



# paperplates

*A Magazine for Fifty Readers*

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Vol. 8, No. 1

**Essays, poetry, fiction, reviews**

## Contributors

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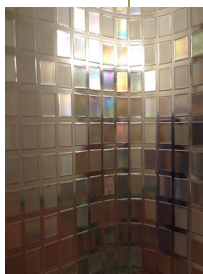
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And that, Baby Bear said, is when we went viral.

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## This night has opened my eyes

I DON'T DO MATH. IT'S NOT THAT I CAN'T. I'M PERFECTLY capable of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. I can calculate percentages. It's just that given the choice, I'd rather let somebody else do the math for me. So when faced with a combined bill at a restaurant, I simply ask my friends what I owe. I trust them. Why shouldn't I?

I haven't always been anti-math. In grade 4 I was in my class's advanced math group; in grades 7 and 8 I participated in the Gauss Mathematics Competition. One year I even got a prize. Up until last year my marks were always in the 80s. My maternal grandfather was a math and science teacher, so I must even have some genes for it. Maybe the ability to do calculus isn't transferred through those genes.

It is calculus's fault that I don't do math anymore. For some reason I decided that I should take it instead of finite math this year. Maybe it's because my physics-loving boyfriend doesn't think finite is real math. Sometimes I should really just ignore him.

Some people define calculus as the study of rates of change. I define it as the bane of my existence. Since the beginning of the term, Mr Andrychuk has given us a quiz every Friday. I guess he wants to make sure we're absorbing our lessons. Clearly, I am not. Every Monday I head to the math department with my gut in knots, dreading my quiz results. Every Monday I see my average diminish; from marks in the high 80s I am now one or two quizzes away from an F.

Why don't I just drop calculus? Good question. It's not like I need it to get into university. No, it's my own masochistic tendencies that keep me here. I'm stubborn. I'm not a quitter, which is why I sit suffering at a much abused desk in an airless classroom this Monday afternoon.

I haven't just been sitting around watching my grades fall. One of my friends has been tutoring me and I've enlisted Physics-boy to help me with my homework. Concepts seem to make sense when they're in the room, but as soon as they're gone, I'm lost again.

Mr A hands out the quizzes from last Friday. My knots erupt into a full-fledged snarl when I see my grade: 52. A pass, but barely. I sigh, looking at the problems I failed to answer: untouched equations mock me from the page. The sad thing is that although I passed this quiz, I don't even really understand the part that I apparently understood.

"Some of you seem to be having difficulty with the concepts we've been covering," Mr. A has a knack for stating the obvious. He draws an arc on the board. "What we're trying to do with these equations is to determine where the straight line is on the curve." He draws a line segment on the arc, demonstrating. Okay, I get what we're trying to do. But the jumble of letters and fractions on the page doesn't make any more sense to me.

Finally, the bell rings and I can escape. Climbing onto the bus to go home, I think I need to do something fun, something I'm good at, something to get rid of the cloud of failure I'm sure is hanging over my head. I think I'll head to my sewing machine.

I'VE BEEN SEWING SINCE I COULD PIECE TOGETHER doll quilts. I like to make my own stuff to wear – I get to decide exactly what the piece is going to look like, and nobody else has the same clothes. Also, I find sewing really relaxing – my brain zones out and works on solving other problems while I focus on the task at hand. Maybe it'll come up with a way for me to deal with my math problems without sacrificing my whole GPA.

Sitting in front of my basic Sears-brand machine (sounds like a tractor, runs like a dream), I start to pin the facing to the neckline



## homeplate

of the dress I'm making. (If you don't already know, the facing is the part that folds to the inside so you have a finished edge around your neck instead of the ugly and likely to unravel cut fabric edge). I love this pattern – it's an A-line with a deep, rounded neck. Pinning things this rounded is a pain; you have to be really careful about fitting the fabric together because, although you can maneuver the fabric so that your seam is curved, ultimately each stitch is a straight line. You have to put pins really close together so that the curve pretty much becomes a series of straight lines that ...

Oh. My. God. I swear, sometimes I can be so dumb. All the time that I've been struggling with calculus I've had the ability to actually DO it, not just theorize it through some dumb old formulas. I mean really, what's more important, being able to abstractly figure out the line on a curve, or being able to find it in practice?

First thing tomorrow I'm heading to the school office and dropping calculus. No more equations, no more mocking letters. Maybe I'll invite my friends out to celebrate. Maybe, just to show there are no hard feelings, I'll figure out how much I owe all by myself. ■

– Marcia McLean

## A summer of change

THE ROLLER COASTER IS SLOWLY CHUGGING ITS WAY to the crest of the hill: agonizingly slowly, as if to increase our terror of the thrill to come. In the background, growing smaller and smaller, is the world's largest fair – an amusement park and over a hundred futuristic buildings and themed pavilions. Situated on an island between the skyline of a great city and a mighty river, the fair is like a series of jewels, displayed for all to see. The spherical shape of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic American pavilion stands out.

The ride is aptly named *Le Monstre*, a little Québécois humour thrown in for the tourists. It is the largest roller coaster in the world, as it should be, since this is a world's fair. I am in a four-seater car with my grandmother and two strangers, skin faintly tinged with green.

My grandmother has already let go of the safety bar, throwing her arms freely in the air. "Close your eyes", she says as we go over the top and plunge straight down. I'm holding on with clenched white knuckles, stomach in my ankles, heart pounding. It is over in seconds. Laughing and crying at the same time, I awkwardly disembark, with nervous legs buckling under my knees. Taking a deep breath, I turn to look at my grandmother and she is smiling. "Don't worry, everything will be okay," she says. Any time I am worried or scared about something, she always says that, giving me great comfort.

It is 1967 and Canada is celebrating its hundredth birthday! I have just celebrated my seventh.

THESE WERE HEADY TIMES FOR A NATION DIVIDED by two solitudes, valiantly trying to establish a separate identity from its powerful southern neighbour, only acquiring its own flag in 1965, its last province in 1949 and still beholden to the British Commonwealth. To celebrate a hundred years of existence, cosmopolitan Montreal was chosen to host the world's fair – Expo 67 – with the broad theme of *Man and His World*. It was as distinctly Canadian as the great *fleuve St. Laurent* that flowed by and the city of Montreal across the water.

The whole country was on a high. The Queen was visiting, as were other distinguished heads of state: Lyndon Johnson, Princess Grace, Charles de Gaulle. Even Jacqueline Kennedy.

My father had passed away, two months before. His promise, to show me the world, I had taken into my very soul. Despite our being dirt poor, he had managed to purchase the

passports we needed to visit Expo all summer. I raged at God for taking him away from me. My grandmother, though, delivered on the broken promise.

Nan was my hero, my mentor, and my friend. She never judged me, never raised her voice, never spoke to me in anger. Patient, kind, compassionate, and loving, she was beautiful and seemed unaware of it. Heads turned when she entered a room. So youthful that she was often mistaken for my mother, she would inhale her cigarettes the way movie stars (like Ava Gardner, whom she resembled) did in that era, exhaling smoke languidly through her nostrils. She let me try it, and I came up spluttering for breath – which taught me not to pick up the habit (the habit that eventually killed her).

Apart from the Lord's Day, when no one was allowed to work, Nan spent five days a week selling hosiery and gloves to chic Westmount ladies, the kind who lived on Mount Royal, had their hair coiffed at elegant salons, "did" lunch, and shopped at Eaton's (which had the apostrophe then). Married at 18, she had given birth to three daughters by the time she was 21. My grandfather worshipped her.

Nan did not suffer fools gladly. When the nuns at the convent sent her daughters home because their skirts were too short, she hemmed the skirts shorter and sent her daughters back. And when the priest publicly chastised her for exempting her frail third daughter from fasting (because the latter fainted in the choir during mass every week), Nan left the Church, children in tow, never to return. Not that anyone got a reprieve from religious training; it was just completed at home. Her belief in God was strong. She said her prayers every night until the day she died.

Each Tuesday in the summer of '67, Nan and I would take the sparkling new subway system over to Expo, where she gave me my geography lesson by making sure we stepped on every con-

tinent. One week it would be Ghana, Mauritius or Rwanda in Africa; the next: Mexico and the United States; the next: India or Australia or Europe. She also instilled an interest in me for epicurean delights, because Expo was a feast not only of sights and sounds but of taste as well, and we sampled everything: Cuban black-bean habanero, Russian bliny and caviar, Irish corned beef and cabbage. It allowed us, two souls from the lower class, to imagine we were on a round-the-world adventure, without our having to step too far away from the comforts of home.

My brother, 14 months younger than I, didn't enjoy the same experiences. After our father's death, we were split up for the summer, he going to my aunt, who had a few boys. My mother spent the time trying to make ends meet, while continuing to run my father's garage. There were many break-ins, the result of his unpaid debts to not so stellar business associates. Much later, we would learn of the seedier side of his life, the troubled marriage, and the history of congenital heart disease. But for now, all that mattered was the change in our lives.

WE WERE BOTH ADOPTED CHILDREN, NOT BIOLOGICAL siblings. Our mother said she was grateful we didn't carry the genetic strain that killed off our adoptive father's entire family. But having adopted children presented challenges natural mothers didn't have to face. Quebec laws were different in those days; there was a constant threat of our being taken away, for lack of a male provider in the house. Sometimes at night I'd hear her crying in fear of losing us. She said if the Catholic Welfare Agency ever came knocking, she'd skip town, cross the Vermont border and start a new life with us. The solution was obvious: she needed a husband; we needed a new father.

Before we were separated for the summer, my brother and I talked endlessly about how we had to find a dad. It wasn't right for small children,

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ages six and seven, to be without one. I would tell my mom when we went to church that she could go in and talk to the priest while we sat on the stairs and prayed. And we hounded her incessantly: where was he? She tried to explain that it wasn't that simple, that whoever she married, if she ever married, had to love us all, not just her. We were a package deal.

At the end of the summer, Expo came to a close in a blinding display of fireworks. My grandmother had a surprise. She had rented a cottage in the Laurentians for a week so that we could all be together before school started. My mom needed a break from the garage, and I needed to be with her and my brother. The cottage had a pool and a playground. The owner, a MicMac who raised bees, sometimes braided my hair.

Nan was a wise woman. She understood that, despite all the celebrations, as a family we were lonely and sad. "Don't worry," she told me. "Everything will be okay."

Always eager to make things happen, she convinced my grandfather to invite one of his friends to the cottage for the weekend: a warm, gentle Irishman, from a large family, a gentleman, never married. He was 45, my mom 35. It may not have been love at first sight for the adults, but my brother and I were smitten. We knew how life could change in an instant. ■

– Carleen Carroll

## On the road with Persephone

THE LAST MOUNTAIN VILLAGE ON THE OLD ROAD from Rethymnon becomes the scene of an incident that could illustrate any number of points, but two in particular will do. One, that Cretan mountain roads are the most adventurous in all Europe as evidenced by the ubiquitous *ikon* shrines marking fatalities, within each, *mementos*, candles, and offerings of olive oil. Two, that mythic potential lies in the quotidian, as in, say, Persephone's wanton play.

It happened where three roads meet, specifically, in the *Plateia Mere*, the tiny central thoroughfare of that village, which is the result of ancient goat tracks converging near a mountain stream, of *ad hoc* architecture in rugged terrain, and of the exigencies of modern transportation all coinciding at one point with too little time and too little space.

At one corner, a café: before it, men in high boots and black caps, sitting outside with chair backs to the wall, filtering ouzo through large moustaches. Two play cards.

Opposite stands a nondescript shop, dusty and untouristed, a weatherworn advertisement for the Communist Party of Greece in red paint on one wall, the building itself serving only to offer obstruction to through traffic, large vehicles in particular.

On the third side, a simple stone dwelling roofed in cracked and faded tile, with an adjacent farmyard, a rock wall enclosing all, including chickens and sheep. Add a goat. Here, too, stands a donkey, two great panniers, heaped with fleece, crisscrossed on his back. By the doorway to this dwelling three old village women labour, each performing her necessary function. All work as one. I have a vague idea of what they are about, as does the donkey that blinks, and periodically shifts hind legs as though affecting poses.



Patience largely. The goat is typically curious.

Now situate the bus I have travelled on, since Rethymnon, between the two larger establishments, allowing me a full view of the little square and the farm and its inhabitants. Call the driver Captain, for he is commander supreme of his prideful ship, he who navigates the tortuous roads now with daring, now with caution, now with klaxon blaring. Captain exchanges words with some aged villager leaning on a long crooked stick.

At the rear of the bus, three travellers eat cheese and break bread; they have Union Jacks on their backpacks. They embarked at Episkopi and have measured the curves and terrors of the mountain road with Oooh's and Aaah's, and "That's a one, a two, or a three *ikon* corner."

Captain's assistant, the second mate, functions as ticket taker, baggage handler, window wiper, cigarette lighter, traffic controller. He now leans out the front door of the bus yelling "*Elas! Elas!*" at the driver of a three-wheeled Zundaar, a much maligned little vehicle, packed with gravity-defying logic: its cargo box a mass of red plastic crates containing empty wine bottles, the whole looking as though it recently escaped from Pandora's amphora to plague contemporary travellers. A sense of excess exists here, a sense of going beyond reasonable limits, necessity notwithstanding. At any other time it might have been oranges or pomegranates or containers of olive oil or terracotta contrivances. The cab of the Zundaar is green and gritty, looking like a tired little bug. Inside sits a woman, a wife. She with her small child gets out to stand by her husband, a man cursing his fate, the condition of the road, the mechanical failings of his means, and indeed his own ineptitude.

Blocked, therefore, the road to the right, the better part of it at any rate, the one that leads to Chania.

To the left, on the third approach to the square looms a weary Volvo diesel, the first in a

line of military vehicles, a convoy returning to Souda. As it rolls ahead slowly, its klaxon having sounded inexorable approach, a soldier in grey-green fatigues jumps down from among those who sit crouched under the tarpaulin smoking cigarettes; he waves both his arms out before him like a matador without a cape. A collective cheer arises from the back of the lorry. A heated exchange ensues.

The donkey, all ears, ears as responsive as radar, lets out a forlorn wail. The old women, momentarily distracted, return to their task.

A black Mercedes with tinted windows and dented right front fender glides up in front of the Zundaar. Within, an impatient driver and one other. The horn registers a higher pitch and quality, but even its elegance inspires no movement.

Up behind the bus runs a big, beautiful road bike and, on it, two riders, like one, a leather pack between them. The "one, two, three *ikon*" girls wave excitedly. There is recognition. There is an audience.

Captain sounds the klaxon. From out of the café tumble two young men. One is a lanky youth with long blond locks; the other is dressed in denim and in his struggles manages to purchase tickets. They appear to be inebriated. High on the events unfolding, one of them brays. It is the one with long blond locks; it is a convincing exhibition; and it is laughable.

"*Elas! Elas!*" calls the driver, tossing out a cigarette impatiently and revving up the engine. "Get two more *ikons* ready," says one of the girls when a billow of black diesel exhaust envelops the bikers.

THE CAPTAIN LOOKS AT ME IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR as though I am the culpable one here. I look out the window past my own reflection across the narrow gap to focus on the three crones, who are huddled together now, watching.

The bus edges out, inches forward into the narrowest of spaces, shaking and shimmying.

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The Zundaar, pushed impatiently forward, lurches into a pothole filled with water, challenges the vertical, flips over to an angle of about forty-five degrees, cases catapulting into the road: crash, splash, and chaos.

It is all so inevitable this cacophony of confusion.

The motorbike pulls out from under the poisonous, black cloud, wheels past the bus, slaloms awkwardly through the crates, bottles, glass, and water, glances off the rock wall, and hurls its riders into the farmyard, one in the prone position, the other prostrate before the goat. The chickens scatter asquawk, the sheep skipping about in pursuit of the chickens. The goat dances delightedly. The donkey brays. The old women cross themselves three times and spit.

There is no death in this drama, only more delay, but somewhere in a neighbouring village, or perhaps here, flowers grow to be picked, another candle begins to taper, more olive oil is being pressed and soon to be blessed, an artisan fits together the sections of a portable roadside shrine, and another *ikon* artist in Chania paints golden halos around the heads of Saint Nicolas and Agia Pareskevi. In the green room of inevitability, Persephone arranges her hair. ■

– *Reed Stirling*

## Walking on water

Journeys, like artists, are born and not made. A thousand different circumstances contribute to them, few of them willed or determined by the will ... whatever we may think.

They flower spontaneously out of the demands of our natures ... and the best of them lead not only outwards in space, but inwards as well. Travel can be one of the most rewarding forms of introspection ...

These thoughts belong to Venice at dawn ...

– Lawrence Durrell, *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus*

THE TRAIN STOPPED IN PADUA TO LET OFF SOME locals. They looked in as they passed our compartment.

“Touristi,” they said with self-satisfied smugness.

Welcome to Venice.

All we are at this moment seems suspended in time. We are carried forward on a journey with no apparent control. Our trip was to take just under three hours. It turned into five. The promised first-class dining car must have been left in Milan. Lunch became rolls, plastic-packaged cheese, and apples saved from our hotel breakfast.

A long, thin isthmus of road and railway track attaches Venice to the mainland. Around us is the Adriatic. In the distance the picture book antiquity of the city begins to reveal itself through a haze. As we draw closer and look back through the smog, we see a refinery on the other shore. There is no beauty in the contrast.

Are we travellers or tourists? In our minds we are the former. To the people of the places we visit, we are the latter. It is not hard to tell. Standing on the steps of Termini Santa Lucia trying to decipher the map in your expensive guidebook brands you instantly. Asking locals

for directions to your hotel in clumsy Italian confirms it further. If you are struggling with suitcases in the heat of the day, a tired, drawn look on your face, trying to move yourself and your belongings somewhere, but you're not sure where, you are marked. You are a tourist. You have not yet earned the right to be called traveler. Perhaps that will come later when you learn how to be invisible in a strange place.

Just outside Termini Santa Lucia, Ponte degli Scalzi spans the Grand Canal.

There are steps on this arched bridge that force you to drag your luggage, *bumpity-bump*, up one side and bounce it down the other. Hard work on a hot day, especially when other tourists are watching.

On the other side of the bridge, Santa Maria di Nazareth, or, as the locals call it, Scalzi, after its barefoot Carmelite Friars, rises on the bank of the Grand Canal. On its steps sits a wiry old man who is well into his wine. Dressed in a striped gondolier's shirt, ragged scarf, beads and a dirty captain's hat, he happily berates passing tourists. Some walk in wide arcs to avoid him. Others pause to take his picture, oblivious to curses they don't understand but find beautiful just the same.

One reads a map of Venice like a poem. *Fondamenta, Calle, Canale, Campi, Salizda, Sestiere, Rio, Ruga, Riva*: music in a maze of passages, a dialect of direction through a labyrinth of islands, the language of watery thoroughfares narrow lanes, and slim canals, all reflecting water and light. The names are meant to make you feel the cycles of time and tides uniting, revealing islands of man's design. And this is what makes Venice magical.

Away from the water, there are slim walkways that never fail to lead you to a smile. Just when you feel you are lost, the claustrophobia pushing down on you vanishes in the open space of

a simple, unexpected *corte*, shaded with trees, dappled with sunlight, beckoning with benches – a postcard moment. This is your cue to sit and do what every tourist is compelled to do, search your street map to find out where you really are.

The cries of vendors lead us to the fish market. Under canvas canopies, neatly stacked on ice are all manner of seafood. Eels are peeled, stripped of their skin, and stacked for sale. Shellfish, flat fish, fat fish, ugly fish, fish we have never seen before lie with octopus, squid, and scampi. Our senses are assailed by smell, sight, and sound. Venetians haggle with fishmongers. Scurrying from stall to stall with cameras clicking, tourists shop for memories.

In contrast to the everyday reality of the market are the shops on the Rialto Bridge hawking blatantly obvious, obnoxious, over-priced souvenirs that must be an embarrassment to the Venetians. Yet the tourists are not embarrassed to take them home.

Piazza San Marco is packed with tour guides leading with unopened umbrellas raised above their heads. Ragged, plodding lines of Europeans, Asians, students, even Italians circle the umbrellas when they stop at some site of historical or artistic significance.

There are small *Palm Court* style quartets at the four corners of the square: under the canopies, white-shirted musicians play waltzes, music from *Phantom of the Opera* or *The Godfather*, and cheesy Italian pop tunes from everywhere in Italy but Venice.

Relaxing on stone steps under a portico, we take advantage of the shade and try to separate ourselves from the hordes of our fellow tourists filling the square. A small girl throws pieces of brioche at persistent pigeons. The wings of the incoming make a whistling sound that sends the others scrambling as they swarm the crumbs.

We go to Harry's Bar to escape the congestion of the square. You would hardly find it if

## homeplate

you weren't looking. There, at the end of Calle Vallaresso, just before the Grand Canal, is a simple door with the name etched in the window. The place appears small on the outside. Inside, it is cozy, with tables tightly laced together around its famous bar.

Our table is next to a wealthy British couple who appear to be regulars. Behind us, a rich American couple. The man uses a throat microphone to carry on a conversation. His companion, every inch the wealthy American socialite, speaks Italian to the waiters. We eavesdrop as they talk of art galleries and exhibitions and who brought their "only adequate" chef with them to Venice.

The waiters are straight out of *Casablanca*: white dinner jackets with white bow ties. They are attentive and obviously used to serving the rich and famous – which we are not. It is the most we've ever paid for lunch in our lives.

San Marco is sinking. Could it be because of the weight of the crowds in the square? Actually, the tide is coming in off the Adriatic, creeping up between the stones of the Piazza. Tourists are forced to walk around the puddles.

As we stand in line to enter the Basilica, we have to step up onto a makeshift bridge, because water is everywhere. It finds its way into the foyer of the Church. You walk in it to get to the souvenir stand. There is something strange about the sight and sound of tourists sloshing around in a holy place. You would think St. Mark might petition heaven for some miracle to turn back the sea and save his church.

Venice in the evening is enchanting. Watercraft constantly gliding, a ballet troupe of boats, illuminated to be noticed, dancing on a dark surface. Water ... when you're walking at night, its dampness finds you. The only lights, high on the corners of old buildings, act as beacons as you feel your way across the wet, glistening cobble-

stones. Dampness diffuses the light.

At night, Venice is also sinister. Darkness makes the faded street signs harder to read. Besides, they are meaningless, since shadows mask anything that might be recognizable. At every turn, you hesitate before deciding on the direction. As you listen to the echo of footsteps behind, your only fear is of not finding your way. Venetians pass you with a sly smile. They know you are lost and confused. If you asked them for directions, their answers would be simple, but you still wouldn't understand them. That's your fault. Not theirs

In the tiny chapel of San Giovanni Evangelista, Tintoretto's *Crucifixion* looms large upon the wall. An old man given to the church looks into my eyes.

"You are Italian. I can see."

Offering his hand, he speaks to me as if I were his son. I am only someone who will listen while he tells me every detail of everything he watches over, of its history and why the paintings are so. And of the stories the paintings tell. And of the reasons for the craftsmanship in the carvings of wooden pews and marble reliefs in the small church, on a small street in Venice. Not a Duomo, Basilica or Cathedral, but once the simple church of storied men, now in the care of a simple man who speaks to me in a language I should know, because he believes we are the same. And that I understand.

I did not come to Italy to find my roots. I came because I was born Italian and grew up Canadian. Because I didn't realize what *being Italian* meant in any sense. When you're raised as an Italian-Canadian, the influence of both cultures does not make either pure. Impressions during my Italian youth formed some attitudes, habits, and beliefs. People I grew up with, Italians I lived, worked, and played with, all contributed to my personal concept of *Italian-ness*.

But was it accurate? When this old man

looked into my eyes and said, 'You are Italian,' his words resonated to the depths of my soul. *Anima*. When he smiled and offered his hand, it was the connection I had been looking for. And it was humbling. But it was an affirmation. It didn't matter that I spoke his language poorly. What counted was the recognition, the confirmation.

You have to be Italian to understand.

At the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, the Orchestra di Venezia is giving a concert. Musicians in period costumes perform Mozart, Vivaldi, Pachelbel, Albinoni, and Boccherini on period instruments. From the Balletto Veneziano, two couples dance and a *commedia dell'arte* clown plays to the audience, trying, with paper flowers, to win the hearts of two young women.

The acoustics in the long, cavernous Great Upper Hall of the Scuola are excellent. Thick drapery hangs heavy on the windows. Tintoretto was a Brother at the Scuola. His generosity is evident in the massive canvases that cover every wall. Inlaid marble floors, a carved marble altar, frescoed ceilings, the long, winding marble staircase – all take you back to a time when this was commonplace. When men wore wigs and danced with affected, feminine gestures that spoke volumes to those who understood, in salons and halls as grand as this. There was such a time. And it lives again for us, tonight, at a concert in Venice.

Next morning we wake to thunder. The lightning over the Adriatic can only be imagined, because our window is shuttered. Rain falls on it outside. Voices of children in their innocence rise from the street. In these waking moments, they echo, speaking to us of far-away places. Footsteps can be heard on the cobblestones but no cars. That is the strange and wonderful sound of Venice. A sound that trails off naturally into silence the

farther you are from the Grand Canal. Water surrounds us, swallowing silence, giving back a sound of its own. Water is the traffic noise we are unfamiliar with.

This morning we are sailing for Salute, the Vaporetto landing across from San Marco. In Dorsoduro we walk quayside along Fondamenta Zattere. As we look across the Canale to the island of Guidecca, the light of midmorning plays at painting pictures. Pointillism blends into portraits, constantly changing with the movement of sun, sky, cloud, mist and water. Waterbuses crossing between shores appear to have been rendered by Monet. Canal-side cafes artfully arrange themselves on the mind's canvas. Weatherworn facades become backdrops, awash with the shadows of the day. Churches shape the horizon. Looking out across the water is like looking at a palette on which light and colour have been mixed, blended, and then splashed with abandon on the scene unfolding. Transformations in time indelibly painted on your memory.

Venice this evening *is* enchanting. We have no destination in mind, content to follow a path wherever it leads. Discovery is our only goal. On this our last night, we find ourselves in a *corte* well away from the tourist centre. Taking an outside table at a small trattoria, we order dinner and settle in to watch the Venetians hurrying by. The sound of shopkeepers closing up echoes in the empty streets. Their day is ending. Our stay is ending.

Train travel teaches lessons. Lesson one – arrive at the terminal hours early so that you have time to deal with the little surprises that inevitably happen. Lesson two – improvise on the surprises. Lesson three – refuse to be treated like a tourist.

We hold tickets to Florence, First Class. This matters little to the bored, impatient man



## homeplate

behind the glass who says the same thing to everyone. “Full.” It’s Friday. All of today’s trains to Florence are full. “Go to Bologna,” is the alternative he offers. Obviously, pre-booked Eurostar tickets don’t impress anyone. “Go to Bologna,” means we have twenty minutes to catch the Bologna train. Once there, we’ll have a mere ten minutes to transfer to the Florence Eurostar.

As we run for the platform, we pray that everything is on schedule. We are leaving Venice on a train of confusion, with as much uncertainty as when we arrived.

This underlines a truth few travellers realize. Those infamous Italian civil servants set your timetable. Whatever freedom of choice you thought you had is conditioned by an indifferent system that always wins. You only have to enter the Venice terminal to understand.

Travel forces you to deal with discoveries about yourself. You have no choice but to shake

off established patterns of everyday life. There is no place for undiscovered cracks in a relationship. If your relationship is sound, it will get stronger, deeper, richer, more mutually supportive with each passing destination. You are alone together. Travel gives couples time and opportunity to become what they thought they were.

There is some solace in talking to other travellers. Although train conversations last only as long as your next destination, they are full of stories, personal revelations, travel mishaps and recommendations. They end with smiles and best wishes, always bittersweet, because you part friends, brothers and sisters of circumstance, who will never meet again.

We leave Venice the way we came, on a train, crossing water, once again the willing victims of circumstance. ■

– *Ed Nanni*

## Brick Books at 35

ONE DAY IN 1966, A FEW WORDS OF A POEM I HAD READ FOR A CLASS IN MODERN literature sprang into my mind with such insistence that I had to stop what I was doing, head for the library of the school where I was teaching, and look it up. It was Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Spring and Fall: to a Young Child," a poem as beautiful as it is bleak. Discovering that I suddenly *needed* that poem was a revelation to me, almost a conversion experience. I seem to hear *Amen* from all the others involved in Brick Books. Nobody spends decades publishing poetry without having been grabbed by poetry for good.

Now let me tell you how to fall into publishing poetry without even trying, just the way I did. First, hang out with friends who've started a publishing house and watch with interest while they publish their first books. North of London, Ontario, this is, so you should probably move there. Anyway, you're watching and applauding these folks in their brave and risky publishing endeavour. One has been a teacher, the other a psychiatrist, and they've dropped those careers to live with writing. *But*. The estranged wife of the psychiatrist has had no revelation concerning poetry. She wants custody of their two kids and alimony based on the salary of a shrink. The divorce judge agrees with her. You don't, and you make your sense of outrage clear to your friends. So when they make the agonizing decision that they have to vanish, mostly for the sake of the kids, and ask you to watch over their publishing venture, how can you say no? Don't say no, friends, not even in this vicarious adventure.

All you are asked is to be a custodian. Store the existing books, sell the odd book if anybody wants one. Oh, and go ahead and publish a book yourself, if you'd like. Sure. You have a full-time job and it certainly isn't a nine-to-five. So much for that idea.

You can probably hear another *but* coming. With it, I slide back into the first person, sincerely hoping you'll stay with me. *But*. It wasn't long before I found myself reading poems like this one, in a wonderful manuscript by Colleen Thibaudeau called *10 Letters*:

Place was that piece of ground between house and swing,  
yielding to the foot,  
covered with reddened strawberry leaves

---

[From a speech delivered at the Brick Books 35th Anniversary Party, which took place on October 13, 2010, at Mitzi's Sister in Toronto.]

and that small vine that isn't wintergreen.

Among the cedars, some of them struggling still like old limbo  
dancers,

covered with a lighter green lichen,

there on the day that William Faulkner died I came and stood  
and even if I had not willed it so, down my head would have  
gone down,

thinking definitely about something:  
God, how I love this little part of ground.

Somebody should make a nice chapbook of fine poems like that, I thought.  
Who?

Oh.

So *10 Letters* became the first Brick Book, in a sense, though it came out  
under the imprint of Nairn Publishing House.

And – *whoosh* – thirty-five years later, here I am, summer of 2010, now  
blessed with Brick Books colleagues, scattered from sea to sea, who are equally  
devoted to poetry; here I am picking up Julie Bruck's *Monkey Ranch*, one of  
the fourteen publishable manuscripts on this year's short list, and reading the  
first poem. It's called "Love to But":

Our very important neighbour's  
fused to his new Cingular headset:  
Now he can walk and talk.  
*Blah-blah-blah* goes Mr. DeBroff.  
This makes it hard to hear  
even the packs of feral dogs  
howling all night, or the cats  
doing what they do in our dark  
fog-bound city gardens.  
The world needs its chemistry  
checked, that's for sure.  
The poisoned river is high,  
fast at this time of year.  
Fences between houses are down,  
and we all like our boundaries.  
Pharmacies? Closed.  
All essential services, shut.

Time to fetch my daughter  
from a birthday party which  
ended in 1963, but she runs late.  
Sometimes, I have to pry her  
from the door-jamb, carry  
her to the car like a small,  
warm totem pole with sneakers.  
A yellow Hummer slipped  
through a crack in our street  
on Tuesday: not seen nor  
heard from since, despite  
the crowd of looky-loo's,  
still milling around out there.  
Love to. But these are  
strange times. I could  
expire before I meet  
you at the gate. Yessir.  
Love to. Toothache.  
Can't.

Discovering pure leaping poems like that is one of the greatest joys I know.

Together with our poets, and with readers and listeners like yourselves, we at Brick Books are a family, one of many extended families in the arts spread across the country and over the globe. Our responsibility is to be custodians of culture, carrying it forward, keeping language and meaning lively and sharp. This is no hobby, no mere indulgence in private joy. It's an investment in the life of the spirit, which we humans neglect at our peril. I'm very glad that it's also a pleasure, and I'm very happy to welcome you to this celebration: thirty-five years and counting.

KATIE DRUMMOND

## The launch

I am here, I am home, I am thousands of miles away  
as your spirit is read aloud out of tune I am sure.

I will miss this milestone post-mortem and I  
will not celebrate, bringing you back to life  
with red wine store-bought cheeses the threadbare  
carpet of a library basement. Such is the sorry scene  
of your resurrection.

May they celebrate and read you well,  
and your own voice echo in the room,  
into the airwaves that will travel to me  
that will travel through time, through space,  
to always keep your daughters warm,  
keep us from dying like you did.  
Alone on a cold night.



## Not cold like Canada, mon

DIS IS DE HOUSE DAT JOHN BUILT,

dat John built, dat John built,

an John is my Daddy,

my Daddy, my Daddy an I am helping.

"Please help by sitting over there. Over there! Right NOW!"

"Ok, mon."

He's sweaty an strong building de house for Mrs Williams 'cause we're leaving an she was nice except when she was lickin Sissy, but Mummy said no beatings here, so all de pickney dem play in our yard an den Sissy comes an stands at de gate with a pipe in her hand an calls come home, come home, but no one is fooled, not even me. Mrs Williams forgot an she chased dat bad boy Lenard around de kitchen.

"You heat Masa Nelson's rice, mon. I going give you a lick, heating Masa's rice."

"He was hungry," Mummy says.

"Don't call me Masa," Daddy says.

An Lenard, he howling behind Daddy, holding his bum-bum, an Mummy made Mrs Williams promise again, an she did 'cause she's really nice, an she saved my sister's life 'cause Mummy left her on de changer. It's way high up an De Banana rolled over for de first time ever when Mummy wasn't looking 'cause I was stuck to de skeeter net on my bed, an De Banana rolled an fell an Mrs Williams tried to catch her, but her hands were wet an De Banana slipped through, but it was okay 'cause De Banana's head landed on Mrs Williams's toes an dey broke, but De Banana was saved, praise De Baby Lawd Jesus, mon.

I didn't get into trouble for all de gum dat I chewed up before my nap. It's Double Bubble an pink an Nanny sent it to me, an I don't want to share, so I didn't, I didn't. I put all five pieces in my mouth an I couldn't chew, but it got out when I fell asleep.

"Praise De Lawd mon, you didn't swallow an die," Mrs Williams says.

When I woke I stuck to de sheets an de net, but it's ok 'cause De Banana's head didn't split like a melon. Daddy calls her De-Blond-Haired-Blue-Eyed-Banana, but it's too long. Mummy went over de mountain fast for de nuns to help her take De Banana out of her tummy. It was Chewsday an Daddy was at de big school way down de mountain, an I was at Mrs Foster's school way up de mountain an we don't have de phone. Uncle Will an Aunt Marg'ret came an got us 'cause dey have de phone an dey said it's a boy, an Daddy told me he was going in de car to get Mummy an Anthony, but when he came back Anthony was a girl, an Mummy called her Bethany, an she's all red an skinny like a chicken, but Mummy gets vexed with me if I say dat, an Daddy takes me out to de hammock to count stars.

"Let's not bother Mummy," he says.

Mummy's very brave, I heard Aunt Marg'ret tell Uncle Will when dey visit De Banana, an Aunt Marg'ret say Mummy is brave to come to J'aica with a baby in her tummy an now she is tired 'cause De Banana has diaper rash an screams all night.

"It's the cloth diapers," Mummy says.

"Her head is as hard as a coconut," Daddy says.

He's holding De Banana while Mummy unsticks me, an Mrs Williams tries to ice her toes but de ice keeps melting. Mummy cut my hair off, an I was itchy an hot an De Banana was screaming.

"You give the baby the boob," Daddy says. "We'll have a bath."

He took me to de bathroom, an he opened de wata in de bath an put me in, but he left to find more ice for Mrs Williams, an I had to pooh, but de bathtub is bigger than me, an my little chair dat Daddy made me was somewhere else. I called for him, but when he came it was too late.

"Jesus Christ!"

An he picked me up an put me in de toilet with my feet first, an Daddy just take de pooh out, but he can't put de pooh anywhere 'cause I'm in de toilet, an I'm stuck, an he can't lift me out 'cause he has de pooh in his hands, so he gets a newspaper an wraps it up an put it away, an washes his hand in hot wata, which we have 'cause Daddy put wata in a drum on our roof, an it works 'cause de sun is hot, an when's he's clean he gets me out of de toilet an washes me.

"Christ Almighty!"

Is he angry? But he's not, not now. Now he's laughing an can't stop. De tears are rolling an he's laughing hard he can hardly tell Mummy why when she comes running in. He's like dat. First he's angry den he laughs like de time he came home up de mountain an saw me an de others playing de game.

"Flog 'im, mon, flog 'im!"

"My turn now, my turn!"

An I bent over an Shaggy was flogging me good, when Daddy came home.

"Jesus Christ Almighty!"

He snatched me up an ruined de game an I was in bed an heard him telling Mummy, an he was laughing, an she was trying not to.

"Oh, John."

So it was okay, I was still allowed to play with Shaggy which is more fun-fun than playing at De Other Canada Girl's house, it's so big an clean, an no one can have fun, an we're not allowed to play except in her room, but once I made her sneak out an we went to de house on de hill, but we're not supposed to 'cause dere are no bars on de windows to keep de duppies out, but it was de only place no one would see her out of her house an tell on us, so we went to de house. It was full of glass an we had to hide 'cause, even though it wasn't dark, a duppy came an broke more glass. When it was finished it left an we ran an ran, an De Other Canada Girl wouldn't play with me 'cause of doing such a quashie ting, but dat was good 'cause I could tell Shaggy about de duppy an I went down de hill. Mummy an Mrs Williams were scrubbing on de wash boards an Shaggy, he come running really happy, 'cause Daddy gave 'im de

empty bottles to take back for money an 'im could keep de coin.

"Stop your runnin, Shaggy", Mrs Williams says.

But he didn't. He tripped an fell an screamed, his hands an front all full of glass an blood an thank de good Lawd it was Satcherday an Daddy was home so he could take Shaggy to de hospital.

"I should have just given him the money, Gwen."

"It's not your fault, John."

An later when he came home all bandaged up, I went to his old house on poles, an Shaggy was in de big bed by himself an didn't have to share with de oder eight pickney dem. It used to be nine, but Mr an Mrs Doolan, dey didn't have a pickney to love an were sad, an Mrs Williams was nice an gave dem Hildy.

Sissy once got bit on de head by Uncle's Will's mean ole donkey an her whole hair was covered with a big white bandage just like Shaggy's hands, so I had to feed him de pink grater cake Mummy sent him.

"We share it, mon," he says.

"No tanks, mon," I says. My tummy hurt den 'cause I never gave him Double Bubble, an I have a lot an he doesn't, we must share our luck like Daddy does when he makes a hot wata drum for Mr Chin an Mr Chin lets him have de blocks to build de house for Mrs Williams, a house on de ground, but where will de pigs live?

Maybe Mr Williams will let me chop off der heads like de chickens last time, but I don't know 'cause after de house Daddy builds we are going to Canada where I was born but I don't like it even though it's where Nanny is. When I'm dere Mummy says I have to talk proper an not say mon an I have to wear boots an a snow suit like de time Grampa died an it's so cold an de clothes are so tight, I can't move. Nanny an Mummy won't let me just be in my undies even though Daddy stands on his head in his undies all de time doing de yoga. He's 'tating an I shouldn't bother him, 'specially not like de time I poked my finger in de hole in his undies on his bum-bum.

"Jesus!"

He fell over an got mad an den he laughed an couldn't get up an Mummy let me go with Mrs Williams an Sissy to der church in de bush 'cause Sissy needs de Lawd an Mummy was going to de city. She made me a dress an a purse for de coin. Mrs Williams's preacher is Mr Brown, an he's like Daddy except bigger.

"De Lawd Jesus Christ!"

I thought Mr. Brown was angry with De Lawd, but Sissy says no an he wasn't, he just had a big voice dat was good with de singing. A boy came to Sissy after an I was screaming 'cause it was de duppy from de big house an Mr Brown took him inside de church to exercise him, an give him a lick an den he wasn't a duppy any more. Sissy was scared 'cause she do de ting with de boy even though Mummy says she should get married first, but Sissy say it was okay 'cause she take de ice wata after an it freezes de ting. She's afraid she did de ting with a duppy.

"You should just do tings with him at church 'cause no duppy dare go into Mr Brown's church, it has lots of bars," I say.

I like it better than de big church where de teachers go 'cause de principal says we

have a position to keep, but Daddy says he'd rather fix tings, an Mummy makes people give poor people money. De Other Canada Girl says her house is bigger an she has de phone an I'm poor 'cause my Daddy makes my toys an her Daddy buys her tings. Maybe we're poor 'cause Daddy's undies have holes in dem, but Mummy says we get by an when Daddy helps people dey help him an when Daddy isn't fixing tings or teaching, he an I chase de goat dat eats our bushes or when Mummy is napping with De Banana we paint de arinjs on de trees. Arinj is a quashie ting to call dem 'cause dey are green, but dey taste good not like de boiled banana we had to hide.

"Mrs. Williams went to a lot of trouble, but I just can't eat it, it's so mushy and, and ..."

"An what, mon?" I say.

"And grey!"

We couldn't throw it out 'cause Mrs. Williams takes de slops to de pigs an she looks sometimes in de drums so we put it in a bag, in de car, an Daddy forgot an forgot about it until we was at Uncle Will's house an he gave it to Will's pigs an we gave him our goat an some chickens too 'cause we won't need dem in Canada. I had to give De Other Canada Girl my dolly bed dat Daddy made me, even though she's not poor, but I won't give her my house.

"But Sweetheart, we don't have much room in de trunks. Daddy can build you another one in Canada," Mummy says.

"I don't want to go to Canada. I'm vexed with you! I want to stay here an do de ting with Shaggy."

"Oh, Sweetheart."

"Dere's no one in Canada to do de ting with. I want to stay here. I can stay in de new house. Dere's room 'cause Mrs Williams gave Hildy away."

"You shouldn't really say it like that, dear."

"He's my friend. I don't like to do de ting with De Other Canada Girl. She's always vexed with me."

"You should say you like to play with Shaggy."

"Are you crying, Mummy?"

"I don't know."

An Mummy holds me an says I'll find other pickney dem to play with in Canada an another family needs dis house. She's crying, I know it, but she lets me put my dolly house in de trunk, an I'm going to give my little chair to Shaggy, den we took De Banana down to de new house. Daddy's all sweaty an dirty an he's mixing cement with Mr Williams an Mrs Williams is hugging Sissy.

"We have no money, we be poor, but de manners, dey always come tru," she says.

Daddy an Mr Williams start putting de bars he got from Uncle Will for de cow in de windows to keep de duppies out. De Banana is crying an she wants Daddy.

"Hush now, Daddy is building," Mummy says.

"Yeah," I say. He be happy, mon."

## Members of the cast

I steal from our sheets, at twilight,  
Sneak, barefoot, across the rug,  
Softly as a black leopard  
Stalking its own shadow beneath an ivory moon,  
Leave you sleeping in our room,  
Escape, beneath your uneven breathing,  
Like the soul of a spirit recently deceased  
Exiting its vessel, then stretch,  
As my moving silence parts the stale air  
Hovering, like penitents at matins,  
In the hallway at the head of the stairs.

All morning, into afternoon's haze,  
I've chastised myself  
For having taken such pains  
To keep from waking you, ask why  
I wasn't compelled to pause,  
Linger above your delicate fetal shape,  
Run my fingers through your hair,  
Kiss your twitching lids, grasp your gaunt hip  
(Protruding, under the sheet, like a cliff)  
As if to hold on for my precarious existence,  
And say my "God be with you" in person.

Perhaps my urgent retreat  
Was foreordained, in secret, by jinns  
Bent on accomplishing my disappearance  
Or mythological witch-muses  
Conspiring to abduct and seduce me with philters  
Before the sun could intercede  
And regenerate, with reason, my subdued senses.  
More likely, sentenced to exile,  
For my fundamental lack of spontaneity and passion,  
I was reenacting my best scene:  
Romeo fleeing his lover's deathbed.



## The dreaded fugu fish

TORENT WAS TWO INCHES SHORTER TODAY THAN HE HAD BEEN YESTERDAY. FEET TOOK LONGER to hit the floor by his bed. Couldn't see the end of his tie in the hall mirror. Pant cuffs sat on his shoes like a hick in a deer stand. Torent's wife didn't balance on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. Didn't notice. Torent noticed. It wasn't much. Just enough.

The brake pedal of the company car was farther away, floor mat looking up like a confederate. His boss clapped him on the back with ease, and Torent lost the daily basketball game on a missed lay-up.

Torent took the long way home and squinted under the visor. His wife passed the pepper and Torent's sleeve streaked a crease in the mashed potatoes. When he walked up the stairs he tripped more than twice, muttering silently, Torent's wife kneading the line between her brows.

Torent's wife believed she was less beautiful than necessary and never forgot her mother's white teeth and slender fingers, perfect and small next to hers. Torent's wife hid her hands in her pockets and only smiled when someone else did first.

Torent kicked at the tucked sheets, rolling over in the new room at his feet. He wondered if he didn't need to see somebody.

The next morning Torent was four inches shorter than he had been the day before yesterday. Shirt draped over shoulders like false lashes on a lid. Mouth drooped, throat crunching under his tongue. Torent faltered at the bathtub, knees skimming the stop. It was his calves getting shorter, he decided. And his forearms. Torso. It was only that.

Torent's wife edged her way around him at the breakfast table, his eyes small and wandering. Everything was different four inches down. Torent's wife hid her hands under slim thighs and waited for him to smile.

His boss spoke to him too long, shook his hand too long, smiled too long. Coworkers ceased whispering over unfair job promotions, more certain of being heard.

Torent wanted to enjoy his new office but was claustrophobic in its emptiness. He curled up under the desk more comfortably than he would have liked and left before lunch.

His arms ached from stretching to grip the wheel and his neck craned dangerously, a slinky without the bounce.

Torent's wife grasped him tightly and looked into his face from flat feet. He didn't speak the rest of the night, staring at his hands and knees. He wasn't sure he could bear a tomorrow.

Torent's tomorrows came and went and whispers became fact. His boss stopped noticing him, his position was conspicuously unimportant, and the floor under his desk warmer than the chair above.

Torent's wife stared at him with lighthouse eyes, moved the salt and pepper before he asked. His company parking space was in a competitive pool, along with fifty dollars and free lunch with coupon. The car sat motionless, an extension of the house, shiny and clean, tires crisp as cut apple as Torent faded away like a smile falling from a face.

When his wife woke up, she followed her eyes from room to room, repeating his name softly. She cried the rest of the day and returned no calls.

When asked, she said Torent forgot how to love her and found a girl of compromised morals with big white teeth and hands small enough to hold tightly.

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## Carrying packages for strangers

HIS PARENTS WAITED NINE YEARS TO HAVE HIM. SWIRLING THE PALE REMAINS OF ROOT BEER in a plastic cup, sitting beside his mother, fold-out canvas chairs, looking at the sky because there was nothing else to see, he wonders. Billy wonders, not for the first time, what his family had been like those nine years between him and his sisters. All the stuff he hadn't been there for, the old family mythology and the stories his dad told sometimes to make the girls laugh at the memory, but Billy never quite got the jokes.

About how they hadn't needed him, or missed him, or even noticed he wasn't there.

Billy couldn't imagine it; it looked like some other kid's family. So he stopped trying, and closed his eyes, making fireworks rope and skitter and dance across the backs of his eyelids.

His mother was quiet next to him, like she usually was the afternoons he visited from college, drunk with stories he couldn't tell. Instead of stumbling into trouble, making her change the glowing beliefs she had about him, he watches. He likes to watch her face. He's been watching her face for twenty years. He watches her face like she watches the sky, and waits for what he knows will come. Because there are many kinds of smiles. The insincere *wellscreyouanyway*, the *wishiwasanywhereelse*, the *mindonsomethingelsecompletely*, and the *goingalongwithajokeidon'tget*. But there is another kind of smile entirely, one you can't prepare in advance, or fake, one that convinces you briefly but completely of the existence of God and the benevolence of the universe. This is the kind his mother can do, sometimes, and does now. The kind that makes Billy want to take packages abroad for strangers, smoke in gas stations, swallow chewing gum, run down steps with his hands in his pockets, stare at the sun.

She squashes the empty root beer container, placing it next to her chair with an easy motion, soft like air. "They take up less space, flattened," she explains.

From overhead comes the sound of their neighbor's voice being pleased about something private. No words, just an unashamed pulse of sound, pushed out onto the air.

"Ah, well," Billy says. "Don't we all?"

When he visits his mother, he is very happy. Their small talk is small. No souls are

unburdened, no secrets revealed. He is thankful for this. Before, when he saw her everyday, he worried. Coming home from school afternoons, having brushed shoulders with ordinary everyday people, he sometimes had trouble breathing, the contrast between his mother and these others was so sharp, so readily apparent. They were always solid and uncomplicated, a known quantity, whereas his mother was slippery and potentially clinging, like soap. If you touch her, some of her might come off on you.

It's different now. Why, he doesn't know. Maybe the moments they have are too important, too closely held for his mother to fully expose herself. She doesn't want him to look away.

It's not a very reasonable thought. Billy knows this. Watching his mother like he has, every spare second he can get. She must know he couldn't stop seeing her if he wanted to. It had been a pastime of his, but sometime, before he was allowed anywhere by himself, when he had to ask permission for his friends to come out and play, it became historical, measured in past and present. She had always been his mother, fixing lunch and dinner, warning against blindness, one must always be observant. And he was, truly and honestly, even for things he couldn't see. He listened to her, his first love, and worked to make her happy. Mothers needed keeping. But this day, this one day, she found a box, somewhere high up, taped and ragged, labelled and crossed out, over and over, and smiled to see it still existed. It was the smile Billy waited for.

A bundle of yearbooks and dark pictures, thankyou cards and deflated balloons spilled onto the floor, shining like an overturned jewelry box. He felt honoured, privileged to be beside her, allowed to see something she loved that he couldn't understand. Picking a rumpled polaroid out of the assemblage, his mother held it tight, scanning slowly. He rested his elbows on her knees, looking up. "Who is that?"

She didn't speak for years, eyes filled with something Billy couldn't place. She breathed like she'd been holding one breath her whole life. "Me." It was suddenly like those kitsch Catholic cards, the ridged plastic ones that, when you tilt them, show another picture behind the first, so you can make it look like Jesus is blessing you. To Billy it felt like everything had been tilted to reveal this whole other picture, which had existed, just out of sight, all along.

It was only once, only once, before Billy wrote things down, to remember for posterity's sake. Because anything that happens just once has a kind of lightness about it, like it might well not have happened at all. More than once makes things real, and then you have to think about them. That lick of chill.

He only saw his mother's eyes like that a moment in an afternoon, but he's almost certain she was someone else, an instant, a flash of light, someone she was before he was real, growing inside her. A life apart from his own, from hers with him in it. Before she ever noticed he wasn't there.

Watching his mother now, he remembers. She looks young and pale as if she's normally kept in a box underground. "Well, time to go inside." She smiles. "Nature abhors a vacuum, and all that."

Billy pinches together a fallen leaf, fragile as nothing. It's a shame Nature has these

inclinations, otherwise vacuums might live out their whole lives in safe obscurity.

She's about to move when Billy puts his head against her shoulder, weighing her down, an involuntary reflex, like breathing.

She stills, resting her hand on his cheek, warm and beating. Even with her two lives, neither of which he can ever grasp onto, his mother can be happy. Not happy because she's had a good day, or is finally making some money, or has drunk an especially good wine, just happy. And maybe Billy can be happy too. He wonders if feeling everything will be all right is an indication you've finally grown up, or just a sign you're not right in the head. He isn't sure and, unusually, he's just fine with that. Because knowing would take the fun out of it, like when you're reading a good book and someone says, "Oh that's a great one – did he get hit by the train yet?"

He wants to tell his mother that after he left, after he went to be on his own in a new city and a new life, all he could think of, every day for months on end, was her – , who had always believed in things that were more real than true – holding him, still too much of a little boy to fill her lap, and whispering as if it were a prayer, "You are worth every day we waited for you."

He wants her to know she is every good thing he could imagine, every thing perfect and clean, what God intended his world for. He keeps his head on her shoulder, feeling the mechanisms that are his mother working, lacing his hands under the damp edges of her hair.

"What's wrong?" she says softly against his ear.

"Nothing." Billy shivers. "Everything."

His mother smiles; he can feel it against him. "Well, that narrows it down, then."

After a while, their breathing synchronizes.

LEIGH KOTSILIDIS

## Domestic

A persistent westerly wrestles  
the cotton of Kelvin's pillow, irks  
the hammer's handle in his ear,  
yanks the strands that hook  
the hippocampus.

On his forehead, anger barely bulges,  
instead, it grows five hundred metres  
*into* his brain, one hundred kilometres  
wide, festers against the insides  
of his lobes.

Kelvin is about to explode  
when she lets up,  
and anger piled as one colossal wave  
sloshes through the caverns  
of his cranium.

The tools she's used to pick  
his brain, every penny she's given  
for his thoughts, she watches  
wash away. She doesn't linger  
long enough to learn:

A kilometre up the slope  
of his skull, whales are stranded,  
ships are split, sleepy towns  
have slipped to the floors  
of fissures.



## Vodka

VLADIMIR REALIZED HE WAS IN SERIOUS TROUBLE WITH HIS MOTHER, WHICH COULD MEAN bodily injury to himself. One reason he feared trouble was that he was extremely late for supper, which would compound the earful and ominous warnings and warnings, if not whacks, of her broomstick. Besides, he was certain that she would have chores for him to complete. Also, he would be expected to eat perogies for supper, along with wallopings great dollops of sour cream, fat chunks of sausage and fried eggs and bacon, and homemade bread, which was, he would have conceded, collectively, probably better than the double cheeseburger, french fries, and strawberry milkshake that he had just eaten at the fast-food concession of the racetrack. But another supper meant he would have to find the appetite, make room in his already full, bloated stomach, for the supper she had undoubtedly cooked.

In the fading light of the long summer evening, going from the racetrack to his mother's house – in the part of the city that had been dubbed, as a consequence of demographic movements and ethnic population migrations, a new part of Southeast Asia – he searched for an original excuse he could tell her. He was sitting at the back of the bus, minding his own business, the racing paper open in his lap, when a group of highschool seniors – who were extolling the virtues of beer – loudly, uproariously, took their seats across from him. He personally could not understand the appeal beer had for young people. He thought beer crude, vulgar; nonetheless, he couldn't help speaking up, as the driver drove the double-length, natural-gas-powered bus along the circuitous route to the subway station, about an alcoholic beverage – clear, smooth, and dry – that these young people might find more agreeable to the palate: a fine spot of vodka, perhaps simply mixed with tart cranberry juice.

The taller and darker of several girls suddenly interjected (after all, the teenagers had been discussing who would be responsible for buying them beer, not a six-pack, but a case of twenty-four): "Oh, okay, if it's so good, will you buy me a bottle?"

Vladimir was beginning to regret not having minded his own business. Moreover, he realized that he might have committed a *faux pas*. He looked around to see whether anybody had witnessed his transgression – which could cost him his landed immigrant status – aside from the bus driver, who may have overheard. But the driver probably didn't care: he was talking animatedly with a woman passenger; and other than these two, there were no mature adults on the bus except for Vladimir himself; and the subject of his maturity, he figured, was certainly subject to debate.

"Well, how old are you?" He asked this skeptically.

"Seventeen?" she replied, with that querying, upward lilt. He had no reason to disbelieve her. "And you?"

Not only did he not want to tell her his age, her asking seemed impertinent. Besides, the answer embarrassed him, and her friend, or boyfriend, was looking at

him jealously.

Why? If only the boyfriend knew him, his circumstances, he would have realized that there was, strictly speaking, nothing to be jealous of. Only: circumstances – such as the death of his twin brother from alcohol poisoning; situation – a forty-year-old unemployed stone carver living with his mother; relationship – a mother overprotective of her son because she was a widower and had already lost to drink the two other men in the family; personalities – to pity for their bathos.

Yes, he would have realized that there was nothing. Nobody among them henceforth would feel ashamed, belittled. But Vladimir doubted the kid and his friends were capable of such sentiments, anyway. His imagination had made too many concessions. Still, he didn't want to show this group, these teenagers, or any of the other passengers on the bus, that he was embarrassed by his own age, though he was, in reality.

"Forty," Vladimir replied and took a large breath.

"Wow? That's amazing? I would have thought you were, at the most, thirty? You certainly don't look forty?"

That was a comment Vladimir often heard, and he didn't know quite what to make of it.

"So, like, when can you get me a bottle?"

"A bottle? A bottle of what?"

Speechless, he didn't know what to make of the request, either. What had he gotten himself into? Evasion, that was the solution: he could get off the bus at the next stop. But then he would have to walk a long way through a crime-ridden neighborhood to reach home – which, however, was also located in a crime-ridden neighborhood. How had he gotten himself into this messy business? This fine looking young woman, or teenage girl, asking him to buy her a bottle of liquor – that was illegal. He could resort to deceit, deception, but, ever since his recovery from alcoholism, he'd found it extremely difficult to lie again to anybody. Or, at least, he didn't think he could lie and keep a straight face.

"Here's my cell phone number?" she said, just before she got off the bus with her friend. "Call me when you get the bottle? Try to make it for Friday next weekend, that's the long weekend?" She was thinking ahead, and he was still wondering what he had gotten himself into. He took the number and crumpled the paper into his pocket, hoping she wouldn't try to call him. For one thing, he had vowed, because of his abstinence and abstemiousness, never to walk into a liquor store again, to avoid the severe physiological, neuropsychological, and social consequences of alcoholism.

At home, his mother criticized him for arriving late and demanded to know where he had been. He merely said he had gone to the theatre. She pointed at a dinner plate wrapped in aluminum foil. He was expected to wash the dishes, clean the counters, countertops, and kitchen table, and sweep the floor. As he later went to sleep – his mother banging together pots and pans, in the kitchen, at three in the morning, to make perogies – he found himself fantasizing about the young woman, about his hands caressing her hips, groping and fondling her plump breasts. He thought he was

turning into a dirty old man; meanwhile, his penis had become very firm and erect.

The following morning, his mother shouted that he had a phone call from some girl. Thinking himself the victim of a cruel and thoughtless prank, he took the cordless handset upstairs to his bedroom, fearful his mother might be listening on the extension.

“Darling, where’s that bottle of vodka you promised me?”

He looked at the spines of the science-fiction paperbacks on his bookshelf, remembering the several bottles that had been sitting, for the past several years, in the bottom of a beer cooler in the garage.

“Hello?”

“Yes. I have it with me now.”

“Fantastic?”

“Do you want me to mail it to you?”

“No? No?” She nibbled on something – a chocolate chip cookie, perhaps. “Not at all?” He heard her chewing on the cookie crumbs. “I want you to come here, to my house, and deliver it to me personally? Can you do that for me?”

He thought for a moment and cleared his throat. “Don’t you have” – he tried to put it delicately, imagining her parents’ disbelief at the sight of their daughter with a man more than twice her age – “a roommate?”

“My parents are gone to cottage country for the weekend? I want you to come to my house and tell me more about this wonder liquor, vodka? Okay?”

“I’m not sure there’s much more to tell.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll think of something?”

She gave him her address, and Vladimir, still afraid that his mother might be listening on the extension, hastily committed the street and lot number to memory. He went into the garage, found the cooler, and put a bottle of vodka from the old country into his backpack.

HE PEDALED HIS BICYCLE THROUGH THE RESIDENTIAL streets to her house, which was located somewhere south of the expressway that led to the industrial park with the world’s largest tobacco-processing facility. It was hot and humid, and by the time he had managed to pedal and push his bicycle to her place, he felt, feared, that he was on the verge of a heart attack.

She answered the door wearing an unfastened housecoat, which her movements opened to reveal the bikini underneath. Was that lingerie or a swimsuit? He stood there staring. As he was turning around to see whether neighbours were looking on, she took him by the hand. Then she pulled him into the house, practically hauling him upstairs to her bedroom. He felt helpless.

“I’ve got the ice and glasses all ready?”

Putting down the vodka bottle, with its Cyrillic label, upon the two condoms in their foil wrapper, beside a bottle of water-based lubricating jelly, a carton of chilled orange juice, and the glasses, he felt the lumps – in his pants and throat – grow. It appeared she had considered every contingency, every possibility.

The girl was wild, oversexed. The situation was out of control, he feared, his feelings of helplessness more and more mixed with sexual arousal. She poured the vodka straight over the crushed ice and started to drink it as if it were iced tea. Then she was all over him.

“What about Muscles?” he asked.

“Mark? What are you worried about him for?”

“I had a friend once –”

“Wait a minute? You had a friend?”

“That was before he took a gunstock to another friend, because he was sleeping with his girlfriend.”

“Mark is just a friend, period.”

The girl was a visual delight, a catch. She had wit, a sparkling intelligence, and a sense of humor; she was wild, whereas he was meek and shy; she had an athletic body and a fine face, whereas he was thin, balding, jagged. But she seemed to be on the point of becoming – if she wasn’t already – an alcoholic, judging from the way she drank. After all, it took one to know one.

She pushed him back and started to unbutton his clothes. He listened to the kids fighting and swearing on the street outside.

IN THE MORNING, THE BATHROBE OVER THE bikini again, she cooked him French toast, brewed him fresh coffee. Then she directed him to the shower, telling him to hurry because her friends would be arriving at noon.

She would have asked him to stay and meet her friends, she explained, but her friends were so naive? He understood, didn’t he?

He was more worried about what his mother was thinking. He hurried home, trying to concoct a plausible explanation.

THAT EVENING HE DID SOMETHING that he had not done in several years: he got drunk. Then he called her up.

“I want to apologize for taking advantage of you.”

“You didn’t take advantage of me?”

“No. I’ve no excuse.”

“No excuse for what?”

“I’m older and I exploited you. I took advantage of the situation.”

“What advantage? What situation?”

“I should have known better than to exploit –”

“No? No? Apology not accepted? I should be apologizing? I took advantage of you?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“And the fucking was fine?” Her frankness caused his face to turn crimson, as he prayed to all the angels and saints his mother wasn’t listening. “I mean, you could use a little practice – ?”

“I’m sorry –”

“No reason to be sorry?”

“But –”

“That’s why I want you to come again tonight and bring another bottle of vodka?”

The cycle had begun anew; he didn’t know what would bring this one to a crashing halt. He recognized the type, but he was also smitten. No, he was in love, and they would both have to learn the hard way, he thought, as he heard his mother calling to him to mow the lawn.

## HEZI

I WAKE UP WITH THE WORD *HEZI* IN FRONT OF ME, IN BRIGHT RED LETTERING ON A BLACK BACKGROUND.

Then the world around comes into view.

*HEZI* – the letters spell out *h - e - z - i* – blaze forth from Rachel’s digital alarm clock. I’m lying on the floor and I’m looking at it upside down.

I get up. Now the clock reads 12:34, but my head still feels *hezi*. I don’t know what *hezi* means, but I know my head feels *hezi*.

So I was sleeping on the floor in Rachel’s room. On the floor, because Rachel was in her bed when I retired at sunrise, and although her bed’s a queen-size, Rachel’s politics are decidedly capitalist when it comes to mattress space. In Rachel’s room, because Rishani was in my room, in my bed, which, by the way, is a single. In my bed, because she passed out there, last night, when the seeds of this morning’s *heziness* were sown. She’s not there now, when I poke my *hezi* head through the half-open door. She’s gone, and the bed’s not made.

Funny. Rishani doesn’t look like the kind of person who wouldn’t make a bed she’d lain in. But I’m a poor judge of character, I’m told.

Tonio tells me I’m a poor judge of character. He’s in the kitchen cooking scrambled eggs. They started out as regular fried eggs, but they wound up as scrambled because Tonio didn’t grease the pan, and he’s using a fork in lieu of an egg-flipper. “I may be a poor judge of character,” I reply, “but you, Antonio, are a culinary imbecile.”

He offers me an egg, but I take one look at the mess he’s made and declare myself a vegan.

I tell Tonio that *hezi* is the word for the day. Then I get a beer out of the fridge. The fridge contains seven eggs, four processed cheese slices, one jumbo carton of reconstituted orange juice, and thirty-eight bottles of beer. Oh, and Rachel has a tub of yoghurt hidden in the back, behind all the beer. She’s the healthy one in the house. I don’t know why she insists on hiding the yoghurt. Tonio believes that yoghurt is just milk that has passed its use-by date, Vladimir is far too lazy ever to open the fridge-door, and I am too much a slave to my sense of decency to touch other people’s tubs of yoghurt.

Tonio asks me what the number for today is. I tell him that’s his department. I only do the words for the day. I don’t want to muscle in on his territory.

In the mellow room – replete with beanbag chairs, Andy Warhol posters and other reminders of better days long since passed – Vladimir, in a corner, is lying in a pretty convincing corpse pose, sunglasses over bloodshot eyeholes, a cigarette pointing upwards from his mouth like a periscope. Bob Marley is singing *Easy Skankin’* on the stereo. I turn it off, because *skankin’* was yesterday’s word. Vladimir doesn’t react.

His cigarette ash is almost to the filter. It looks like a tiny pillar of salt.

I put on *Zeppelin II*. The CD has been used as a beer-coaster once too often, so it stammers a lot, but it's still loud enough, which is the whole point with Led Zeppelin. When Vladimir still doesn't move I politely ask him if he's dead.

"No," he replies, "just mellow. This is the mellow room, and I'm being mellow. Now, kindly remove that cacophonous whiteboy cock-rock from the CD player and put my Rastafarian friend, Bob, back on."

I nod thoughtfully. "*Hezi* is the word for the day," I declare, in a tone in keeping with the gravity of the announcement. He says nothing, but I take his continued corpse-like position for acquiescence, and turn and leave the room, with Robert Plant still wailing about the whole lotta love he's got.

I shuffle up the dilapidated stairwell of this crumbling redbrick house and right there, halfway up, I'm struck by the illuminating notion that maybe my *hezi* feeling can be washed off. So I put myself in line for the bathroom, where Rachel has been locked away since the Renaissance. And I spend a good three-hundred years there, through the Enlightenment and into the Modern era, waiting for a locked door to open, to gain entry to the bathroom that Rachel regards as her own. Her share of the rent covers the bathroom. She only gets access to the rest of the house by virtue of our kindness.

I know she's in there by the smell of the incense and the sound of the whale-call CD she's playing on her mini ghetto-blasters, but she ignores my pleas for entry, which are punctuated by the occasional dull thud of my *hezi* head against the closed bathroom door. Finally, I give up, sit myself down on the floor in the hallway, and start reading a *Beginner's Guide to Origami* that somebody left there. By the time Rachel finally emerges, I'm already halfway through Chapter 7 and believe that I have unlocked the alchemical secrets of folding paper into little cranes, but I cast the book carelessly aside and lunge for the open door before Tonio – whose heavy socked feet are clomping up the stairs – can usurp me as rightful successor to Rachel's claim on the house's only bathroom. Once I'm in, I lock the door and turn up the whale-call CD to drown out Tonio's cries of protest from the hallway. I turn the shower on full and immerse myself under a blast of water. But my efforts are useless, and I am finally forced to the disturbing conclusion that *hezi*ness does not wash off. I give up and open the bathroom door just in time to save Tonio from an embarrassing accident in the hallway.

After that I'm on my computer, disseminating the word of the day to e-mail and chat contacts. While I'm there I take the opportunity to google *hezi*, in the hope of deciphering its true meaning. Depending on who you believe, *hezi* may be a personal defence weapon, a Polish slang term, or a 35 year-old blogger living in Zurich with an interest in religion and computers. My online research proves inconclusive, but my head is as *hezi* as ever.

Then Colin shows up with a couple of pizzas and a 24-pack of beer. Colin is the only person we know with a full-time job, and he knows how to win the hearts of the residents of this houseful of starving students. Even Vladimir rises from the crypt when the smell of pepperoni drifts down the stairs.



SOME TIME PASSES, AND I'M BARELY FINISHED my third beer and my second game of bilateral chess with Erik when night falls on top of us all like a clumsy drunk.

In bilateral chess, you can move the opponent's pieces as well as your own. Colin complains that this renders the game politically unsound, but I say, Isn't it the ultimate in democracy? Where all the pieces are yours? But in a game of two, says Colin, if all the pieces are yours, then none of the pieces are yours. You may have complete control, but you also have no control at all.

Someone has put on a Radiohead CD and placed a bottle of tequila in a challenging position in the centre of the table. According to Farley Mowatt, there is an unwritten law in Newfoundland that states that when a bottle of any spirit is placed on the kitchen table it must quickly be emptied, preferably down the throats of those nearby. Curiously, although our house is located in a large metropolis over a thousand miles away from Canada's east coast, it falls under the jurisdiction of Newfoundland law; probably something to do with the Entanglement Principle. In any case, the bottle is soon empty.

Rishani has reappeared by now and is trying to convince me to join some friends-of-the-earth group she's affiliated with, and I'm listening attentively, although deep down I can't help feeling that anyone who wouldn't make the bed she'd lain in must lack a social conscience and therefore forfeits the right to preach philanthropic concerns.

And finally, when talking becomes too much work, I close Rishani's mouth with my own, in the earnest hope that she might wish to lie in the bed she hasn't made, and in a *hezi* sequence of events we're together in the hallway, on the stairwell, and in Rachel's room, because mine is occupied ... but then she's gone, when she decides that my desires are not what she calls ... philanthropic ... and I'm left lying, contemplating her sweet face with the ever-moving lips, and the delicate art of origami, and bloggers in Switzerland, and how I have all the control and no control at all, and how every day blends into another, with the tequila and the scrambled eggs and Rishani and the unmade bed and the yoghurt and the pillar of salt and the hard wood of Rachel's bedroom floor.

And my eyes are directed towards the clock, blazing forth in bright red digits – 12:34, which, from my point of view, can only be read as *hezi*.

## Settled in

TOM LIES FLAT IN BED, NO PILLOW, THE SHEETS SHOVED DOWN TO THE END.

Rebecca returns upstairs with the coffee, the Sunday paper, still cold from the snow, and the dog, Kumor.

She hands Tom his mug, says, "Careful."

He takes it without sitting up, says, "Always."

Kumor goes to Tom's side of the bed, drops her chin on the mattress, sighs. Tom reaches out and pets her. Like the paper, she has the freshness of winter on her. The dog circles her own bed, then settles into it: an oversized grey pillow with wine trim.

Rebecca sets her mug down on the antique table beside the bed – she restores and refinishes everything herself (she does interior design) – puts the mug on the stone coaster that goes with the "historic" motif of the room. Above the antique dresser on the opposite wall hangs a "Live Love Laugh" sign, a decorative fragment of faux rock purchased from the environmental gift shop in town.

TOM HAD LAUGHED WHEN SHE BROUGHT IT HOME.

She pretended to ignore him, thumped the wall with a closed fist to find the stud, said, "It's nice. I think it's nice."

The nail for hanging the sign was between her teeth, the hammer at her side. She set the sign on the dresser, leaned it against the wall, stepped back, and turned to Tom.

He was smiling.

"Don't laugh," she said.

He looked at her, and without looking away he stepped forward and drew a line with his finger under the word "Laugh".

She pursed her lips and furrowed her brow, put the nail up to his forehead and mimed the hammering.

*Tuck, tuck, tuck.*

Tom let his tongue hang out, dropped his head back, and fell onto the bed, taking Rebecca with him. The way they fell, the hammer drove into his lower back and the nail stuck into his elbow. He didn't notice the nail.

The hammer sent him upright. He arched his back, set his feet on the floor, said, "Jesus," and looked over his shoulder.

Rebecca sat up, laughing, and shimmied to the edge, plucked the nail from his elbow and showed it to him. He turned his arm up expecting blood. There was none. He looked puzzled.

She straddled him and pulled off his shirt, took his arm in her hands and squinted. The pretend doctor. She squeezed the elbow skin. Still no blood. Brought the elbow to her mouth and kissed it, said, "You can't feel anything here," then bit down. "See?"

He grinned. In one motion he peeled off her shirt and bit her neck, gently, so her skin was just between his teeth. Enough to send a shiver.

“You can here,” he said and slid his lips to her ear.

She leaned into him and they fell back again.

They clutched, fingered, and tugged – wrestled with the belts and buttons of jeans. Shoved, pulled, twisted, freed their legs. All skin and sensation, they rolled into each other. Pulled at each other and pushed. In and in and in. Striking the smallest, fullest points of pure feeling.

*Tuck, tuck, tuck.*

*Tuck.*

Kumor, the quiet voyeur, sat up on her haunches, front paws together, and tilted her head to one side, as if she were watching a concert of squirrels from behind a glass door and was expressing her uncertainty about whether the two creatures were in battle or at play.

And in the drunk, fading rush of afterwards, they lay crosswise on the bed, eyes closed, his head over the edge, her face on his chest.

He loved the weight of her.

“Lust. Love. Laze,” he mumbled.

He had to say something. He couldn’t not.

She repeated the words, moved down his body, kissed each syllable.

Then they crawled beneath the sheets, fell into the pillows, and slept – tangled, naked, and drained.

THIS MORNING REBECCA SETTLES BACK into bed, but not for sleeping or for sex.

She sits up, arranges her pillows, sips the coffee, opens the paper, and wonders if he has forgotten.

Tom does not sit up. He sets the mug, steaming, on his naked chest. He keeps a hand close by, just above the sternum. Like the emergency crew in the wings, poised with the stretcher, the fire extinguisher – armed with the experience of saving life.

Without lifting his head he peers down at the mug and sets a finger at the base. The spotter.

He readies himself mentally, runs through the sequence of the stunt in his head. Takes a preparatory breath, careful not to breathe too deeply or too quickly. Takes another for steadiness, for suspense.

Always the performer.

The stadium, he imagines, is packed, hushed.

He breathes in again, deeper this time. The mug leans, teeters.

Gasps from the crowd.

He pauses. Holds. The mug steadies.

Then without warning, he makes the attempt. A deep, chest-lifting inhalation.

He bends his head forward, drops his jaw, juts the bottom lip out. The technique is flawless. The mug lifts, tips, and tings, faintly, the rim against his teeth.

Beautiful. Just beautiful.

There it is, ladies and gentleman. There it is. The perfect no-hand, chest-to-mouth, steaming-coffee sip. Pure perfection. Let's hear it now for the one and only, the incomparable, Tom Bloom.

He takes the mug in his hand – the emergency crew coming in to check vital signs: all clear – and holds it in the air for his fans, closes his eyes to the roar in his head, nods repeatedly in appreciation.

Rebecca, sitting beside him, takes the mug, thinking he wants to sit up and needs both hands for the push.

"Your neck sore or something?" she says.

"Just taking my bow," he says, still lying flat.

"Mm-hmm," she says behind a sip of her own coffee, not pretending to know, showing no interest in wanting to know. Just "Mm-hmm," pushing her brow up the way she does, taking another sip.

Tom sits up.

"You should use a pillow," she says. "It's not good for you to lie flat like that."

He says, "It's comfortable."

She says, "I don't know how."

All of Rebecca's pillows are in place. A decorative stone and wine coloured one with tassels for her to lean on (she is practical too), a regular white one for sleeping doubled over for her head to rest against, and one in her lap like a desk, the *Homes* section spread open on it.

She's reading an article called "Escape From the City" about Port Perry, the town they live in.

They do not call it *their* town.

They argue about this.

TALK OF THE NEW SUPERSTORE HAD brought about the following conversation:

"Don't you think we should do something? Voice our opinion, write a letter at least? Go to the meeting? It is our town."

"First of all," Tom said, "it's not our town. You can't limit the word 'town' with a possessive pronoun (the English teacher). It doesn't make any sense. No one can possess a town."

"Jesus Christ, Tom. It's just an expression. When people live somewhere they call it their town. It's what people say."

He cut in: "People are wrong."

She ignored him: "It becomes their home."

He waited, said, "That's just sentimentality."

"It's nice," she said and walked away. "I think it's nice."

This was one of the patterns.

Later, she came back and said, "Haven't you ever heard of the play *Our Town*?"

He looked down at the floor, put his hands in his pockets, paused, looked up, and grinned with his mouth closed, as if to say, "Rebecca, dear, did you just ask me if I've ever heard of *Our Town*? Who are you talking to?" Then, in his actual voice: "That's

just a title, love, not a defence. Besides, it's supposed to be ironic."

She looked at him, tightened her fists unconsciously, said "Fuck you, fuck you," in her head, and left. She had to.

REBECCA WON'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT the "Escape from the City" article she's reading. She can hear the sarcasm already. Something about magic or Alcatraz or *Hamlet*.

She continues to read:

The sleepy little town of Port Perry, just forty-five minutes north of the city, is the best kept suburban secret of the Sunday leisure-ist. Even in the quiet of winter, echoes of a world gone by murmur in the streets of the quaint, picturesque village. Some of the people there, huddled in their stylishly collared coats, even smile and say "Hello" as they pass and "Excuse me" should they accidentally bump into you or impede your passage in some barely noticeable way. The kind of deportment oft-lost in this frenetic, self-focused, gestureless time. Port Perry, a cozy little place on Lake Scugog, an oddly cacophonous name, is a throwback to everything which was once "good" and "decent" in this once good and decent world.

"Deportment oft-lost?" Tom would say, sneering.

She knows.

"Once good and decent world? Who does this guy think he is?"

"Woman," she'd say.

"Figures," he'd say.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It means she's trying too hard."

"Trying too hard? You can't try too hard, Mr. Logic Man. That's what effort is." Then in his voice. "You can't modify the level of trying with 'too.' It's contradictory. It doesn't make any sense."

He'd smirk, the way he does when he's stuck, when he knows he's beaten but pretends he's not. She'd roll the paper and swat him, playfully at first, then seriously, because he'd still be smirking. He wouldn't stop. Then wanting to be in verbal control again, he'd get serious and make a point about her crossing the line.

She'd try to keep things light and say something to the effect of "Don't be like that."

He'd say, "Like what? What is *that*?"

She'd shake her head and leave, say, "I'm not doing this."

She'd go downstairs to the kitchen, run the tap, open drawers, clang pots. He'd listen, lying in bed, and wait for the sound of her return steps up the stairs.

A few minutes would pass and the steps would come. Purposeful and firm.

She'd open the bedroom door and say, "*That* is you. Don't be you."

They would continue this way for a while. More buttons would be pushed. Kumor would whine and bark in reaction to their arguing.

The morning would be ruined.

It's settled, she thinks. I won't show him. He never reads the *Homes* section anyway,

thinks it's "fluff," which is something he said to her once pointing at an article about pillows. She smiled but didn't laugh, so he explained the pun (instant regret), and she didn't smirk or roll her eyes, only said, "Yes, I get it. It was funny."

Rebecca finds her spot, continues:

Under a heavy quilt of snow, the private century homes and the quiet tree-lined streets of Port Perry are the stuff of postcards. Early in the new year, Christmas figurines still frolic on the front lawns, lights blink in the trees and in the windows, the storefronts remain decorated with garland, and the trill of carols still hangs in the evening air. And it is not uncommon to hear the jingle and clip-clop of a horse-drawn sleigh down the historical Queen Street which buttons the center of the little town. A portrait of winter warmth.

Hmn, she thinks. He might actually like this part. Sounds like something he would write.

On either side of the main strip there is a collection of cozy little eateries, elegant clothing stores, antique depots, independent bookstores, and other must-see shops with soothing, time-capsuled names like *Settlement House* and *Everlasting Memories*. And I'm told when the ice melts and the water comes alive with spring and summer activity, there will be a charming little cruise ship docked at the park-lined shore that foots the downtown which offers regularly scheduled tours of the lake, replete with live jazz and fine dining.

A cruise on Lake Scugog – he'd hate that, she thinks. He'd say it was stupid and laugh. He'd never go. I know he wouldn't.

He might, though, for her.

The article ends:

So if you find yourself sluggish and sore in the wake of those nagging New Year's celebrations, take a drive northeastwards. Shed the city for a day. Port Perry serves up an old-fashioned, home-style country remedy that would cure any urban headache – a soothing blend of scenery, serenity, and civility.

Tom sits up. He's been watching her read.

Rebecca notices (late), flips the page.

He falls across her lap, reaches for his coffee. The paper crinkles beneath him. He grunts, unconsciously at first, then embellishes, hoping to mask the effort.

She could say, "You know, Tommy, dearest, there are these little things called words that people use when they require the assistance of others," but she doesn't.

He would have.

Instead she lifts his mug just before he's able to take it, holds it above his head, grins, threatens to let some spill, shrugs her brow, takes a sip. He pretends to scowl, looking up at her. She bends down, kisses his forehead (warm coffee lips), and hands him the mug.

He sits up again, takes the coffee, and says, “So what’s new in this awful, indecent world of ours?”

Holding up the paper again, she drops her hands, looks at him, says, “How? How do you do that?”

He points at the front page in her lap, draws a finger under the cutline that advertises the article within.

*Small Town: Everything Decent and Good.*

He smiles, says, “I know the writer. She’s a friend of mine from grad school. She e-mailed me about the article. She knew I lived here.”

Without looking at him, Rebecca refolds the paper along its natural crease lines, as though it were a blanket she was putting away, and says, of the article, “If it weren’t my town, I’d want to visit.”

Tom gulps the coffee – barely warm now. He sets the mug down, stretches, arms overhead.

He says nothing about the phrase “my town.”

Instead, he says, “Small towns north of the city. They’re trendy now. Like the East Coast was. Is. I can’t keep up. I’m mad I didn’t think of it first. Doesn’t matter though. Small towns are a bountiful mine.”

She yawns, unintentionally. He doesn’t notice. He’s in his head, fantasizing about being interviewed on his latest imaginary book. A collection of essays on urban sprawl and the ruination of the small town. She’s in her head too, thinking about the article, the “friend” who wrote it, the lake cruise. She wants sleep again. Sunday morning, lazy return-sleep. Purposeful dream-sleep. She wants the summer on the lake, dancing on the boat’s deck with Tom, the summer smell of lakes and evening, her black dress, no talking, no human language at all, only soft jazz and the sounds of the lake lapping at the hull.

Tom fidgets. The interview is over. He was brilliant, as always. He stuffs a pillow between himself and the headboard, draws his legs up, crosses them, leans, and retrieves his portion of the blankets still shoved down to the end. The bed creaks beneath him. Another antique.

He shivers, says, “Christ, it’s cold all of a sudden.”

The furnace kicks in, as though on cue.

Eyes closed to the image of the boat, Rebecca slides back down beneath her side of the covers, halfway between wakefulness and sleep, says, “At least the house listens.”

He considers a response, a grammatical undoing that highlights the absurdity of an inanimate object taking any kind of purposeful action, but decides against it. Her eyes are closed. He lets her be. Jots the line down in his mental notebook. An opening for a story, an image, a title. *The house listens*. Occasionally, she’ll recognize a line in one of his stories and wonder why. If she only knew how often he turned her – what she said, what she did, her love – into his poetry.

He knows, as he watches her find sleep again, that on some romantic level she believes that people become spiritually connected to their homes. He loves her for letting herself have such beliefs. He wishes he could have them, but too often making



sense of things gets in the way.

He waits for her breathing to deepen, for the little twitches that indicate she's in that place of dreams, then – because he needs to touch her, or because, like a child, he has the sudden urge to reach out and make the object real by touching it, or because, as an adult, there are moments when sense does not get in the way at all and he ignores reason altogether – he slides his cold hands beneath the covers and puts them on her warm skin.

In the dream, she pushes him overboard, feels the shock, the cold rush of unexpected water herself. All of a sudden she's a swimmer gasping for the surface.

Her eyes burst open. She breathes in. Deeply, quickly. An inward scream.

Then the laughter comes. Uncontainable, unwanted. She writhes, tries to wriggle free. The blankets become a trap, a web. His fingers spider up her sides.

Belly-deep, painful laughter.

"Stop stop stop," she manages, breathless. "Stop. Stop."

Kumor bolts up from her own sleep, throws her nose in the air, howls and barks, puts her face close to Tom, growls, then barks again.

"Get him, Kumor!" Rebecca shrieks. "Get him!"

The dog lifts and drops each paw, barks again and whines, as if to say she were stuck, unable to move forward, confused about the boundaries, unsure where her loyalties lie.

Rebecca frees a hand, smacks Tom, kicks him, swats at his head blindly.

He blocks the flailing limbs, gently, gets his fingers in where he can, delivers the scripted laughing noises: "Aahh, ha ha ha ha. Eeee, he he he he."

Finally, he relents.

There are tears in her eyes. She's out of breath.

"I hate you," she says.

He's out of breath, too, says, "No, you don't."

"I do," she says. "Hate. Hate. Hate."

"You should make signs," he says, and points to the one over the dresser.

"Hmn." She frees herself from the covers, swoops them back like a cape, stands, and faces him, fists on her hips: "Just so you know, I'm buying tickets for that lake cruise this spring. And you're coming with me."

"What lake cruise?" he says.

"The one your *friend* wrote about."

He readjusts the pillows, tries to attain comfort. The mattress creaks. He settles, looks at her, grins.

"It would be nice," she says. "I think it would be nice."

TOM STAYS IN BED WITH HIS BOOK: *Island*. He's reading a story called "The Return." He wishes there were a place in his life he could go home to, that kind of ancestral home place you feel connected to even if you've never been. Rebecca wants this place – this house and this town – to be that kind of place for them, and she does her best to make it so. She wants him to come through the door at night and say the words, "I'm

home.” But he never does. It’s not fair. She knows what it’s supposed to feel like. He envies her for having that sense, for having come from somewhere. It’s easier when you miss a place to make a new place feel like home.

Right now she is downstairs making muffins. He can smell the warm banana. The dog has stayed in the room with him, settled back into her own midmorning rest. Before he settles back in himself, Tom will take the birthday card from the bedside table drawer and place it on Rebecca’s pillow. She’ll see it when she returns with the hot muffins and coffee, and the corners of her mouth will go down when she does. She’ll put a hand to her chest, she’ll feel warm. She’ll set the coffee and muffins down, take the card, and carefully lower herself back into bed, as if she were slipping into a hot bath, all her efforts set on trying not to wake him. She would never think of getting even, especially after the card on the pillow. The bed will creak, as it always does, when she climbs back in. She’ll wince, hold her breath, wait to see if he stirs. He’ll roll towards her, sigh deeply like the dog, and pretend to be asleep. She’ll settle in, turn the card in her hand, snicker at what’s written on the front:

Beck, my Beck  
You’re thirty-three  
What the heck  
You’re still with me

She’ll read it again, shrug, and say to herself, “Sometimes I wonder why.”

He’ll hear her. He’ll open his eyes and watch her read. She won’t see him. When she’s finished reading, he’ll close his eyes again. He’ll wait in the silence for her mouth to come to his. He can predict this. She’ll shift her weight. Her hair will touch his face. There will be tears in her eyes. She’ll kiss his forehead (warm lips), then his mouth. He’ll perform the waking ritual of stretches and yawns. He’ll sit up and hold her. He’ll pretend to notice just then that she has opened the card. He’ll smile (sincere), and he’ll try not to repeat in his head the words he wrote inside. He’ll try not to feel like such a writer in that moment. He’ll try not to feel so good about being able to make her feel so much. He’ll try not to feel like a magician. He’ll try not to feel like escaping. He’ll try not to feel like Hamlet. He’ll try not to say anything and just let the moment be. But he won’t be able to. He’ll have to say something. He’ll have to. It will already be thought of, already rehearsed in his head. When he says, “Love. Home Sweet Love,” her shoulders will drop, and she’ll settle into him. The quiet will overtake them and the dog will yawn. They will settle in, but they will not sleep. They will not sleep.

## Beware the Keelies

### *Kieron Smith, boy*

James Kelman

Harcourt, Inc.

432 pp

"Oh, Kierrunn, that is a nice name. Then he said it to Mrs Davis, and he was looking at me. His name is Kierrunn. Is that not nice?"

NAMES ARE IMPORTANT IN JAMES KELMAN'S novels. Kieron is unhappy with his, since it is a name usually given to Catholics rather than Protestants and, as such, during this indeterminately postwar period (50s? 60s?) in Glasgow, can lead to serious misunderstanding. Pape or Proddy, Chapel or Church – you (ye) had to know, as did everyone else, where you (ye) belonged.

Far better to be nicknamed Smiddy, as Kieron eventually is, and find security, if not identity, in something that might have come from either tribe.

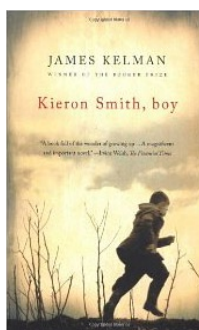
Kieron's worldview is upset, early on, when his parents move, with him and his older brother Matt, to a housing "scheme" away from the city centre – away from his grandparents, whom he relies on for a warmth not found at home, his friends, with whom he has only just acquired status as a climber of roofs and "dykes," and his school. At the new place, distances are greater and the countryside around it is distinctly mixed, with a disaffected gun-site up a hill but also, elsewhere, a burn (a small stream) too wide to jump after heavy rain, a "wee loch," a big boulder, ferns and long grass, and a camp of

Squatters who would chase you (ye) and "fire stanes" at your back.

Kieron is a boy through and through. One could say that he is a boy by profession. And what we catch of his entirely unfiltered (though not uncensored) thoughts is without ulterior motive. There are no Haddonesque "curious incidents" to be investigated; there is no Jamesian narrator to prod Kieron's listener into awareness of this "still small life." Kelman has chosen, in a remarkably consistent manner, to let boy be boy, no matter how very banal his interests, how very random his observations.

Kieron does develop somewhat: he becomes a Smiddy, is esteemed further for his skill at climbing "ronepipes" (drainpipes), acquires a little independence. And there is some dramatic tension to be drawn from his grandparents' waning health, his father's foul moods, his own friends' unpredictable conduct. But, for the most part, we are afloat on a "wee loch" of Kieron's making, one that moves neither forward nor backward very much. These are, in essence, the whispered ramblings of a child as he prepares himself for sleep and expects not to be heard or contradicted.

Which leaves us, as readers, with language: Kieron's mother, by default the family lawgiver, wants her boys to "speak nice," to forgo aye, nay, doon, etc., in favour of speech that is purified not only of regional dialect but also of curses and obscenities. (Hence the many asterisked words, evoking a kind of deliberate mental obscurity as well, perhaps, as that peculiar 18th-century practice of eliding the letters in a name that no



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one was ever at a loss to recognize.) But regionalism does, in fact, creep back in, as it cannot help doing. Kieron, for all that he is a “boy” generic, is a boy of his own place and time. He speaks/thinks of “heidies” (headers), “workies” (workers; also works), “greeting” (crying), and “girning” (complaining). That is how his pals speak, and that is how he would speak, too. But, says his mother, they are “Keelies” (Glaswegians) – they will never go anywhere, never amount to anything.

In such exchanges, the reader does sense other concerns at work, another dimension in play. But, mostly, he/she is exempted, even discouraged from entering it, the only dimension of worth being the one Kieron is so closely defending – the natural dimension of his boyhood.

A signal word in Kieron’s vocabulary is “if.” It springs up so frequently one cannot tell (a non-Glaswegian cannot) whether it is dialect or idiolect. In the separate world that is a novel, it could, of course, be both. For Kieron, “if” appears to mean something beyond provisional, something that one might begin by fearing, as it can only portend fearful change. There are times, too, when it appears to mean nothing, to be no more than a verbal tic, betraying, by its intrusion, a persistent state of boyish anxiety.

*Kieron Smith, boy* is not, in the usual sense, difficult. It may, however, prove difficult for readers hoping to be guided by at least the implication of a plot to accept that what is being presented here by Kieron/Kelman is all there is. For some, that will simply not be enough. For yet others, I suspect, it will be a good deal too much. ■

– **Karl Buchner**

## Bohemian adventure

### *The Joyful Child*

Norman Ravvin

With illustrations by Melanie Boyle

Gaspereau Press

137 pp

IT IS NO SECRET, FIRST OF ALL, THAT NORM Ravvin has published two books with *paperplates*; so we won’t pretend (or try) to be entirely objective. Still, *The Joyful Child* (which another fine press has published) deserves (nay, demands) to be noticed, not only for Ravvin’s usual strengths and preoccupations – wryly summarized in the promotional material as “a man’s love of neighbourhoods, of jazz and old cars” – but also for the exquisiteness of the thing itself, a truly well designed and aptly illustrated book we found a pleasure simply to handle. (No e-book jokes, please.)

Melanie Boyle’s ink and papercut illustrations evoke in their straightforwardness the innocence, perhaps the aura, of children’s literature, perhaps even the kind of world such literature is bound to produce: one in which the motives of adults are most often obscure and the security of children is continually at risk. There are other similarities: an overall flattening of affect, sudden transitions between chapters, a seemingly indeterminate quest, the attachment to objects (shared, it would appear, by father and son), the acceptance of one’s fate, of one’s helplessness before it.

The opening chapter gives us a glimpse of the curiously masculine orbit we’re about to enter upon, the three “old car guys” distinguished, quite naturally, by the “jalopies” they favour, their common bond the mechanical mortality of

engines, parts, and bodywork. Paul has a Nash, of all things; the nameless narrator a Sedan de Ville; and Stitchman, in whose garage they met, a cucumber-green Thunderbird. The narrator says, of himself and Paul, that they are “exquisite loners”; but he is “one of the city’s true bachelors,” the city being Toronto, and he having left home (and family life) as a teenager; whereas Paul, by this point in the story (neither the very beginning nor, we presume, the very end), has become a single father and not, by Stitchman’s account, a tranquil one.

The second chapter, to which the first was a prologue, begins ten years before, when Paul and Mary, as a couple, are coming apart. Mary is a lawyer, more and more devoted to her work; Paul has been a music reviewer but is now, in effect, a “house-husband ... but without the usual child-raising responsibilities.” Enter Nick, whom they conceive, rather desperately, as a kind of (blue) solution, which, it soon emerges, he will not be – is, instead, a new reason not to love each other, though lovable in himself. Into this present estrangement intrudes one from the past: Paul’s father (an “asshole [in Mary’s view] who’d abandoned him”) has died – and died rich – and left a collection of vintage cars, of which Paul, inheriting it, sells all but the two-toned Nash (merely sitting in which makes him circumscribedly happy). And then Mary, whose own inheritance went into their Cabbagetown house, accidentally burns down the latter, as a result of which they are not only homeless but also (Mary decides) free to travel, the three of

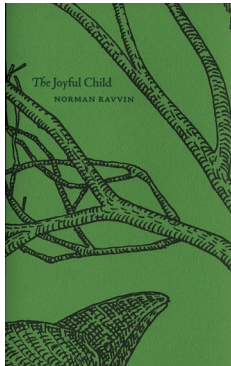
them, west, to a rental, ultimately, on one of the islands.

By this time, infant Nick’s perspective (as reported by Paul, via the not quite transparent narrator) has grown stronger, his reaction to the passing scene (within, without) that much more marked: “the landscape surrounding them like the palm of a giant spirit-hand offering the

view.” He possesses imaginary friends, makes distinct (and distinctly recorded) errors in speech, puts up resistance where resistance is least expected, and finds, among a group of “hippies” in a caravan of trailers near their (rented) house on Hornby Island, a sort of (alternative) family harmony. One of these young people,

Mirella, takes Nick to the local library, where he becomes enamoured with Sendak’s *The Sign on Rosie’s Door*, which he borrows again and again. The book itself, although he’s sure he never read it back then, stirs something in Paul’s memory, from his childhood, something about his father (whom Paul last saw when he was 8), his refusal “to read that kid his baby books.” That kid, now a father more than willing to, finds something else in its pages, something that leads him to unearth a photo of Mary as a girl, “posing in a dress-up outfit like Rosie’s.” One more once joyful child.

Paul tells me that life used to have a different smell. Sharper. Narcotic. Roof tar steaming on a rain-soaked morning; the dark spice of grass cut at sunset; brewer’s yeast – flowersmelling, oversweet – wafting above a bridge full of traffic; broom,



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geranium and caragana, the perfume of his youth.

What he seems to want for the child is that there should be no falling off of these smells and the feelings bound to them. But everything – everything conspires against this.

PAUL IS BESET WITH THE MOST PAINFUL form of nostalgia, the superstitious form, which suggests to him that his “long discreditable bohemian adventure” may have its origins in a single incident when, as a child, he witnessed his father misbehave and trip up none other than Thelonious Monk, whose playing he, the jazz lover, disapproved of. No, more than that, he hated it:

He hated the way he chopped at the piano keys with his elbows. He hated the way he'd arrive an hour late for his final set. And most of all, he hated the big bear dance Monk did when his sidemen soloed. It was a weird slow funky bear-groove, arms akimbo, butt wiggling slowly to the swing of the bass, a hand up to the hat brim, a kind of slow, sly salute before Monk returned to his piano and began to cut the weird blues chords that were like a careful explosion in a clockworks factory.

And yet Monk, the bear, laughs and goes on after he's been tripped. Where, the reader might ask, was the bad luck?

There's a bit of bearishness in Paul, a bit of honest to goodness morosity. But his story, as Ravvin tells it, has the generous (and intricate) sweep of a (jazzed up) bearwalk. And the explosion, such as it is, is a careful one, audible on every page. ■

– *Bernard Kelly*

## *What the bullet was thinking*

*Snowball, Dragonfly, Jew*

Stuart Ross

ECW

178 pp

SOME WRITERS HAVE ALL THE LUCK: THEY'RE born Jewish. The rest of us can but read along, envying (and hoping to imitate) them. Do they see themselves as lucky? Probably not. Their standard (usually humorous) reaction is to complain, in the very pages they're writing (we're happily reading), that said heritage (or culture or religion) will only, ultimately, be burdensome. And certainly, as they then go on (happily) to show, it does come with a few (major) anxieties. The threat of annihilation, for instance.

Forgive, please, this timid generalizing (if not the wary patronizing). There is no one way of being Jewish, I realize, any more than there is of being a writer. And writers who are Jewish needn't always identify themselves as such. Nor (in case you were wondering) should we greatly care whether they do or don't. Unless, when they do, we're meant to.

Which would seem to be the case with Stuart Ross, whose latest book strikes me as both an elaboration and a departure. In his previous work, the “autobiographical” aspect, though, on occasion, tantalizingly present, was never so forcefully (knowingly) ... steeped. (“That's a very strange word, isn't it?” says Kim Novak [p. 154]) Hence, one would think, the title *Snowball, Dragonfly, Jew*, of which the common element (via a kind of associative rigor) is fear.

Fear paralyses the fearful. Violence suspends animation.

WE SEE THIS EFFECT FROM THE VERY START, when Ben remembers – or believes he remembers – witnessing his mother’s unlikely shooting of a notorious white supremacist in front of a hardware store. All the details are there (in this first chapter, “The Dream”): a nostalgic pot-pourri of grocery-bag items, neighbours’ names, neighbourhood features, and stillness, enough stillness, it would seem, for us (and Ben) to take everything in. We’ve been supposing throughout that “the dream” is Ben’s, but there’s another dreamer to be accounted for, by chapter’s close, the victim himself, dead or dying, “dreaming of a white, white world.” And above Ben and his older brother Jacob and their tidy mother assassin, above everyone, at roof level, neither going up nor coming down, is “the big man’s yellow hard hat,” which had “leapt into the air” a moment after “the bullet sailed out of the gun.”

Ben, in “the dream,” would have been very young, which partly explains his uncertainty as to its content, as to its dreaminess. What he’s certain of now, as an adult, is that his mother kept clippings about the man (the hatemonger), gave voice to revenge fantasies in which he, Ben, did not share, and recognized (both of them) the injustice and cruelty she’d experienced as a four-year-old when, because she was Jewish, she’d been pelted with snowballs on her way to school.

As for the dragonfly, there was just the one, really, encountered when he and

some friends were floating (memorably) on inner tubes in the lake:

Its wingspan was that of a crow, and its body was made of a thousand horrible segments, a thousand thoraxes, a thousand anthraxes, each sprouting a terrible hairy leg. Its pointy metallic head jerked from side to side, its jaws clanging open and shut like an assembly-line contraption that crushes things flat, and its blank black eyes drilled right into me.

Just the one, standing in for all the rest.

BEN, THE CENTRALIZING CONSCIOUSNESS,

is a performance artist. He puts on shows that have the persistence, themselves, of childhood trauma: “Night of a Thousand Donuts,” for example, in which the spectators line up to feed him “raised chocolate, chocolate peanut, coconut, vanilla iced, cream-filled, double chocolate, honey-glazed,

marble swirl, ... Hawaiian sprinkle,” the latter being his father’s favourite (his father being the person most likely to understand the piece, although, in fact, failing to attend, his second wife having persuaded him “to see a funny movie instead”). Or “Stagger,” in which Ben, blindfolded and wearing one of his father’s shirts, spends 24 hours staggering about a Yorkville gallery window “made up ... to look like a concentrated version of the living room from [his] childhood home: a small couch with a floral fabric, a couple of coffee tables, a desk, and a bridge table with four folding chairs around it and a heap of mah-jong tiles





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on top, ... every surface ... cluttered.”  
Staggering and destroying.

Ben, throughout, is remembering (and perhaps grieving) for two: his brother Jake, having fallen ill of some sort of brain fever, can remember little afterwards without being prompted, is continually, in the institution he’s been confined to, approaching things or people as if for the first time. This includes Denise, his ex-girlfriend and unrecognizably faithful visitor, with whom Ben himself will become enamoured one dreamily romantic night, when they go so far as to toss their watches into a creek, to stay the moment that will separate them. Their declarations take the form, naturally enough, of reminiscence, as nothing could be more loving than to remember, nothing more worth remembering than one’s own life.

Toward the end, Ross summons up everything that the assassinated (or imagined and wished to have been assassinated) “self-satisfied Nazi scum” was the enemy of. It’s quite a list, from the Buzzcocks to Samuel Beckett, and constitutes Ben’s best attempt at self-definition or self-appraisal (other, that is, than as “a guy who’d eaten one thousand doughnuts,” etc.). It’s not definitive (one name comically, by chance, suggesting another), but it is persuasively organized, the songs, singers, movies, directors, artists, actors, poets, as named, giving flight or buoyancy to that unyielding bullet:

I asked the bullet what it was thinking.  
The bullet said nothing. The bullet was  
aware of the value of mystery. ■

– *Ida Kohl*

## **Agram-Bagram**

### *Poems for the Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names*

Soraya Peerbaye

Goose Lane, 108 pages

[...] You might as well say “I don’t read books” or “my brain is full.” If I don’t read it my soul be lost, nobody’s fault but mine / Ah, Lord, Lord, nobody’s fault but mine / If I don’t read it my soul be lost. I don’t read books I read poetry. I don’t read unless it is on a computer. I don’t read stuff.

– derek beaulieu, “I don’t read,” in *How to Write*

SORAYA PEERBAYE HAS AN EAR, A FIGURATIVE one, for the unfamiliar in familiar settings, for English mixed in but not mastered by French, for the language of her ancestral Mauritius:

We talk of family, his patients, horse-racing, poetry, cooking, dreaming or not dreaming. Small words nod their heads, my *huh*, *hmm*, Créole utterances that have found their way into our mouths from French and Arabic, Urdu and Hindi, Malagasy.

*Ayo, taé, y’Allah...*

– “Zistoire”

The first two sections of this her first collection are devoted to her father’s memories (“Curios: Poems for K.”) and her own (“Zistoires”), the former inflected, often, by what we imagine to be, have been, an exuberant personality, the lines tracking widely across the page, words clustering, leaving (to see, to hear) rhythmic (inner-time-consuming) spaces.



Red spiral of peel hangs round  
     the fruit, paper lantern whose light  
         is flesh   (Rosa)

and he slices a cheek  
                                 – “Mangue”

She has an eye, too, of course, a poetic  
 one that works with (or against) the ear,  
 in spacious, tab-defying combinations:

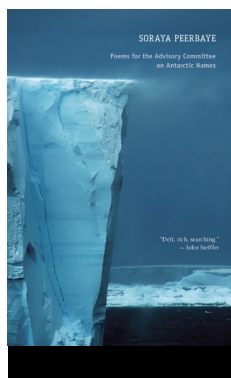
I can *see* this as though I'd been there he tucks the instrument  
     in his palm it disappears like a blade of grass  
 hands, carinal fingers, fluttering wings  
 foot tapping the kitchen floor as the women murmur and clap  
     *Allé! Éta! Guette-li!* breaking the mourning period

his grandfather drawn from the darkened bedroom  
 to watch his cheeks fill and hollow  
     hollow  
 to the shape of bone

inbreath and outbreath equal  
     bodied and living  
                                 – “Armonica”

Peerbaye's diction tends only occasionally to the poetic (the poetic pedantic): carinal (as above), cicatrix, syrinx, hematite. (Is there any – exact – word a poet *won't* use? *Shouldn't* isn't in question.) Mostly, she works her surprises with the material at hand:

The instinct to pull fur. She sat back on her haunches, combed her belly with front paws, caressed a slight skein into being. It floated as if in wait, the cage gleaming, amniotic, until strand by strand it came undone and disappeared.  
                                 – “Girl, rabbit”



The other two sections turn quite deliberately outward but have nonetheless the same central ego, the same controlling/filtering intimacy.

THE THIRD SECTION, FROM WHICH THE BOOK takes its title, was inspired, we're told, by Peerbaye's research on "the Yaghan or Yamana people of Tierra del Fuego and the whaling industry of the south seas." These poems accomplish, as it were, their gesture by taking the form that best responds to a landscape (an abandoned whaling station), a sighting (penguins, seals), as if to pull away from the very sides of the prose accounts of shipboard

## reviews

(researcher/tourist) life, isolate themselves out there, a few words occupying a single page:

On the leaden sea, from each prism, a  
blue, luminous / hum.

THE FOURTH SECTION IS A RELATED POEM, “Reading the Yamana-English Dictionary,” in which the poet marvels at

The worlds created by parts of speech,  
but especially // these verbs, their clarity,  
even as I have / no clear action of my  
own. *To grow up and forget / what one  
used to do, say or be like.* Their diversity,  
/ and their loss, too: failed promise of  
the infinitive, gesture // severed from the  
body that signs it.

And, finally, there is a glossary, the first entry of which goes: “*agram-bagram*: Créole for this and that.” A handy phrase. A luminous début. ■

– Karen Belanger

## **Contradictio in adjecto**

### ***Nothing Could be Further***

Tim Conley  
Emmerson Street Press  
199 pp

### ***One False Move***

Tim Conley  
Quattro Books  
74 pp

TIM CONLEY IS THE AUTHOR OF AN EARLIER short-story collection, *Whatever Happens* (Insomniac, 2006), as well as a number of chapbooks and academic texts (notably

the ingenious *Joyces Mistakes*). He has also been, from time to time, the reviews editor of *paperplates*, although, as it must (I know it must) be stated here, he had no hand in this issue or in the choice of books reviewed.

There were 19 stories in the first collection; there are 30 in the second, ten of them, by my count, not longer than a page each and several others ending overleaf. The brevity may be levity – may, in fact, be (Lydia Davis-like) leavening, as Conley, at greater (more serious) length (e.g., “Eye of the Hawk,” “Potatoes,” “Dry Water and Wooden Iron”), demands not merely our close attention but also our willingness to defer the usual (addictive, narrative) gratification, perhaps even to surrender it altogether for the cooler, subtler pleasures of rationally calculated gameplaying.

“Eye of the Hawk” is, indeed, a description of the rules of a game, in all their esoteric glory; rules of such refinement they threaten to become more important than the game itself. (But aren’t the rules here the game? Isn’t the game the making of rules?) It is a man’s game, exclusively, being older, according to (surely not very reliable) legend, than the creation of womankind. (We are in an alien, perhaps ancient, perhaps alternative culture. Or an especially murky sports bar.) It is played on a table known as the slide, the players, standing at either end, using pieces, polished stones, that have been named after birds, robins to start with. In the middle of the table is a red circle, the “eye of the hawk” .... Arbitrariness abounds: what happens (or should happen) when the stones of opposing players touch or enter the eye; when one player must seek pardon (or exact revenge)

from another; when players fail to caw at the collision of “crows,” and so on. There are opening gambits, as in chess. There is a code of etiquette, enforced at times by the people watching:

It is strictly forbidden to fondle an opponent’s birds. The fondling of one’s own birds while they are in play is not absolutely prohibited but is generally frowned upon.

*Elaborationem ad absurdum*, evidently, but not (or not simply) in the M. Python manner, in which one absurdity readily replaces another. Here, coherence is the point, the absurdity monolithic.

“Potatoes” will turn out to be a game, too, but of a more philosophical complexion, as we are warned by the epigraph, a quote, in German, from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 262, which (translated) is rather akin to a rule:

It might be said: if you have given yourself a private definition of a word, then you must inwardly *undertake* to use the word in such-and-such a way. And how do you undertake that? Is it to be assumed that you invent the technique of using the word; or that you found it ready-made?

A language-game, then, in which young Laura’s mother tells her she won’t have “nice dreams” unless she finishes her potatoes – a proposition Laura seeks immediately to verify in remarking, to herself, that:

- (a) her mother never lies,
- (b) lies and potatoes are different things,

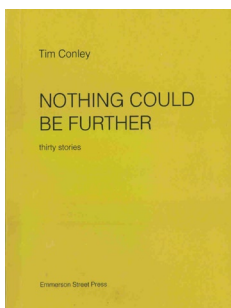
- (c) potatoes are disgusting things, too disgusting to be lied about,
- (d) potatoes are not important things,
- (e) lies are only told about important things.

By contrast, Dr Bilge, Laura’s dentist (whose ears resemble potatoes), was lying when he told her she had “really lovely teeth.” She hates her teeth almost as much as she hates ... potatoes. If this were a psychological portrait, we might wonder (and perhaps worry) at the displacement. But Laura appears to mean what she says and not to be masking her concern (or self-consciousness) about her teeth with this verbal campaign against *you know what (you know what* being the subject of her obsession, as well, possibly, as *the other thing (the other thing*

being the object of some implied (freudian) dream analysis, some “bilge”).

In any event – and we can only assume Laura did not finish her potatoes (or else her mother lied) – the dream that follows is anything but “nice,” has perforce the dimensions of a nightmare (drawn up by Lewis Carroll) in which, transported to her grandmother’s kitchen, she encounters swarms of *them*, is pummelled and pursued into a dark winding underground tunnel, from which, emerging, she enters an indoor garden, where more await her, though these, animated, are “small, jovial, [...] relaxed” – so relaxed they serenade us with a self-promoting jingle before leading the way to the study of the Gentleman Potato:

It was hard to tell, despite the fine top hat and highly polished shoes, whether



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the figure who stood before her was a potato-shaped man or a man-sized potato, or even a man made of many potatoes.

Whatever his (shifting) composition, the GP seems to be at a loss to understand what Laura is saying when she says she doesn't like potatoes, is at pains to parse (he, too, alliterates freely) the very sentence she's uttered, in which, between the subject and the object, there stands this entirely negative relation. One might just as soon say: I don't like words.

Which, for the reader, is pretty much *du pareil au même*, the word "potatoes" having irritated his/her inner ear excessively by now, rooted as it must be in every (almost every) sentence he/she's read, internalized. Should we, then, regard the "private definition" as a code to be cracked – or simply an illustrative example of how language works (and "works")? "You see," says the Gentleman Philosopher, "the problem of potatoes is not a problem but a series of problems, problems of systems, of constructions and variations ...," all ending, it would seem, with Grannie's potato-masher mallet. Which one could take to be an instrument of destruction, for thought and thing alike, unless it's, more broadly, the occult process of naming that Wittgenstein mentions (in paragraph 38 of *P.I.*), the "*queer* connexion of a word and an object" (W's italics).

[P]hilosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday. [ibid, ditto]

OR, AT LEAST, WHEN LANGUAGE RELAXES, goes (off) to a party (a diplomatic reception), as in "Dry Water and Wooden

Iron," the very title of which should demonstrate its instability. Its treachery. (And perhaps its evolution: these examples of logical inconsistency, favoured, the latter especially, by such philosophers as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, having found, now, their real-life (or linguistic) counterparts, in silica-coated water droplets and quilting tools. (Quod vide Google, Wikipedia.))

An envoy sent from abroad to this royal court, the narrator speaks the local language imperfectly: when he asks where the music he hears is coming from, he hesitates over the word corresponding to (and meaning) piano and, not getting the right answer, apologizes for having "put it badly." Which we, reading, have to take on faith, the language he is writing in being, plainly, one we share. Other "uncoordinated dialogue[s]" follow, each more sinister than the last. Observed among the guests are "a twitchy-eyed stick of a man" (the royal treasurer), "a spry-looking baron," "a practised gossip" (the treasurer's wife), "a short man with a fixed expression of anger" (once, the gossip tells us, a fire-brand, now – thanks to royal cunning – a government minister for "the Disputed Territories" and no longer, visibly, in a position to achieve their statehood or sovereignty by "confus[ing] everyone with his made-up language," reduced, really, ultimately, to being "just a drunk") and, of course, the king himself, who, for all his cunning, has "nothing in his visage to suggest a potentate" and who humours his subjects as if the notion of "supreme leader" were entirely, pitifully theirs. (In this language-game, it seems, the king is what Wittgenstein might call a means of representation.) More

urgent (and more confusing) encounters accumulate – with the spry Baron (possibly, the narrator briefly hopes, his “inside contact”), the ambassador for the Ambivalent Sylvanian Union (and a glove collector), the (become slightly more talkative) Minister of the Disputed Territories, the (seemingly amorous) treasurer’s wife, whose feared “proposition” is, instead, a question (“[D]o you think we are too *nice*?”) that the (English) Canadian reader will instantly (queasily) recognize (while wondering, and not for the first time, whether this (the whole story), too, like the tapestry described a few pages back, might not be allegorical, something more than a series of droll misunderstandings, allegory being, as it were, the earliest (most primitive) form of language-game). None of these ambiguities will be completely resolved. And yet, in the end, an explanation will – brutally – be called for, the narrator’s final words sounding as sad (as determined) as a translator’s (an outsider’s) lament.

CONLEY’S POEMS (*ONE FALSE MOVE* IS HIS first collection) seem no less playful than his stories. They have the advantage, of course, of not having to sustain even the implication of narrative. They can be about the words themselves: their sounds and rhythm (“Ignimbrite, Hang-On, Rudy”), their slippery associativeness (“Now is the winter”), their bullish tenacity (“Sacred”), their freakish autonomy (“Maudite”), their semantic flexibility (“Friendly Words of Caution”).

[...] the way wind rassles the words /  
and knocks the sense out of ’em, boy do  
I ever / like that.

– “Cephalus & Procris”

The poems constantly question – unearth a joke or a barb in – daily (shop-worn, deeply discounted) idiom, often taking the part (as to narrative) of an unintermittible (but by self) declaimer,

for whom sense is secondary, though tending (he/she), however deferredly, to make (however muted, blunted) a point. Or, if you prefer, a non-point.

Point is exactly what it lacks  
[...]

– “Mad Comics”

Throughout, Conley maintains a special regard for the irony ignited by our most common expressions.

[...] A portable  
dictionary has its appeal but irony  
(from the Greek) is the new denim [...]

– “Compartment”

How ironic, how amusing (how amusingly ironic) that the epigraph should be from Sergio Leone’s ultraviolent *A Fistful of Dollars* (“In these parts a man’s life often depends upon a mere scrap of information”) whereas the poem giving the collection its title (“One False Move” [and, one would expect, you’re dead]) is so brief and so pacific:

King’s bishop takes Queen  
Dancing



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There is dancing and there is walking in Conley's work, poetry or prose, and there is a cheerful combination of the two:

[...] tonight you may ask to dance and / learn to hike together occasionally, a whole lot / of cognitive effort sauntering but done in a jiffy / over and over, earth always rising to meet you / and this lope is lovely, is thought, is continuous.

– “Perambulation”

Nothing could be closer. ■

– *Brenda Keble*

### *Workbook*

#### *memos & dispatches on writing*

Steven Highton

ECW Press

74 pp

ANYONE WISHING TO WRITE ABOUT THIS elegant (and concise) little (work) book should pay especial heed to Chapter V, *On Criticism*, in which the author, more concisely than ever, attempts to make himself review-proof by maligning the general business of reviewing. That, at least, is likely to be one's first impression. But Highton, poet and novelist, is also an exceptionally good reviewer, his work appearing regularly in the pages of the *New York Times*, and thus knows (more surely than the average reader) both ends of the “business.”

It is this particular vantage point that makes these apophthegmatic reflections, his “dispatch-to-self,” so interesting. Here, the bluntly assertive, sometimes imperative sentences, whether hot or cold, hopeful or despairing, have pretty

much always an air of self-communion, grow, the more forcefully they're expressed, that much more, one presumes, personally applicable. Indeed, the longer, discursive chapters, even the tribute to Al Purdy, appear less engaged with, by comparison, as if the harder work were best done in miniature (in private), one numbered paragraph at a time. The structuring, in this sense, implies – when it doesn't impose – authority, although the (very) last word, whatever the subject, generally fails to arrive, other than by occasional cross-referencing, through which Highton – at once critic, editor, and author – manages to convince us he has approached the question from all sides.

True thoughts are those alone which do not understand themselves.

– Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

In other words, try it out, watch where it leads. Unless, of course, you can claim, as Highton clearly can, the organizing principle of a full career, in which case your experience must be considered telling, your cautions plainly justified. Hence, the memos in Chapter II summon back a younger self, who is advised, all the same, not to be a careerist but “to confront and relish challenges,” to “embrace oblivion.” Memo No. 9 sounds like nothing so much as a vow retaken:

Stand on the side of artifice – of worked and earned elaborated form. Life gives us enough of life. We approach art for something different: more distilled, catalyzed, charged, and signifying.

A CHAPTER LATER, THE SELF IS WEARY, IS “a decade deep in the work,” and has learned to adopt the more sanguine view (“[w]hat makes the majority snicker now may be what makes the work last in the long run”) and stick (stoically) to his convictions (“[b]etter [to] baffle a thousand dormant readers than insult an alert one by being obvious”). The task has become twofold: allow the mind free rein (“write everything that occurs to you”) but curb excess (“cut ferociously”). Not every excess, mind. “The surest way to sound generic and nondescript is to write too cautiously [...]” Good writing (over- or under-) is, ultimately, what you can get away with.

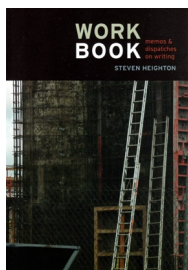
What Heighton can get away with, that is, the tension we detect here at play, between (respected) poet and (admired) novelist, seeking to expand, ultimately to dissipate, itself – the “problem with poeticized novels” (III.16) to be countered, farther on, by the distinction (VII.9) that poets build them (their novels) “from the microlevel upwards,” i.e., by the syllable, attending carefully to “its length, stress, latent or overt music, onomatopoeic potential and so on”. (*Afterlands*, his second novel, would be a good, because mostly subtle, example of such “molecular construction” (VII.9b).)

THIS MID-CAREER SELF HAS GROWN FAMILIAR, inevitably, with the vicissitudes of the writing life, to which there is both “a sacramental and a secretarial” aspect (III.28), the first (as inevitably) beset by the second. The same self must now contend with feelings (sympathy, scorn)

aroused when reading the work of others (Chapter IV) and with the not altogether equal experience of being read (Chapter V).

The bad reviewer’s art involves universalizing, in authoritative, pseudo-objective language, a totally subjective response to a book. (V.2)

One might quibble that “authoritative, pseudo-objective language” is the very element we’re (currently, while reading this) immersed in, but that would be beside the point: here it’s appropriate, elsewhere it’s not. And it’s not, because the generalizations are there being used, we should realize, to disguise the bad reviewer’s bad faith, his/her envy, ambition (as a writer-critic) to be more writer than critic (more writer than the writer under review).



[...] Bad reviewers like only what they can imagine writing themselves and lash out at anything they can’t understand or which threatens their vision. (V.1)

The merely mediocre of the tribe, like the lazy readers they’re recruited from, want simply to *empathize*, preferring to speak of a novel’s characters as if they were (but perhaps, by now, they are) FB befrienable, easily assimilated into their own (non-literary) lives.

Good reviewers appreciate books on the level of execution, aesthetic integrity, and achievement. [...] (V.1)

Which, one would like to believe, it’s



still possible to do, although the debate this summer (of 2012, online) as to whether any purpose is served by publishing unfavourable (or even lightly mixed) reviews might cause one (the same one) to have doubts.\*

THE POET-SELF, IN THE CHAPTER DEVOTED TO poetry, cannot escape, it seems, the horrors of externality other than by taking refuge within.

Poetry demands a language not only stripped of cliché (that hoary guideline) but also stripped of commercial valence. [...] Poetry is a precinct where such language can still be recognized as barbaric and ephemeral. Where only virgin, cold-pressed language has any motive power. (VI.5)

Here, too, there are careerists, indulging in their “puerile gang wars,” formalist against lyrical against experimentalist poet, when, really, we should only be concerned, as to poems, with “whatever feels alive, whatever jolts [us] into new frames of feeling and thought” (VI.12).

The reader who is, as it were, overhearing this self-enjoinder might well agree (as to a certain kind of poem’s desired effect) but feel, nonetheless, dissatisfied, Heighton’s outlook sometimes, as now, seeming unworkably narrow – not anti-intellectual, exactly, but certainly anti-academic (or, more coarsely, anti-theoretical). Which, for a practising (lyrical) poet, is a matter of focus, perhaps, but, for a critic (or a poet-critic), would be a

notable limitation.

First, a deep idea generates a theory. The theory begets an institution. And for a long time after, the institution extrudes ever mushier secondary ideas and promotes this guano as proven truth. (VII.15)

Which is, on the face of it, a theory about theories. (The school of Heighton? Heightonites? Heightonians?) Or, if we heed the warning implied in its development, a dispensation from theory:

[...] How to avert, or subvert, that narrative of decay? To be alive is to be molten, to flow, to course. (VII.17)

Which, as a sensation, is wonderful, certainly. But as a *program* – ?

By book’s end, Heighton, the working writer, has proven himself (the self we’ve been reading of, listening for) to be more passionate than systematic, more of a loner than a joiner, more willing to explain than to make a cult of his process. *Workbook*, all in all, is as generous as it is brave, and full of the most practical wisdom. One could argue with it for hours. ■

– Karl Buchner

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\*See Daniel Mendelsohn’s article on the New Yorker website [<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/08/a-critics-manifesto.html>] for a (not quite as succinct) reassertion of the critic’s unpopular role.



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