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A Magazine for Fifty Readers

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Essays, poetry, fiction, reviews

Contributors

Tom Abray's stories and poems have appeared in *Malahat Review*, *Fiddlehead*, *Prairie Fire*, and *paperplates*.

Andre Barnes lives and works in Ottawa. His aspiration, he says, is "not to follow in the footsteps of the oldtimers but to seek what they sought." His poetry has appeared in *dANDeIion* and *CV2*.

Carolina Corcoran was born and lives in Whitehorse, Yukon. Her work has appeared in *CV2*, *Other Voices*, and *Jones Av*.

Amberlea Daigneau is a writer and fine artist. Her work has appeared in *Room of One's Own* and *Jones Av*.

Edward Gates is the author of *The Guest Touches Only Those Who Prepare* and *Seeing the World with One Eye*. He lives in Belleisle Creek, New Brunswick.

Sarah King was, at the time of submission, "a never-before-published high school student residing in Calgary, Alberta." She has, she says, "a long-standing passion for reading and writing."

Drew McDowell teaches at the University of Calgary. His work has appeared in *Front&Centre*, *Misunderstandings Magazine*, *ditch*, and *The Green Muse*.

Matt Santateresa is the author of *Combustible Light*, *Icarus Redux*, and *A Beggar's Loom*. He lives in Montreal.

Lana Storey holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Guelph.

Stephen P. Sweeting is a professional fine arts appraiser living in Toronto, Canada. A part-time graduate student in Athabasca University's Master of Arts – Integrated Studies program, he is currently working on a final research project dealing with the decline of kayaking traditions in Arctic Canada.

Philip A. Waterhouse, who published widely, died last September at the age of 87 in Sonoma, California [www.sonomanews.com/obituaries].

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COVER PHOTO & CARTOON, P. 4: KAREN BELANGER



I don't watch TV myself. I let the wife do it.

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PUBLISHER/EDITOR

Bernard Kelly

REVIEWS EDITOR

Tim Conley

FICTION EDITOR

Brenda Keble

POETRY EDITOR

Karen Belanger

LAYOUT/PRODUCTION

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paperplates
19 Kenwood Ave
Toronto, Ontario
M6C 2R8 Canada

magazine@paperplates.org
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The Leslie Street Spit

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO I LIVED IN AN APARTMENT on the top floor of a three-storey walk-up building in the Beaches area of Toronto. Situated high on a rise of land at the point where the city's eastern beaches transition into the Scarborough Bluffs, the wide windows in the 1950s-era building provided unobstructed views of the lake to the south and the southwest. The vista was unique in Toronto, limited only by the horizon and the atmospheric conditions over the water. Every weekday morning I would scan the lake for approaching weather or the odd passing freighter. If I spotted a ship, I would grab my binoculars, lean on the window sill, and watch closely until the vessel passed out of sight. Then, I invariably shifted the binoculars off to the southwest to examine an unusual looking headland extending far out into Lake Ontario.

First glances revealed a long, almost flat spit of land defined at the water's edge by heaps of rock and other unidentifiable material. When a southeast wind was blowing – usually the herald of stormy weather – I could see waves crashing up against the shoreline and sending spray high into the air. But if the lake was calm – as it was on most days – the headland appeared to float on the surface of the lake like a grossly oversized barge. It was an optical illusion that never failed to fascinate me and an indication that a phenomenological perspective of the world has its limitations.

When time was available I lingered at the window to watch the activity on the spit. And there was plenty. Graders, bulldozers, and backhoes moved busily around the spit, shifting earth and rock. But by far the most noticeable activity was the steady procession of fully laden dump trucks moving slowly out to the spit's end. I could

never quite see where the loads were dumped, but often saw the result – clouds of white dust that would hang in the air for a moment, then dissipate in the wind. After a few minutes the trucks reappeared and headed back down the spit's length. Although I didn't know it at the time, as many as a thousand loads a day were dumped onto the spit during my tenure at the apartment. The result of this continuous shifting of fill was a complex 400-hectare site extending five kilometres into Lake Ontario, complete with two lengthy causeways, interior wetland cells, bays, and long beaches made up of both sand and rubble.

My interest in the spit remained a passing one until the late 1990s when I took up kayaking and bought a folding kayak – a modern version of the skin-and-frame vessels used by the Inuit. With its shallow draft and high degree of maneuverability, a kayak provided an ideal platform to explore the spit in a way unavailable to boaters in yachts and motorized vessels. I could paddle close to dangerous looking outcrops, glide slowly along shallow beaches, and thread my way between small islands and sandbars. As well, I was able to land on beaches to explore on foot. But in spite of my considerable time spent around the spit during the early part of this decade, I always felt conflicted about it. I could never quite come to terms with its artificiality, its defiance of what I perceived to be the natural order of the Lake Ontario shoreline. In the back of my mind the spit was always that bizarre long grey barge visible from my old apartment's window.

OFFICIALLY IDENTIFIED AS THE OUTER HARBOUR EAST Headland, this considerable extension of Toronto into the lake is known to almost everyone in the city as the Leslie Street Spit. Sitting at the foot of an under-utilized industrial zone and curving out beyond the Toronto Island archipelago, the spit is a long-term project reflective of the city's changing needs and priorities. Conceived

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in the mid 1950s when Toronto expected a huge increase in its shipping traffic as a result of the soon-to-be-completed St. Lawrence Seaway, the Spit's genesis connects directly to post-war optimism and a still active though somewhat dampened quest for "world class" status. During the mid-to-late fifties Toronto was nipping at the heels of Montreal and anxious to assert itself. Industrial growth and the expansion of port facilities were viewed as key elements in this rush for national dominance. The Spit was to provide a large protective headland to shelter a new outer harbour and port – facilities that would make Toronto into a major Great Lakes shipping centre. The "spine" of this enormous headland was to be made up of unconsolidated fill and rubble from the city's many downtown construction sites, as well as dredged sand from shipping channels.

Ironically, soon after construction started in 1959 it became obvious that the anticipated shipping boom was not going to happen. Toronto's heavy industry was leaching away from the lakefront and the 1960s container revolution meant that most freight arrived by rail and truck rather than by water. Almost as soon as it started the Spit's primary *raison d'être* had disappeared. The headland, however, was not discontinued. As a result of Toronto's construction boom and the need to get rid of vast quantities of "clean" fill excavated from building sites, the Toronto Harbour Commissioners allowed the dumping to go on as originally planned. By the late 1960s dredging in the silt-filled Inner Harbour had started in earnest and by the mid-1970s work started on the new Outer Harbour. These long-term harbour improvement initiatives provided millions of extra cubic metres of sand to expand and shape the spit.

As the Leslie Street Spit grew larger and larger a number of development schemes were considered. The most ambitious – and perhaps the most ridiculous – was an aquatic park develop-

ment, complete with multiple private marinas, a waterskiing school, an aquarium, a maritime pioneer village, shops, cobbled streets, an amphitheatre, parking for up to 2,000 cars, and a hotel. But as any Torontonians will tell you, waterfront developments have more than a little trouble getting started. With only a couple of exceptions, Toronto's shoreline dreams generate costly studies, lots of talk, and little else.

Concurrent with these glacial development considerations, two other processes related to the spit were going on – the first natural and the second human. As the spit grew, a number of hardy plant species established themselves on the areas where sand and other soil had been spread. Ecologist Michael Hough catalogued a total of 152 vascular plants on the Leslie Street Spit in 1977, evidence of a natural colonization process dependent on wind, animals, and people. Only a portion of these were native to the region and most were growing like weeds. With the pioneer vegetation came bird and animal populations – gulls, cormorants, geese, terns, raccoons, groundhogs, muskrats, skunks, and later, coyotes, foxes and beavers. As the base of the Spit connects to a ravine system extending right up to the northern border of Toronto, small mammals could come and go relatively unimpeded. Bird populations, of course, could simply fly into the site. Though hardly a natural wonderland, the once barren spit was steadily developing into an unusual example of ecological regeneration. And all this was happening within sight of Toronto's dense urban core.

As this natural regeneration process continued at its own speed, Toronto residents started to pay attention to the Spit. Inaccessible to the public until 1973, when it was opened on weekends, the Spit was attracting hikers, runners, and cyclists interested in experiencing an emergent natural environment within the city's borders. Through the decade and into the 1980s these many weekend visitors developed a strong affection for the

Spit and its natural regenerative processes. With the threat of losing the headland in its “natural state” to developers looming, they began to mobilize and make their opinions known. Additionally, a small sailing fraternity had been given permission to establish a marina in one of the coves at the Spit’s base in the late 1970s. Although these yacht owners would eventually come to loggerheads with environmental activists, they too did not want to see urban development of the type officials were contemplating.

And so the dumping of Toronto’s broken-up concrete, foundation soil, construction detritus, and harbour dredgeate onto the Leslie Street Spit continued without interruption by development schemes. Transformed by colonizing vegetation, the Spit was no longer the barren wasteland it had been in the past, and people liked it – a lot. But if one probed a little deeper – particularly on the spit’s shorelines where few had close access – problems could be found. The “spine” of the spit was not a pretty sight.

IT WAS EARLY AFTERNOON BUT ALREADY CLOSE AND hot. Sealed into the kayak’s cockpit with the spray skit, I steadied myself in the water and looked across the Outer Harbour. As I dug deep with the double-bladed paddle, cooling water splashed up on my hands. It felt good in the heat. The boat moved forward slowly at first but within a few strokes picked up some speed. Waves from a passing cabin cruiser splashed over the bow and sluiced across the deck, leaving a residue of stringy algae. Soon, I was far out in the harbour, with the annoying boat traffic behind me.

The Spit’s low mass loomed ahead and I corrected my course by leaning over on the paddle so that I could swing around a treeless point. Drawing close, I had to watch the approach intently. Tangled lengths of rebar poked up through the water, threatening to puncture the kayak’s soft hull. Looking down

into the surprisingly clear water, I saw the remnants of buildings and sidewalks, irregular chunks of concrete held together by structural supports. Heaped up toward the shoreline, they were dangerous obstacles requiring slow passage and a watchful eye.

Maneuvering parallel to the point’s jagged shoreline, I stopped to mentally catalogue the scene. It was nothing short of a post-apocalyptic nightmare. Piles of cracked and water-smoothed bricks, red, yellow, cream, and brown, spilled down the shoreline into the water. Concrete staircases, bent metal railings, twisted doorframes, and slabs of multi-coloured terrazzo were set at odd angles, as if they had been exploded into place. Broken concrete and cast-iron sewer pipe – some as wide as a metre across – were scattered across the point’s shoreline. And everywhere there was the confused tangle of rusting rebar. Crushed into the ground just above the waterline, a sea-foam green bathtub introduced a ridiculous suggestion of hygiene to the scene. But this was quickly cancelled out by the tub’s deeply rusted underside and the fetid brown rainwater collecting in the interior. Avoiding a floating condom, I altered my course and continuing on toward a tremendous din rising from the other side of the point. A few gulls circled above, watching me closely – a waterborne intruder of unnatural proportions.

PRIOR TO THE MID-19TH CENTURY WHEN TORONTO started to slowly expand its port and harbour facilities through infilling, some 600 hectares of marshland existed in the area around the current base of the Spit. Although the harbour was badly polluted prior to the port’s expansion, 19th century accounts indicate that the wetland – one of the largest on the lake – was home to thousands of water fowl and a key stopover point for migrating species. By the end of the second decade of the 20th century the marsh had essentially disappeared, with the birds dis-

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placed. Some shifted to the western end of the Toronto Islands, current home of the Island Airport. Most, however, simply vanished.

In the early 1970s, after colonizing ground cover started to change the surface of the Spit, ornithologists noted that birds of various species were beginning to return to Toronto's shoreline, congregating on the new headland. By the middle of the decade the vegetation was maturing; poplars, willows and cottonwoods had reached heights of up to five metres, adding a protective canopy to some areas of the Spit. The bird population started to grow dramatically. In 1973 naturalists counted 10 pairs of nesting ring-billed gulls; by 1977, 20,000 pairs were nesting on the Spit. In the same period a population of 35 nesting pairs of terns grew to over 1,500 nesting pairs. Approximately 185 different species of birds were counted in 1980. Arriving from all over the Great Lakes, and filling a niche that had been absent for most of the 20th century, Toronto's shoreline was once again becoming a key habitat for birds on Lake Ontario.

Although by 2000 the number of observed species had risen to 300, and the area had been declared an Important Bird Area (IBA) by ornithologists and wildlife organizations, the dramatic increase in the bird population was not without problems and some degree of controversy. The wildly successful gull population – some 57,000 nesting pairs by 2005 – was pushing out other species, such as the terns and herons. Gull droppings were increasing the levels of fecal contamination in the harbour. And the birds were getting in the way of small aircraft taking off and landing at Toronto's Island Airport.

It was another species, however, that really captured public attention about the expanding bird population on the Spit – the double crested cormorant. This large greenish-black bird had an enormous appetite for fish and a tendency to defoliate trees with its copious acidic droppings. Eliminated from the Toronto area by the effects

of DDT at the end of the Second World War, the bird made a spectacular comeback on the Spit, with over 23,000 nesting pairs counted by 2005. Some naturalists regarded this as a good sign, viewing the isolated Spit as an ideal habitat. Others opined that the cormorants were crowding out colonial nesters, degrading water quality, and killing off vegetation. Staff at the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, the body now responsible for the Spit, considered the possibility of a cull through the spraying of mineral oil on their eggs – a relatively humane form of population control.

The situation was inflamed when the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters said they were going to initiate their own illegal cull by sending out hundreds of shotgun-toting members to deal with the problem themselves. Arguing that the cormorants were eating all the fish in the area – species the anglers thought they had first dibs on – this vociferous interest group raised the ire of the left-liberal and alternative press, naturalists, and law enforcement agencies with their threat. Ironically, the fish cormorants feed on belong to a non-native invasive species that anglers rarely take. In the end, common sense prevailed and after a year or so the cormorant population started to decline on its own as a result of restricted habitat. But there is still one hell of a lot of birds out there.

AS I APPROACHED THE TIP OF THE POINT THE NOISE hit me with full force. Although I could not yet see the source, the cheeping, squawking, cawing, screeching, honking and clucking were almost deafening; I wanted to cover my ears but both hands were occupied with the paddle. Once around the point I finally saw them – on the water, in the air, and on the ground in their thousands. I thought back to a paddling buddy's colourful description of the vista: "It's like a scene out of Star Wars – you know, the battle scenes when waves of ships shoot through

space ... first the Alliance's white ones, then the Empire's black ones."

Clearly disturbed by my presence, hundreds of large black cormorants rose from the water in squadrons, while white and grey gulls wheeled around in wide circles behind them. Cawing and flapping, they filled the air with black and white rushes of movement, rising, diving and hovering. I floated, transfixed, as the cormorants alighted in a grove of defoliated trees further down the point's length. The trees were obscenely coated in thick layers of droppings. Dried out and bleached almost white, they looked otherworldly – like enormous Daliesque wishbones ready to be cracked apart by some huge set of hands. The few remaining leaves were wilting and rapidly approaching death.

Paddling closer to the cormorants, I saw that some had landed on branches while others were wedging themselves into large, spiky nests scattered through the trees like grotesque Christmas tree ornaments. After examining them closely for a while and deciding that they looked prehistoric and a bit frightening, I paddled further into the bay to look at the gulls. As I approached their flight zone, liquefied droppings plunked into the water and onto my kayak's deck. The water's surface was coated with oily grey guano and a fine, fluffy down blowing into clumps like dandelion seeds. I veered inland to escape the bombing raid and saw that the concrete and brick-covered base of the point was also covered with tens of thousands of nesting gulls – more birds than I had ever seen in my life. The gulls followed my progress, turning their heads in unison. Another film title popped into my mind—this one by a master of intrigue and suspense. "Tippi Hedren didn't know the half of it," I said, out loud.

I swung about to continue on around the bay's perimeter. The noise faded quickly as a strong hot wind picked up, filling my nostrils with a sharp ammonia-like odour. Looking down into the scum-covered water, I saw a

lifeless gull chick floating with featherless and almost translucent wings extended fully in sad, flightless suspension. I knew I was finished with the Spit for the day.

ALTHOUGH THE LESLIE STREET SPIT STARTED WITH a design plan, it was not an ecological one. The Spit was intended to be merely a long breakwater protecting the new outer harbour and port, so there was little initial thought given to the possibility of its developing its own ecosystem. Dumping was restricted to "clean" fill, which meant that all sorts of construction detritus could be included with any excavated soils. Organic waste, contaminated waste, and what we generally classify as garbage could not be legally dumped on the Spit. That said, a close examination of the layers of fill visible in older sections of the Spit indicates that all manner of rubbish found its way into the mix. Old bottles, flattened tin cans, melted plastics, and even bundles of deteriorating cloth are visible in the compacted layers. The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority obliquely refers to this material as "poor quality soil," possibly code for "we are not exactly sure what was dumped there."

In spite of the questionable lower layers comprising the Spit's "spine," natural regenerative processes created what Robert Fulford has referred to as an "inspired accident." But it was public pressure that forced the Toronto Conservation Authority to classify the bulk of the Spit as parkland and move toward the development of a Master Plan balancing community use with an ecologically grounded habitat creation and enhancement program. The program had four principal goals – the creation of "seasonally flooded and protected pools for amphibian reproduction, mudflat areas for migrating shorebirds, flat open areas for nesting colonial waterbirds, and sheltered thickets and den sites for overwintering reptiles, birds and mammals" – all within a varied public use context.

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Pivotal to this “conservation by design” program is a combination of two biological theories that exist as uncomfortable bedfellows – *ecological succession* and *invasion ecology*. The former is a reasonably well understood concept of the predictable changes occurring when an unoccupied environment moves through successive natural development stages, beginning with pioneer plant communities and ending with a climax forest. The purposeful act of assisting this process includes natural area enhancement on land and water as well as seeding and planting. But unlike ecological restoration, management is minimal with the Spit and there are no attempts to exclude non-native species. This is where the concept of *invasion ecology* comes into play. Largely disassociated from *ecological succession* as a result of spurious distinctions between native colonizers and introduced invaders, *invasion ecology* is regarded by some naturalists as a substantial threat to native biodiversity and the primary cause of biotic change in today’s world. Yet, according to a number of recent studies focused specifically on the Spit, the invasive species that form a significant component of the succession process have been pivotal in the transformation of a barren wasteland into thriving biotic community of considerable variety and complexity. Essentially utilizing what is already there, the Spit’s conservation-by-design approach manages to successfully balance the needs of a working landfill site, a public park, and a provincially-designated Environmentally Significant Area (ESA). Although there are some questions about the long-term stability of anchored beaches on the Spit’s perimeter, and concerns over the toxicity of some of the materials dumped on the interior, reviews and studies indicate that most ecologists, environmentalists, and biologists like the results.

AFTER CROSSING THE OUTER HARBOUR, I RELEASED THE spray skit from the kayak’s coaming and reached

down into the cockpit to a dry bag. Opening the bag, I removed a map of the Spit, carefully unfolded it and chose a route into Embayment B – a small bay extending deep into the Spit and terminating close to one of the major trails. My destination, which would necessitate beaching the kayak and making a small hike, was a small body of water identified on the map as the Triangle Pond.

On entering the bay, I noticed it was considerably different from the Bird Areas further up the Spit’s length. To begin with, the bay was reasonably quiet, only a few gulls circling overhead. And the water was not fouled by droppings. I paddled past a school of large carp swimming under the boat. More than a metre long, the fish paid little attention to me and went about their bottom-feeding.

Before reaching the beach, I looked over to a small marshy area thickly populated with cattails and sedges. Beyond the little swamp, a shrub-covered hill rose gently to a grove of tall cottonwoods. The trees’ leaves trembled in the wind, revealing both their dark green tops and their silvery-green undersides. Through the branches, I could just see a meadow filled with bright-yellow wildflowers and coarse-looking grasses. I considered the scenery for a moment and then beached the boat on the shoreline. Using my paddle to steady the kayak, I stepped out into the water, sinking deeply into dark, sucking mud. After extricating my feet from the water and mud, I hauled the boat up onto the shore. Although the bay was secluded, I pulled the bright yellow and black kayak behind some brush, effectively hiding my ride home. I quickly slipped out of my paddling gear, stowing everything deep inside the cockpit. Then I picked up the dry bag and started up the small hill.

When I emerged from the cottonwood stand beside a trail, my reef boots were coated in thick, odorous mud that made me self-conscious. I stood for a couple of minutes at the side of

the trail and watched as a group of cyclists on mountain bikes zoomed past me, on their way to the lighthouse at the end of the Spit. Then I crossed the trail and joined a large South Asian family standing at the observation platform overlooking the Triangle Pond. Five minutes later, they followed the cyclists along the trail.

Seemingly alone, I sat on a large rock carefully placed to afford the best view of the pond. Looking down on the water, I saw a tranquil scene almost too perfect to be real. At the pond's edges were tall grasses interspersed with rushes, several of which were releasing seed into the air. The fluffy airborne seed blew towards the Spit's interior marshes behind the pond. Floating on the surface of the water were dozens of water lilies, their broad flat leaves supporting delicate white and yellow flowers. At the centre of the pond I saw an impressively large beaver lodge, with sticks piled high out of the water. No beavers were visible, but several leaf-filled branches floating at the pond's edge indicated ongoing renovations.

I stood up and looked over to a second observation platform on the other side of the pond. A dark-haired woman in cycling gear sat sketching the view from her slightly higher vantage point. She looked up from her pad; I nodded to her. The woman waved and then went back to her sketch. I surveyed the scene one last time, focused briefly on a brightly coloured butterfly fluttering near the pond, and then headed back across the trail to my beached kayak.

of citizens with varied interests, including bird watching, ecology, and cycling, the Friends have been tireless advocates of "passive" recreational use of the spit. They have submitted briefs to the government, orchestrated letter-writing campaigns, organized demonstrations, pushed their way onto development committees and generally opposed any attempts by planners and developers to move the Spit away from the urban wilderness concept. Selecting one issue at a time and utilizing the considerable skill set of members, the Friends have a remarkable success record, stopping a number of development schemes and substantially influencing the direction of the Master Plan now in effect. By taking a "positive role of stewardship" as well as using every political means at their disposal, the Friends of the Spit have become a sterling example of citizen advocacy with an environmental bent. Ever vigilant, the Friends continue to keep a watchful eye on private and governmental interests anxious to develop and "finish" the Spit.

Current community use of the Spit largely reflects the ideals of the Friends. On any given weekend, hundreds of hikers, runners, cyclists and birders engage in low-impact activities restricted to specific trails and paths. Yacht clubs continue to press for more space and extended vehicular access to moorings at the Spit's base, but, to a large degree, their battle seems to be a losing one. Heightened concern about the environment and community acceptance of the "less is more" credo appear to have taken root.

ANY CONSIDERATION OF THE OUTER HARBOUR EAST Headland would be incomplete without dealing with the Friends of the Spit (FOS). Although politicians, bureaucrats, consultants, engineers, workers, biologists, and ecologists were all essential to the Spit's development, it was this group of interested activists who acted as the city's conscience after the headland opened to the public. Formed in 1977 out of a loose coalition

ROUNDING THE END OF THE SPIT WITH ITS RED AND white automated lighthouse situated high above, I made straight for the forked tip of the endike-ment on the lake side. As I hit open water, a strong wind informed me I would have to contend with a swell further out. I checked to make sure that my on-deck gear was secured and then dug deeply into the water with the double-bladed paddle, punching the kayak's bow through

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the waves. Moving parallel to the long, low endikement, I rode up and down on the waves, the folding kayak's flexible hull accommodating the swell like a creature of the sea.

While paddling, I looked over at the endikement, which I had contemplated so many times from the apartment window. It didn't look anything like the low, barge-shaped landform I remembered. The Spit looked as if it belonged here – as if the lake and the city had accepted it as a life-bearing entity. Midway down the endikement's length, I braced with the paddle to shift the boat around to face the Spit. The breeze had died down and the swell was now minimal. I let the small waves push me slowly toward the shoreline and thought about all I had seen and read of the Spit. I realized I had almost missed what the spit is really about; I had nearly been blinded by the apparent.

THE SHORT BEACH RUNNING ALONG THE EDGE OF THE vast landform was littered with thousands of multi-coloured bricks and fragments of urban detritus slowly being reduced into fine particles of sand. Birds circled overhead. A groundhog scurried into a den under a concrete slab. Hikers combed the shoreline looking for beach glass. And in the lake, floating just off the Spit and emerging from its shadow, a lone kayaker finally got it. ■

– *Stephen P. Sweeting*

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Communication or English as she is spoke

"DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. THEY ALL SPEAK ENGLISH. You'll have no trouble getting around."

So said our friend when we told him we were planning a trip to South East Asia. We were eager to follow our usual habit in a new place – first take a standard tour to be sure of hitting the "must" spots, then go off on our own, just poking about.

Hong Kong was our first stop. It was exhilarating but exhausting. Our friend had spoken truly. Everyone spoke English. Pleased, we headed for Bangkok.

We reached our hotel in the early evening. It was new and very western. Tired, we decided to dine in our room. My wife had some difficulty making room service understand her wants, but eventually breathed a sigh of relief that the order had been taken accurately. "Oh yes," she finished, "and add a couple of Benedictines to that."

The knock a little later was timid, but the young man who entered, dark-skinned and very white-toothed, laid out our meal with confidence. Everything seemed as ordered until, with a final flourish, he removed the metal cover from the last dish and proudly showed us our *eggs benedict*.

We explained that eggs benedict were not benedictines, the liqueurs we had ordered. His face crumpled, the white smile disappeared. "Take them back," we said. "No harm done." He retreated unhappily, to return with the desired drinks.

Our meal was delicious. Replete and still smiling over the misunderstanding, we went to bed.

At eleven o'clock, a hesitant knock on the door roused us. I opened it, to find our young man looking very sad. In his hand was a familiar

covered dish. He presented it to us and for the second time, removed the cover. The same eggs benedict were there, now congealed and very unappetizing. They were no more unhappy-looking than our servitor. For the first time in my life I recognised the accuracy of the term "woebegone". We told him to leave them and we'd clear things with management in the morning. Doubtfully relieved, he bowed out and we went back to bed, chuckling.

In the morning we discovered that since he had taken the order, it was his responsibility to see it was paid for. The cost to him of our eggs benedict would have been his week's wages, and this was his first week on the job.

Amid agreements that management shouldn't have put someone with little or no English into that position, we made a settlement and everyone smiled, the boy most of all.

Language problems settled, we boarded our tour bus to the Golden Buddha, one of the "must sees". Another flashing-toothed young man stood alongside the driver, facing us, and somehow maintaining his balance as the bus careered along the roads.

Bangkok drivers must be the finest in the world; otherwise, the population would be decimated daily. Our busload, all fellow Westerners, mostly bald heads and blue rinses, soon settled down and listened attentively to the story of the Golden Buddah as related by our guide. Unlike our waiter from last night, this man was very proud of his ability to speak English.

He told us that when the Burmese invaded many centuries ago, the Buddha was covered to conceal its value. The ruse was successful, but over the years, knowledge of the real Buddha was lost. The statue became just another inconspicuous effigy of the God.

Then in the mid-1900s, it was decided it had to be moved. A crane was brought, the statue was hooked up and the winch tightened.

"But dee Buddha, it prove too heavy for d'

crane. The crane it topple, an' dee Buddah it fell to d' groun'." There was a dramatic pause while the guide ensured every eye was on him, every ear attuned to his next words.

"An' when it fall, dee covering crack." His voice became solemn. "A golden streak showed tro' d' crack.." We were all enthralled. This was a great story.

"You see," continued our guide, "dee Buddha had been cover' wid semen, an' it crack'." Pleased at the reaction from his audience he repeated his words. "Dee Buddha, eet was cover' in semen, which crack', to show dee rich gold beneat'."

We had heard correctly. My wife and I and several others convulsed. Not daring to look around openly, we stole furtive glances at the blue rinses staring straight ahead in stiffened shock, most with their cheeks aflame.

It took only a few moments before we realised the word he'd used was "cement". The explanation was whispered through the bus, and the ladies relaxed.

Our guide, not understanding what had happened but delighted at the reception of his tale, told us that the statue was solid gold and weighed five tons. No wonder the crane toppled.

But all was forgotten in the splendour of the Buddha itself, who sat, hands in lap, with a 24 carat smile, as it watched over its worshippers.

I don't think the guide ever realised why his tips were so substantial on our return to the hotel.

"Eggs benedict and cemen'," I said. "What next?"

But for the remainder of our trip, English saw us safely through without any trouble. ■

– *David Glyn-Jones*

Travel (and language) barriers

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON MYTHS OF OUR TIME IS that the world has shrunk significantly. Because of the ease and relative affordability of travel, one can reach almost any part of the globe in less than 24 hours. Particularly for English-speakers, the world is supposed to be waiting to be explored. But if my experience in Brazil is typical, the reality may be more complicated – because of persisting language barriers.

In the spring of 2007, I spent a month lecturing on Canadian literature across Brazil, from the extreme south (Rio Grande do Sul), through the Northeast (Paraíba and Pernambuco), to the Amazon (Rondônia). Since I speak Portuguese, I had informed my hosts that, though the lectures would be in English, the question period afterwards could be in either language, or a combination of the two.

Early in the trip, I gave a mini-course on Canadian literature and globalization. But, soon after I began my first lecture, I sensed that there was a sizable number of students who couldn't understand me. As I found out later, the class was attended by students not only of English but also of theory, and the latter weren't all bilingual. So, to reach my audience, I had to switch to Portuguese, which I used for the rest of the course.

The limited reach of the English language also became evident when my teenaged son, Jonathan, tried to reach me, by phone, at my hotel in the southern city of Porto Alegre. Jonathan is, by Canadian standards, bilingual, speaking English and French, but he is not fluent in Portuguese. Yet he valiantly tried to speak it to the hotel clerk. When he realized he wasn't being understood, he resorted to English. That didn't help, however, since the clerk didn't speak

homeplate

English. Only two days later did I receive a message that some English-speaking person had attempted to phone me, but the clerk had no idea who it was or what the person had wanted to communicate.

The use of English is also either of varying quality or quite limited at airports and during flights. For instance, an announcer at Rio de Janeiro's Tom Jobim International Airport repeatedly stated, in English, that a flight was about to depart for "Londres," inadvertently renaming the British capital. On some short domestic flights, the English wasn't just poor, it was nonexistent, as all on-board announcements were only in Portuguese.

I don't wish to imply that Brazilians are the only people who fail to pay proper attention to the linguistic needs of travellers. We do exactly the same in Canada. During a previous trip to Brazil, as I was preparing to board a plane at Toronto's Pearson International Airport for São Paulo, I was shocked to discover that the announcements were made in English, French, and Spanish, but not in Portuguese, the official language of the country to which we were travelling.

In any case, an obvious lesson of my experiences travelling in Brazil is that the world remains as foreign as ever and the only way to counter this inevitable foreignness is to acquire a modicum of fluency in the language of the places one is visiting. This truth was demonstrated, dramatically, as I headed back to Canada.

Brazil requires that you fill out a card when you enter the country and that you return the card before you leave. I was waiting to go through customs at Guarulhos International Airport in São Paulo, and there was a middle-aged man ahead of me. Judging by his business suit and his manner, I would say he was probably a business executive. However, when a customs officer asked him, in Portuguese only, for his entry card, he was utterly lost. If he spoke any Portuguese at all, the language soon deserted him before this

increasingly aggressive volley of words. Within seconds, the business executive had been transformed into a blubbering infant who couldn't articulate a single sentence. Although he spoke English, the world's dominant language was now useless to him, because the customs officer, as foreigners sometimes do, had decided to assert *his* difference by not speaking it. ■

– *Albert Braz*

SARAH KING

Byslexic

She writes and she writes
but has no one to read
Her b's swapped with d's;
butterflies with fleas
The dirbs fly across the sky
as her pen across paper
Colliding with windows
that hadn't been seen
Splattering across unmarred glass
a trainwreck in the countryside

Ghazals

I

I throw the chainsaw into
the back of the old dodge

and drive to the high country

my last chance before winter
to cut and pile brush

another acre
another thousand pounds

each berry a drop of ink

lightens life's margins

and erases my foot
prints from the sand

II

a drizzle

the

cement truck parked the chute extended

I strain with stomach
deep into tandem

shoulders loose breath steady
trying to hold one

handle of the wheelbarrow
no higher than the other

to keep this gray soup
from shifting and spilling

a light left on civil
ization a phone off the hook

a fair and level load
green with fear

cures on its plastic
and styrofoam home

III

the pencil rolls dull hope
dull point near the table's edge

read to me and I'll mark every distance
plus or minus a sixteenth

a little girl was
lost in a corner

start at the bottom yesterday's safe
we'll build on what we have

on the twenty-sixth of june angela called
buy a present answer any time

monday or tuesday

XXXXVI

I tighten my jacket

and walk back to

mouth eyes nose

away from the wind

snow

drifting over the banks

along the sides of the road

the mailboxes like severed arms

the houses alone and silent

flesh can freeze if I stop

good news no mail

and on the back step

a damp damp cold

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CAROLINA CORCORAN

Morning

Early, when I cut myself shaving, I discover you
paddling up and down my bloodstream
in a yellow canoe.

Later, as I cry over someone else's poetry, I find you
running the maze of catacombs
that wind through my body
like empty white riverbeds.

And while sitting at my little desk
preparing to conduct an orchestra
with pen and ink, I notice you
shuffling along the outer rim of the strain
that has yet to be played aloud.

Finally, when I leave the house, I find you
sewn, inextricably, inside the lining
of that blue corduroy jacket I always wear.
I like it because it's blue

and I like it because you're there.
I don't mourn your presence anymore.

Run there

From my window
I spot the dog
I have named Simon.

He seems to be on his way to the shop
for milk and the paper.
His front legs are disfigured

so he will smile and run there
with the peculiar buoyancy
of the lame.

Early poems

It's what they call the work
at the front of the anthology
the thing that bloomed unasked
in spring.

The season for poetry, you understand,
begins in September
and runs autumn's gauntlet only
so whenever a poem is found bearing May's signature
or even, god forbid, April's

it is quickly hustled to the front of the collection
surreptitiously with not a moment to pack
subjected to the exile of the young

the dismissal with a wave of the hand
of innocence
of how one used to be

the sudden withholding of
the allowance made
for childhood.

Throttle

GEORGE ELLIS LAY COMATOSE, DYING OF LIVER FAILURE. HIS TWO SONS STOOD AT HIS SIDE, holding his hands. His wife waited in the Kiwanis grieving room, or went into the garden to smoke.

On the second day a young nurse with a matter-of-fact, competent air about her came in to check the gauges and adjust the dials. She paused to watch the brothers at their vigil, each bowed and clasping one of the patient's hands, and then she said to Peter, who was the closest, "Sometimes they need permission to die." Peter leaned toward his father's ear and said, "It's okay, Dad. You can go."

The boys had been estranged since their early teens, but during those hospital hours a subtle alliance formed between them. A few days later they led the mourners through the funeral rites with a silent complicity, so silent that there had been almost no discussion when the director slid the urn into a cardboard box and offered it to them unsurely: it was Dan who reached out and took it.

Peter didn't expect to see his brother again until Christmas, but one evening about a month later Dan showed up at his apartment, riding a new BMW motorcycle.

Dan was a big man, even bigger than their father, though probably not as strong. George had been six feet tall, thick-chested and broad-shouldered, but light-footed, a natural heavy-weight. Dan was taller, but the same width all the way down, strong but slow. The new BMW riding suit worked like a girdle, pulling in the soft spots and accentuating the hard. Sheathed in leather, reinforced with kevlar, he looked like a hide-bound linebacker.

Having a body that instilled an instinctive respect in the listener, Dan had developed a sedate manner of speech. He expressed himself in short, weighty sentences, like a cowboy, but softer, with less menace. Still, there was usually a little grin in his eyes, a knowingness of the mass behind the words.

He wanted Peter to take his new bike for a ride, but Peter could not be convinced. Dan wasn't used to hearing the word "no", except from his wife and sometimes his boys, and it had the strange effect of making him blush.

Peter said he didn't have a bike license, but he still might have driven around the block if he hadn't been a little afraid of motorcycles. When he was younger, he always had to steel himself against the noise before he kicked the starter, and when the engine screamed to life a tremor would travel from his stomach up through his chest and down to his fingers.

But Peter also declined Dan's offer because he considered motorcycles childish and he was ashamed in a way that he'd ever been excited by them. Motorcycles were dangerous, expensive toys for relatively uneducated people who appreciated neither the simple pleasures in life, like walking, nor the real fruits of civilization, like literature, philosophy, and classical music.

Peter declined the offer graciously, the way a father might decline to ride his son's skateboard off a curb.

Dan stared at the bike silently, temporarily rebuffed, and Peter, who was holding a red pen, the one he'd just been using for marking essays, tried to redress the disappointment he'd caused by praising what he imagined to be the prodigious stopping power of the front disc brakes.

Tight-jawed, Dan rounded the bike and opened the rear compartment. He extracted a shiny grey full-faced helmet and held it out. "Get on the back," he urged.

Peter pulled on the helmet and tied the strap. His fingers remembered how.

"What I want you to take from this," he told his class, "is the liberating, transforming power of literacy. Reading opened Frederick Douglass's eyes to the injustice of his condition."

"But it made him want to kill himself," said a student, without raising his hand.

"For a while," Peter said. "That's a phase you go through when you start to see. Camus talks about it. If you haven't gone through it, maybe that's a sign you're still in the ignorance is bliss phase. Maybe your life sucks and you don't even know it."

"Or maybe you were always awake."

"Or maybe life doesn't suck. I don't think it does."

"Maybe," he said, to shut them up. "But what I want to get to is this: if a little literacy can awaken you some, a lot of literacy might awaken you a lot." He looked them over, with a clever smile on his face, hoping to witness the magical effect of his words. But there was no sign of spontaneous enlightenment. Instead, they looked at him as if he'd just recited a dumb joke.

He assigned something out of the book. "Write your own literacy narrative. In other words, Explain how you learned to read and write." Some said they didn't remember. "Then make it up," he told them.

He pretended to write with them. It was something he'd learned during the Intro to College Teaching course he'd been required to take his first semester. Of course, you were supposed to write for real – "modelling" it was called – but he'd already taught another group that morning and he'd been teaching the same course for three years. He wasn't going to keep rewriting the same story. So he just squiggled a line across the page and hoped they were fooled.

He always told them that moving the wrist triggered brain activity, and it seemed to work on him now, to such an extent that he considered sharing his thoughts with them. He had a habit of doing that – of putting them to work and then interrupting them. They never complained.

Take my father, he wanted to say – but he didn't this time, the thought was too personal. – My father had a grade nine education. He could read and write but only on a rudimentary level. He wrote me a letter once, but the tone was completely off.

Dear Peter,

This is to inform you of our Christmas plans. Your mother has purchased you a ticket for

December 25th since your tests are held so late this year. For this reason we will celebrate Christmas on the 26th, Boxing Day. Please find your ticket enclosed. We look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,

Dad

Something like that. He should have kept it. But the letter was not the point, even if it had taken George Ellis a half an hour to write with a dictionary, his wife looking over his shoulder. The point was – what he wanted to tell the students was – his father had died a month ago, at fifty-five years of age, and he, Peter Ellis, was willing to bet that his father would have lived longer if he'd been better-read. They would ask, Why? and he would answer, Because George would have understood himself and he would have been able to express himself and laugh at himself and he probably wouldn't have had to drink away his shame because he wouldn't have done the shameful things in the first place, if he'd read.

A few of the students were watching him. When he met their gaze, their eyes focused on the wall behind him, like they were lost in profound thought. Peter leaned over his paper and pretended to scribble another line, setting off more thoughts – of the other night, his ride with Dan. They'd gone over the Jacques Cartier Bridge, out toward Rougemont, where the September fields were being harvested. Though he'd grown up on the other side of the city, near Rigaud, the landscape was similar. Maybe that was why Dan had such a good nose for the narrow country roads, paved but unlined, quiet and "curvaceous", as Peter had said during their short debriefing. That was a nice part of motorcycle riding: you weren't expected to talk. You couldn't. You just remembered a few ideas and said them when you got back. "Nice riding. Quite the curvaceous roads."

It annoyed him, the way Heather kept trying to lead him on. "Did he say anything else?" "Was that a new helmet?" "Did you talk about your Dad?"

The questions came whenever he lapsed into silent thought, or tried to change the topic. Her motivation was transparent, and it irked him: it wasn't that she was desperately interested – not exactly. She was trying to point him toward something she wanted him to see, something she thought she saw clearly, that had to be tended to, but which he avoided, either consciously or unconsciously. He saw what she was up to, and he didn't like it. He hated being "treated". What he wanted was loyalty and unconditional love.

"I think it's great that he showed up and you went with him," she said, and then she added, "You guys have a lot of issues to talk about."

He grabbed the plates and dropped them in the sink. She stared at him as he started to run the water, but rather than say anything she retreated to the living room, sulking mildly, and turned on his TV.

Well, he thought, at least she is finally starting to make herself at home. They had been dating six months and until recently she would still ask him, Do you mind if I use the washroom, get a drink of water, take a shower, turn on the radio, start the coffee ...

There weren't many dishes. He took his time washing them and then wiped down the table twice and scoured the top of the stove, which they hadn't even used. He was only vaguely aware of what he was doing. All his attention was directed inward, reviewing memories, then verifying his standard analysis of them, amending, adding, in general reliving the past.

When he sat down on the couch next to Heather he was still back there, thinking about the time in the mudroom, when his father had picked him up by the head and thrown him across the room for not banging his boots off outside. In reality, George had gone into the kitchen, leaving Peter in a heap on the floor, sobbing, but Peter imagined a different ending, where he crossed the room and punched his father on the nose – *Pow!* like in the comics, an atomic explosion, annihilating everything. Of course, at the time he was too small to reach his father's nose.

A flush came to his cheeks, as he thought of it. His eyes burned. Heather looked over at him, then away, as though she'd opened a door and found someone naked. Peter pretended he hadn't been seen.

If he had just once fought back ... how that would have changed him. "The fucking fucker!" George Ellis's son thought. He worked himself into a fury thinking about how he wanted now to bring his father back to life just to beat the shit out of him. The thing was, George probably would have loved it. He was a fighter. When the boys were little they would often scrap with him. They would start in the house and get kicked out by their mother. On the back lawn Peter and Dan would attack George, who could withstand their blows or swat them away as he pleased. Eventually one of the boys would get hurt and lash out at George for real, but he would put his hand on their forehead, holding them at arm's length while they vainly punched the air.

If Peter, full-grown, had sought his revenge with a rematch, his father probably would have said, "That's it! Come on! We're finally seeing some fire in ya." Peter would almost certainly have lost. Even days before his father started to haemorrhage, he could still crush beer bottle caps effortlessly between thumb and forefinger, while Peter could barely do it with two hands. Maybe losing would have been okay. It was a matter of standing up for himself, win or lose. And there was always the chance, the slim, slim chance that he'd land a lucky punch and knock his father down, but even that wouldn't necessarily have been a victory, because his father would have picked himself back up, laughing, and the laughter would have made him the winner because it meant he didn't really care, and the one who cared less won. His father's laughter would say, I'm in your head, kid, but you're not in mine.

But Peter knew that would be an act. His father did care. It ate George up that his son hated him, and Peter knew it.

Once when Peter was home for Christmas, George got drunk and said to him, "So I betcha tell all your u-nee-versity friends that your old man used to beat you." And Peter said no, which was half-true.

Peter asked friends whether or not their parents used corporal punishment, because if everyone had been raised like him, then he didn't have much to complain about – the problem was him, he was too sensitive. But his investigations revealed that almost

none of his fellow undergraduates at UBC had been spanked.

And you? they would ask.

He told them about the spanking ritual, how he had to sit in his room for a half an hour, thinking about it, and then his father would come up, tell him to pull down his pants, lay him across his knee, and slap him hard, five or six times with his open hand. They weren't token blows either but sharp, stinging slaps that scorched his skin like a bad sunburn.

And what had he done to deserve it?

He couldn't remember. Nothing. He was a good kid. And that was the truth. If, in his adolescent years, he became a little mouthy with his mother, it was only natural, after being treated the way he was. And he couldn't talk back to his father. He was too afraid. He had to be very careful and clever in the way he rebelled against his father. But his mother got his sharp tongue, and she deserved it, too, for being an accomplice.

His last spanking came a couple years after he was supposed to be finished with them. He and Dan were working on the motorcycles, while George was feeding the cows and sweeping up. Peter removed the bolt underneath his transmission and let the oil drain into a pan, which he then emptied on the driveway to keep down the dust. He came back inside and opened up a new container of high-performance racing oil. Meanwhile he and Dan were jabbering away, bragging about their riding skills. Peter put the funnel in the side of the engine and started to pour.

"What the hell are you doing?" said his father, who'd come up behind them.

Peter looked around desperately to see what he was doing wrong and he noticed the pool of oil forming beneath his bike. He'd forgotten to replace the plug. George grabbed him and shook him hard. "Think!" he said, and he poked his son between the eyes with his finger.

"I think," Peter said.

For that his father threw him across the floor. As Peter began to sob and say over and over, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," his father's eyes scanned the workbench for the right weapon. Not finding it, he tore a piece of wood off the wall. He just reached up and pried the edge with his fingers and tore it free. There was still a nail in it, though, so he straightened it, yanked it out with his fingers, and then ordered Peter to pull down his pants.

He remembered telling Heather that story. They'd been going out a few weeks and she'd already heard a little about his childhood. He thought she would console him or condemn his father, but instead she stared with a kind of impartial amazement that therefore implicated him, as though they'd all been savage in the world he came from.

Maybe it was the way he'd said it. With practice he'd learned to tell those stories impersonally, as amusing anecdotes, like people learn to talk about broken hearts or close calls with death, as if they were almost bragging.

But whomever he told, he always made it clear he hadn't been beaten. He was never punched in the head or kicked in his gut (though he had been kicked in the ass a few times), he never suffered an extended attack, George never lost complete self-control, and Peter was never wounded in flesh or bone.

On the couch, Peter reached across to Heather. She wasn't very angry at him, he knew, but he couldn't stand even the slightest rift between them. He gave her shoulder a friendly squeeze and she looked over. "Sorry if I was short," he said.

She had a smart, friendly face, and supple lips. "You weren't short," she said.

"Whatever I was." He studied her face, interpreting her expression. He could read it well, he thought. Facial expressions and poems – he read them keenly, detecting the nuances, balancing the contradictory impulses. Hers said, I don't really care, but you frustrate me, Peter. Sometimes you behave in a manner unworthy of your intelligence and education. It said that and more. It said, I love you all the same, silly man.

Most men were ever-so-slightly silly to her. She'd inherited this attitude from her mother, the wife of a respected botanist.

He often told her how envious he was of her upbringing – educated parents, books in the house, culture, reason, impatient remonstrance instead of spankings and kicks in the ass. Peter had once asked Heather if the professor had ever laid an angry hand on her. No, she said, but it wasn't paradise. He knew that. He hadn't expected paradise.

"Don't be angry at me," he said, squeezing her shoulder again.

"I'm not."

"You're not?"

"No."

"Kiss me."

She did, and he sat close to her, and they stayed up, captive to some New York cop show right up to the last revelatory minute.

THE NEXT WEEK DAN SHOWED UP AGAIN. This time they drove north until they were beyond the city and the clogged arteries that fed it. Dan shifted up a gear and moved his wrist, opening the throttle. The quiet, stately German machine began to howl-hum and churn out the horsepower. Peter reached back and located his hand-holds at the edge of the seat. Fighting the air resistance, he leaned to the side and peered over Dan's shoulder. Mailboxes and road signs whipped past like meteorites. He began to envision a dog jumping out of the ditch, a horrific spill and a newspaper headline about two brothers dead.

But the speed also felt good, like a magnetic tickle, a combination of fear and acceleration, emotion and physics. He clung to the back of the bike and tried to decide whether or not Dan knew what the fuck he was doing.

They went as far as Piedmont, then came back, not so fast, but just as daringly, on a narrow, winding road. Peter felt the tickle again, like paper wings fluttering against the wall of his abdomen, and he resisted the temptation to tap Dan on the shoulder and yell, "Slow down!"

Later, he stared through the bare walls of his living room, listening to Springsteen, while his ballast continued to sway with imaginary curves and swoop over the tops of phantom hills, like adjusting to land after a day in a rocking boat.

One day last year his office mate, Ryan Vanstone, stuck a Springsteen *Best Of* in the computer disk drive. When Peter heard the lines, "You end up like a dog that's been

beat too much / and you spend half your life just to cover it up”, Peter pivoted his chair around, silently repeating, “ ... end up like a dog ... spend half your life ...”

Heather didn't like Bruce. Even when he quoted her the lyrics, she just shrugged and pulled a “not so hot” expression. “I guess, you hear what you want to hear,” she said.

She was on her way over now, so he removed Bruce and loaded some Satie.

They sat on the floor, drinking her favourite wine.

“Guess who came by tonight?”

“Did you talk about your Dad this time?”

“Nope.” He shook his head very slightly from side to side for a few seconds afterward, almost like an echo of the word itself, except each shake had the effect of making the original answer less decisive. What he was really doing, as his head continued to move from side to side was re-examine the night, because while he was nearly certain there had been no mention of his father, he had somehow been thoroughly discussed.

It was the motorcycle. For both Peter and Dan, anything about motorcycles reminded them of their father. When they were very young George himself had raced an old Husqavarna, a two-wheeled tank. He fell once in a mud puddle and was run over, leaving knobby tire tracks on his back for three weeks. Every night Peter would ask to see them, as if they were wounds from some mythic battle.

When George was at work, carrying boxes and appliances, his sons played imaginary games in which they assumed his strength, won motocross championships (which he never did), carried fridges with one arm, and smote the villains of the world with bare hands. When he got home he scooped them up and carried them outside to play. And later he might say to one of them, “Ask your mother if you can sleep with me.” In bed he would write something on his son's back and his son would have to read the word from touch alone.

“Y.”

“Right.”

“A.”

“Right.”

“M. A. H. A.”

“What's that spell?”

“Yamaha!”

And then they would change roles, the boy spelling and George “reading”, and they would do this for half an hour, until George said it was time to sleep, and then he would close his eyes and start to snore.

“Did you ever talk about your Dad?” Heather asked, taking equal portions of conversation and wine.

“Not really,” he said. “He doesn't like to hear a word against Dad.”

After George had struck Peter eight times with a piece of wood he'd ripped off the barn wall, Peter told Dan he would kill his father the next time. That hadn't bothered Dan, but a few years later when Peter referred to their father as a “stupid brute”, Dan had shifted uncomfortably and then summoned a sceptical, superior smile, reminiscent of

one of George's expressions.

Peter could not understand this. How could Dan be loyal to a man who bullied and humiliated him? Peter was often angry for Dan. Like one Saturday morning when George had come out of the back room in a stew.

"Were you playing in the kitty litter?"

"No," said Dan.

George pushed his finger into Dan's chest. "Don't lie to me!"

"I wasn't."

"There's shit all over the floor. I know you did it. You can either admit it and get five smacks, or keep lyin' and get ten. I'll give you five minutes to think about it. Meanwhile get in there and clean it up."

Peter went with Dan to help. "Did you do it?" he asked.

"No."

But he provided George with a false confession and took his five smacks.

The only explanation Peter could find at the time was that Dan wasn't all that bright. Later in life he came to regret this assumption, because it had been fed to him by his parents. The family policy was that Peter had the brains and Dan the size. This interpretation was propagated mainly by their mother. In her own distant way, she had nurtured Peter's intelligence, but what had that got her? – a critical son who was withdrawing more and more from the family. So she changed her strategy with son number two, making sure not to instil him with any lofty expectations. At the same time she grew bitter toward Peter, who more and more stayed in his room, drawing or reading. At supper time he heard her say to Dan, "Will you go get the prima donna?"

Five or six years later, home for Christmas during his second year at UBC, Peter asked Dan if he'd decided which universities he would apply to.

Muscle-bound from pumping iron, black-eyed from one of his many bar fights, Dan said in strange, semi-helpless tone, "Mom told me she didn't think I was university material."

Peter tried to change Dan's mind. He was an English major, but he couldn't find words to convince the muscle-head sitting across from him, who no longer looked or sounded like his brother, so he took it up with his mother. "I can't believe you told Dan he wasn't cut out for university. You're stifling his life."

She played dumb. "Do you really think? ... Oh, I didn't know ... You would know ... I didn't mean to stifle anyone's life."

He was only home for three days. What could he do? Dan never applied to university. He went to work for George.

DAN PULLED ONTO THE SHOULDER OF THE ROAD, stepped off the bike, and swept his gloved hand forward for Peter to take over, and Peter did, but he was unused to riding a road bike or carrying a passenger on the back, so after ten minutes, he pulled into the parking lot of a faded diner at the intersection of two county roads. They went inside and pulled off their gear. A waitress came by and they ordered hamburger platters in French. There was no English out here.

Dan was wearing a t-shirt with the company logo, a moving truck, with “Ellis” painted on the side and beneath it in a bold font the words “Taking you to better places.” Peter had invented the motto when he was sixteen and he cringed now whenever he read it.

He looked through the window at the BMW. He was starting to feel as if it was half his and he regarded it with satisfaction and maybe even a little pride: it was a well-crafted, reliable machine. Of course, it had cost a fortune. He hadn’t asked Dan how much, probably twenty grand, and Dan had probably paid cash too. Twenty thousand to Dan was like a thousand to Peter. The only thing Peter could pay cash for was a bicycle. He had no regrets. More money meant more things, and he’d never liked having too many things. He never would have pretended to be poor, though, even when he was grossing three hundred a week teaching ESL to Chinese immigrants, because he knew perfectly well that his parents would not let him starve. He was privileged-poor. In fact, at one point his parents – through his mother – had offered to buy him a house in Vancouver – not as an investment for them but a gift to him. Since he’d left home, and even before, they had always been extremely generous with money. He tried to accept only when necessary because it made him feel guilty even to hear the offer, because he knew it was made partly out of guilt. By not taking it, though, he was pushing the guilt back onto them, effectively saying, No, I will not let you off so easily. So sometimes he took their money and sometimes he didn’t. He refused the house, for years he refused a car. The circles of guilt were so complex he wasn’t even sure what his own motivations were – vengeance, forgiveness, maybe even greed.

Sometimes the world said to Peter, Grow up, get over it. Everyone has complaints about their childhood, the universe is overflowing with the clichéd whining of ungrateful children. And he felt chastised by this attitude, as he encountered it – in faces and stories, and even from some quarters of his own brain – but it was hard to forgive when your father showed up in your dreams to humiliate you the same way he had twenty, fifteen, ten years before.

For years after Peter moved out George would step into Peter’s dreamscape and push him into a corner with his big finger. Sometimes Peter had the body of a child and could do nothing. Sometimes he was an adult but still did nothing, except cower and bawl. But now and again he fought back, using his speed against his father’s strength, careful to avoid the vice grip of George’s hands, and if he was caught, he would fight to get free, to find a vulnerability in George, thrashing against him, against sleep. He would wake up, heart pounding, wrists sore, and look around the room, half-expecting to see George climb to his feet at the foot of the bed.

Sometimes Dan was in these dreams, watching, silently cheering for George, enjoying Peter’s humiliations ... because Peter was a university boy, thought he was better than Dan.

Dan at seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty would sometimes refer to his older brother as an artsy-fartsy fag. They never saw one another, so the conflict never unfolded, but Peter knew it was there. Sitting across from Dan now, though, he almost didn’t feel it, maybe he didn’t feel it at all. They had both seen enough of life

and known enough people to recognize one another's decency.

Peter figured Dan's opinion went like this: he, Peter, had taken wrong turns, he had no wife, no children, his hair was too long, he had strange tastes, and he lived in a dirty, cramped, perverse part of the city, but if you cut him out of his environment, if you just drew a line around Peter and snipped it and freed him from that corrupted artistic world, he was still at heart a good guy, a competent guy who could put in a hard day's work, a guy with firm morals, a guy who could appreciate a well-built motorcycle and a clean line through a tight curve. And Dan had come to the conclusion, some time after the birth of his first child, that these were the things that really mattered.

Peter looked through the window again, regarding Dan's bike. He said, "Do you remember the day we got our first bikes, riding home in the back of the pick-up, holding them."

"Singing," said Dan.

"Right. That jingle from the track."

Dan sang high in his low voice, "Sandy Valley, it's a family place. Sandy Valley, come out and watch the cycles race."

Peter had been twelve, Dan ten. Their father, who no longer had a bike, staked out a track in their pasture, and they circled it over and over until the grass was ripped up and churned into loamy berms. The next year Peter started to race competitively and George and his sons spent every free minute around the motorcycles, cleaning, fixing or riding them.

Dan said, "Do you remember what Dad said about what he wanted done if he died."

They'd been talking about death and one of them, Peter or Dan, said they wanted to live forever.

"You don't want to live forever," George huffed.

"Why not?"

"You'd get awfully lonely."

The feeling with which George had uttered these words startled them. They were quiet for a moment, humbled, as they polished their rims or oiled their chains, whatever bit of tinkering they were up to on that day.

"Seventy-five," George said finally. "I'll take that. It's a good age. Seventy-five and then die in my sleep."

"Do you want to be burned or buried?" Peter asked.

"Burned. Then you can take my ashes out on the road, sprinkle 'em and do a great honkin' burnout on them with a nineteen sixty-seven Triumph. That's the way to go."

"Do you know what year that'll be? Do you know how old that bike'll be by then?"

The boys tried to calculate in their heads. They spat out a few numbers before Peter convinced Dan it'd be 2020.

"That's long enough," George said. "I'll be an old geezer by then."

Fascinated by the idea of their father's mortality and the drama of a burnout, the boys revisited the topic over the next year, questioning George to see if his preferences had changed. They liked it when he imitated the sound of the burnout, the way he opened his mouth wide and bared his teeth like a wolf, as he pretended to crank

the throttle, unleashing the dangerous inhuman power that sent question marks trembling through your nerves: would you ride it out or be tossed on your ass? Their father had introduced them to the power, and now they were drunk on it. Their 80cc mini-bikes could only muster a sample, but still it was more than they could handle. They almost never opened the throttle all the way, despite George's urgings and his insistence that the best racers rode full-throttle from the drop of the gate to the checkered flag. And so the instructions their father had given them for the disposal of his ashes made perfect poetic sense. In death, he would be laid before the full power of the beast, as if to say, Give me all you have, grind me into the road, spew me into the air, howl over me like a gear-gnashing hound from hell, like a tap gushing out the immense power of the universe. That's what I want. Nothing less.

"Well, we did half of it," Peter said, and he watched Dan narrow his eyes to slits and bob his head, and he was relieved when the waitress came by and swept up their plates, and Peter looked up at her and said, "L'addition, s'il vous plaît."

Dan drove westward, back to the city, while behind him Peter watched the sky, how the red and orange bled into the darkening blue, and he thought of George's death. It was no wonder he'd temporarily forgotten about the burnout: his father's real death was nothing like he'd imagined as a boy.

Peter didn't know his father was an alcoholic until a year before he died. According to his mother, George was in the hospital because he had a nose bleed that needed cauterizing, but when Peter stopped by to visit, he found his father strapped to the bed, mumbling and frothing at the mouth like a rabid animal. "Is this the morphine?" he asked the nurse, and she gave him a big kindergarten-teacher headshake and said, "Nooooo, this is withdrawal."

"From what? Alcohol?"

Very good, she nodded.

"DTs?"

He asked to speak to a doctor. The nurse dialled a number and handed him a telephone. The doctor said the bleeding was part of a condition called varices, which was caused by liver disease. Peter went out to the hall, where his mother was sitting, chewing her fingernails. "This is liver disease," he said, "not a bloody nose."

"Oh, really," she said.

"You don't usually end up in critical care with a nose bleed."

"Well, he's always been a bleeder, you know. Whenever he got a nick he bled for hours."

He took it upon himself to carry his father back into the world of the living. When George went into a fit and tried to break out of the squeaking restraints, sending tremors through the bed and turning his face lobster red, Peter took him by the shoulder and said firmly, "Dad, Dad, relax," and it seemed to work a little. And he stayed much of the night, when doctors and nurses were scarce, changing the diaper that filled with blood-black tar, giving sips of water and relaying information from one shift to the next. And when a squeamish resident gave up on installing a feeding tub because it kept curling out of George's mouth, Peter tried himself to thread the

transparent tube up his father's nostril – until a nurse came in, pushed them both out of the way and got it the first try. He stayed there, sixteen hours a day, for four days, while his father raged for alcohol, strained against the leather cords, shat blood, and suffered small heart attacks.

George came through it, sort of, and went home, and called Peter a month later to say that his GP had just given him a year to live.

Peter channelled his incredulous panic into a campaign for his father's life. The doctors had said nothing about the possibility of a transplant, so Peter emailed the transplant centre his "impassioned plea", as he described it to his friends, and then called the GP to solicit her support. It was difficult to get an alcoholic on the waiting list. George would have to prove he was a "good investment". Those were the actual words on the website.

For now George was too weak to be tempted off the wagon. At Christmas, there was no wine, no beer. George sat at the end of the table, trying to be good-natured, exuding a meek shame. Peter couldn't decide whether or not he liked his father that way.

As part of the screening for the list, George went to a liver specialist. After the exams and the tests, he had unexpected news. George's liver was actually regenerating. It defied medical science, said the doctor, white-haired and hearty, accustomed to seeing medical science defied. "We won't question it. Just keep doing whatever you're doing."

George started to think about living. He emailed Peter the plans for a boat he was having built by a small company in Cornwall. He had unusual tastes for a retired millionaire. Instead of a white yacht or a sleek cigarette boat, it looked like a tug, short, squat, with a metal hull. You could picture a wiry fisherman standing in the back, hoisting in the nets. "Looks sturdy," said Peter the next time they spoke. "Oh, hell," his father replied, "it'll last forever."

Peter's parents bought a condo in Cornwall and spent most of the week there so George could keep an eye on the progress of the tug. They rented a slip in a marina nearby. It stood empty all spring, like a new crib.

The plan was that Peter would go down as soon as the boat was ready, but the delivery kept getting postponed. The semester was over, Peter had free time, and Cornwall was only an hour away, so he could have driven down just for a day to say hi, but he and Heather were too caught up in the honeymoon phase for him to leave and it was too early to introduce her yet. He did talk to them every week, though, and they raved about the view, loved Cornwall, should have moved there years ago. Peter's mother wanted to sell the house in Rigaud, but his father wasn't quite convinced. He was still adjusting to retirement. The free time made him antsy. "I gotta find something to do with myself," he told Peter. "You know me. I can't sit still." So he got a job at the marina, pumping gas in the afternoons. His boss was a twenty-year-old who went to some Catholic university in the States. "He's a bit of a Bible thumper," George said, "but he's a good kid. I bought us a couple a' fancy lawn chairs and now we're buddies."

By late July the boat still wasn't ready, but Peter's mom said, "You may as well come now. Those guys are giving your father the runaround. That boat's never gonna be ready." She'd been against the boat all along and now she was gloating angrily about

the waste of money. Peter, who'd argued for the boat, felt guilty and decided to go down that weekend. "Cornwall ...," he said to Heather. "Fuck."

His father answered the door; he had a shaved head and two gold chains dangling down his chest, beneath his unbuttoned shirt. It was so fantastically out of character that Peter had to recalibrate his understanding of human nature. Disoriented, he followed his father on to the balcony, where his mother was reclining on a lawn chair, smoking. His father sat down next to her, picked up a bottle and poured beer down his throat. Some deep inhibition prevented Peter from unleashing his surprise, disappointment, incredulity, anger, though when George went inside for another bottle, Peter did turn to his mother. "He's drinking?" She just looked out at the St. Lawrence, shrugged her shoulders and said bitterly, "I can't stop him."

Supper was macaroni but there was no ketchup. George leapt up to run to the store, which, as Peter only realized later, meant a chance to stop in at a bar or sneak a drink in his truck. With George gone, his mother rushed to the walk-in closet and pointed. "Look at that. Look!" On the floor lay an opened, disorderly toolbox, with nails and screws strewn about the wrenches and Allen keys. To his mother it represented the dissolution of George's life, which in a way was kind of funny, because it was in exactly the same state as Peter's own toolbox, but he knew what she meant. George had always kept his tools as clean and ordered as instruments in an operating room. He would never throw them all together like that.

"The thing that shocks me is the gold chains," Peter said.

"Oh, that was his girlfriend's suggestion."

He knew she wanted him to be angry, but he just shook his head.

"Some little slut," she said, "one of those lap dancer, prostitute junkies. She works up the road at the bar he likes to go to."

It made him sad, not angry.

"He told me people sometimes need more than one person to satisfy them," she sneered. "That was nice to hear."

The next morning she escaped to Rigaud, leaving George to Peter. They went for a drive along the river to Brockville. Peter looked for words the way his father had once sought the right weapon to spank him with, but everything was nailed down too well. He couldn't get his fingers under the edges. All he said was, "So you have a doctor's appointment soon?" And George grunted guardedly.

What could Peter do? If he'd earned himself some credibility by being a better son, he might have lectured George, hoping an eloquent, passionate plea might convince him to check into a rehab centre, but under the circumstances he thought it somehow hypocritical. Maybe he was wrong. He didn't know. He was confused and wanted to get home to Heather and leave his parents to their own madness.

For most of August his mother stayed in Rigaud, his father in Cornwall. The boat arrived on the twentieth. Peter was planning to go down for Labour Day, but on the twenty-eighth George hired a taxi to take him all the way to Rigaud. When he arrived, he was so weak, the driver had to help him to the bedroom. George collapsed on the mattress and never woke up.

A MUTE INTENSITY HUNG OVER DAN, so Peter suspected what was to come. He had pretty mixed feelings about the whole idea. Dan drove up to the 40 and joined the westward flow. It was late October and even in his winter coat and mittens, Peter froze. He tucked in behind Dan to cut down the effect of the 120 km/h wind, but it still got beneath his clothes and chilled him to the pit of his stomach.

Peter hadn't asked where they were headed on any of their previous rides and he wouldn't now, as they took the Rigaud exit and slowed to less than 100km/h and he felt slight, physical relief from the whipping cold air. He thought of Heather's bed. In two hours he would be in it, with the cold evening safely behind him.

In twilight they accelerated up the side of the escarpment. Dan turned right, onto their old road, and braked until the bike wobbled in the breeze and they both put their feet down, to steady it.

Twenty-five years before, the day they moved to the farm, their father had led the whole family up there to survey the bush and roads and fields below. He was buoyant and rhapsodic as he sang the praises of country life, the life they would have from now on, away from the constraints of the suburbs. They could ride loud motorcycles, hang laundry on the line, and bellow out into the spring evening, "Jeeeeeeeeessssuuuus Chriiiiiiiiiist!" as George did just then, throwing back his head and hollering as loud as he could, sending a splash through the quiet evening air. Peter and Dan, six and four, were delightfully scandalized by both the volume and the profanity.

Without a word, Dan dismounted, moved to the back of the bike and opened the storage compartment. He stopped before he pulled out the container and pushed up his visor and indicated briskly that he wanted Peter to do the same.

"What do you think about spreading Dad's ashes?"

There was a tremulous solemnity to his words that rendered them all but irrefutable.

"Sure," said Peter, and as his brother reached for the cardboard box, he became distracted by a practical worry. If called upon by Dan, could he even do a burnout? He had never done one. He'd raced motocross, not road bikes, and that was fifteen years ago. In order to lessen the chance that Dan would ask him, he stepped off the bike and held it from the side. "I'll dump them," he said. "You do it."

Dan pointed to a smooth spot on the road, climbed on the bike, and looked about, troubled. "A little windy," he said, before he pulled away to circle around.

Peter didn't think much of it. Maybe he expected the ash to be granular like sand, or perhaps he was just remembering his father's sturdy body.

Dan pulled up and revved the engine. Peter knelt and carefully removed the lid. The contents were light-grey, almost white. He overturned the box in front of the rear tire and the ashes slid out and were whisked away by the wind, across the road, like a smoke trail, or snow in blustery January.

"Whoops," he said.

There was a moment of shock and then, as there was nothing left to do, they quietly laughed.

HEATHER WAS HALF-ASLEEP. She'd woken up to let him in and now she was back beneath the covers and he was standing on her area rug in the dark, half-undressed.

"So how do you feel?" she asked.

"I don't know." He stepped out of his underwear and tossed them near the wall.

"You seem ... exuberant." Her cheek was pressed against the pillow and her eyes were half-closed.

He pulled a t-shirt and long-johns from his allotted space in her bottom drawer. She washed them each time he wore them and then put them back, neatly folded and smelling of Bounce.

He got into bed and she draped her sleepy arm across his chest and nudged her nose against his shoulder. Soon she'd fallen back to sleep.

He lay awake, confused. It was all so unfathomable. Sometimes Peter even wondered if George might have had a brain tumour. Maybe the tumour had been there all along, just small at the beginning but then growing, gradually taking over the man, from the inside out. That would explain the strange behaviour.

He regretted having declined the autopsy. The doctors asked, but at the same time they made it seem unnecessary, as though they knew what had killed George. But they didn't, really. Really, they hadn't said much at all. Complications from liver failure – how did that cause a brain haemorrhage? At one point they mentioned a fall, but they didn't know for sure. Peter had looked vainly for an answer on the Internet.

At the hospital his father was a second-rate citizen. That first time, a year ago, a nurse had said, "Here, Georgie. Your favourite drink," in a nasty, superior tone. And George, who'd been fighting against the leather restraining straps, lifted his head, all tongue and mad eyes, and the nurse teased him a little with the straw, to prolong the humiliating scene, which was, Peter knew, all for his benefit, and then George sucked up the half glass of Blue and dropped his head back to the pillow. Peter was outraged, but what could you say to the woman who would come in at two o'clock in the morning to adjust George's catheter and make it as pleasant or unpleasant as she pleased, depending?

He wrote an angry letter.

My father suffered humiliations at the hands of the hospital staff who knew nothing about him. Doesn't the Canadian Medical Association consider alcoholism a disease? Do they indulge in the same self-righteousness when they treat cancer patients? My father was a strong-willed man, a fighter, filled with strong passions, who built a prosperous business out of nothing and raised two decent sons. From what I've seen, there is not a doctor in your building who is half the man George Ellis was.

He never sent it, though, which was fine. It wasn't really for them anyway.

Close by

On him again and again
The bus stops, people change

Confederation moves on, methods pursuant

37

AMBERLEA DAIGNEAU

Rib

The disappointment
revealed and concealed.
Keep your rib
and your ridiculous books.
Each time mirrors the past.
It is about being even.

A long time ago it was good and saturated with us.

The absence,
a slow death of faith.
Your lack of consideration
that led me to warm my hands elsewhere.

No use crying

WHEN THE BOTTOM DROPPED OUT THE WHOLE CARTON FELL THROUGH, EGGS POCKING THE sidewalk where Jane stood, seemingly dipped in milk. Tears poured out of her, tremors coursed her small, sturdy body, gasps gasped throughout the moaning – her sobs breaking in triplets of shuddering breath. Her life, as she could conservatively envision it, was over. A short jaunt for parsley five minutes before the store closed? Forget about it. A quick flit over for field tomatoes? Not a chance in hell. With the bulging eyes of the produce manager burning her bra off her chest as he squashed grapefruits into pulp? With the gum-smacking checkout girls, tight-lipped, gunning prices into the register, bursting into peals and peals of spastic laughter? Or the two-toothed butcher splattered in cold, thin blood, leering down her blouse whenever she reached for her hundred-grams of chicken loaf? Not in *your* life. Not if she could stop time and catch every egg before they hit the sidewalk. Not if she could seal her bulbous tits flat against her chest. Not if she could erase the crimson globs of lipstick mashed into her teeth or un-crimp her straw-blond hair. Not even if she could take back every dumbfuck word she wailed at Richard the-dead-end-grocery-clerk as he nervously stacked cereal boxes into a pyramid – or sleeping with him in the first place.

In the sixth grade, when they'd first begun to bulge around the discrete kingdoms of her nipples, she was puzzled. *Speed bump*, they called her, *speed bump*, and swerved imaginary cars wildly over imaginary roads, collapsing in piles scattered haphazardly throughout the dusty school yard, the expansive gym, the ratty cat-piss carpet in the reading corner at the back of class. Jane's bathroom became the court of her changing appearance, the mirror her hung jury – some days acquittal, some days death by lethal injection – the evidence mounted beneath her neon t-shirt as recess ticked by, and the witnesses were strewn throughout the playground. Testimonials were passed hand-to-hand beneath the desks.

She was forever tilting, top-heavy and losing balance, as if tipped from behind. They were anthills seething with activity, colonies ready to double or triple in size overnight. Yet, when the bulges refused to budge, despite Jane's silent, unyielding pleas, the absent weight became tangible, her lightness rendering her almost unscathed by gravity. *Speed bump*, they called her, *speed bump*, but now their make-believe cars juddered only slightly, never wavered off-course, and remained firmly, intractably, rooted in the flatness of the earth.

But then, finally, they did. To Jane's mother – who made the obvious point whenever the opportunity revealed itself (as it was liable to do, shockingly, every time she bounced into a room during the summer between ninth and tenth grade), or whispered lowly into the phone's complicit receiver – they were Jane's saving grace. *We'll have her married before graduation*, coupled with *the proof is in the pudding*, augmented by *she could nurse an army with those things!* While her relatives, her parents' friends,

and the friends of her parents' friends all left the Acker residence visibly shaken, Jane's mother beamed favour down on Jane with expensive bra and panty sets; jet black, blood red, all cool slippery silk with skeins upon skeins of layers and layers of intricate lace. Tiny ribbon bows nestled sardonically between fortified soup-bowls of luxurious fabric. *Late bloomer* meant retarded. *Late bloomer* meant being a centrepiece at her kitchen table over dinner. *Late bloomer* meant opening up. *Late bloomer* meant tits. *Late bloomer* meant growing eyes everywhere you went.

BAWLING – MILK FROM THE SPLIT BAGS SURFING OVER the cracked slabs of sidewalk, washing broken eggshells and the torn grocery bag into the gutter, streaming from her sleeves – Jane seethed. The midday was overcast. The buildings hulked around her. The street was nearly un-peopled, though her cramped apartment was still an exasperating block distant. As she hyperventilated, a honking station wagon laden with honking boys horseshoed after crossing through the intersection, passing her, but then careening back. Caught. Cover nowhere in sight.

"HEY baby DON'T cry OVER spilt MILK!" Their growls wavering from half-unwound windows, smothered in the rush of cars.

"Get a life," Jane sputtered, smearing blue eye makeup with the heel of her wet hand.

"Pardon?" Their necks craned, smirks twisted the corners of their pursed lips.

"GET A LIFE!" She spat, hoarse from so much crying.

"Dolly PARDON?"

"GO SUCK EACH OTHERS DICKS, DICKHEADS! JUST LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!" Her anger and her hurt were finally tonguing free. Richard, that dry cunt of an asshole of a prick stacking goddamn boxes of fried sugar (just add milk, har-har) into some stupid pyramid, clearing his throat instead of speaking, looking at everyone but her, running his hands through his greasy blond hair instead of striding embracing grasping holding *I'm-so-so-sorry-baby-she's-nothing-compared-to-you-how-can-I-make-it-up-to-you-how-can-I-make-things-right?* Smoothing hair from her head, burying his stubbly face and sweaty palms against her neck, kissing her with tongue in the symphonic climax of dead-end grocery laughter, symphonic in its dying pregnant stillness, drawn tense until the coda of their unrestrained passion birthed into love, what the world needs, love, all *they* need, love, oh careless, careless love, love, love.

Fuck all that. Fuck him, fuck him, fuck him.

"SUCKLE *what?*" The brats screamed, speeding through the green, stretching long pink tongues towards the nipples on their make-believe breasts. Jane paused, as their mime repeated overandoverandover in the darkened, crowded, theatre of her skull. She could fit her past lovers in a compact, her past poets on a bicycle. Richard, the one, a sparkling fuse in a handful of wickless duds.

Jane,

we are nothing

but body meeting body

*mind meeting mind
in the
gangly
groping
blind
of love's
first
distress*

From Richard

It was jotted in marker on the back of her *TV Guide*; beside it, an origami swan surfed the curling pages. Like a long drawn W, Jane thought at the time, and thumbed the folding switchblade of its neck and bill. She had clicked on the television, bathed in its murmuring, its purpling wash. Mostly, she thought of Richard – night-blind in her apartment, stumbling out of sleep for an early shift, his hair frayed up from his crown and forehead. As he teetered depthless into his wrinkled khaki's, as he wriggled into the work shirt flung over the back of her wicker chair. Not risking the shower, the tinny ruckus of water spouting into her scaly tub. Not risking the toaster's jarring twang, or the bruise of orange light from the kitchen. Not risking a quick kiss on the cheek, the forehead. Or whispers pushed slowly into her dream.

"I want them sliced off." Jane had pulled the covers tighter around her body, had snuggled deeper, once, into Richard's curling dominion, both of them propped on their elbows. "Some days." His eyes were glazed electric pink, the room smeared red in the clock's LED. "Some days I can't even bear going to the bank." Pause. "The laundromat, the mall. Convenience stores are the worst, though, the fucking worst." Say something. *Please*. "No, bars. Bars are the worst." Their competing breath huffed as they'd blinked, silent, red.

"You shouldn't care –"

"But I do."

"You shouldn't –"

"I do, though. They exploded in highschool, and the chatter hasn't ceased."

"Everyone's a dick at that age."

"*What* age? At the corporate softball game, Ken 'Porked-Her' Parker, Senior Manager of Finance, actually told me that my clothing was 'inappropriate attire for team-building activities.'" She gruffened her voice. "'Next year, wear something more suited to the event.'"

"That's just one jerk."

"I was wearing a fucking t-shirt and knee-shorts!"

"You shouldn't care."

"I know."

"You really shouldn't care."

"I *know*!"

Pause. Her anger sizzling, but turned low.

Richard reached over to the night-table, groping for his cigarettes. "I think they're beautiful." He sat up, a fluid shadow in the half-gloom, and cupped his hands around the lighting ember, drawing deep, "they're so ... nice," he said and exhaled, twisting red ribbons in the tinted light.

Nice? She stared for a moment, considered his lumpy shape on the other side of the bed. The poems left in the freezer, on her night table, in the pocket of her coat. His leisurely pantomime, the brazen silhouette of his craning neck as he floated rings among noosing streams of smoke. *Nice?*

"It's all jealousy."

"Thanks."

"Nothing to do with you at all." He snubbed his cigarette in the saucer that passed for an ashtray. Settled deeper beneath the layers of sheets and comforter.

"I just wish everyone would leave me the fuck alone."

"They do."

"All in my mind?"

"Yes."

"The butcher? Was that a ... what? Figment?"

"Come on. The guy's married. Probably hasn't been laid since Mulroney."

"His wife should divorce him."

"Probably. But for his coke-nose. Admiring tits from behind a display of cured meat is hardly a matrimonial crime."

"Or those hillbilly teeth. I'd be surprised if he isn't on a Gerber-only diet." She twisted cool cotton, let it smooth between her fingers. Outside, the quiet breeze of cars passing down her street. The small fish tank gurgling in the living room. The fridge hummed through, erratically, pausing and stuttering to life. "I just wish they'd stop looking. I just wish everyone was blind." Muffled voices penetrated from the hallway of her apartment. The quiet clunk of her neighbours' door, and footsteps, until they mounted their bed, the headboard rattling Jane's bookshelf. "I might love you," she said, staring at the dark slurry lines of her furniture, the shifting dimensions of her room at night. Beside her, the soft click as Richard's breath changed flow. The drawn sniff and throaty exhale that preceded his careless, wriggling roll. "I might."

THE SMELL OF MILK EVAPORATING IN THE SURPRISINGLY intense spring sun was the smell of milk soured. Its high-water mark scribbled around her body, the drying lines etching themselves into the fabric of her clothes. The street got busier as the day drifted past noon. Jane pulled her buggy full of sundry groceries as she slogged down the sidewalk. Very sundry. The tins of vegetables and condiments, cleaning products and cat food (sans milk and eggs), rattled against the steel cage of her old-maid cart – trailing her limp grip. He totally noticed the cat food. He totally noticed that she *didn't* have a cat. No, scratch that. He wouldn't have blinked if I'd cleaned them out of condoms or cake frosting, home pregnancy tests, or all three. Her stomach growled. All these groceries, she thought, and not a single meal.

Oh, Richard. What happened to eating stolen tubs of ice-cream right out of the container, wrapped in blankets and naked for days on end? Or drunk on boxed wine, the forgotten penne bloated in the alfredo, slow-dancing to Marvin Gaye in the dark? Jane looked down at the thread bracelet he weaved during a re-training session, ragged and unstitching, its dulling frost of sapped colour. She remembered his unsteady hand, his bumbling fingers as he knotted it round her wrist. The way her ears burned and her throat snagged when he mumbled the pronoun “we” off-the-cuff. What happened, what happened to the poet of her dreams, explosively sandwiched in her thighs, cool arms in the fever of night-sweats, an anchor in the tumult and drift of her manic, hysterical tide?

*Jane,
though silent
as the moon’s long
tongue trips
through the shaded
room*

*the stereo of our even hush
the darkness outside
waking*

*it’s your breath
caught
your breath that gives me
wind*

From Richard

“Is this what you’re looking for?” Crouching at the bottom shelf of the aisle, he had looked up and smiled a slow, steady curve. “Can I load it for you?”

“No, I can manage.” How striking, Jane thought at the time, his azure eyes match his shirt perfectly, his hair stylishly overgrown, curls frizzing into his ears. The cracked nametag – Richard – flapped at his breast.

“It’s heavy. I’ll carry it up to the front.” He hefted the huge box up onto his shoulder and stood, small flurries of cut and torn cardboard flaking from his black pants.

“No, really, I can manage it. I still have shopping to do.”

“Suit yourself. What does one need ten kilos of laundry soap for, anyway?” he asked, leaning the box against the handle of her cart, pulling the pen from behind his ear and tapping it against the lid.

“One needs it for laundry.” She measured his long body, the bare muscles of his arms stretching his skin, welts and red slashes from taking more than he could carry.

“Right. Well, can I help you with anything else?” The detergent bludgeoned into the cart.

“No, I think I’m good. But thanks.”

“No sweat,” he said, mock-wiping his brow, as Jane ploughed past the disciplined rows of household cleaners, the toy-gun interlude between foil baking pans and garbage bags. She looked back at Richard’s playful salute, his vaudeville corniness. She looked back, at his smile and his eyes glittering in the fluorescent wash, at his lanky muss, like an ear swab gone jungle.

When they met again, they were already familiar. Banter before business, made more than interesting by the precise lip liner and mascara, by the too-casual spread of fingers through the hair, the wisping curls tucked behind ears, by the long, scathing glide down to neck, chest. The low-cut blouse. The leisurely-seeming lean. Their near head-bumping, huddled over brands of crackers and cuts of plastic-coated beef. Dinner, fucking, drinks – in the proper order. He would surprise her after his shift with dessert. She cooked on the nights he stayed. He avoided his parents, avoided meal-times, if he could manage. She was disappointed on the evenings he didn’t show. He was going back to school when it was feasible, financially. She was being passed over for a promotion, in finance. He dogged part-time shifts, hated living chez parents, always. She worked 9–5, and considered getting a cat. It’s a match, Jane thought to herself, basking in his singular attention. It’s a match made.

MADE *WHERE?* HELL? HOW SPECTACULARLY CHILDISH. How distressingly naïve. How pathetic, and dense, and ugly, and disgusting, and cheap, and wretched, and deserving, how utterly deserving – of Richard, of everything after. God, she thought, why can’t I just hate him? Why can’t I stop blubbering long enough to get to my apartment unnoticed? Why can’t I turn on my heels and heave the full cart through the fucking store window?

Jane tripped along the sidewalk, sun-dried, the spill thin enough through her clothes that she could safely call herself moist. She clattered, stumbling, as her load unbalanced behind her. She considered each tic, each glance sidelong, each bead of sweat that thickened on the edge of his brow or in the cradle of his palm. But she couldn’t – no matter how she spun it, no matter what came before what, or what eventually led to what – figure how it all piled up. Meaning one thing, saying another. But where was the lie? Which half came up short? His slow, deciphering touch, smoothing her nervous Braille. Or, his sharp, sharp tongue, preening her with every pass. Far more than she’d bargained, far less than she’d hoped, yet all of it – Richard, her – mingled so that she didn’t know where she began anymore, didn’t know where he left off.

The lie was hers – *that* she did know, as she pulled herself step by step through the doorway of her apartment building. The lie, as always, was hers.

WHEN SHE’D WALKED INTO THE STORE FOR WHAT SHE would later swear was the last time, she’d waited – Richard was nowhere to be found. Not gathering the loose carts in the parking lot, not facing out the product in the aisles, or arranging the bread and milk with the soonest best before dates to the front of their displays. Gone. She’d waited. Perused the aisles so she didn’t look suspect. Yanked the cart behind her

blank wandering, pulled in whatever was within reach. She would've bought a nice picnic, rattling her empty cart the entire way here, would've surprised him with lunch. Unless, she got his hours wrong? Or the dates switched around? Or he had to break early?

Legs crossed, bouncing from the knee, the piled bags of distracted groceries compacting in the cart beside her as she shifted, couldn't get comfortable, and sat on the bench by the store's only exit or entrance, dwarfed between the bottled water and ice cooler. The cash register lowed. She waited, though began to hear the checkout girls' snicker, the once whispers that passed between *LISA* and *DORIS* growing steadily shy of secretive. Finally, the doors flapping open and shut, open and shut, Jane stood, glanced through the large windows at the parking lot behind her, and approached the pen of nattering cashiers. "Richard?" She asked, "Is Richard working?"

"Oh my God, can I *help* you?" Lisa smacked, the curled grub of chewing gum at the corner of her lips, her eyes drawn magnetically to Jane's chest.

"*Richard*. She wants to know where *Richard* is." The other inclined toward the metal trough of cigarette packs, scrawled counts on a clipboard. Jane remembered – jealousy. These hags will never don another smock again, are forever leashed by the nameplates dangling from their necks.

"Well that's easy," she sprayed, gnawing, "hasn't he gone for lunch? Dor?"

"Yeah, I think he's on lunch already. Sorry." Doris mumbled without looking up from her inventory.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"We were going to meet –" Jane began.

"– Oh *you're* his fiancée?"

Fiancée. Fiancée. The sound branded itself into her cheeks, swelled into the pit of her belly. All of them floored by such an improbable equation. Gum-smackers dropped silent, Jane tingling from head to foot, swirling in constricted breath. "Yes." Her temples began to throb.

"Really?" Disbelief wrinkled across the sheen of their foreheads.

"Yes." She said, if only to see that sour, rotten twist ferment on their tongues, wizen further their bruising, incredulous glare.

"Then I don't know where he's gone."

"He's here till five. I think." They shrugged, kept a kernel of doubt, but detoured shock with a quick turn. Jane, hit at full speed, skated out into the aimless whorl of activity – the money changing hands, plastic bags parachuting, snapped, and then filled with complementary items. A spinning top wobbled out into traffic, she steadied on the handle of her half-full cart.

Facing the giant windows that looked out onto the street, Jane felt like she'd been incinerated, the alum of char and ash, a breath away from scattering dust. She looked out at the parking lot, the jigsaw of cars filling spaces, the red and green sheets of sale meat and bulk shampoos plastering the curb. A tent city of bedded plants and shrubs erected at the far edge. When she turned around again, he was there.

Crouching, he built a pyramid of cereal; scalped the large cardboard cases with a

few quick passes of his cutter, upending them, the smaller boxes sloughing out like a log of jellied cranberry. Lengthy snarls of cardboard slivered off his blade, scattered along the tile floor around the gigantic display. What, what, what, could she say? What could she ask, and what could he answer? The cashiers tittered, biting the sides of their cheeks, stuffing their crooked smiles into their sleeves, the back of their hands. But Jane didn't care. All she knew, that moment, was that Richard – his beach-head, his lean curl beneath the sheets, his smell like wind and campfire – was marrying someone else.

"Oh, Richard –" the cashiers pummelled out, their voices wavering in the midst of spastic laughter. "Richard, I think there's someone here to see you."

He paused as if shot. As if hanging on the stopped blade of a guillotine.

"Oh, Richard ...," they taunted.

But she couldn't make sense in the flood of noise that wracked furiously throughout the crowd. The rambling carts squealed, clashed the mellow brass of instrumental oldies ricocheting throughout the store, the whirr of conveyor belts, cash registers, the thud of shanks and hocks, wrapped loin and chops slapping back into the bins, the frenzy of conversation, the whooshing clasp of the refrigerator doors. She froze, gorged on the catastrophe raging around her, the cashiers' injected chortle, their ripening glee. Jane tried to focus on each detail of her ruin – the pile-ups at the cash, gridlock through the aisles, the fender-benders by the barrels of out-of-season apples – but couldn't salvage, no matter how she tried, the instance where everything changed. Perhaps, she thought, perhaps things change before they ever change; perhaps we only have accidents –

It was Richard, Richard who was shaking her clear. Wasn't it, though? His fingers clawed into her shoulders, his seizing vice at arms' length. Wasn't it him? The cashiers awed behind Jane, the scattered melee swirled around. Wasn't it Richard – his insistent slur, his wish to be understood, his need to not be hated – that kept them all firmly, intractably, rooted in the flatness of the earth?

ROBERT BOATES

Shattered

Here is a broken man
with angels watching
over his life. He would blow
his brains out
had he not made
promises. He would return
to drink if his bladder
were not dead, his blood
sugar not a problem, and if
he could afford it. However, he
doesn't miss the hangovers.
Tobacco is a long-term
addiction not missed.
He has been broken
for eighteen years. He
keeps to himself as much
as he can. Goes
out for bread, coffee,
the newspaper. Buys
lottery tickets now
and then. Dreams
of returning to Hamilton
with dead love
in the harbour and ghosts
on the mountain. He plays
the horses, never
for anything but the thunder
of their hooves as they
pound out of the gates
into a sometimes better
arena, where grains
and a rub-down await them.

Hart Crane to the Poet Cædmon

1.

A living recital, incandescence itself, each cadenced word
Bede heard, his penitent heart somersaulted firmaments
Chugged Latinate recall to old psalms, hymns, Cædmon
Of Old hard English in his mouth's foul chamber
His tongue clicks in a sound of branches synapsing
In wind's bluest movements, which is unusual
For his usual petty warm muscle, now making
Discriminate noise in lurch and loam from lung-mind
Spurred, spun ... some cyclone god
Pesters his neurons wet with telemetry –

The Bede attends each pronounced benison
This crusty human serf who reeks as livestock
And plinthy oatstraw, dirtied lips, hayseed conductor,
Claimant who abets god's own breath, ambrosia pure,
Cædmon's eye opaque,
Lost in linkage, lip-syncing creation.

Serious concern for Cædmon
Who sneaks away, skulks to claim introversion
From the gliding circle, of off-keys loud plunk
And misaligned voices bellyaching eighth century
Calling names with brouhaha
With tankards and drunk cowerds, cow surds in a stench
A communal sing-along up heaves and cacophony rings
From men that sought more from crotches
And bawdy lies and myths of longing –
Mithras, Belatucadros, Serapis, et al.

Now, sunk in a thatched cowshed, asleep
Cædmon's mind aglow, earthsmell in ovine fur
Botched with shit, as Gabriel steel-eyed amid combers
Swoop and splurge, he stands straight as an iron post
Decrees his lines to the ragged farmhand's loomweighted channels.

2 .

Cædmon's MRI would reveal a stippled hotspot, burly activity
Lighting up sophisticated cortical loops in red squarish pixels – oxygen consuming
cells luminescent and aphonic, about to be
Rendered purely remembered in translation, aroused
In differential qualities of serotonin, dopamine, noradrenaline, acetylcholine, as he
regains consciousness.

3 .

A neuronal event, Cædmon –
Raised consciousness turned
Into harmonious cadence, as though
A presence flapping angelic waxing
And waning through brain impulses
Strains of beauty, not hyperventilated
Sophistication of adjectival movements, pyrotechnics
But rather kisses that cannot be killed
Flux in recession with god's quernstone

4 .

Cædmon's body's
a mind of its own
 And rhythm explains creation, a hymn
 That instills life itself to dream, only
 Such galloping as his, a firey line
 From beginning to end, daily arousal
And words befitting a cleric with outside
Knowledge of god's purpose and caesura
Alliteration, kenning, all neatly infused
In his gait that an angel renders and
Cædmon remembers, remembers
In telling the Bede who cackles with amazement
And decides to authenticate the lines, give
Them a rustic flavour, and inscribe them
In a vernacular English for the very first time in history
And in Christendom.

(Cædmon is backstage, an understudy
And knows how cows summon him to recite
In a lea, his words sing like the rain he praises, actually
The form's picked up Sundays in sermons, from
Those holy words, the elements notwithstanding have
Quietly inspired a young ecstasy in him and loneliness

Keeps him skinny in the fields, then scurrying away at sundown
After eating lightly, communally with other cowsherd, until
Their big armed brawls and acrid swearing
That fills their hoggish voices at dinner
Plucking the lyre entirely off-key; as heavenly
Cædmon listens, a savant, his brain organizes
His refuge like music before it's made and then
Instead come never-heard-of words: Cædmon keeps
All this tucked in his leather swain.)

To what avail, what reason? he asks Bede.
Life continues, mysteries abound, and you are
One, with no understanding of what unction
A brain provides, nor I, its miraculous doxologies
Come out of you, Cædmon, just think, patterns
Emerge where your mind's been absorbent of cow smells
While you stood, akimbo with sheepish grin
Gazing emptily across a lea to your charge
Looking back at you to no avail, blank landscape
Mirroring blank landscape, only you, with a poet's
Schemas underscores some residual song of your
Making restored from a dream, a grace, a love
Other than Beowulf that the others sang, you
Sang for an angel who requested unrestraint
Nothing shy like your corporeal self, stowing
Hay, gardening shit, but you the radio
Loud broadcaster-bard, rune-writer in English
Thank god you are making and made!

5.

Years later, centuries pass, and now, winter
Brown sand-spawned roads
No rood, but black ice's skipless slide
Toward unknowing, submit to its
Incoherent ride, almost frictionless
The blood seeps in to wood
About the nails that drive
Home to restless sleep, our father
Drinks an emerging light, you cannot
Say, or what wind will 'om'
Full circle, tangential to a child's
Birth and rescue from oblivion
And back again.

Cædmon, insomniac on sidestreets
Mad houses that wake like rats
As you meander, coat collared
Homeless, hearing
Pipes rattle, their freezing
That grips the ice in them
For 28 feet and flowers
Frozen in their dormancies
Eyeing TV screens; sitcoms
Documentaries on themselves
Coming through spring
Like swallows, black
Spots across a field of vision

It was late

when I spoke with the woman,
told her over airwaves
where I was and where I was
going.

Went down to wait
under the overhang.

He pulled up. It was fast
but who was I.
He stayed pulled never parked
and just riding the waiting road
still.

The name on top
wasn't the one I had called
but who was I.

I forget how it went
but we talked and it was wrong
and he drove on anyway.
The static broke
and a three a m god was confused
but the driver,
"I guess they changed their mind."

I looked out the window as I often do
and saw the two girls standing smoking the path
from their own door.

They would get mine.

I give good tips at least.
And maybe, I think now,
and I thought then months ago,
that my mistake
and the car riding the waiting road,
all gave that driver
or the other or the girls or me
a fate that we all or one needed
but who was I.

I wrote you

I wrote on paper with an upside down candle,
With an upside down candle.
So that I would remember.
And as I wrote I thought about that.

If I tried it on your body
it might hurt you.
But the look of that black on your belly,
With an upside down candle.
Then you would remember.
And as I wrote you thought about that.

The next day you showered.
But not before it rubbed
on your shirt it was a white shirt.
So it wasn't only on the inside.

And when you kiss me?

the rushing when the door didn't close or
the night smell that left a fog feel on our
blankets. When you sank in the sinking ground
like Wesley or another we enjoyed
it was like the trees had never wept wild
green. It was true, you said, that out-there cloud
that came down and swallowed, a too thirsty
child left in the car in the lot, windows
tightest they'd ever been, or that we would
see.

cherry juice stained your lips, or wine, and I
thought about looking at your room through a
bottle, the green, you'd like that. You write of
other women, faeries you say, it's o.
k. And when you kiss me? so I have thought
about going out at the right time, be
fore noon time, and there lie out under a
tree, to be kidnapped by a faerie of
my own. And be one. My own. Then you will
see.

in a land of faeries the faerie king
is king. And you are not Orfeo. You
left me in the air or fridge too long; I
have moulded to you but my mould you can
not cut off like a limb or otherwise.
I am beyond that. Even if you took
up the floor or opened new bread, I would
remain, a subfloor or crumb that you did
not forget but you have forgotten to
see.

PHILIP A. WATERHOUSE

Roadkill

They're everywhere you go, sidewalks,
road shoulders, gutters, on store floors,
come across so many I don't bother to
pick them up anymore even if I do need
that much ink remainder of my days to
write the cheques to pay off two mortgages,
three, four credit cards, two cars, couple
department stores, couple, yeah, sure,
and the butcher and the green grocer and –
look, there's another one, some classy
printing on it, from a big hotel or other
monster corporation, have to stop, ask
what am I doing reminding myself about
all these debts, leave it, don't touch,
pass this one by, wait, better than that
this time get the all's-right-with the world
feeling, kick the sucker, no-no, stomp it
until it's only little howling plastic shards,
stop sweating the big things.

A unit of Rubinflesh

Crossing the Hudson

Peter Stephan Jungk

Translated by David Dollenmayer

Handsel Books

219 pp, \$17.50

PETER STEPHAN JUNGK IS A SCREENWRITER AS WELL as a novelist. So he might not be too surprised if I were to describe the novel under review in movie-goer's shorthand: *Cosmopolis* (by Don DeLillo) meets *The Dead Father* (by Don Barthelme). As in *Cosmopolis*, the protagonist's objective is frustrated by a traffic jam. As in *The Dead Father*, the progenitor's corpse grows unimaginably large. Happily, these influences, if such they are, soon disappear behind the particularities of Jungk's narrative, in which the oedipal struggle is given a most European, perhaps even Germanic twist, "behind the wheel of a [rented] snow-white 1999 Cadillac DeVille."

Gustav and his mother Rosa Rubin find themselves on the Tappan Zee, the three-mile-long bridge between Nyack and Tarrytown, north of Manhattan. There has been a chemical spill (toluene) up ahead. They are stuck with each other (always, once again) and with the various other characters who, as in a Fellini film, say, have their brief eccentric walk-on parts, since no one is going anywhere (but for the Rubins, backward, in memory) nor behaving especially well.

Gustav has just arrived from Vienna, where he's a fur dealer, as his grandfather was. His mother's father, that is. (His father's father "suffered from gephyrophobia, the fear of bridges and crossing bridges.") Gustav had wanted to be a historian (specialty: the Hundred Years War), but someone (Rosa) persuaded him to be more

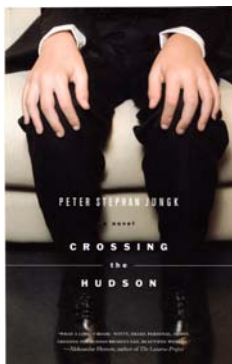
practical. Now he has a wife and family awaiting him in their vacation home on Lake Gilead and is worried he won't reach them before the start of Shabbat. (His mother mocks his orthodoxy, mocks him for having married "a pious girl who takes everything amiss.")

What happens on the bridge and whom they meet, though sometimes interesting (the former stationmaster of Victoria Station, London) and sometimes promising (the female pilot of the plane Gustav flew here in), have less importance than what appears underneath it. Leaning over the railing, Gustav sees the "gigantic naked body of his father. Directly under him, at the western end of the bridge, the waters of the Hudson

were washing in foaming waves over Father's feet. [...] Father's head, however, lay more than a mile away" Rosa, who, like most mothers, reads minds, is aware of it, too, and will, shortly afterwards, dare to take a look. They both see the "monumentally long" body, "motionless, but not lifeless; passed away, but not dead." They alone. (For now.)

"No doubt about it," thinks Gustav, "it was the fatherbody lying there [...]. The father he had idolized, his best friend, his big brother, the fatheranimal that seemed to him immortal." The father he had buried, some eleven months before, in the cemetery on Staten Island.

Ludwig David Rubin was a mensch, larger, more heroic than life. An "internationally renowned nuclear researcher and professor of physics" (specialty: solar thermonuclear fusion), he was forever, during Gustav's childhood, travelling, lecturing, not so secretly philandering. He knew, or we are given the impression he did, all the famous Austrian/German émigrés and their families, the Chargaffs, the Schoenbergs, the Blochs, the Adornos, the Marcuses. (He could certainly cite the missteps of their offspring.)



reviews

Constantly summoned elsewhere, he was never, as Gustav so vividly recalls, emotionally distant. Indeed, the family intimacies continued well into Gustav's adulthood:

You and only you give meaning to our lives, Father drummed into his son. You are all your mother and I have. That's why there's nothing unusual about you coming to our hotel room and sitting on the foot of our bed to have breakfast with us, even though you're thirty, thirty-five years old. [...] Someday when we're not around anymore, you'll long to dig us up out of the ground again, just you wait and see. I'm sorry, but you'll just have to accept that we're more attached to you than normal parents are to their children. [...] You embody the feeling that binds our family together, Gustav. You are us. I am the two of you. Rosa is us. We are you. We are one flesh united, a unit of Rubinflesh.

Gooseflesh will surely be most "normal" readers' response, a mixture of envy and distaste. A similar ambivalence is evidently forming in Gustav, who, even as he seeks to draw closer to the extravagantly proportioned body ("gigantic penis and colossal butt cheeks"), is nonetheless drawn with equal force away, in the direction of his own fathergiven life and perhaps his own (fatherlike) infidelities (to parental memory, to religion, to marriage).

Jungk manages throughout to keep the phantasmagoric at bay, the question he's chosen to preoccupy us being not what Gustav and Rosa might see from their unusual vantage point but what they (chiefly Gustav) can remember. (Thoughts of ratio and proportion were, I must admit, a little distracting at times. A stomach the size of a soccer field?) Ludwig looms most impressively in life, manufactured life, all the more mythic (i.e., satisfyingly fictional) for being so intensely detailed. The bridge needn't only signify; it can be a bridge, too.

Crossing the Hudson is a fine novel, as familiar, oddly, as it is original. David Dollenmayer's translation, exceptionally smooth and readable, increased the delight. ■

—Karl Buchner

A knock on the noggin

Noah's Compass

Anne Tyler

Doubleday Canada

277 pp, \$32.95

YOU DON'T NEED A COMPASS WHEN THE WHOLE world's under water and there's nowhere to go. Thus Liam Pennywell, the protagonist of Anne Tyler's new novel, to his four-year-old grandson, for whom the story of Noah is as much about abandoning others as it is about saving them. Liam has been a bit of a Noah himself, we understand by this point. Or, more accurately, Noah's opposite: nothing like the famous three-storied ark, Liam's boat, long emptied out and even longer adrift, is growing uncomfortably small.

Tyler doesn't overwork the metaphor. Nor should we. But just which bearings Liam has lost, or endeavoured to lose, will become more and more obvious as we read on. Even his age, that once essential coordinate, is smudged, from the very first line, where, with a well placed biblical echo, he is said to be in his "sixty-first year" – not 61, as the dust-jacket copy would have it, but 60 – and feeling, evidently, as if he were, like Noah at the onset of the flood, in his six-hundredth.

Things may have, as we're told, "taken a downward turn a long, long time ago," but Liam's difficulties are very much of the moment: it is June, 2006, and he has no job, won't, he believes, be able to find another. A schoolteacher (fifth grade), he accepted his dismissal, unfair though it was, with characteristically little protest. Now,

perhaps too eager to retrench, he is moving into a ground-floor apartment in a building across from a shopping mall. This might, he thinks, be “the final dwelling place of his life.”

Liam is a man who prefers his mattress firm, his top sheet tight, his pillow bouncy. When he wakes the next morning on a mattress that is slick and hard, he knows right away that he’s in a hospital bed, but it takes him somewhat longer to discover why. And even when he does (he was attacked by a burglar), he is upset to realize that he can’t remember how it happened. Those particular moments during which he was struck on the head and bitten on the hand are a complete blank. He is soon desperate to retrieve them.

Fortuitously enough, he encounters a youngish woman (38) whose job it is to remember things (names, appointments, etc.) for an elderly executive. Liam wonders whether she might not also be able to help him. Of course, being Liam, he doesn’t go about asking her this directly. And again of course, being by his own account “a friendless, aging man,” he falls in love, whereupon the remembering, the urgency of it, gets pretty well forgotten.

Noah’s Compass is Tyler’s eighteenth novel. It should come as no surprise, then, that, as some reviewers have pointed out with marked ambivalence, Liam resembles several other similarly befuddled characters in her work. He is a duffer, to be sure, and through him Tyler, who is in her late sixties, may well have thought to mock (but gently) those who, having scarcely entered the decade (mind the step), manage to convince themselves they’re finished. Diminished, possibly, says Tyler. Finished? Don’t bet on it.

Liam may also owe his origins to the notion, implicit here, that forgetting is sometimes as hard a task as remembering. The lively cast surrounding him, and dropping into his new apartment as casually and unbidden as the burglar still at large,

are so many memories straining to be recognized. So many points, one might say, on Liam’s compass. They all lead in the direction of life, whether backwards, self-justifyingly, to his eccentric eating habits as a kid, his father’s defection, his first marriage’s dismal end or, more timidly, forwards to the hope of a greater participation in the concerns of his three daughters and that earnest little grandson who has begun to call him Poppy.

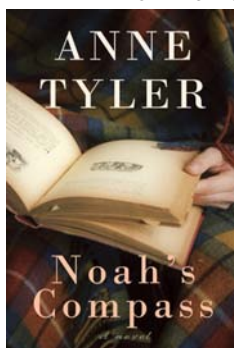
Liam is not quite a type, but he does at times seem to be the mere sum of the other characters’ accusations, his own disappointments. At times, indeed, and this may be a nod to Noah and the allegorical, he seems to have received the knock on his noggin from Tyler herself. Her form of

relaxed, mildly euphoric realism has always depended upon a certain amount of lifelike arbitrariness (something has to happen, after all), but in *Noah’s Compass* the concussion arrives, however tactfully, from left margin, and Liam remains ever afterwards suspiciously mechanical, tidily predetermined. Not so representative (i.e., sacrificial) a figure as Roth’s “everyman” or Coetzee’s “slow

man,” he is more like Baum’s “tin man,” who, you may recall, had a kind rather than a loving heart.

Tyler’s previous novel, *Digging to America*, spread itself over such a wide canvas that whatever followed was almost bound to look narrow in comparison. *Noah’s Compass*, despite the occasional wryly touching or amusing passage, looks not only narrow but pinched. The quietist conclusion – Liam settling down, alone, on Christmas Day, to read “a new book about Socrates” – may well illustrate some respectable maxim (strive to want less, for instance), but it will leave not a few readers wondering if he hasn’t simply drowned, poor fellow, and the novel with him, in his own dreary, right-minded contentment. ■

– Brenda Keble



The return of bell-bottoms

How to Write

derek beaulieu

Talonbooks

71 pages

\$16.95

Bardy Google

Frank Davey

Talonbooks

80 pages

\$16.95

If you want to write good copy, you must be where the things are.

FOR SUCH A LITTLE BOOK, DEREK BEAULIEU'S LATEST IS brimming with concepts (with copy). Made up of parts originally published separately, the contents of *How to Write* have this in common, that they all begot themselves, whether purposely or randomly, elsewhere. For example, the title chapter, we're told, is

an exhaustive record of every incidence of the words "write" or "writes" in 40 different English-language texts. These texts were picked aesthetically and to represent a disparate number of genres.

And so they do, from *The Lost World* to the *Communist Manifesto*, from *Gulliver of Mars* to *Gulliver's Travels* (the entire list of titles, as given, carries a suggestivity all its own), if by "disparate number" beaulieu simply means several and different and by "genre" no more (or less) than poetry, (science) fiction, and essays. As to the aesthetic behind the choice, this is obscured somewhat by the severe compression undergone by each text (from which have been left out, of course, the

many sentences not containing the two forms of the verb). Should the reader approach, say, the 767 words taken from *Emma* with the expectation of finding a potted version thereof, something essentially familiar, he/she will be disappointed, although it must be said that Austen herself (her tone, her syntax) survives, sentence by sentence, even if Miss Woodhouse and Mr Knightley, in whatever constitutes character, do not. Identifiable remains, then, but still only remains.

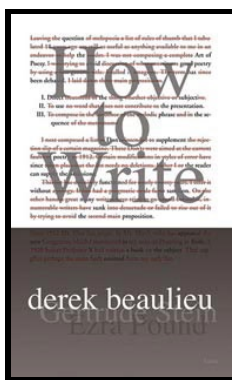
Should that same (straw) reader understand "picked aesthetically" to mean picked for the beauty (interest, oddity) of the result (the extraction), then something essentially unfamiliar emerges: a weirdness, as Lovecraft (also plundered) might say, a craziness, an absent-mindedness, a repetition compulsion that paradoxically furthers, expands the limits of, what, at some

unremembered period long past, might have been (against or for?) an argument. This is, to be sure, the aesthetic engendered by any found (filched) text, and beaulieu derives a similar but distinctly muted effect in the chapter "How to Edit: A," which, he notes, is

an exhaustive record of every incidence of the word "edit" in the over 1,100 different English-language

texts stored at Project Gutenberg ... indexed as starting with the letter A.

Possibly, some texts are more searchable in quantity than others (40 vs. 1,100), some words more willing to be found. Or some key terms evoke more (key) responses (edit vs. write). And the "effect," here, is anything but (singularly) intentional, no matter who we take to be the author. – Or the guiding hand. In "How to Write" the texts are arranged on a "descending scale," from long to short, which, eventually, tempts



the reader into imagining a relation between them, into supplying, as it were, some poignancy or cockiness to the final entry: “Never mind, I’ll write it” (the next to final one being: “I did not write that message,’ he stated”).

Ah, but who did? The answer may have to be: nobody, as in “Wild Rose Country,” which is “every piece of text within one block of [beau-lieu’s] home.” Every piece, that is, whose existence (incidence) he could verify, which makes this unpunctuated list of numbers, product names, and cautionary signs a more subjective undertaking than the computer searches (if not nearly as “exhaustive”) and yet produces nothing like the same illusion of subjectivity (locality, yes, thanks to the recurrence of “Alberta,” but no ambulating annotating self).

In these and other chapters of *How to Write*, the parameters of the search, the arbitrary (oulipian) constraints with which the text (in the larger, ore-like sense) has been processed, come to assume as much importance as the eventual yield itself, which is only to say, perhaps, that subjectivity is now the parameter we’re least likely to be conscious of. It’s the little man in the cabin of the steam shovel over there. (The blindfolded little man.) Too far away, really, (the man) for us to identify with, but doing (the shovel) admirable damage to the landscape, clawing out, as (somehow) directed, just that one useful/unusable, expected/surprising thing.

BEAULIEU CONDUCTS HIS SEARCHES ON WHAT WOULD seem to have been a fairly stable corpus (the light redundancy of “exhaustive ... every” being perhaps the best assurance). By contrast, Frank Davey has chosen to conduct his on the great *amorph* of our times, the Internet:

Because the content [...], and the search-engine

priorities assigned to that content, change continuously, these texts are unrepeatable.

The parameters have become a (transfer) protocol, the protocol a (steam-driven cyberspace-trawling) dragnet, to gather in not, presumably, every incidence of a word or phrase but only so many examples of the “basic structural unit” (the sentence) incorporating them as will be accounted (by Davey, of course) a catch. The day’s catch, duly dated, historicized.

The rules, Davey explains, varied, applying, some, to all and others to but a few. In several instances, he changed the rules abruptly mid-search, to cause the tone to shift (see below), and, throughout, preserved “idiosyncratic spellings and syntax,” the end, overall, being (despite the formal constraints, the lulling refrain/repetition) a stylistic variety, such as we might hope to encounter in a poem whose source was more (how do you say) unified.

From “Sorry / 27 June 2008”:

Once again, we are sorry that we are not taking orders for personalized dish towels. We’re sorry; we apologize for what happened to Eddie Carter. We apologize for the gross mismanagement of our Human Resources department. We are sorry we don’t

maintain waiting lists; we suggest you watch the artists website. We’re sorry to report that one of our webservers was hacked. We are sorry for changing things around. We’re sorry the project was dead for nearly a year. We apologize for the return of bell-bottoms. We are sorry to hear that you are suffering from having the wrong kind of metabolism. We apologize for the experience you have had. We are sorry to hear that you wish to leave Sales Spider. God is wrong and we apologize for what He said. We apologize that this paragraph undermines our apology.



reviews

Is the customer-service “we” funnier (insert your own comparative) for being supposed one rather than many? Or is polyphony the point? I suspect, since we (the readers) are now so used to having our own searches “post” equivalent results, that we manage, barely consciously, to read it both ways, as the voice of the medium itself and as the multiplicity of voices toiling, crowding together, though still distinguishable, on the party (ADSL) line.

Oops, sorry, wrong patient! Oops! Sorry, Aulus!
Oops, sorry, wrong forum. Oops! Sorry about the extra junk. Oops – sorry – it wasn’t crack babies after all. Oops, our bad. Here’s the sorry reality. Oops ...

This isn’t to say that apposition doesn’t become, at times, opposition or that Davey, by chance or by cunning, doesn’t draw out a lambent irony. But, mostly, the speakers/writers/basic structural units stand back to back, unaware of what they’ve done, are doing, will do. There is, after all, (here’s the sorry reality) no sustained dialogue – up, down, or across.

From “Time Lapse Action / 7 June 2008”:

Mmmm, I be like stay up, stay on, she only wants to see me break down. Come to stay or stay away. Stay lady stay, stay with your man a while. Won’t you stay stay stay stay stay just a little bit longer? It’s very clear our love is here to stay. So why can’t we just find a way to (live) – stay together? I know that it’s hard to stay clean these days stay clean these days. River, stay ’way from my door. You’d better walk right in and stay a little while, daddy, you can’t stay too long. I don’t care what they say, I won’t stay In a world without love. Hey, hey, I saved the world today ... the good thing’s here to stay. Why don’t you stay a while, just till the night is through? Stay ... with the demons you drowned, stay ... with the spirit I found. I’m just trying to help, but I wonder why doesn’t anybody stay together anymore? If you let me stay – I’ll say what I should have said. Darling you gotta let me know, should I stay or should I go? If you shave your legs I’ll stay home every night. ■

– *Karl Buchner*

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