Fern, probably."

"Ron's your friend?"

"Jay; Ron's his father."

"555-2276?"

"That's his father's, probably: say something about 555-1175?"

"Yeah, I'll have to call it ... Jay Fern ...?"

"Phil O'Reilly?" he asked, looking up at me.

"Yeah."

"I'm calling from *Sex and metaphysics*. You know a Phil O'Reilly ... ? He can. Okay ... Yeah, you'll need a deposit and we'll need to keep the license 'till it's returned."

"That's okay, I'll watch it tonight, anyways: I just live over on Arlington."

"That's five seventy-five."

I counted a pocket of change for a moment, then handed it over: "I think that's the right change."

"It's due back tomorrow night by eight," he said while counting the change.

"Is that right?"

"Yeah," he said before counting up and putting the money in the register. He handed me back a nickel.

"Okay, thanks."

"Enjoy," he said as he handed me the movie.

As I turned around to leave, the same young man that blew by me earlier, who I had not noticed until that very moment had been back in the very room, let alone mopped away my dirty footprints around the store, followed me down the stairs with mop in hand. Usually, when I am being trailed towards a door, I wait by the door, holding it open, by chance the follower may pass through. I knew this would not be necessary.

I stood back outside, lighting up a cigarette between cupped hands. For the first time in what seemed like days, I enjoyed the tobacco. My lungs felt almost fine: definitely fine enough to enjoy a cigarette. As I went along, I could see the lights of Kant and Nelson in the near distance. I felt oddly proud: not because I had achieved my goal: I had once told myself I would find and watch *Popocatepetl* by any means necessary. No, I felt proud because, although I couldn't muster enough courage to invent an elaborate story, thoughts excepted, in order to avoid the deposit or miraculously obtain a membership,

I had used some courage. Had I not boldly brought to his attention the possibility of a deposit in replace of credit card, I more than likely would have walked away empty-handed. I hardly now cared for the movie – although, obligingly, I watched it shortly after arriving back at my apartment – but felt, at that very moment, a satisfaction, if not joy, because of the means by which I took the movie.

ROBERT F. THIMMESH

All the news fit to watch

I missed the 10 pm news;
I cannot tell you
which house burned
which car was chased
who was murdered
whose child is missing.

The cold front's moving in,
humidity's moving out;
it may rain,
then again maybe not.

Rain or shine, I know
what to do when my estrogen wakes,
which test for prostate cancer
(draw blood),
and which PR is best
for protesting
seals ... coffee
women ... men
babies ... war
torn-up, blown up – streets and neighbors.

I will miss the news until I see
it again yesterday or tomorrow;
it makes no difference which way time flows;
TV news – relativity's new absolute.

CORRINA AUSTIN

The singing bowl

RHODANNE KEPT THE TIPS IN A LARGE METALLIC SALAD BOWL, NEAR THE CASH REGISTER. It had been a long-standing custom for her regulars to position themselves behind a yellowed piece of masking tape stuck on the linoleum about fifteen feet away, and pitch the coins into the bowl.

"Make her sing," Rhodanne would demand from the grill, or from the sink, or from the floor where she knelt, scrubbing angrily away at grease drippings and black scuff marks. Coins would strike with hard, vibrating clangs; the echoes would hang in the hot air of the diner in lingering, resonating tones. Rhodanne could tell by the duration of the vibration what type of coin had been thrown in – loonies and toonies were almost identical, except that toonies made a slightly higher pitched sound. Quarters made a dull, hollow noise, while dimes made cheap-sounding, pathetic pings.

All conversation was temporarily halted when it was time for a pitch – people stopped with their coffee cups mid-air, cigarettes were laid in glass ashtrays, forks set down--all eyes turned, and no one smiling. For many, it was the only moment of anticipation they would experience all day. It was worth pausing for.

Rhodanne's regulars always experienced varying degrees of tension when it was their turn to throw. It was a sensation akin to stage fright. Well-aimed tosses were applauded and congratulated. Misses were greeted with jeers and boos – not all of them good-natured, either.

At the end of the day, Rhodanne dumped the contents of the bowl on the counter, and her waitress, a dreary, drooping woman named Therese, would divide the coins into two even piles. Everything about Therese sagged – her limp, straw-coloured hair, the hem of her pink uniform, the corners of her mouth, the bags under her eyes, and her ill-fitting pantyhose, which bunched around her ankles. One time, shortly after she started at the diner, Therese had openly complained that using the bowl deterred folks from leaving tips in the form of paper money. The bowl remained silent for several days.

That was the last complete sentence anyone ever heard from Therese. Thereafter, she limited her comments to subjects only directly pertaining to the menu. She did not even offer *good morning's* or *thank you's*. Folks appreciated it.

Rhodanne was Therese's direct contrast. She had a riotous head of frizzy grey curls, and she stood severely erect, giving the impression that her vertebrae were fused. It was Rhodanne who did the cooking and the talking. She was one of those rare people who could be simultaneously talkative and exceedingly unfriendly. Her regulars kept coming back, allowing that she didn't really intend to be so unpleasant. "You look like hell!" she would call out bitterly, as her customers came in. "So do you!" they would reciprocate, with grins and winks among themselves. They didn't mean it. Rhodanne did.

In spite of the questionable atmosphere and the terribly tacky décor, the diner was a popular choice. Rhodanne's cooking was highly regarded – likely due to the generous

serving sizes, and the amount of grease used in the preparation. Any chef can talk about blends of herbs and the sifting of ingredients in a prized dish, but there wasn't a soul in the diner who would trade a plate of Rhodanne's eggs fried in bacon grease for something like that. Her coleslaw was better than any fancy frilly salad anywhere. A piping hot meal at Rhodanne's, topped off with her cherry pie (made with lard – not vegetable shortening), was worth a repeat visit. And, of course, there was the bowl.

Rhodanne's diner was situated on a four-lane highway, near the city limits. On one side of her there was a popular donut establishment and on the other a gas station. Most strangers to the city opted for the donut stop, but occasionally, unknowns wandered into the diner, looking for something served on a plate, with cutlery. These stragglers were greeted by the regulars with nods and ignored by Rhodanne. You had to give her that; she only swore at the people she knew.

RHODANNE WAS AT THE GRILL EARLY ONE MORNING. It was still dark; the highway threaded with the beams of tired headlights, cars moving cautiously through a slushy-salty combination of half-melted snow. The early-risers were there, hunched over, Therese-like, on the peeling red vinyl stools, watching Rhodanne flip pancakes and holding out their coffee cups as Therese approached with the pot. A man came into the diner. He wore a grey coat and overshoes, a black felt hat. The man was dark, perhaps oriental, some of the diners thought – a businessman, with a dark tie aligned perfectly under his clean-shaven chin. He chose a table, away from the stools, and sat facing the door. From his slender hands, he removed a pair of black leather driving gloves, which he laid beside the metal napkin dispenser on the table.

Therese took a cup and saucer in one hand – she was still holding the coffee pot--but the newcomer called over to her. "Not for me, no coffee. Tomato juice."

"Don't got any of that," Therese informed him. "Orange and apple."

"Bring me the apple juice then, in a large glass. And a poached egg. Perhaps two. Whole wheat toast, no butter. Do you have any grapefruit?"

"No," Therese replied, in a snide, withering tone.

"You ought to; grapefruit is plentiful at this time of the year, and your customers might appreciate it."

"These guys?" Rhodanne turned from the grill, and scoffed. "The only thing they want for breakfast is pancakes and eggs, lots of bacon. And I don't have any whole wheat. Just white."

"Remember, no butter. Do you have a newspaper?"

"End of the counter."

The men at the counter passed the newspaper down; Ollie, the one on the end, tossed it onto the stranger's table, and turned back to his plate of eggs and sausages. "What is the name of this place?" the man asked Rhodanne.

"We call it the Limits, because we're just inside the town line. There isn't a sign or anything."

"And you are the manager?"

"The owner. It isn't often I poach eggs; folks around here like their eggs fried, generally."

"I am not from around here. Your name?"

"They call me Rhodanne – my mother named me Rhoda Anne, but it was too damn hard to say."

The man took a small notebook from his overcoat pocket and jotted something in it, then turned his attention to the newspaper.

"You some restaurant critic?"

The man looked up, briefly. "No," he said. "A doctor, of sorts."

Therese brought his juice, and he sipped at it, in a careful, distrustful way.

"It isn't fresh-squeezed," Rhodanne called sarcastically, over her shoulder.

"That is obvious," the man remarked, this time without looking up. He turned the page of the newspaper.

Rhodanne scowled. She had more questions. Like, where was he from? (Originally.) He had an unusual accent and spoke English in that precise, awkwardly syllabicated way particular to foreigners. But there was something about the way he turned the pages of the newspaper that was unmistakably dismissive. That little jot he had made in his notebook was the end of the conversation, as sure and final as any period. Rhodanne shoved the toaster button down with an irritated slam. Exclamation mark. Ollie stood up, wiping egg yolk from his moustache with the back of his sleeve and yanking his hat down over his ears. Rhodanne, cracking eggs into boiling water, called back to him, "Make her sing!"

"Yeah, yeah," Ollie muttered, digging around in his grimy pocket. He stood with his toes precisely on the edge of the tape and wriggled his shoulders, passing the coin from one hand to the other. There was no sound, except for the rustling of the newspaper and the tentative swallows of the newcomer as he continued to cautiously ingest his apple juice. It was not until he heard the sound of the coin striking that he looked up.

"Nice one, good ringer," the others were saying as Ollie made his way through their congratulatory pats towards the cash register. Therese stood, poking keys, adding up Ollie's order. Rhodanne dragged her knife through the dry toast; the two poached eggs with their pale yellow eyes regarded her blandly from the plate.

"What was that?" asked the stranger, who was now standing up. A thin stream of yellow liquid was pooling on the floor around his black overshoes. It took an awkward minute for everyone to remember the apple juice. He must have tipped it in his haste to get to his feet.

"What was what?" snapped Rhodanne, as she picked up the plate of poached eggs. Therese had gone to get the mop, and it was not beneath Rhodanne to serve, on occasion.

"That sound. That ringing sound!" The man ran his hands over his expensively trimmed hair. It was something he did when agitated or excited, although the people in the diner would not have known this. They knew instinctively, however, that this was not a man who typically spilled his beverages.

"Oh, the bowl," said Rhodanne, setting his plate down in front of him. "You want more juice?"

"Show me this bowl."

"Over there, by the register. Hey, mister, you know, poached eggs get rubbery when they get cold."

The man paid no heed to Rhodanne or the future state of his breakfast but rushed from the table to the end of the counter, leaving a trail of sticky, yellow apple juice footprints behind.

He took the bowl in his hands, gazing down into it with a stunned, drunken expression. "Bon," he whispered. "Where did you get this?"

Rhodanne shrugged. "It was around when I was a kid. My mother had it to mix her bread dough in. I used it for a salad bowl when I first opened up, but nobody ever ordered salad. This is not exactly a salad kind of clientele we have around here."

"Bite me, Rhodanne," one of her customers laughed.

The man flipped the bowl; a loonie fell out – Ollie's tip had been the first of the day. "Have you a mallet – a meat tenderizer, or something similar?"

"Are you suggesting that my cuts of meat might be of questionable quality?"

"I need the mallet immediately!" he exclaimed, in what sounded like an insolent, exasperated tone – in actuality, he was feeling almost frantic.

The men on the stools shifted in their seats, and pushed their plates away. "Look here, Buddy," one of them said edgily. "You hadn't ought to talk to Rhodanne that way."

"I mean no disrespect; I simply must have the mallet. You don't understand, but this bowl, this bowl …"

Rhodanne rolled her eyes, and rummaged around in her utensil drawer, behind the counter. "What are you going to do with it?" she asked him, as she handed him the wooden mallet, with its ridged head.

"If everyone could be quiet," the man ordered, apparently with some authority, because all complied. They watched with interest, as he took the mallet and struck softly, just inside the bowl, repeatedly and with great reverence. The sound began as though from a great distance, and then grew bigger, with a lovely, deep, rich resonance that filled the diner. People's faces relaxed, their hands dropped to their sides, and they got that far-away expression in their eyes that folks get when they are remembering their grandmothers or watching a baby laugh. Rhodanne felt the magnificent humming encircle her and then seep into her chest cavity, spiralling up and around inside her, as though she were a bell tower and all the bells were swaying and bonging in splendid, haphazard harmonies inside her skull. She saw rose petals and white lace. She saw the hopeful faces of brides.

The man took his hands away from the bowl and laid down the mallet. Everyone sighed as the humming diminished, hung for one last, bright second, and then faded away. Heads were bent, as though in prayer. Finally, the stranger spoke.

"The mallet was not appropriate, but it demonstrates an idea of the sound. These bowls are used for meditation, in my country. For many centuries, we have made the bon sing. All sound different, some low, and others high – very beautiful and unique. I have colleagues that use them in their practices."

He set the bowl down, his hands still cupping the curved sides. "It is old, and in all

likelihood, contains a high percentage of precious metals."

Rhodanne gaped at him. "Precious metals?"

"Gold and silver." He continued to stare down into the bowl. His mouth worked, as though he were struggling not to cry. "I am almost sure that it comes from Tibet."

"The Dahli Lama coulda ate his cheerios from it!" Ollie remarked loudly. He had remained standing by the cash register the whole time, watching.

"Shut your pie hole, Ollie," Rhodanne snapped at him.

Ollie smiled at her, beatifically. There were crumbs in his moustache.

"May I buy it?" The man looked at Rhodanne timidly, hovering like the tips of his fingers on the bowl, on the edge of her answer.

He was crestfallen when she told him no.

No one was more surprised than Rhodanne at how sorry she felt for him. "It was my mother's," she said, in a sympathetic tone that no one recognized. Therese regarded her with arched eyebrows, so out of place on her gravitationally affected face.

"I understand," the stranger replied, visibly crushed. He reached into his pocket, and drew out a business card. "If you should change your mind," he told her quietly, laying it beside the bowl on the counter. He handed Rhodanne a ten dollar bill. Therese passed him his leather driving gloves.

"I will not throw a coin into the bowl," he informed the company, with something close to contempt. "You," he addressed Rhodanne, "should make it sing."

Rhodanne met his eyes for a moment, then turned back to the grill.

He left without another word.

At six o'clock, after the tips were emptied out and divided, the ketchup bottles and napkin dispensers filled, and the counter wiped down, and Therese's white shoes went scuffing off through the dirty snow, Rhodanne sat down with the mallet. She closed her eyes and made the bowl sing. Round and round, until the endless days, like links in cumbersome chain, relaxed their iron grip and all the "un's" in her life – unfaithful husbands, unpaid bills, unrequited loves, untold dreams, all unraveled, dissolved away into pleasant nothingness.

When it was over, and the world began to creep wolfishly back in, Rhodanne burned the business card in an ashtray, without reading it, then sat and watched a snowplough, its blue lights flashing, crawling sluggishly past on the highway.

A.M. MURPHY

poems

our bodies like each other
skin to skin awake
hands on curving hips awake
finger parts of you
fit perfectly parts of me

our bodies like each other
make pleasure in the night
stroke into the darkness
perfectly parts of you
fit perfectly parts of me

our bodies like each other
fit in the night
curl together in sleep
after parts of you
fit perfectly parts of me

* * *

I have memorized your body
it is everywhere here
that slenderly beautiful body
its gracefully floating limbs
ghosting all around me

I have memorized your smell
it is on the pillow here
where your face lay softly
laughter on the pillow
breathing in the night

the first touch between us
comes from your hand
surrounded by tables and colleagues
your fingers clutch mine
signal there will be something
certainly there will
will be something between us
plant little seeds of longing
in the palm of my left hand
to seek you without tiring
like creatures in the sea

* * *

did I ever tell you about
my near-death experience
in a bar in Red Deer
I was nearly killed
as I was falling
I thought
this wouldn't happen
in Vienna

MARK SAMPSON

Invasion complex

SO I WENT TO SEE MY BUDDY, AEIOU.

I had needed to earn extra money that fall – Christmas was looming and with it a chance to escape to the beaches of Indonesia, a venture requiring me to raise about one-point-two million in less than four months. It had been a harsh summer for me ruined by long overtime hours: I was beginning to resemble some latter-day Al Pacino, say from *Insomnia* or *People I Know,* and was desperate to find the cash for a beach holiday. Not an impossible task in this city, if you were friendly with a character like Aeiou. He was, simply, one of those lifer expats, terminally stranded in Seoul and infinitely well connected. He once bragged to me that he had no less than 125 individual numbers logged into his Samsung handphone – most of them, I suspected, belonging to Korean girls he had picked up in the foreign quarter who wanted to marry him after one night of Western-style debauchery. He often rode me about my own lack of contacts. "How many numbers do *you* have in your handphone?" he once chided. "I don't own a handphone," I replied, at which point he poured a beer over my head. Like me, Aeiou was Canadian – though he originated from some vague border city in southern Ontario, a place rife in mobster types with nicknames like Jimmy the Shovel. And like me, Aeiou was a teacher. He specialized in Business English, the art of suppressing cultural peccadilloes.

I rode the subway for forty minutes to get to the foreign quarter that Saturday afternoon and the pub where I knew I'd find him. A ceaselessly strange experience, to climb the stairs out of a hole in the ground and feel like you've been transported across continents and returned to a street in your home nation. The pub he frequented was even worse. Not a stitch of Asia anywhere in its atmosphere, save for the miniskirted waitresses floating through the crowd with beers on round trays. I entered the pub to the sounds of American rock and American conversations; the GIs were still hours away from their curfew. I found Aeiou in a smoky back corner playing pool by himself. He had a battered ball cap crushed onto his cranium to hide fresh bed-head.

"You little fucking monkey," he said as way of greeting, trying to restrain his joy at seeing me. He had this way of acting hurt that I let weeks and weeks go by without calling him, even though I represented but 1/125th of his social circle.

"Oh give it a rest, Aeiou," I said grinning, trading hands with him.

"I never see you unless you need something," he pouted. "So what gives?"

I explained my situation.

"Oh fuck you, man! Like I'm going to find you extra work? I scored you part-time lecturing at a university, and you *turned it down*. I swore I'd never help you again after that."

"Aeiou, look at me. I need a holiday. I need the money to go on holiday. Can you not set me up?"

He sighed, then handed me his pool cue. "Alright. You finish this game. I'll make a

phone call." And dug his handphone out of the leg pocket of his cargo pants.

By the time I slammed the eight ball home, he had returned to the table with business done. "Her name is Ji-young. She wants to meet for two hours on Sundays. Her dad owns some ritzy hotel in Kangnam Station, so she can afford to pay. It's fifty thou an hour, so don't fuck it up. Here's her number."

I did some quick math in my head. "I knew you'd pull through."

"Another thing: I know this girl. She's cool, but she'll tell the most *godawful* lies about me."

I laughed. "Thanks, Aeiou. I won't believe a word." To show my gratitude, I bought him a pitcher of beer before packing up to leave.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"What, you think you're the only wheeling and dealing I have to do today? I'll be in touch."

"You are such an asshole."

"Really, I mean it," I said, steering towards the door. "We'll hook up next week."

"Yeah yeah," he sniped, racking up the balls again, then called out across the bar just before I disappeared. "And get yourself a *handphone*!"

I WASN'T ALWAYS A BEACH HOLIDAY SORT OF FELLOW. I came here looking to embrace that holy grail: the Cultural Experience. I wanted to find rich histories among the skyscrapers and subway stops, the blood and bones of a 5,000-year narrative still in progress. So I did it all. The pagodas. The temples. The fortresses. The giant Buddha statues. After eighteen months, I learned something about this pituitary gland dangling off China. This is a country of fighters, ever vigilant of those who encroach on their destiny. So many have come in those fifty centuries – Japan, Mongolia, China, America – to take something away. It goes on and on, like a parade of people who believe invasion is in your best interest. This is what I've learned from those cultural landmarks: that nothing here is really built; it is simply rebuilt to substitute for that which existed before it. Each monument comes with its own apology: "The original temple, burned to the ground by Japanese marauders in …"; "…the fortress was reconstructed when the Chinese vacated the land after …". And so I began hunting for anything not rebuilt. A piece of cultural detritus that had stood its ground, untouched by the race to replace all those things that foreigners found necessary to destroy.

I SAT ACROSS THE TABLE FROM JI-YOUNG trying to insinuate a theory of mine into our conversation. We were in a café with the words JAZZ, COFFEE & DRINK written on the window. When Aeiou had said "Don't fuck it up", he meant only one thing: Don't attempt to turn your private English lesson into a date. And in the beginning, I was of course all business: we were there to discuss verb tenses and current affairs, not our turn-ons. But a few sessions in and it was hopeless. My afternoon charge was a brutal little cutie-pie, stylish, 48 kilos, long black hair and skin like an unmarked beach. I was soon overrun with the urge to make her blush.

My theory: I find prepositions incredibly sexual. I mean, how could one not?

You can't tell me you teach someone prepositions and not feel the tug of arousal in your imagination. What would sex be without them? *In. Out. On top of. Underneath. Between. Behind*. See! This was a theory that I hoped Ji-young would grasp as we worked on her prepositions, but it wasn't going well. I suspected her English and general life experiences were a bit underdeveloped to appreciate my insights. In a lot of ways, she was 27 going on 15: still lived at home, still had unrealistic expectations about love and careers, still spoke with a kind of vague idealism. Yet one mention of Aeiou changed her demeanour completely: She got this smoky, mischievous gleam to her eyes at the sound of his name that made her look worldly in a tartish sort of way. I was awash in curiosity. When I asked for an explanation, she just shook her head and returned to her demure self. "A foul man," she said with a restrained smirk, mixing her f sounds with her v sounds. "A foul man."

I decided to change tactics.

"So why is learning English so important to you?"

"Because I want to do graduate work on American university," she answered.

"You want to do graduate work *at an* American university," I corrected. She also struggled with her indefinite articles.

"Yes, yes. I go to there and get my graduate degree. Start my career, my good job."

"As a 'designer'."

"Yes, yes, as designer!"

I didn't know what a designer was, but it seemed like every Korean girl I met wanted to be one.

"Have you been to America before?" I ventured, experimenting with the present perfect tense. Her eyes rolled up to her brow with a look of unmerciful cuteness that was downright edible. I could tell she was hunting through her memory for a grammar lesson from grade school and couldn't find it. She was beginning to look embarrassed, so I helped her out. "Did you ever go there, before, in the past?"

"Ah! No, no. I didn't went there. I go next year? It is my first time." She touched her stomach with unease. "Oooh, the thought makes me feel nervousness."

"Yes," I nodded solemnly. "First times can be very scary." Looked up at her. Hoped for a fierce little flush, a tremor in her past. Even a mention of Aeiou. But nothing.

"But I go because American university is good for my career. It's important."

"But why is it important?" I said. I'd been in Korea long enough to already know the answer, but wanted to see if she could articulate it in English. "Why don't you just do graduate work at a school here?"

She put a palm on her head and shook. "Ooh, very different, ah, difficult question." She stammered for a while, assembling an assortment of infinitives, adjectives and nouns, none of them being "to gain a competitive edge." But by the end, I sort of understood.

"Plus, you'll have a wonderful time," I said. "You may even marry an American."

Ji-young crinkled her nose. "Ah no! American boys, I hate them." Then she looked me square in the face, that sultry glimmer returning to her eyes, and said with a voice like cream: "I like Canadian boys more better."

And God help me, I blushed.

YOU GOT TO FIGURE WE OWE IT TO THIS PLACE. After all, isn't what we do here a kind of pillaging? Every day, more of us get off those planes at the mud-flats of Inchon. Crushed by the weight of our student loans back home, we come here to vacuum up money and leave our language in its wake. Is this not just another incursion, this time of the downtrodden, the unemployable victims of high tuition? Where else can a three-year degree in philosophy garner you a $50,000 salary? I figured visiting all those museums and temples, all those pagodas and forts was a way I could give back. At first, it didn't matter that the landmarks here were not the originals. I didn't care. I wanted to stop myself from becoming one of those expats: the ones who spread this global contagion and then spend the profits in American pubs in the foreign quarter. It seemed wrong to me.

One time, I got a lead on a small temple in a suburb of Seoul that was supposed to be 900 years old. This little gem had evaded the travel books and scuttlebutt of the pubs, had come to me from a nine-year-old student of mine. I got all excited. It didn't matter that I was working 12-hour days in the hottest part of the summer, or that it took nearly two hours on a crowded subway to get there, or that I needed to hike up a crumbling fortress wall for another hour to find it. I had to see this temple. So on a rare free Saturday I made the trek. Suffered through two wrong subway transfers, got lost in the "suburb" (population: 900,000) looking for the fortress wall – but finally made it, a sweaty, exhausted mass of excitement. And, of course, the kid had been wrong. Had mixed up his numbers. The little heritage sign in front had an English translation that said the temple was 90 years old, not 900. And besides, the Japanese had burned it to the ground the last time they invaded, and it had since been rebuilt.

That's when I knew I needed a vacation.

AEIOU AND I HAD BEEN DRINKING IN A SOJU BAR at the top of Hooker Hill. On weekends, he was not wont to do more than skim the surface of local customs, but admitted he had a weakness for Korea's national poison. Most of our conversation remains lost to me because soju will leave big smoking craters where my memory used to be. But I recall fighting the urge with zero success to bring up Ji-young over and over and push Aeiou about precisely how he had made her acquaintance. I thought, What difference did it make? She was a private lesson on the side and therefore off limits. I wasn't mentally attracted to her any more than I would be a fifteen year old. And yet I had to know the origins of their relationship. Aeiou was, of course, not forthcoming. He had endured my sly navigating of the conversation the first few times but by the end grew bored and suspicious. "Look at *you*, man," he said lecherously each time I brought up her name and would say nothing more.

Later, we stumbled down Hooker Hill, past the brothels en route to the main strip. Always an eye-opening experience.

"Hey Aeiou, good to see you. You wanna come in for a good time?"

"How's it going, April? Nah, not tonight."

"Hello there, Aeiou. Who's your handsome boyfriend?"

"Don't waste your breath, Jenny. He's impotent!"

"Ooh, a challenge!"

Unbeknownst to Aeiou, we had different destinations in mind and would part company at the bottom of the Hill: He was off to find a dance club, and I was off to find my bed. I used to go to the discos with Aeiou a lot when we first became friends, before I grew tired of them, and his routine for picking up Korean girls never wavered: dance, dance, dance, encroach, encroach, make sure she spoke enough English, impress her with the few Korean words he knew, encroach some more, start dirty dancing, ask her why they were pretending to have sex on a dance floor when they could do the real thing in his apartment – she'd giggle at that! – dance some more, then hit her with the big line, "So you comin' home with me tonight or what?" Nine girls out of ten would go stomping off in their Prada heels, but do it eleven times and you just might have success.

"Aeiou! So nice to see your face. How come you never stop by anymore?"

"Sorry, Rachel. I've been busy. Give my best to Vivian, would ya."

I looked at him. "You know, it appalls me that you're on a first-name basis with these girls."

"Oh relax. I only go to them as a last resort. It's not like I'm a degenerate."

We reached the bottom of Hooker Hill. A place of food vendors, drunken expats, and vomit. The circle of life.

"I'll hail us a cab," Aeiou said above the din.

"Man, look, I'm going home. I can catch the last subway if I hurry."

"What, you're not coming to Stompers!"

"Aeiou, tomorrow's Sunday. I have to teach Ji-young."

He rolled his eyes. "Ji-young, Ji-young, Ji-young. Why does it not surprise me that you'd fall for the first hot student I throw your way?"

"I'm not falling for her," I lied. "But I would like to know. When you met her, did you, you know, I mean, did you ever …" What was the right word: did you ever *invade* her?

"If you're not falling for her, then what's it to you?" he said.

I thought of my 90-year-old temple on the outskirts of Seoul. "You'd never understand. But c'mon: would you humour me?"

He put his hands on my shoulders and looked at me drunkenly in the face. "Dude, she is Buddhist. Bolted at the knees. Don't waste your time."

"Look, I don't want to –"

But he was already bounding to the curb and flagged down a cab. I put my face at the rolled-down window as he slithered onto the leather back seat. "Not that I want to make a play," I said as he closed the door, "but just in case: what's the Korean word for 'flirt'?"

Aeiou shook his head with a smile. "Damned if I know!" And the cab sped away.

SHE AND I MOVED ON FROM PREPOSITIONS AND ARTICLES to current events. I had a copy of the *Korea Herald* spread out on our table at the café.

"So question: if the North ever did attack again, what would you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, where would you go? Seriously. You know, China's closer but I think you might be better off in Japan. Or would you go all the way to America? Or even Canada? We have a decent track record with refugees."

Her expression was a sign of improvement: confusion not due to the language barrier but rather my stupidity. "I don't go anywhere," she answered.

"You *wouldn't* go anywhere?" I corrected and questioned simultaneously.

"Yes, I wouldn't!"

"Then what would you do?"

That same look again. "I would pick up a gun and fight for my country."

Her answer flattened me. I imagined this pretty-in-pink Korean woman, this little *girl*, with ammunition belts crisscrossing her diminutive torso and a machine gun in her hand. I pictured her standing brave in an apocalyptic wasteland that had once been a city block of her favourite beauty salons and Espirit outlets. And suddenly I couldn't look at her at all, not without imagining us doing something on that table other than reading the paper.

"You have a red face," she beamed at me. Then she brushed my hand with hers. Oh *God*.

"Ji-young, I have to ask you," I crackled. "I'm interested in old Korean things. Places, really. Temples, forts, whatever. Do you know of any places like that?"

"Of course. Seoul has many."

"No, what I mean is old *old* places. Landmarks that haven't been rebuilt umpteen different times."

She looked confused.

"You know, something original. Something that survived all the wars and invasions."

She looked confused.

"Something not rebuilt. Something built once and only once."

"Ah, I understand!" she said, although I wasn't clear if she did. "You need Gukboeksa!"

"Gukboeksa? Never heard of it."

"I go there many times. I take you there, okay."

"Alright."

"Oooh, but it's more than two hours. We should go on Saturday instead."

Saturday? More than two hours? Were we just switching days and extending the time, or did this mean more? And if so, did that not violate the tutor-student relationship? (Was I worried? Had I not, a moment ago, imagined us violating the tutor-student relationship atop this table?) And worse, should I ask if she's going to pay me?

"Yeah, okay. Saturday it is."

"Good," she beamed again. "It's a date!" Another expression I taught her.

HUGE SWEEPING MOUNTAINS COVERED IN THICK EVERGREEN rolled all around us. Looming in the distant valley were grey-on-grey assemblages of apartment buildings, an oval

Samsung logo stamped on each of their sides. Out here, Korean moms in their sun visors and bun haircuts power-walked along the trails, their arms jabbing epileptically in front of them to maximize the workout. At one point the path grew treacherous and I went first before helping Ji-young up the rocky incline. We held hands longer than necessary, yet after letting go she showed no discernible reaction. Later, we found a rest stop to have our bottled water and to talk. I mentioned my recent visit to the soju bar with Aeiou, and once again her response to his name was visceral. I asked Ji-young if she had ever considered dating him. "He's very charming," she replied, (another word I taught her). "All Korean girls think so. But I watch enough Western movie to know charming doesn't always meaning good. Sometimes outside is charming means inside is …" – she mulled for vocabulary – "like … *bugs*." Overall, it was a sophisticated, metaphoric thing to say; a great leap forward in our ability to communicate. If only I could screw up my courage and say something charming and not the least bit bug-like.

Our trail climbed higher and higher into the hills, further away from any signpost of civilization. Based on all this wilderness, I grew optimistic about Gukboeksa's authenticity. I began to doubt that Ji-young would drag me all the way up here if she hadn't understood what I was looking for. As we scaled closer to our unseen zenith, I began asking questions to make sure. Some she understood and answered, others she couldn't and didn't. Still, I wasn't satisfied. I was about to press further when she stopped walking and looked at me with another of her indecipherable glances.

"Do you know what I am like about you?" she said.

"What's that?" Cool and oh so nonchalant.

"You really care about the Korean things."

"Really?" I asked. "And what, most foreigners don't?"

"No. Other foreigners don't aren't like that."

"Which ones? You mean like Aeiou?"

"Yes, like Aeiou," she nodded. "I don't am like him."

I was puzzled. "You don't *like* him? Or you're *not like* him?

"He meets Korean girl and he only cares about her sex." A monstrous flub of the language, and yet wholly accurate. "*You* meet that girl and you don't caring about her sex. You want the Korean things. So I am like you."

I swallowed. "Ji-young, are you flirting with me?"

"Flirting?" she asked, tilting her head. "Wha's mean?"

But it was then that I noticed how much the pristine forest surrounding us lived and breathed with an existence of its own, unmarked by gunfire and cannon balls, by foreign intrusion and the great ruse of progress. I decided not to spoil it.

"Never mind," I said. "Is Gukboeksa much further?"

"No, no. Only over that hill."

We made our way up and across the bluff, then back down into a clearing within the dense evergreen. There in the middle of it was one lonesome building, a small Buddhist temple. Its iron pagoda roof was rusted to a dull red, its burgundy pillars chipped and splintery. All along its ancient stupa tall gangly weeds reached for the

heavens; upon the temple's ruddy siding the symbol of the Yin-Yang faded to near invisibility. And inside the door, a shining gold Buddha.

"Most Koreans don't aren't come here; they think it's ugly," Ji-young said. "But I think is beautiful."

"I agree," I mumbled, soaking it in, ready to admit that I had seen nothing more beautiful in the last 18 months. Standing there with Ji-young, her face soaked with an impenetrable expression, made it seem even more beautiful. Soon, she smoothed out her shorts and eased herself down onto the grass to pray before Buddha. It was a series of chants and full-body bows, and I felt I should leave her to it.

I approached the door to the temple and caught the thick pungent aroma of incense. It smelled like it had been burning in there for a thousand years. Next to the platform was another of those Korean heritage signs, its post hammered into the ground. I moved to read it, my heart picking up pace. I was about learn how well Ji-young had understood my query. But the sign was written entirely in Korean. Not one English word in that array of perpendicular characters forging out its own grammar, its own vocabulary and idioms. Nothing. The best I could hope for were a few numbers scattered throughout the text. The one at the top was 1247; I was no anthropologist but maybe that was when this temple had been built. In the middle, a 58, a 17. Okay, no problem. But then, down near the bottom, written as if an afterthought, was one last number: 1960.

1960.

What did it mean? Was it possible that that was a date of reconstruction, that the dilapidation before me was due merely to forty-odd years, not hundreds? Or maybe it was only the date that they declared Gukboeksa a heritage site and put this sign up. I didn't know. I didn't want to know. I was glad there was no English to tell me the truth, to burst my bubble. I was glad the sign was written entirely in Korean.

Ji-young, having finished her prayers, came over to join me. Took my shaky hand into hers without hesitation.

"Is this what you wanted?" she asked.

I looked at the sign, at the temple, and into her face. Felt secure in the vagueness, in the timeless secrets all around me.

"Yeah, pretty much," I said.

GARY PIERLUIGI

The Old Vic

Remember the Victory Theatre on Spadina?
Sure you do, especially you seasoned vets
that still grace our modern day strip joints. It had been
a leftover from the burlesque era, its large flashing
V a sleazy beacon steering in wayward vessels
brimming with testosterone. Brian, my forever
horny little friend, dragged me into its dark decaying
cavern, where, for the price of a few bucks, you could
sit in a tattered red upholstered seat and watch
porno films between sets of aging women removing
their long white gloves and corsets, wiggling their
asses just long enough for the old men in the front row
to spend themselves. Old comedians recited jokes so
tasteless and stale on its once glorious stage
with such insincere mirth that you actually felt sorry
for them, yet Brian and I had been attracted
to the Old Vic like bees to honey. We were both
nineteen and virgins, and every time we left the
old structure, we felt positively aglow with
carnal knowledge and with the variety of gum
that stuck to the soles of our shoes.

She said

Do you want to go for a coffee
and I married said yes she preening
in summer university ruffled hair
casual fuck this fuck that.

Let not mere friend see our bliss
nor robin spy our end game,
but let my fantasies alight
on the whispered unwhispering
of your name.

My woodpecker has a headache

for love of the city
Alan Reed
Buschek Books
110 pp

My Chimera
Michael Penny
Buschek Books
95 pp

ALAN REED'S FIRST COLLECTION OF POETRY, *for love of the city*, is, by his own admission in the afterword, "a deliberate effort to romanticise the city." The city itself, however, remains anonymous. Instead, Reed creates an urban setting that is never specific, never particular, and yet is always familiar and recognizable.

In that regard, Reed introduces himself as a strict minimalist. These untitled poems, which should be read as a single poem, seldom describe – adjectives are in short supply here – but rather evoke what is seen, what is experienced, in only the barest terms:

> going
> out the door
> down the stairs
> to the street
>
> there's the sound
> of my feet
> on the sidewalk
>
> there's
>
> no word for
> it

While such staccato phrasing can be overly artificial, even pretentious, Reed uses these terse, truncated lines to considerable effect. In the course of the collection he narrates the story of his loneliness in the city, a loneliness which is interrupted by a brief romance with an unnamed "she." When the relationship ends, he is returned to an even greater feeling of seclusion. And all the while he is walking, always walking through the city's streets, at once free to roam and yet trapped by his need to find some place to go, some place to be. Or, to be precise, someone to be with.

This is unmistakably the work of a young man, and there are times when it seems like Reed is a little too "acquainted with the night." Indeed, there's very little here that's new – to the extent that he almost skirts clichés. The typical big-city denizens are all present and accounted for: the crazy lady at the bus stop who tells him "my womb was/ taken out," the homeless man "drumming/ a song/ from/ a newspaper box," and the woman at the grocery store whose "eyes/ were thick/ and sad," all put in an appearance to the constant rhythm of "the stops and starts// of traffic/ and/ people walking by." The city is, of course, a "seething," "teeming mess."

That aside, *for love of the city* reminds us of the isolation between people in the city, and Reed is at his best, genuinely poignant and tender, when capturing those little moments when the gaps are briefly and unexpectedly bridged. Thinking of a woman he has passed on the street, he writes:

> we walked past each other
> and
> I looked up at her
> just as I passed her
>
> and she was looking at me
>
> we looked away
>
> shocked
> and maybe
> smiling
>
> a little bit

He notices her on the street regularly, and even though "we've been doing this/ for a while," he can't seem to cross into something beyond those fleeting moments:

> I walk past
> and
> I could stop
> to talk
>
> I want to
> I want
> and I want and
>
> I never do
> all I do
> all I can remember to do
>
> is want

This miniature portrait of the city as a place where longing goes unfulfilled is memorable. Moreover, *for love of the city* has a unified, concentrated effect, demonstrating Reed's keen awareness of his own craft. For a first collection, that alone is a considerable achievement.

AS A CONTRAST TO REED'S BOOK, THE POEMS IN Michael Penny's collection, *My Chimera*, are set largely in green and wild spaces, in gardens, fields, forests, the ocean, the arctic and the desert. Penny's subject is animals, but the possessive "My" used in all the titles ("My Centipede," "My Sardine," "My Elephant") alerts us that his critters and creatures may be different from the ones we think we know.

Beginning with "My Trilobite" and "My Virus," Penny works his way to the world of insects, to the world of sea creatures, on through to reptiles, birds, and mammals, finishing with some self-reflection in "My Skeleton" and "My Self." Occasionally he uses animals that are already symbolic ("My Raven," "My Rat," "My Horse"), but usually he selects less ready-made subjects ("My Green Algae", "My Woodpecker," "My Squirrel"). His challenge, then, is to make them meaningful. Here is where the theme of the *chimera* – a mythological creature, part goat, part lion, part serpent – comes into play as the animals that he presents must be a hybrid of something partly recognizable and yet fictionalized enough to become characters. And if the results are at times anthropomorphic, so what?

"My Woodpecker," for example, "has a headache," and "My Owl," also with problems, "needs eyeglasses." "My Rat// is courteous," and "My Hyena// laughs at its own jokes." Often Penny is able to twist the reader's expectations: "My Rhino," for instance, "is thin-skinned./ An egret will insult it/ by flapping to the neighbour rhino." Or "My Camel// is sentimental./ You can tell by the tears in its eyes,/ moist as an oasis." Obviously humour plays an important role here, setting the tone for much of the book, but it's balanced with moments of strong lyricism, as in "My Jack-Rabbit":

> My jack-rabbit is mostly
> mere tracks in the snow for me
> but I read survival
>
> to summer, when it will dress
> in brown, loyal to the soil
> which will then feed it green.

And also in "My Horse," which elegantly captures both the horse's evolution and its temperament as a beast of burden. Penny's horse is "mortgaged/ making daily payments/ with its back and muscles." His horse cannot remember borrowing the mortgage and can never seem to pay it off either, and yet, though permanently in debt, this arrangement "surprisingly, comforts."

As is often true with poetry that focuses on animals, here too the voracious, violent, and predatory creatures can be the most vivid and striking. Thus, "My Maggot// has a single mantra/ and it's 'eat, eat, and eat'," or "My Mantis," which has "found a way to pray/ while hunting, and/ without supplication." Then, in "My

Cougar," with its speed and strength the big cat provides a kind of zen-like moment at the death of its prey:

> It also expects, I know,
> what it kills to have expected
> death;
>
> that is, surprise at the moment
> but not surprise at the event,
> which just is.

At these moments, the collection may seem somewhat haunted by the ghost of Ted Hughes, with his violent Hawk and ornery Crow. However, Penny's wit usually intercedes, preventing these poems from being derivative celebrations of tooth and claw.

And, if it's not already obvious, Penny is more than willing to admit that his poetry has little to do with animals as you would find them in nature. In "My Self," he readily confesses that "My Self// is all there is/ to these animals," and, in the collection's final poem, "My Animals," he tells us that the foregoing creatures "are all imagined./ I dreamt them and then awoke/ to their watching me." This reflexiveness is a nice touch: the poet is then, of course, part of the *chimera* hybrid.

Like Reed's *for love of the city*, Michael Penny's *My Chimera* is a first collection, and it also demonstrates a skillfully concentrated, unified voice and vision.

Where both poets choose to go from here should prove interesting. ■

– Jacob Bachinger

Great bran pie

white
rob mclennan
The Mercury Press
98 pp, $16.95

Always Someone to Kill the Doves
A Life of Sheila Watson
F.T. Flahiff
Newest Press
356 pp, $34.95

> "The complexity of things becomes more close," said Bernard, "here at college, where the stir and pressure of life are so extreme, where the excitement of mere living becomes daily more urgent. Every hour something new is unburied in the great bran pie. What am I? I ask. This? No, I am that." – Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

SOMETIMES WE MAKE TOO MUCH OF THE DIFFERENCE between poetry and prose; sometimes we don't make enough. Poetry becomes the place where the rules we follow in prose (in life) can and should be broken; prose the place where everything must be (as in life) direct, coherent, fully comprehensible. Remove that distinction, or allow it to waver, and we have the poetic (the limply figurative) mixed up with the prosaic (the dully factual), each a mere derivative, a weaker value, to be taken as at best an inadequate substitute, at worst a brazen falsehood.

This conservative view of things, however disinvigorating, can be critically useful, especially when affronted by a case in which the form (a novel) is only partly embodied in sentences that are direct, coherent, fully comprehensible; only partly, because the rest of them, weightless and hesitant as they are, would be more familiar (more pardonable) to us if they were identified as lines from a poem. Which, if one really had to

decide such things, is what rob mclennan's *white* might well have been called.

Question of emphasis, of course, of knowing which was more important to the author: the tale or the telling, outside or in. How, after all, are we to get at the inside of a character when the outside, the plot, is so clearly a *fait divers*: nervous newlywed runs away from secretive husband, runs back to misogamous mother. Oh, and there's a stray, which disappears, then (new page, newly restored willpower) reappears. And the husband, handily named H, begins to smoke, the smell of which P, the wife, resents (her own smell – "[o]f open spaces, fields of wildflowers, and shortbread" – was the first thing he noticed about her, he says). This is not to imply that the facts we gather along the way are uninteresting or without particularity. They do matter, but what matters more, to author and reader, is that P and, in a smaller compass, H and (eventually) P's mother, D, assume a separate consciousness, become something higher than the pawnish third person, while not quite acquiring the autonomy, the regality, of the first. The characters behind these foreclosing initials think and feel, convert every supposed mental act into an image, an evocation of a state that will hang there, self-sustaining, self-justified, until we turn the page.

Is *white*, as the prosaic back cover copy would have it, about a P who "struggles through the challenges of coming to terms with her situation" (i. more plainly e., who suffers)? Or is it, as I'd prefer to believe, about "the great bran pie" and the new things that might be "unburied" there?

> Picking organic from her mother's low shelf, Virginia Woolf and *The Waves*.
>
> P knows, when you drop a book in the bath, you're supposed to immediately slip it sopping wet in the freezer, so the pages don't warp. Everybody knows that.
>
> When it finally happens, she isn't quite sure how much time is allowed between drop and save, or save and freeze. P steps out of her mother's tub quick as silver, fishing the volume, and forgoes the towel, padding bare feet down carpeted stairs, and into the kitchen, dripping wet and naked.
>
> Standing in her mother's kitchen, water a breadcrumb trail back, P feels a sense of divine accomplishment; a freezer-door breath, she feels sudden on skin what she's done, and burns red, full in the face and more.

With *The Waves* Woolf attempted to pull her characters inside out. Thought and action were mutually conniving:

> "On the roof of my mind time, forming, lets fall its drop. Last week, as I stood shaving, the drop fell. I, standing with my razor in my hand, became suddenly aware of the merely habitual nature of my action (this is the drop forming) and congratulated my hands, ironically, for keeping at it."

The result, for some readers, was a nightmare of expressivity, a display of garrulity that no pub local (or tea-pouring *salonnière*) could hope to match. These preening voices, these theatrical, self-aggregating characters, homely but hieratic, have been assigned the role of both narrated and narrating. Not for them the evasions, the inward folding of the free indirect style. They must speak of walking before they can walk. They dress themselves in their own adjectives, behave as instructed by their own adverbs. They are carried forward by the momentum of a stream, yes, but a stream of hyperarticulation.

All of which, more fairly put, is, for other readers, the point, as it was, surely, for Woolf, who said that she was writing to a rhythm rather than a plot and wanted to make prose move as it never had before. (Except, perhaps, in Blake and the Song of Songs.) A psychology made physically manifest, an unsupervised, untrammelled team of egos as talkative and full of "effects" as the form then so pervasive, the radio play, this, to simplify, is what we end up with when inside and outside are deliberately confused, the Cartesian

party-wall flattened.

Maybe so, but how otherwise get at the inside when the outside is thrumming with details it requires such an effort of attention to describe? An effort uncertain of ever being rewarded. If you're a poet admired for your casual dexterity, your minimalism, as mclennan is, you get at the inside by leaving the outside (or most of it) out. His minima are drawn from the free zone of white space; the shapes it releases are the ones we can identify without looking straight at them. We catch sight of their implications peripherally. P and H aren't stereotypes, exactly, but they do have attributes that are intensely familiar and, for that reason, need not be dwelled upon. We accept P's isolation, her flight, as the ground for a specific kind of internal discursiveness. H's point of view, when we're presented with it, is almost unwelcome; it threatens to come up with an explanation, which, by now, we are eager to avoid. P is in free fall and that is how we best understand her.

> It was as though she was being eaten alive, consumed by the place itself. It felt like drowning, [being] consumed by the very waves.

IN ITS SLENDERNESS, ITS ASPIRATION TO A KIND OF teleological starkness, *white* bears a passing resemblance to Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*. Indeed, there is what one might call a retromodernist quality to mclennan's aesthetic that Watson would have recognized easily, although for her purposes it would not perhaps have been modernist (or vorticist) enough. Here, too, in Watson's novel, there are women on the run, husbands uncomprehending, threats of retribution, but the violence is more than implied and the energy is constant, every action invested with a symbolism both explicitly manichaean and vaguely Lawrentian.

> Lenchen was part of any animal she rode. Moved with its movement as if she and the horse breathed with the same lungs. Rode easy as foam on its circling blood. She was part of the horse. Its crest and the edge of its fire.

Always Someone to Kill the Doves is a sad book – not so much because of Watson's fate, which, in the scale of things, cannot be said to have been especially harsh – but because of a perceptible undertone of regret (Flahiff's) that she who wrote *The Double Hook* did not go on to write anything else as good, did not, that is, create anything like the œuvre we would expect of her today. (Or was that the day before yesterday?)

The title is taken from her Paris journal – in which she notes that Picasso has "had one of his caretakers jailed for destroying his doves" and reflects "how hard it is for an artist to live at all." At the time she wrote this, she might have added that it is hard for two artists to live together, especially when one of them – in this case, her husband, the poet Wilfred Watson – was being praised by T.S. Eliot for having written "the first real Canadian poetry." Not many people now will claim to have read *Friday's Child*, the volume that Faber & Faber then undertook to publish. *The Double Hook* is another matter entirely.

A decade earlier, the Watsons had been living in Toronto, he pursuing his graduate studies, she teaching at Moulton Ladies College, on Bloor St, just east of Yonge. They lived on Admiral Road in a second floor flat under whose eaves the pigeons (renamed Doves) were such a nuisance to Wilfred that he, "with Sheila's resistance, took measures to be rid of them." Watson later described how it was on one of her walks along Bloor to the school – in fact, at the corner of Bloor and Avenue Road – that she first thought, "I know what I am going to do – I can hear the voices beginning."

The Double Hook was her second novel. Her first, *Deep Hollow Creek*, she had eventually given up on – had come to "quarrel with its very premise, the encounter between an urban and an urbane consciousness and a small, remote, and heterogeneous community." Something

about the tendency of the narrative to privilege its own character and alienate the others had disenchanted her. (*Deep Hollow Creek* was eventually published in 1992.)

Flahiff was a friend of Watson's for several decades – as a graduate student and later as a fellow teacher. They first met in 1956 in a McLuhan seminar. His approach to "a life" has been to mix his own observations with those found in the archives Watson left behind. It is a highly personal work in tone, although much of the material – the changes in university teaching attitudes, the history of St Michael's College, etc. – comes across as a little dry.

From a present-day perspective, Watson's academic life (and the married life it supported) seems to have been a drain on her creativity. We wouldn't want, necessarily, another *Double Hook*, but there is evidence, in *Deep Hollow Creek* and elsewhere, that she was capable of writing more naturalistically (more naturally) without descending altogether into journalism or anthropology. Her own objections to *Deep Hollow Creek*, insofar as they prevented her from doing more work in that line, now sound overly scrupulous, possibly self-punitive. Both novels can be viewed, certainly, as responses to the same experience (of landscape and isolation), one highly figurative, the other quasi-memoiristic, though no less literary. But if this implies some progressive formal experimentation, the experiment itself appears to have led Watson into an artistic (doves abounding) impasse. ■

– Karl Buchner

For rob mclennan's own review of *Always Someone to Kill the Doves*, see www.danforthreview.com/reviews/nonfiction/watson_caruso.htm

Holding True: Essays on Being a Writer
Susan Ioannou
Wordwrights Canada
$19.95

WRITER, EDITOR, AND TEACHER SUSAN IOANNOU shares the wisdom of her experience in this collection of essays that are – variously – cautionary, encouraging, satirical, and pragmatic.

The first essay sets the tone for the rest by asking that most basic of questions: why write? For Ioannou, "the answer is simple: life's randomness. I want to defy it and be in control in my 8½″ × 11″ world." The satisfaction, as rare as that might be, comes from looking deeper into life than our day to day activities allow.

Other essays treat of the writer's wavering self-confidence, the blandishments of inspiration, the search for standards, the public influence of poetry, the magic of free (or nearly free) inspiration, the importance of the descriptive element in fiction, the folly of certain types of criticism, and even a little theory of creative development.

Ioannou's reflections on the submissions she received while fiction editor at *Cross-Country Writers' Quarterly* are amusing as well as admonitory (and, unfortunately, do not seem to have dated one bit). ■

– Bernard Kelly

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