The New Orphic Review

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For
Michael Woligroski
May your journey be untroubled
May the wind
In your nostrils
Be salty and sweet

Nelson  Canada
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Cover art: Compelling Reasons by Madame Ovary. Madame Ovary is the pseudonym of an obscure Nelson, B.C. artist who deconstructs images from the mass media for her mental, spiritual and emotional health. An obsession with paper dolls during her girlhood honed her scissorly dexterity with cut-and-paste technique. She has studied and made art for decades.
ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 37 books. The most recent are *Kafka: The Master of Yesno, Heretic, The Life of Bartholomew G., Melancholy and Mystery of a Street, The Big Dave (and Little Wife) Convention, Up & Coming (In Seattle), Man’s Sadness* and *The Last Thing My Father Gave Me*. Hekkanen is listed in the Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada and Contemporary Authors.

The Slavery of Our Times

Ernest Hekkanen

ON THE WEEKEND of July 6-9, 2006, the Brilliant Cultural Centre in Castlegar will be hosting the Our Way Home Reunion. You may have heard about the Our Way Home Reunion. The brainchild of Isaac Romano, it made its official debut at a press conference on September 7, 2004, at what seemed to be a fairly innocuous event at the Vienna Café in Nelson, British Columbia. You must understand that Nelson is a remote, little town tucked away in the Selkirk Mountains. The town is as charming as its locale, replete with an array of stately buildings which hail from the early 20th century. While there is a lot of creative, political and environmental ferment in Nelson, news of its activities rarely travel beyond the mountains. We are cloistered, extremely cloistered; indeed, I would go so far as to say that we are downright parochial. However, news of Isaac Romano’s proposed reunion quickly changed that. As soon as the world discovered that he and his fellow war-resisters intended to raise an anti-war monument to Vietnam War draft-dodgers, news agencies descended on our community. The proposed event garnered the attention, and in some cases the animosity, of people from across North America. Articles appeared in *The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times* and *The Vancouver Sun*; footage appeared on CBC television, Fox News and ABC news, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars in the United States urged President George Bush Jr. to put an end to Isaac’s project – with force, if necessary.

Here, in Nelson, the proposed Our Way Home Reunion caused a rift in the community. Citizens were arrayed for or against the monument, as well as the reunion event. For a while, Isaac Romano became either Public Enemy Number One or the Hero of the Moment, depending on
one’s point of view. I found it all very amusing, very interesting. Our little tempest in a teapot brought to mind Henrik Ibsen’s play, An Enemy of the People (1883). The human desire to take out one’s animosities and intolerance on a scapegoat shone through the whole affair. Some of the board members of the Our Way Home Reunion committee quickly discovered they didn’t have enough courage to carry on with the proposed event and forthwith scuttled back to their holes in the countryside, never to be heard from again.

The episode proved to me how sensitive our neighbors to the South continue to be about the Vietnam War and to what extent Canadians continue to live in fear of U.S. reprisals, particularly when it comes to losing tourist bucks. As I said many times in a subsequent interview with ABC News, “You don’t kill 1.3 million Vietnamese without committing some human atrocities and war crimes along the way,” a remark that wasn’t aired on television – in order to protect the overweening sensitivities of our neighbors to the south, apparently. In our little community of Nelson, we discovered there was a fairly large contingent of people willing to overlook human atrocities committed by Americans, in favor of collecting tourist dollars. Atrocities committed by America in an attempt to further its geopolitical aims is something that rests rather uneasily on the conscience of Americans. A figure that many Americans continue to ignore is one having to do with how many returning Vietnam War veterans ended up committing suicide. Approximately 58,000 American soldiers lost their lives in Vietnam, but a greater number than that committed suicide. By 1988, the suicide figure had surpassed the number of soldiers killed in that conflict, which leads me to believe that the veterans who committed suicide must have possessed some nagging memories they found difficult if not impossible to live with. I’m sure some of those memories revolved around the atrocities they were forced to engage in in the name of patriotism.

The decision to move the Our Way Home Reunion event to the Brilliant Cultural Centre was made rather late into the game plan. The Brilliant Cultural Centre is owned by the Doukhobor community. As many of you probably know, the Doukhobors refused to be enlisted into the Czar’s military. They were pacifists. Their refusal was so contentious they were treated like enemies of the Russian state. Leo Tolstoy, author of War and Peace and Anna Karenina, was instrumental in helping them leave Russia for the shores of Canada.

Moving the Our Way Home Reunion to the Brilliant Cultural Centre held special importance for me. Back in the late 1960s, when I was educating myself about the Vietnam War, in particular as to why it was being fought, I, in part, turned to Leo Tolstoy for my understanding. Although Tolstoy is primarily known for his blockbusting novels, he wrote treatises on a wide range of topics, among them Patriotism: The Slavery of Our Times.

Back in the middle-to-late 1960s, I was a student at the University of Washington and an active member in the Students for a Democratic
Society. I knew about the human atrocities and war crimes that were being committed on behalf of the Lyndon Baines Johnson administration and had no desire to participate in them. As most people do in such circumstances, I started looking around for people whose lives I might try to emulate. Henry David Thoreau was an individual worthy of identifying with, but while Thoreau’s arguments in favor of civil disobedience were intriguing and perhaps even relevant to what was going on in Vietnam, he didn’t influence my thinking as much as Leo Tolstoy and his little book, *Patriotism: The Slavery of Our Times*, which I discovered in the bowels of the University of Washington library; and Albert Camus’ *L’Homme Révolté*, translated into English as *The Rebel*, a title guaranteed to appeal to nearly every twenty year old with a rebellious streak.

Leo Tolstoy’s sixty page pamphlet, which has since been reprinted as a rare book by Kessinger Publishing, under the title *The Slavery of Our Times*, appealed to me because of the author’s righteous indignation and because he seemed to assess the political and economic landscape a lot more accurately than did Thoreau, although, upon rereading *The Slavery of Our Times* not too long ago, I discovered it was a little too angry and rhetorical for my taste. But in the late 1960s, when the U.S. was gripped by so much violence and patriotic fervor, it made a direct appeal to my visceral annoyance with the state.

As a young man who was fast approaching the age of majority, the age of reason, if you will, I didn’t want to be a warrior in the tradition described by Tolstoy in his book on patriotism.

In olden times the warriors, with their chiefs, fell upon the defenseless inhabitants, subdued them and robbed them, and all divided the spoils in proportion to their participation, courage and cruelty; and each warrior saw clearly that the violence he perpetrated was profitable to him. Now, armed men (taken from the working classes) attack defenseless people: men on strikes, rioters, or the inhabitants of other countries, and subdue them and rob them – that is, make them yield the fruits of their labor – not for themselves, but for people who do not even take a share in the subjugation.

Because America had taken over from France in Vietnam, in an attempt to protect the interests of wealthy individuals and corporations that had investments in rubber plantations, and because it was speculating that oil might reside offshore of Southeast Asia, Tolstoy’s argument seemed to be pretty damn pertinent, as his argument would seem pertinent decades later in the Middle East, when George Bush Jr. decided to invade Iraq in order to secure oil resources and to strategically locate the U.S. Military in case he and his cronies ever decided to invade any of the surrounding countries.

But Tolstoy went even further:
If doubts suggest themselves to some people as to whether all this is necessary, each one thinks only about himself, and fears to suffer if he refuses to accept these conditions; each one hopes to take advantage of them for his own profit, and everyone agrees, thinking that by paying a small part of his means to the government, and by consenting to military service, he cannot do himself very much harm. But, in reality, submission to the demands of government deprives him of all that is valuable in human life.

That was pretty heady stuff for a young rebel like me who thought he was capable of choosing for himself what he wished to believe in. I eagerly read on:

[Military] discipline consists in this, that by complex and artful methods, which have been perfected in the course of ages, people who are subjected to this training and remain under it for some time are completely deprived of man’s chief attribute, rational freedom, and become submissive, machinelike instruments of murder in the hands of their organized hierarchical stratocracy. And it is in this disciplined army that the essence of the fraud dwells which give to modern governments dominion over the peoples. . . When governments have in their power this instrument of violence and murder, that possesses no will of its own, the whole people are in their hands, and they do not let them go again, and not only prey upon them, but also abuse them, instilling into the people, by means of a pseudo-religious and patriotic education, loyalty to the very men who keep the whole people in slavery and torment them.

I think we only have to recall the atrocities which occurred at the Abu Ghraib prison camp to verify what Tolstoy was talking about in his treatise.

Albert Camus’ book, L’Homme Révolté, which I brought with me to Canada in 1969 and which I still have in my possession, seemed to begin where Tolstoy’s treatise ended:

What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion. A slave who has taken orders all his life suddenly decides that he cannot obey some new command. What does he mean by saying ‘no’?

He means, for example, that ‘this has been going on too long,’ ‘up to this point yes, beyond it no,’ ‘you are going too
far,’ or, again, ‘there is a limit beyond which you shall not go.’ In other words, his no affirms the existence of a border-line. . . Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right. . . [The rebel] demonstrates, with obstinacy, that there is something in him which ‘is worthwhile . . .’ and which must be taken into consideration. In a certain way, he confronts an order to things which oppresses him with the insistence on a kind of right not to be oppressed beyond the limit that he can tolerate.¹

As Robert McNamara so tearfully admitted in the documentary film, *Fog of War*, the Vietnam War was little more than a hoax. The government did everything it could to persuade Americans that the war was not a fabrication concocted by the military-industrial complex, in order to move unused military hardware off the nation’s shelves so as to make room for military hardware that was then coming on line. A market for planes, bombs, incendiary devices, land mines and chemicals such as Agent Orange had to be developed to keep the wheels of commerce turning in the United States; for, by then, the economy was based on the creation and proliferation of such weapons – which should serve as a warning to Canadians not to pursue that course of action.

America put a lot of time, money and effort into fabricating a piece of fiction known as the ‘domino effect.’ According to that little fiction, Americans would end up fighting communism on the beaches of California if they lost their toehold in Southeast Asia, a scenario that history has subsequently proved to be quite wrong-headed, if not intentionally meant to deceive an unsuspecting public. To further their aims, U.S. authorities proceeded to fabricate the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the same way, decades later, they fabricated the case that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction.

It is interesting how often religion and patriotism go hand and hand off to war. It seems to credit what Tolstoy had to say about pseudo-religious and patriotic education keeping people in slavery. However, too often, ours seems to be a willing slavery; we ache to participate in a story of some kind, and if that story leads us like sacrificial sheep off to war, well, we prefer not to think about it. Our desire to participate in a story, any story, even at the risk of sacrificing our own lives, is something I find endlessly fascinating.

At the Our Way Home Reunion, we will be offering alternative stories to the dominant one that has to do with enslaving populations for economic gain. Check out our website: www.ourwayhomereunion.com

Mr. Fitch and the Japanese Student

Michael Woligroski

MR. FITCH WAS ONCE a handsome man, or perhaps failing that, he was for a time possessed by youth, a slender, well-proportioned body and a sexual energy that transformed his small chin and too large nose from a fair distance into Greek-like posture. His fairest feature (and all except the most unfortunate have at least one) had been his hair, cascading ringlets of golden curls which he combed and brushed and then carelessly disheveled, as if to say he cared less. He had reached his peak later than most men in life and at age twenty-nine after three seasons of tree-planting and fruit picking in British Columbia he glimpsed the power a man’s almost perfectly hardened body could have for womankind.

It surprised him that women could want his body not for himself but for themselves, that he could be an instrument of their pleasure. He was neither kind nor wise with this new information. For the next three years he went through twenty lovers, sometimes keeping them on a string until with a gasp and a final flick they were able to break free. He had discovered the art of guile, that by growing a luxuriant beard his nose would be shortened and his chin grown manful, but there was little he could do about his teeth or his poor eyesight unless, that is, he could stay in one place long enough to earn enough money to get them cosmetically perfected, and he blamed his inability to keep the women he truly liked or even thought he loved, on these imperfections.

Mr. Fitch was now fifty-two and his golden curls had unknotted and without his constant attention would lay quite flaccid and somewhat spent, but which after a morning wash and brisk toweling held their wavy curl for most of the day. By fortunate circumstance his hair had not turned gray or thin and his beard was yet golden blond, so that in favorable lighting one could be tricked into seeing a much younger
man. Certainly Mr. Fitch was tricked and those to whom he confessed his age of thirty-four appeared to nod in agreement, and so he believed himself a much younger man, as if in too hastily destroying his gift, the gods had seen fit to relent, to take on his folly, forgive his mindless cruelties and allow him a second chance.

And by way of appreciation, Mr. Fitch was once again in love. He was in love with a twenty-seven year old woman. She was for Mr. Fitch a remarkable composition of miniature Japanese beauty and he was beside himself with desire. She had listed her occupation as beautician, and since the language school was in the largest red-light district on the outskirts of Tokyo, he supposed that like the other beauticians who were taking English classes, she worked in one of the bars or soap lands that lined the streets. However, within a few seconds of sitting across the table from this gentle and elegant creature he was convinced with some feeling of guilt that he had been wrong and that he had once again fallen into a perversion of his middle age. He was reminded of the fox and the grapes; that which he feared he could not enjoy was somehow tainted or spoilt.

Although Mr. Fitch had always lived in poor circumstances he had done two things in life that redeemed him. The first was to buy a very cheap property on a rocky hillside with a north face, upon which he had managed to build a small crooked house with bad saw cuts, a mountain of nails and much cursing and yelling. The second was to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree, a horrendous effort that took a span of twenty years to complete. He had managed to complete two and a half years in his early twenties before manic depression floated him out of the classroom and when he was forty-five he had had the stability of a mature woman who fed, clothed and supported him while he sat in his pajamas at the dining-room table and engaged in distance learning.

Taking his Open degree in hand he went about the town banging on doors like a conquering hero only to be rebuked with half smiles, raised eyebrows and stubborn silence. It did not seem to matter to them how long he had spent trying to understand Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley or the Moderns. It was then the kind woman suggested he take an ESL certificate and get a high-paying job overseas. She located websites for him to check and, after typing up a credible resume which represented him as a consultant, contract freelancer and owner-operator, got him a job in Tokyo. She went to the bank and drew out her money for his ticket and sat him down at the ticket office. The night before he left for his first job in Japan she lay on the couch with her fat, lazy dog and both were stretched out so there was no room. She was also watching a movie and thoroughly enjoying it. He went into a rage and cuffed her dog who, startled by such an action, had an asthma attack. The woman jumped up from the couch and chased him into the kitchen where he
cowered against the counter. She turned around and threw his bags, which she had packed, outside the front door. He was allowed to sleep in the spare bedroom that night and in the morning she drove him to the airport but the terrible silence and restrained farewell told Mr. Fitch that this was the end of a three-year relationship, the longest he had enjoyed, and which he would later claim had all but robbed his youth.

Ω

Since then he had worked the language schools in Tokyo and every six months or so he would return home to his bleak “hobby farm,” for that is what he now called it, and do more carpentry and plumbing. The plumbing was never-ending. He could never get it quite right and after thoroughly exhausting both himself and his resources he would rent the cottage out, and complaining bitterly about his wanderlust ways, (oh, how I wish I could stay here and enjoy the mountain air) exit for Tokyo.

Like many expatriates with long-term residencies he took a certain pride and arrogance in his status. For one thing, he dressed very Japanese, black suits, black socks, black shoes, a black briefcase and a black umbrella, and now that he could speak a few words of Japanese he would refuse to speak English to Japanese outside the school, even though few understood his mangled attempts to put more than a simple request together.

Mr. Fitch was not a good teacher. He had lost his initial enthusiasm and was now a career professional, reliable as to dress and conduct. He was bored with his job and in fact hated it, particularly in his more feverish moments when, for example, he could not find a file or some teacher had left an empty coffee cup in the classroom. The only time he was relieved was when he could teach one-on-one with a beautiful girl. Since these beautiful girls were also in demand by the other middle-aged teachers, he had been gratified to see that on a particular day in May the Japanese office manager gave him a new file named Namiko Nomoura. “This is a nice waylay,” said Mr. Moto, which was code for what the teachers called hotties, and Mr. Fitch, preening himself in the staffroom, marched out, chest expanded, file underarm like orders, to the waiting room where stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Ω

The school Mr. Fitch worked for was owned by an aggressive Australian whose bitter disappointments in life had turned him into a 2 p.m. alcoholic. In better times the school had organized a twenty-two level system of teaching English and it was Mr. Fitch’s job to place the applicants into grades one to twenty-two. This was called an assessment. He smiled his best smile and extended his hand which the woman
shook without hesitation. “Come with me into room 4,” he said in a deep, warm voice. Room 4 was a cubicle with enough room in which to put a table and four chairs. There was no window but two small white-boards and a map of the world.

Mr. Fitch opened Ms. Nomoura’s file with grave solemnity and then looked up above his reading glasses. “Miss Nomoura,” he said. “Tell me about yourself.”

Miss Nomoura seemed totally at a loss at what to say. She appeared startled, quite unsure of her situation. She looked at Mr. Fitch with the most perfectly slanted brown eyes, like those of a cat upon an emperor’s pillow, and remained silent. Finally she said, “I don’t understand.”

“It says here you work as a beautician.” Mr. Fitch adopted a kind, fatherly voice.

“Yes,” she said and smiled a row of beautifully formed white teeth.

Mr. Fitch attempted a joke to break the ice. “I need a beauty treatment,” he said, waiting for her response.

She laughed and put her hand across her mouth. Mr. Fitch beamed and moistened his bottom lip with his tongue. He liked game shows on television and had thought seriously at one time of being a game show host. In his best game show voice, he said: “It also says you would like to go to the U.S.A!”

“Yes,” she said, appearing to enjoy the sudden sense of drama.

Mr. Fitch stuck out his finger and said, “You are going to America!”

The woman looked puzzled and Mr. Fitch lowered his voice and waved his finger, “But first you must learn to speak English.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “I no speak English good ’nough.”

“Actually, you speak very well.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“Just the grammar, just the grammar,” said Mr. Fitch, “your accent is beautiful.”

She shook her head again. “I don’t understand.”

“You accent is beautiful.”

She was silent.

“It’s beautiful,” Mr. Fitch repeated. “Trust me.”

Mr. Fitch got up and turned to the world map which was on the wall behind him, not more than a foot away. “This is America,” he said to the young woman. “But this,” he said, “is Canada.”

“Canada.”

“Yes, Canada. And I live in a wilderness paradise here,” he said, pointing to an area somewhere in the middle of Southern British Columbia. “I have a house and three hectares of land. When you leave the door to my house you cannot see neighbors. You can walk down to the creek and catch fish. Do you like fish?”

“Yes, I like fish.”

“Sakana oishi des,” returned Mr. Fitch. “Not only can you take a walk around the property, you can walk for half an hour through gardens and trees and it’s all mine.”
The beautiful woman’s eyes grew wider but her face was com-
posed, almost serene.

“Here, let me draw you a diagram,” he said, knocking into a chair to
get to the whiteboard, which was at the end of the table. “Here is the
lake, beautiful lake. You can drink the water. The road goes up the
mountain, past the hay fields and into the forest. I’m at the very end of
the road at the entrance to the canyon. I get two weeks more snow eve-
ry winter than the properties down below, but it’s private. It’s like a
shogun’s estate. I copy the Japanese style.”

At that moment there was a light knocking on the door. Mr. Moto,
the office manager, was advising him his time was up. Mr. Moto
opened the door and gave Mr. Fitch a questioning look. The woman
stood up and bowed. They exchanged a few words in Japanese and Mr.
Moto said, “Miss Nomoura thinks you are a very good teacher. She
wants you double time for the next three months.”

Mr. Fitch could not believe his ears. “Very good,” he said.

“Have you decided on her level?” Mr. Moto asked.

“She’s a level three,” said Mr. Fitch. “We’ll start her at level three.”

Ω

Mr. Fitch had been out on four dates with the beautiful woman he now
called Nami. They had been coffee dates, and always at the end of her
lesson, which Miss Nomoura timed to coincide with his lunch and
three-hour afternoon break between split shifts. The dates lasted for at
least two hours during which time Mr. Fitch would exhaust himself
thinking of new things to say. He had shown her photographs of the
hobby farm and she had shaken her head in wonderment. “So much
land,” she said. “You are rich man.”

“In equity only,” admitted Mr. Fitch, and then he added, “If you had
this land in downtown Kawasaki it would be worth a hundred billion
yen.”

Mr. Fitch was tapped that day and had had to borrow five thousand
yen from his colleague and fellow roommate, Mr. Bond. Once again,
the school could not meet the pay date, due to various reasons, which
the staff of six teachers would debate. Their paychecks were either be-
ing drunk by the boss, stolen by Mr. Moto, being used to cover the
boss’ daughter’s liver replacement surgery, or the big contracts were,
due to the collapse of the bubble economy, not paying on time. Mr.
Fitch had been unable to save any money, and in fact, was behind on
the rent for his one room flat. Both of his credit cards had been maxed
out and most annoyingly, after a lengthy and rude correspondence, one
of them had been pulled when he had written them a letter of counter
claim for the amount owed.

Ω
It was on their third date that Mr. Fitch learned that Nami had a child. She gave him a picture of a pretty four-year-old girl posing on a cushion. Mr. Fitch beamed. He was glad it was a girl and not a boy. “Why, she’s so pretty,” he said. “What about the father?”

For the first time Mr. Fitch saw a spark of emotion in the woman’s face. “I hate him,” she said simply.

“Oh,” he replied. “I understand.”

Ω

The other teachers at the school noticed a change in Mr. Fitch. He appeared livelier, more animated and from time to time you could hear his high whinnying laughter rise from a teaching cubicle. He appeared to be having fun with his students, even the middle-aged dragon ladies that arrived after doing lunch or shopping with their lady friends. They giggled at his antics and thought him charmingly foolish. One even started calling him her ‘naughty man’ and booked extra lessons, for her trip, she said, to Perth. Behind his back the other teachers called him Mr. Poopularity and wondered when this foolishness would end. This was a school of middle-aged teachers, hacks of their profession, but wise to the world. They knew what it was like to tread water while others sailed and if one of their kind had found a log and sailed it like the America’s Cup challenger, then so be it. They would watch until a wave dashed his dreams and he’d return, sadder but wiser, resigned like the others to keep treading.

Ω

Mr. Fitch had one best friend, his only friend, in Mr. Bond, a teacher who had been at the academy for eight years. Mr. Bond, who was six years older, also lived in the room next to him. It was Mr. Bond who had shown him how to make a six tatami mat room as spacious as an apartment. You could set up a bed, kitchen table with two chairs, television, microwave, convection rotating oven, bread maker and kitchen under a kitchen sink and still have room for a refrigerator with chilled white wine, and at the very entrance, the pièce de résistance in modern living, a computer alcove with a seventeen-inch screen, ergonomic keyboard, laser printer, fax and 600 dpi scanner. As Mr. Bond said, “It doesn’t get any cozier than this.”

Mr. Bond and Mr. Fitch lived in what was called a gaigin house. There were two stories and fifteen rooms, seven down, eight up. There was one shower room with two stalls for the entire house and one kitchen remarkable for the grease on its gas fixtures, but there were separate bathrooms for each floor and these were scrupulously clean. The manager was a thin, overly aggressive neurotic who would once or twice a month select one of the roomers to scream at. He avoided both Mr. Bond and Mr. Fitch who were older, mostly because Mr. Bond
pretended he had been in Vietnam and had killed people. Bond could summon tears to his eyes when he’d allude to helicopters and bodies being thrown off. Mr. Fitch supported this untruth and would add, in a whisper, after Mr. Bond had left the kitchen, moist and reddened about the eyes, that certain things should be left unsaid.

The Japanese residents, mostly young girls who were looking for western husbands, boyfriends and visas to America would nod politely. Mr. Bond had been trying to seduce any one of them throughout his tenancy. So had the house manager and Mr. Fitch, in his own gentlemanly way. Not one of the current male residents had had any luck. The only successful tenant had been a black male from Washington, D.C. It had been before Mr. Fitch’s time and the perpetrator’s room had been above Mr. Bond’s. Mr. Bond had complained bitterly about the pounding and loud shrieks. Not only that, he said, and this time his small jowls shook with judgment, the man had, after a period of only two months, enjoyed not one but three of the girls. In no time the outraged Mr. Bond had managed to make the atmosphere so unbearable that all four of the fornicators departed their separate ways to different rooming houses. This won the admiration of the house manager, and it appeared as if the two were becoming close friends. This would end when Mr. Bond’s friend, Mr. Fitch, arrived, hair fluffy and curled, to take up the room next door.

Mr. Bond found Mr. Fitch’s preoccupation with his student as unbearable as the lover had been upstairs. Mr. Bond could not reconcile his friend’s great fortune with his own bad luck. He would date young Japanese women, preferably on the chunky side, with large breasts, and get absolutely nowhere. Mr. Fitch suggested that perhaps he should consider women over forty since, after all, Mr. Bond, who also lofted his chestnut hair, was close to turning sixty. One of the Japanese girls in the house, whom Mr. Bond suspected of doing porno movies, called them Oyagi Guys. She teased them by saying how much she loved oyagi, which was Japanese for middle-aged men, and that her first boyfriend who had been a film producer was sixty-eight when she had been eighteen. She told them this story many times with a lasciviousness she would never show to younger men. After she had put them into an excited state she would quickly retreat, on pretense of sudden urgency, to her room upstairs.

Mr. Bond said that she would probably do both of them together. In fact he said this every weekend, especially after he and Mr. Fitch had sat alone together in their shot bar under the railway overpass getting extremely pissed. It was something Mr. Bond always said after they had run out of things to say. They had already repeated themselves, lapsed into argument and then into silence. On the wall video screen in front of them was playing one of two music videos owned by the bar. They were now watching the one they called fat-assed Sir Paul singing *Let it Be* to a bunch of business executives dressing down and waving Bic lighters. It was time for the Oyagi girl.
“Yup, she’d do both of us at the same time,” said Mr. Bond, as the building shuddered to another overhead train.
“I really don’t care,” said Mr. Fitch, turning coyly to his reflection in the window.
“Whaddya mean by that?”
“I finally have an evening date.”
“An evening date? With Oyagi girl?”
“No, with Namiko.”
“Oh.” Mr. Bond feigned boredom, yawned and took a sip of beer.
“What do you see in that skinny thing anyway?”
“She’s beautiful.”
“She’s got a nice face, I’ll grant you. But she’s got no breasts.”
“She does.”
“She does not. She’s as flat as a boy.”
“I’m not going to sit here and argue like a pair of twelve-year-olds about whether she does or does not have breasts.”
“Well, she doesn’t.”
“She does. She has very nice breasts, in fact.”
“How would you know?”
“You have not made love to a woman in years. And at last I see why.”
“So, neither have you,” returned Mr. Bond who suddenly began laughing, stopped, and then catching hold of something even more amusing, laughed again until he brought the attention of the bar upon them.
“Oh, shut up,” said Mr. Fitch, “it isn’t funny.”
They sat silent for a time. They usually sat by the window so they could watch the girls and women passing by. There were four other people at the small bar in the main room, one a woman who refused to talk and was crying. It had started to rain outside and neither had brought an umbrella. It was a sad ending to another Saturday night.
“Sometimes I hate this life,” said Mr. Fitch.
“Yeah, what else is there?” answered Mr. Bond in his I-did-Vietnam voice.
“I have a bachelor of arts degree and a tesol certificate. I should be doing better than this.”
“Yeah, yeah,” said Mr. Bond. “You and one hundred thousand other ESL teachers in Tokyo.”
“So this is it.”
“No, you’re going to marry Namiko. You’re going to take her and a four-year-old kid back to a shack in the mountains and live on welfare.”
“Don’t be cruel.”
“Yeah, well don’t be crazy.”
Mr. Bond got up and as he did, Mr. Fitch did not see a disheveled drunken gaigin salary man English teacher in a rumpled business suit, but a G.I. picking up his heavy pack and shouldering a rifle. “It’s al-
most twenty-four hundred,” said Mr. Bond, looking at his watch. “We gotta go. It’s work tomorrow.”

Ω

Mr. Bond and Mr. Fitch were silent on their walk home. They did not speak to each other the next morning. Mr. Fitch rose half an hour earlier and was out the door and walking towards the Musashi Nakahara station, sometimes looking behind him, fearing that Mr. Bond would catch up to him and impose himself in the crowded rail car. Mr. Bond was always too loud in the mornings and, furthermore, he insisted on speaking English, not a word of Japanese, a blatant colonial. As well, he chewed peppermints for the length of the ride, very tiny and powerful mints that etherized the space around them.

Mr. Fitch did not go into the Starbucks at exit 17. Mr. Bond was sure to stop there too on his way to school. He walked on instead to a smaller, cheaper coffee shop a block past his school, deeper into the district. The coffee was not as good and the cups were smaller, and the cream came in small plastic containers and left an oil slick atop the brown surface of the liquid, but he would be anonymous there and private with his thoughts. He was very, very angry with Mr. Bond and several times during the night had woken in a rage. Mr. Bond was a foul promiscuous aging roué and it was time to seriously reassess their friendship. He could not have Mr. Bond come around when he was married to Namiko. Nor would he let him around their daughter, especially when she became twelve or thirteen.

Mr. Fitch sighed and thought of his perfect family. He had already asked Namiko, put into the guise of a conditional sentence that “if she were married would she have another child?” and she had answered quite agreeably and without hesitation that she would have another child.

“Yes, a boy,” she had replied.

If there was anything Mr. Fitch sincerely regretted, he told himself, it was not having had a family. He had sired two children, both boys, when he had been in his thirties, but the relationships had been hopeless. One of the women had already been married and her jealous husband had driven around in a Volkswagen all night with a shotgun in the front seat trying to find him. The other woman had been impossible, had loved him to distraction, conceived, and then run away. The boys were full-grown now or close to it, and sometimes he had fantasies that they would find him and call him father and he would explain why he had not been there for their birthdays or special times like their first bicycle or graduation, and sometimes the thought of that would bring him to tears. He had wanted a family desperately, he had told himself, but two things had intervened. He could not find the right woman and he had been too poor. How could he have raised a family on the jobs he
had had in Canada? It had been totally unfair, for at heart, he considered himself a family man. More than anything he wanted the stability of hearth and home, of having a beautiful wife. He imagined Namiko and the children coming up to him scrubbed and dewy-eyed for their evening kiss goodnight before bed. He would be sitting in a large armchair with a book. Ah yes! And, feeling suddenly refreshed and empowered, Mr. Fitch strode quickly on his stork-like legs down the street, for he was a man with a mission. He would not let the inconsequential toad-like Mr. Bond interfere with his dream.

Mr. Fitch entered the café, which was occupied by low-level salary men in cheap wrinkled black suits, cab drivers, construction workers, and sundry denizens and workers of the district. He took a seat at an unoccupied table and pretended to read the indecipherable hiragana and kanji of the morning newspaper left on the seat. In circumstances like these he tried to look as inconspicuous as possible. Some westerners could actually look Japanese after a few years in Japan. They would shave their heads, bow and hunch like Japanese businessmen, develop a masque-like presence and smoke for effect. He could not get away with that. He could cut his hair, he thought, and shave his beard, but he had done that once and his girlfriend at the time had been shocked at the results. He had looked quite strange, incomplete, and of course, his nose, which was not Japanese, looked even larger without the beard. Mr. Fitch, then, was content, instead, to hold the paper in front of his face, and from a distance, it appeared as if he were another salary man reading the morning sports, his head deep into the paper.

He had almost finished his cup and realized that he still had another fifteen minutes before he had to go and open up the academy when he heard a howling at the back of the café. It was unusual in Japan to witness any public display, but when they did happen they were usually unrestrained, chaotic and very emotional. The woman began shrieking at the top of her lungs and then he heard a slap and an angry but controlled male voice telling her to shut up. That much he understood. The woman’s voice subsided to a whimper, a low crying. Good, thought Mr. Fitch. This was no place for shrieking. At one time it would have horrified him to hear such goings-on, but he had been Japanified. The Japanese had been doing their thing for thousands of years and, like it or not, they were succeeding as a civilization. This is what he would expostulate to any gaigin newcomers, horrified at some quirk or another. You have to accept things here, he told them. After all, this is their culture, not ours, and it works for them, not us.

The woman had stopped crying and the man’s voice was low and almost comforting. Well now, thought Mr. Fitch, folding his newspaper and putting it down, I’m glad that’s settled. He stood up and turned towards the door and as he did he could not resist a peek at the man and the woman who had created the disturbance. In the corner he saw what he had imagined, a prostitute and her pimp, but what he had not antici-
pated was that his shrewd and knowing glance would be met by the eyes of his beloved Namiko.

Ω

Mr. Fitch spent the rest of the week collapsed in his room. He cancelled all his classes and when he did return, the teachers received him like a long-lost relative. Mr. Bond had informed them (after extracting a vow of secrecy) of the salacious details, some of which he had embellished. Namiko, he exaggerated, had been doing live sex shows, and her pimp was a murderous yakusa who was known to disembowel his enemies in the traditional manner with a samurai sword. It was the conversation of the week and for some reason it empowered the teachers as a group, satisfied them in the inherent unfairness of all things.

A week later, Mr. Fitch and Mr. Bond decided to move into an apartment together. It was next to a park in Omotesando and was only slightly more than the cost of their separate rooms in the gaigin house which had been in a working-class neighborhood. The sun shines through the window and there is a small kitchen, two bedrooms, a living room and a small bathroom with on-demand hot water. It is actually quite cozy, and for the first time they had guests over, a company of mixed Japanese and Westerners – urbane, educated and quite worldly. There were one or two new women introduced, both master students, and Mr. Bond and Mr. Fitch engaged them in lively conversations. Mr. Bond was promoted to the position of chief instructor of the academy and Mr. Fitch has his choice of shifts. As to Namiko, who is never mentioned, she was not seen again after the morning incident, even though her lessons had been paid up for the rest of that month. Mr. Fitch and Mr. Bond do not discuss it.
MARY RUDBECK STANKO works as a florist, market gardener and sculptor and lives in London, Ontario; her poetry has appeared in over 500 publications in 17 countries, and has recently appeared in *Partners, Nassau Review, Clare, Lilies & Cannonballs Review*.

Mary Rudbeck Stanko / Three Poems

Willy Nilly

Watch what the wind sends you
on an ordinary day
then reach out your hand to grasp
the flying hundred dollar note,
a recipe you once lost
for pumpkin ambrosia, praise-laden letters
from unbidden friends, tickets
to places, passes to parties,
prizewinning announcements, one personally
scripted epistle from a blood-letting
God meant just for you, and there
on your palm lies a leaf
in its many fingered loveliness begging
release and a breath of fresh air.
Nuance

A pearl is the moon on a velvet cloth,
an item to admire through the glassy
vault of the night’s museum.
It is not a thing to own, to fondle
like a drop of light necklaced
against an ebony glove; it is a jewel
accenting our sable propensities,
a stimulus for the bright gesture
of our eyes as they stare
out from dark grottoes onto the high,
ornamental draperies.
When a white gem pierces its way through
the black’s soft eyelet,
men and women tryst and watch the shadows
leave their outstretched hands,
which hold and illuminate the many folds
of dusk with a miner’s love.
Magistrate

One quick compression of forefinger
and thumb
and you crack the stars like nuts,
sprinkling their shells
invisibly in the night sky.
That you exist is enough, immensely
filling up space,
putting time through its paces
by making chaos the only sensible thing
in the universe.
There is an odd manner in which you
relate, rolling lives
like dice
across the floor of the earth,
gambling with the certainty of someone
who has nothing to lose.
One can tease the fate you create
by loving you, by following
a tunnel of light
until it arrives at your doorstep, waiting
to join
whatever jovial, outrageous character
you are, as you sit there
slapping your knee and laughing out loud
all alone.
MARGRITH SCHRANER is the Associate Editor of *The New Orphic Review*. Set in Switzerland, *To Travel the Distance* is a novella-length work in progress that deals with the nostalgic longings and nagging dislocation of Ulyssa Segantini, a character who first appeared in Schraner’s short story, “Dream Dig,” picked up by *The Journey Prize Anthology*, 2001. “Memory is fallible,” she muses. “Memory re-configures the elements of the past and, like dreams, they fail to conform to the strict dictates of the logical, reasoning mind.”

**To Travel the Distance**  
(The Serialized Saga of Ulyssa Segantini)

Margrith Schraner

Chapter 6

ULYSSA COULD TELL at a glance that *Spätzle* was not listed on the menu. There were only a handful of choices, yet Tomas pored over them as if he were a traveler studying a timetable. She sat with her feet propped on a rickety metal chair, having kicked off her shoes shortly after her arrival. There was no need to hurry, she thought. They weren’t going to be catching any trains.

There were now four green bottles on the table; two bottles of *Hürlimann* had just arrived. Tomas kept her glass topped up. He commented on the unequivocal taste of the beer. The heat of the day demanded that she keep up with him, he said.

She gave in, content to keep him company, submerged in the feeling of languid calm that seemed to have spread all the way from the village square over to where they were ensconced, next to one another, beneath the awning of the *San Lorenzo Bar & Grill*. The knots in her stomach had dissolved miraculously and the hunger pangs seemed to have left along with them.

“The specialty from the grill sounds good,” Tomas presently announced, tapping the plasticized menu page. “A pair of San Lorenzo sausages, accompanied – it says here, quite literally – by an attractive salad and a fresh bun.”

“Quite the wedding party, that.” Ulyssa felt bubbles of mirth lifting something inside her. “I’m looking forward to the sausage meeting the bun.” It surprised her that first one and then another hiccup had slipped out along with her laugh. She blamed at first the beer, then the bubbles.

“Wonderful beer,” Tomas laughed, and reached over to give her a pat on the back.
Ever since their arrival at the Bar & Grill, she had been listening to the sound of pigeons cooing nearby. Would the underside of the awning be a likely place for pigeons to be roosting? Did Tomas hear the cooing?

He was once again immersed in his study of the menu.

“They’re lulling themselves to sleep with their cooing,” she said.

He turned to her. “Let the pigeons roost where they will,” he said. “They’re probably nesting in a tree close by.” He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t see any game-birds on the menu. From what I’m able to make out, there doesn’t seem to be any pigeon pie, either. I think I’ll try the Laurentius sausages.”

“I wonder if it’s wild meat they put in the sausages,” she said.

“Wild meat?” Tomas wasn’t sure what she meant.

“You know the kind,” she said, poking two crooked forefingers up beside her ears.

He guessed: “Quotation marks?”

“I mean those animals, with horns – the kind that roam the mountains.”

He tried to be of help. “Moose? Elk?”

“No. Smaller.” The word had escaped her now, it had flown the coop, she said. She sipped the foam off her beer, waiting. He would eventually come up with the name, given enough time, she was certain.

“Antelope? Goat?”

She shook her head.

“There’s mutton stew,” he said. “I saw it on the menu.”

“Never mind the animal,” she said, waving him off. “I’m not particularly fond of meat, anyway. I’ll just order a salad – solo – without the accompaniment.”

“As you wish.” Tomas sipped from his glass. “As for myself, I might give the San Lorenzo ribs a try. I wonder if they’re the saint’s very own? I’ve never been afraid of trying new cuisine. The Laurentius sausages sound appealing, too – as long as Lorenzo’s nether parts haven’t been ground up for our dining pleasure, that is.”

“Just as long as they taste gamey, I’m sure you’d eat them.” She reminded him of their dining experience at The Inner Organ Café in Helsinki, Finland.

He chuckled. “I certainly wasn’t shy about ordering the tripe that time.”

The mere sight of the dish had made Uylissa shudder, the way the ridges of deathly pale flesh had stuck up, barely concealed by the puddle of tomato sauce.

“The dish was seasoned with cumin,” he recalled. “To this day, I can’t stand the smell of cumin. But I am a stalwart fellow. I have lots of sisu. That’s what it took to suck down that meal.”

“And to keep it down, too,” she said. “I hope the San Lorenzo ribs will prove to be more flavorful than that tripe dish. Saints are food for the gods, I hear.”
Tomas had taken off his baseball cap and was scratching his head. The hair on top looked electric, like Einstein’s. “Here’s to Laurentius – saint, martyr and rack of ribs,” he said, raising his glass. “I think he hailed from the third century, so he should be aged to perfection.” He emptied his glass. “Laurentius held a secular position,” he said. “He was a deacon in Rome.” His voice was suddenly thoughtful. “He could have saved himself a good roasting, if only he had deigned to fork over his secret to his interrogators.”

“What secret was that?” The tale piqued Ulyssa’s curiosity.

“He knew where the Vatican’s treasure was hidden.”

She pursed her lips. Had Laurentius belonged to the harried minority of heretics she had read about? She was unsure.

“Laurentius belonged to a chaotic time in history,” Tomas said. “Pagans were battling with early Christians, and the Gods of Olympus were starting to lose their dominion. As the story goes, Laurentius, upon interrogation, was roasted on a gridiron.”

Ulyssa looked up, wide-eyed. She found the thought of martyrdom deeply disturbing.

“Laurentius, among other things, is the designated patron saint of food,” Tomas said. “More specifically, he is the patron saint of barbecues, which gives the expression, to be grilled with questions, a somewhat savory slant, don’t you think?”

Tomas was out of his mind, she thought. The torment of the unrelenting summer heat had obviously done its part to contribute to such an outrageous confabulation. But then, he had always been good at making up stories, for his own amusement as well as hers. His tales of the fantastic, written earlier on in his writing career, were renowned for blurring the line between truth and invention.

“No, no,” he protested, holding up both hands. “Not this time – believe me, I’ve invented nothing. I’m not talking fiction, here. The anecdote is based on actual, historical fact. It took another fifty years before Constantine crossed the historic bridge into Rome and Christianity triumphed over Paganism. It’s all laid out in the tourist brochure. All you have to do is read it.”

She leaned away from him, glancing toward the gardenia bush by the entrance. An elderly gentleman with thinning hair slicked back in a ducktail was coming down the steps toward them. He wore a long, white apron and carried a saucer with macaroni and cut-up sausages. The cat darting out from the shade beneath the bush responded to the name of Stevia. He set the saucer down and petted her at length while addressing endearments to her in Italian.

He smiled apologetically when he finally came to the table to take their order. The strings of his long, white apron were tied in front, and the area across his belly was spattered with grease. When she saw that there were no traces of blood on his apron, she smiled, relieved. He was the proprietor, she gathered, the one in charge of preparing the victuals. Perhaps he was the one who did all the grilling.
She turned back to Tomas. “Did you see any seafood on the menu?”

she asked. She had been toying with the idea of rounding out her meal.

“There was duck,” he said. “And I saw tidbits of freshly caught rabbit – in addition to the ribs, of course – a veritable cornucopia of savory items.”

The elderly gentleman nodded at Tomas, who had made up his mind, he said. He would be putting his faith in Saint Laurentius, today. He would do him justice and try the ribs. And for the lady, he added, the attractive salad might be a safe choice – without the bun, of course. They might possibly indulge in dessert, later on. “A piece of the traditional Graubünden walnut torte might appeal to squirrel cheeks, here,” he said, winking at Ulyssa. But for the time being, the Hürlimann seemed to be doing an adequate job of keeping their thirst quenched.

Ulyssa finished what was left of the beer in her glass.

“Two more?” the proprietor asked.

Tomas nodded.

Ulyssa took her feet off the rickety chair and shifted her shoulder so it touched Tomas’s. They sat comfortably together for a while, looking out at the village square. All motion seemed to have stopped. She could see the heat hovering above the flagstones. The climate was reminiscent of the tropics, she said. It was making her heavy of limb. “Add to that the narcotic effect of the honeysuckle-laden air and – voilà – you have the perfect recipe for a siesta.”

“And don’t forget the gurgling of the pigeons,” Tomas said, “coupled with the soporific effect of the beer –”

“I always did feel lethargic after drinking beer,” she told him. She felt regret at not having ordered the customary Campari, served in a tall glass with tonic water and a squeeze of lemon. The bitter taste of the red vermouth was refreshing; its color, together with the clinking of the ice cubes when she stirred it with a swizzle stick, never failed to revive her sagging spirits.

She looked around for the waiter, but he had disappeared.

They watched a postal bus pull up from seemingly nowhere and come to a halt beneath a diminutive, yellow sign next to a linden tree. The exhaust disturbed a lush carpet of lime-green blossoms; they whirled up briefly before settling back on the ground. Eventually, the driver of the bus emerged and hurriedly crossed the square before disappearing down a side street.

A renewed silence enveloped them. Tomas was content to sit and watch the haze spread across the empty square. The sound of water trickling into the fountain’s basin was soothing to his ears, he said. It was bound to produce visions of Elysium if he happened to drift off. All he would have to do was give in to the temptation and have a little upright snooze. But he resisted.

Ulyssa, while gazing out at the fountain thought she saw a motif of sorts etched into its side. It was shaped like a coat-of-arms, and a year
was inscribed in the stone, but it was worn with age and she could not make it out.

“Isn’t it a curious coincidence,” Tomas said, “that here we are, sitting outside the San Lorenzo Grill, and the Baroque church, there” – he pointed across the square, past the fountain – “happens to bear the name of the very same saint?” He had studied the information in the tourist brochure, he said. The church was said to be the oldest in the valley, dating as far back as the sixth or seventh century. It was lauded for its excellent acoustics. Would she consider going there for vespers – once they had finished their repast, of course?

“Quite frankly, I have no desire to darken the doorway of any church. Not today,” she told him, “nor any other day, for that matter.” The mere thought of frankincense wafting through the nave would be sufficient to bring on one of her headaches, she added. And besides, who in their right mind would want to listen to the voice of that sniveling, young priest again – for the second time in a single day? She had had enough of sightseeing to last her for a week.

Tomas knew better than to contradict her. The food would soon be here, he said. It was sure to placate her spirits and calm her hunger, which he could hear quite plainly speaking through her voice. He took out his cloth handkerchief and wiped first his sunglasses, and then the bridge of his nose. With his handkerchief still in hand, he pointed across the square. What were the gods of antiquity doing, the ones standing on the scalloped stone ledge, high above the church entrance? They appeared to be scowling, as if they wanted to show their displeasure at the sight of anyone who dared to enter.

She sized up the façade. On the narrow ledge stood a number of larger-than-life stone figures. The gilded hemlines of their pastel-colored robes were brushing against the edge; they stood so close she feared the figures might topple over and come crashing down. Among the various emblems of power, she recognized a scepter, a bishop’s mitre and a cardinal’s staff.

“There’s a saint among them,” she said. “That figure with the ruddy face and the deep frown lines.”

“The one with the formidable beard? I see he’s carrying a long cross on his shoulder and has a gospel in his hand.”

“That’s St. Laurentius,” she said. “He always carries a purse of money, too. It’s symbolic of his alms-giving.”

“What about the others, the ones who seem content to bear the lesser implements? They must be his attendants. I see one is carrying a poker, and another a pair of tongs. They look like they’re about to preside over a barbecue, right here in the square. Maybe they’re all coming to eat? My God, it’s getting so hot, all of a sudden. San Lorenzo must be loving it.”

Beneath the methylene-blue sky, the air was shimmering in the square. The heat was making her dizzy, Ulyssa said. Objects appeared strangely warped and wavy, as if seen through a pane of old window
glass. Even the saints themselves were now looking warped. She saw them wavering, on the verge of stepping off the ledge, as if compelled to re-enact a drama centuries old.

Tomas had stopped talking. He simply sat, gazing out through half-closed lids. Ulyssa joined him in his silence. Teetering on the edge of somnambulance, she leaned her head back against the white-washed wall and hardly noticed it when her straw hat slid off. Let it fall where it might, she thought; she couldn’t be bothered to pick it up.

She allowed herself to sink deeper and deeper into a state of drowsiness, letting her eyes roam at will across the expanse of paving stones. Beneath her gaze a pleasing pattern made up of darker and lighter stones assembled itself. Then the stones began to shift. They magically arranged and re-arranged themselves, like a kaleidoscope, until finally they settled into a mosaic, assuming the shape of a great Persian carpet that stretched seamlessly from the terrace of the Bar & Grill all the way to the fountain. The paisley motif seemed familiar; hadn’t she played on just such a carpet during the distant afternoons of her early childhood?

The paisley pattern dissolved quickly, as if it were melting in the summer heat. She had the impression that she was observing the entire square through a curtain of thick, white gauze. Moments later, she succumbed to the need to close her eyes.

In the dusk behind her eyelids, she saw the saintly figures stepping off the ledge and gathering off to the side, where they huddled around what she took to be a pit-fire. She watched as they jostled for position, gesticulating wildly with their implements. What were they doing, raking over the hot coals? She could see the glinting steel of a dagger and the newly sharpened point of a lance. The tip of one implement appeared to have been lopped off; it looked like a poker. One of the saints seemed to be holding entrails in one hand. Most incongruous of all, another, with his back turned, seemed intent on doing something he was hiding from her. He carried what she took to be a scythe.

Were those horns she saw sticking up from the hot coals? She had the impression that she was witnessing some sort of ceremony. Moreover, it was being performed in secret and, oddly enough, everything she saw was visible as if through closed doors.

The figure with the scythe was moving erratically as he approached the fire-pit. He had an odd manner of whistling through his teeth. It unsettled her. Seconds later, she heard a hissing sound, as if victuals had been thrown on the flaming pit and, looking closer, she saw flames springing up and licking at an unsightly lump of flesh.

In the reddish dusk behind her eyelids, billows of smoke temporarily obscured the blaze, but when the smoke cleared, it became evident that the slab of meat had all but been consumed by the flames in the pit.

The dusk gave way to a bright chartreuse color at the precise moment when a pungent aroma hit her nostrils. It reminded her of charred meat. *Bon appetito*, she heard a male voice proclaim. It was followed
by Tomas’s voice, pronouncing the word Hürlimann, and then Campari Rosso.

When she opened her eyes, the proprietor was turning to leave. “A feast for the eyes,” Tomas complimented him. A substantial rack of meat sat squarely on a blue platter with white polka dots. A second platter held the salad. Tomas freed a steak knife from the bundle of cutlery wrapped inside a linen napkin and tucked into his food at once, sawing off a rib and gnawing on it. “You ought to have a taste,” he told her, after licking the corners of his mouth. “Heavenly spices.” He plucked a hair from the rack of ribs and held it up for her to inspect.

“It certainly doesn’t belong to me,” she protested. “It must be the chef’s hair. Mine is curly, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“No need to protest,” Tomas laughed. “We both know that the proprietor doesn’t have red hair.” While she pretended to look under the table in search of the culprit, Tomas tucked into the food, unperturbed. “The meat is so tasty, it makes me want to go pay tribute to the saint and his shrine.” Between bites, he told her that the saint’s shrine was to be found at the cathedral in Chur. The art museum in Chur might be well worth a visit, too. It housed a couple of paintings by Giovanni Segantini, he had read.

“Chur,” she repeated, as if to correct him; she took special delight in exaggerating the rasping, throat-clearing sound that was a constant source of vexation to anyone other than indigenous speakers of the language.

“Cur or Kerr, it’s still the same cathedral to me.” He informed her that the cathedral in Chur had made headlines a few years earlier, when thieves broke in through the crypt and looted the altar of St. Laurentius, located to the left of the nave. “They divested it of many valuable paintings, precious objects and gems,” he added.

Ulyssa pulled the salad platter close to her and speared an olive on her fork. “And did they catch the thieves?” she asked.

Tomas looked up and nodded at the proprietor’s wife, who had arrived bearing their drinks on a tray. He busied himself with mopping up the gravy on his platter with a piece torn from his crusty roll. “The thieves? I’m not sure,” he said, chewing pensively. “I read somewhere that the paintings were recovered, but as far as I know, the actual treasure was never found.”

Ulyssa stirred her iced Campari and bit into the wedge of lemon that was speared on the swizzle stick. “That’s regrettable,” she said, making a face. She took several sips of her drink, savoring the sparkling, bitter taste against the roof of her mouth. “Fortunately, cathedrals and art museums are theft-proof, for the most part. They function mainly as repositories for countless riches that pay tribute to the past.” The drink was making her feel animated. She began nibbling on an artichoke heart, gesticulating with her fork as she spoke. “I’ve come upon records of history in the most unlikely places in the form of art and artifacts, for
instance, which in turn have allowed me to gain insight into the rise and fall of former civilizations –”

Tomas deftly caught the glass she had almost tipped over with her elbow. He smiled. “You seem to be warming to your subject,” he said. “But I agree with you. We’re sitting on ancient territory, here. Every rock in this village has its own history, I bet.”

He went back to paying homage to his San Lorenzo ribs. She sat watching him divest the last rib of its flesh.

Ancient times, ancient rocks, she thought. In this village, there were piles of rubble everywhere, where at one time had sat stone dwellings with slate roofs.

“Villa Riamio,” he said.

She gave him a questioning look.

“The name of the original settlement, back in A.D. 841,” he explained, adding the rib he had sucked dry to the pile stacked neatly on one side of his plate.

“Villa Riamio,” she repeated, savoring the melodiousness of the name. “It’s suffused with Roman history.”

“I’ve always had a penchant for Roman history,” he said, wiping his lips with the cloth napkin. “But I much prefer the Greeks.” He let out a contented sigh and leaned back, his legs stretched out in front of him. The ginger cat had decided to join them and was weaving back and forth, brushing against the napkin that dangled from Tomas’s hand. She purred incessantly and finally pressed her entire body against his naked shins to stroke him to the tip of her tail.

Ulyssa leaned over to touch her fur.

“Do you remember any of this?” Tomas asked, gesturing vaguely at the houses bordering the square.

She did not know how to respond. What she saw before her hardly recalled what she had once known, long ago: A huddle of stone dwellings with slate roofs, a certain bend in the road, an abundance of nasturtiums cascading from gleaming tin tubs set in dooryards, the peculiar, but lovely graffiti etched in the stucco around doors and windows . . .

She bit down on a fully ripened cherry tomato, surprised by the sudden burst of flavor. “I remember the fountain,” she said, taking several sips of her Campari. “There were linden blossoms that floated on the water. And I remember the goat stables, of course –” She broke off, flustered. The goat stables were from an era even further removed, it seemed. It was useless, trying to catch up to the past; she had seen it in a flash.

“You must have been in a daze when you wrote Blue Skies over Savognin,” he said rather unkindly. “I would never have recognized this place from the descriptions in your story.”

“I failed to mention the goat stables in that story.” She shrugged, made careless by the sparkling drink. She reached for her glass once more. “You could call it an oversight, I guess. But then, veracity has never been one of my strong points.”
At least she had taken the plunge into the past, she told herself, although it may not have been in the manner Tomas had expected her to.

Tomas had topped up his beer glass and was watching the stream of tiny bubbles rising up through the golden liquid.

“There were goat stables everywhere,” she said, taking up the thread of conversation again. “Their dark, wooden doors were always open. And yet, I never saw inside. What I remember is the incredible brightness, the way it made the dark inside seem all the more impenetrable.”

There was a long silence. “No need to ponder the gaping dark,” Tomas said, finally. It was as if his voice had insinuated itself into a narrow wedge of sunlit space belonging to a dream she had had.

She closed her eyes, and for a moment gave herself over to the delicious pleasure of the sun’s heat nesting deep inside her eye sockets. Images rose, like bubbles in a beer glass, breaking the surface of her inebriated consciousness; she saw a fountain thrust its roots up through the flagstones, rather like a tree. The wavering sunlight seemed to be casting shadows of its own. In the shady, curved side of the stone basin, she saw a year inscribing itself, as if chiseled of its own accord. The year was 1888. It was the same year Giovanni Segantini had made the trek on foot to Riom. More than likely, he had set up his easel and painted the young girl at this very fountain.

There were glistening hoops now, dancing on the surface of the water. They jumped over the rim to spread out and embrace the young girl who had come to quench her thirst. In the refracting light, the flaxen hues of the girl’s hair appeared to be the color of fully ripened wheat. This must be a trick performed by the sunlight, she told herself, watching as the stream of water issuing forth from the spout was intercepted by the girl’s cupped hand before being transformed into a silver rope plunging down into the basin below. She continued to watch, transfixed; the rope of silver began to unravel and as it did so the flow of water was slowed. What if time itself was but a luminous rope, stretching downward and lengthening out indefinitely?

When she surfaced from her reverie, the golden hues of Segantini’s painting had blended in with her surroundings. Tomas was still sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him, the linen napkin dangling from his hand. At his feet, the ginger cat was weaving back and forth, purring incessantly, brushing her tail against his naked shins.

“Tsk, tsk, Stevia,” Tomas tried to object, but his tone was far too gentle to discourage the cat, and when Ulyssa looked again, the cat was nesting in his lap.

“I think she loves you more than I do,” Ulyssa said. The thought was laughable. What if that golden fur-ball with the twitching tail were to ensnare him and hold sway over him forevermore? She would have to claw him back with all her strength, she thought, feeling a small panic rise in her throat.
She hastily emptied her glass. She would have to pry Tomas loose. The cat was obstinate. If anything, the cat’s purring had grown more insistent. It was now vying with the burble of the water emptying itself continuously into the fountain’s basin. For a while, the two sounds competed for Ulyssa’s attention, but finally the ostinato of the fountain won her over.

“Come, take a picture of me,” she said, rising from her chair. “I’d like to pose for you.”

Tomas hesitated. “What – in this heat? Right now?” He fished the one remaining ice cube out of her Campari glass and brushed his forehead with it before popping it in his mouth.

“I’d like to have a memory of myself,” she repeated, “standing over by the fountain.”

He raised his eyebrows. “In memory of the Segantini girl, I presume?”

“How did you know that?”

He smiled indulgently. “Clairvoyance,” he told her, pushing back his chair and picking up his camera. The cat, startled, fled his lap. “Your mind is as transparent to me as a glass of water,” he laughed and threw the napkin on the table like a young man who had been asked to dance.

Ulyssa ventured forth into the square, the soles of her feet taking pleasure in the delicious Mediterranean heat of the flagstones. Her feet no longer seemed to be her own; they were a young girl’s feet, and she was running barefoot in a moment of pure, lucid dreaming.
R.W. MEYER’S most recent book of poems is Being Here (Vancouver: LYREpress, 2004). New work will be appearing in Queen’s Quarterly and Descant.

R.W. Meyer / Six Sonnets

8.

Once at the Forum I saw bougainvillea
And many coloured shrubs blooming over
The fallen Corinthian capitals;

At the Parthenon, the shards of Achaea
Are naked to the naked eye, but at Ur
Walls fallen fail and all Babylon pales

As Egypt in desert places in the sun.
It makes me weep to think of sharp potshards
When I have known the wine. From them it’s run
Like gold from broken laws and faith in cards.

But these ruins, Love, are nothing compared
To the ruins, Love, of your quaking face,
Your tears on your flushed cheeks, and your bared
Breast heaving: Lady, I know the broken place.
To these residues of yourself I am
Sole heir and dubious benefactor:
A glass heart etched and fractured without blame
And the mind following, treated like a whore,
And learned now in that new cause or not.
How will I know unless I know myself
The profit of usury’s loss, of what’s got,
And giving naught to naught is never self.

Believe me, Love, there are no presences
Like absences or anything beyond words.
Nothing is beyond; something always senses
Feeling our name like the feathers of birds.

Because I can touch your ruffled plumage,
Girl, I am the mirror and the image.

For Lee Tyner

The mare walks, her stride clipped, short in the distance
Till I heel her on. But it is the whip behooves
Her to leap and break from canter and prance
To gallop to run, her thundering hooves

Causing the turf to quiver and all the earth
To rise as she rises under the sun
And fall in strides ever larger, her girth
Heaving muscle as if shot from a gun.

So spurred she parts the contorted wind.
She inhales and exhales deep into her lungs
And snorts in stride a word I’ll never find
As airborne she reaches beyond her tongue

And whinnies aloft through the hedgerow trees
Raising in whirlwinds the fallen leaves.
Now that my grief is my only joy
And all peaces but a furtive form of wars,
So my freedom from you, Love, I enjoy
Like a prisoner in his cell the bars.

So all I have grasped and seized upon
Escapes my fingers till I am lost,
And all my fevers leave me cold, a clown
Smiling and grimacing stiff in circus frost.

Blind, I see the world is my dark absence;
Without a tongue my silences have spoke
Volumes of complaint and wrench my sense
From vacuums as nothing goes baroque.

So I would die who seek my health, complain,
For my desire feasts upon my starving pain.

However, Lady, I only want the world
In which you once were loved, a holy place
Where all my life before you, before the cold,
During, and after, I have only seen your face,

For even in this night of loss singing to loss,
I am quick as the green aurora, seen
Fractionally in the upper air like moss
Falling in the dark, or a wave of green

Rising, a flame of perpetual surprise
That burns only in your love a mirrored fire
Or snuffed to nothing but smoke in darkness is
Nothing numerous, a falling spire

And permutation of silent metaphor,
A non-being of infinite nature.
I gather more and more, find less of you
As if by lapses in content you become
More real than any presence and by that true
Like the silence you now bring by coming home.

The wall of your not saying becomes a well
In which there is no water left to drink.
Love, how can I live where you die and withdraw
But as a parched thought without a mind to think.

How can one woman cold and overcast
Becloud a sunny sky; how can one woman
Whose natural body convulsed in the past
Set out to repulse the love of her man?

Love, I am not mad but sensible of grief
Like a rich man of a common thief.
The Cactus House

Larry Caldwell

JACK DIDN’T LIKE the home Stephanie was raising their little girl in. It looked like a Tide box that had been cut open, bent inside-out, and painted pastel blue. It blended with the other houses in Mesa Springs like a grain of sand on a dune. There was no scent of the desert here, and that made Jack suspicious. *You should be able to smell your natural surroundings*, he thought spitefully. It should come through the glass of your sealed-up windows and demand to live with you.

Mesa Springs only reeked of trimmed sod. The whole development sat huddled around man-made goldfish ponds and planted palms, while timed sprinklers spat water and groundskeepers rode the property in carts, trailing wheelbarrows with landscaping supplies. It left you wondering where the sand traps and holes and rotten-looking plaid pants were.

Jack eyed the rearview and watched his daughter in the back seat, where she sat buckled in like some kind of convict. Her chubby six-year-old hands were clamped over the plush killer whale she’d gotten at the aquarium; her cherub face gazed out the window at the unfolding scenery of her new neighborhood.

“I miss our old place,” Jack said, meeting her eyes in the rearview. “What about you? Ever get sad we don’t live there anymore?”

“I like my new place,” Maura confessed. “Ducks walk around in our backyard. I named one Barney and another Zsa-Zsa.”

Jack made the left onto Stephanie’s street. Somehow he managed to spot the detergent box among the other detergent boxes, halfway down the block, and pulled his Explorer even with the driveway. “Thanks for
taking me to the aquarium today,” Jack said. “The turtles were my fa-
vorite.”

Maura unbuckled herself and pulled at the door handle. Jack reached between the front seats and touched the short sleeve of her rainbow-print blouse. “What was your favorite, honey?”

Maura hesitated, her whale staring back at him, glassy-eyed. “Dad-
dy?”

“Yes, honey?”

“I don’t ever want to see you again.”

“Maura, don’t say that. That hurts my feelings.”

“I don’t love you anymore.”

Jack tried to remind himself that he’d been expecting this. It was, after all, only the third time he’d visited her in as many months. The first, she’d sat up front and thrown her arms around him. “It’s different in my new house,” she’d said. “I don’t like Mitch’s chair, it scares me.” The second time, two weeks later, she’d given him the silent treatment and Jack had spent the day trying to explain the “situation” while she sat in the back, mute as a doll. This time, she’d at least spoken to him a little; but cordial as Stephanie had reared Maura to be, Jack could see right through it. She was scared of him.

“You don’t mean that, Maura,” he tried.

But already he could see she did – just in the way her eyes (so much like her mother’s) wandered his face, the way their moisture loomed over the bottom of her lids, threatening to wet her cheeks. With all her strength, Maura shoved her door open. The heat spilled over the Explorer’s air-conditioning like something liquid.

“Honey, wait.”

“You take me away from Mommy,” Maura whimpered. “I miss her when I’m with you.”

“But it’s only for the day,” Jack said, realizing too late the harsh tone of his words. “We don’t get to see each other for another two weeks. Don’t you ever miss me?”

Maura shrugged; one of her legs found its way out of the truck.

“Didn’t we have a good time at the aquarium?”

“No!” she said with a finality that was like an anvil dropping in Jack’s stomach. “I hated looking at the turtles. And that stupid whale.”

Her face crumpled then, her lips drawing back from her crooked little teeth, her eyes squeezing shut. She threw her stuffed animal over the passenger seat and bolted from the car and across the putting green of Stephanie’s front lawn. Maternal instincts never failing (or maybe she’d just been spying through the peephole), Stephanie threw the door open and rushed out. Her face was already flushed with anxiety. “Why are you crying?” she demanded of Maura.

Jack stepped from the Explorer, the anvil feeling still plummeting in his stomach, and walked his way through the afternoon heat, up Mitch’s concrete access ramp, to the sleepy shade of the front over-
hang. Stephanie was waiting for him there. “What did you do, Jack?”
“Nothing. We were having a good time.”

Stephanie’s hands lashed out and shoved him backward. Jack’s head struck one of her hanging flowerpots and he stumbled back out into the sun. “Are you angry?” she cried, and Maura began crying harder. “You want to yell and fight with someone?”

Jack ignored her, watching Maura disappear into the house.

“She get ice cream on your seats? Was that enough to set you off—”

“I didn’t yell at her!” Jack screamed, his voice like a sonic boom over the golf course quiet of the neighborhood. “We went to the aquarium. We stopped at McDonald’s. I don’t understand.”

“You never did!” Stephanie shouted back. Her voice couldn’t reach Jack’s decibel, but that had never stopped her. “If you understood, maybe you would see your daughter more.”

Mitch appeared in the doorway, his bearded face and small, calm eyes peeking around the frame, four feet from the ground. “Steph, take it easy,” he said. “Maura’s fine.”

“If you ever raise your voice to her again, I’ll see to it you never see her.”

“Steph!” Mitch said. “Easy!”

Stephanie’s face crumbled, the perfect impression of Maura, aged twenty-eight years. She retreated into the house and gestured as if to slam the door. Mitch held it against her, gentle but firm. Jack could hear her trudging up the hardwood of naked steps, presumably to her bedroom, where she had always done her most passionate weeping. Maura’s tiny sneakers were clomping away too, chasing her.

Mitch rolled his wheelchair all the way out into the doorway, his furtive stare at Jack’s feet one second, right in his eyes the next. Then he reached out and clicked the door shut without a sound.

Ω

Jack drove for hours after that. His Explorer coasted through Chandler and Cave Creek, Scottsdale, Tempe, and downtown Phoenix. Then, finally, out toward a quiet and familiar neighborhood in the Sonora Desert.

For a long time, he’d known Stephanie loved Mitch Spencer. She had told him once, just before they were married, and Jack had laughed at her stories of inspired poetry and lost virginity, first-love lyricism and Sadie Hawkins sex. When Stephanie invited him for dinner, Jack thought nothing of the mild-mannered lawyer. It wasn’t until Mitch wrecked his Acura and severed his spine that Jack began to understand. But not until then, when the man was permanently fixed in a wheelchair, as Stephanie’s visits to his hospital bed grew obsessive. She said it was Mitch’s courage in the face of tragedy that rekindled her love. And eventually, enough animosity gathered to set the rest in motion.

Jack didn’t think he would ever get over his daughter living with another man – whose wheelchair had once frightened her, but whose
lap, Maura confessed, she now climbed into every night for story time. He was losing his daughter. Three months of lawyers and three day-long visits with Maura and already she was slipping away. She would continue going on daytrips with him, of course, to zoos and circuses and anywhere else fathers took their little girls; but the look she’d given him today, right before running into Stephanie’s arms, had started the construction of a barrier – one that was thick and towering and unavoidably between them now.

Jack closed his eyes and let his lungs deflate. When he opened them again, he was still racing along the interstate, the sun sagging down to touch the western earth, calling the darkness. Twilight is so beautiful, he thought. A day’s final flare. A last blaze of glory. It led his mind to ruminations of Sunrise Road, happier times, and while he was already speeding, he put more weight on the accelerator, racing off toward the twilight, and that house in the desert that was all he had left now: The Cactus House.

Ω

Idling in front of the Rodriguez property across Sunrise Road, Jack watched the house he’d once shared with Stephanie and Maura. The sun was gone now, the last strokes of pink light lending shadowy hues to their old home. Much to Jack’s delight, the Wilsons – the family living there now – had left most of the abundant number of cacti planted around the property. Ken Wilson had even copied Jack’s idea of keeping a telescope on the roof above the master bedroom.

You’ll never find this place near a golf course, Jack thought with pride.

The house looked like something a creative child had built with blocks. Each of its three levels decreased in size from the one below, allowing for walk-around terraces on the second and third floors. The adobe façade was unpainted, all earth-tones, and if not for the cacti lingering everywhere, the whole property might have blended with the desert floor beyond this single street of houses.

They had only been out for a Sunday drive when they’d found the Cactus House. Maura was asleep in her car seat and an old Velvet Underground CD had been whispering on the player. Two wrong turns later and they’d rolled up Sunrise and spotted it. In front, flanked by two tall, armless cacti, had been the realty sign. “It’s so fucking rustic,” Stephanie had whispered. “I think I love it.” It was the cacti that won them over more than anything, standing and squatting like inebriated party guests all around the house – a senile landscaper’s idea of brilliance, they later discovered. The house was theirs in less than a month. And wasn’t it funny how fast things happened after that? One day you have a family and then...

Jack’s gaze fell on Maura’s killer whale, still belly-up on the floor of the passenger seat. He picked it up, brushed it and studied the
whale’s face, its curved smile and empty marble eyes. The whale stared back, indifferent. Jack put it against his mouth, crushing the soft head against his lips to keep them from trembling. Eventually, his eyes, glassed over in a rain-on-windshield blur, wandered back to the house. Tracing the dark of its curved windows and empty driveway. The Rodriguez place was also dark; the next house was a hundred yards further up Sunshine, a realty sign hanging from its mailbox.

Jack placed the stuffed whale on the dashboard and got out. The air was cool, the kind of cool that is nowhere on earth but in the desert after dusk. You could smell it too, all that packed sand and alkali grit cooling for the night. Jack crossed the street to the house’s front yard, crunching over golfball-sized rocks to weave between the drunken cacti. Maura had named each of them. This cactus was called LaLa. That one, Po. Over here was Tinky Winky and, there, Oscar the Grouch. The two-armed one standing sentinel between the living room windows was El Bandito; the eight-foot single-stalk by the driveway, Big Green Meanie. They all had names, personalities, fictionalized histories, even the potted ones Stephanie had set out on the terraces, even the ones she’d insisted on keeping in their bedroom.

Moving around the side of the house, Jack passed Gumby and Pok-e-y and, in the massing dark, almost smacked crotch-first into Weird One. He reached the backyard and saw Kent Wilson had put up a fence along the back of the property, sectioning off the yellow yard from the yellow desert. Beyond it, Jack could still make out the tiny trail he’d once beaten in the open terrain. It wound west between the blooming yuccas and Russian thistle for a mile or two, then cut abruptly south (avoiding the outer perimeter of the nudist colony out that way) where it doubled back to Sunrise.

There was a construction site somewhere out there now. Building another road where more houses would eventually be. Maura had spotted bulldozers passing their house one day and she’d wept when Jack explained their purpose. “They’re here to kill our cactuses!” she wailed. “They’ll kill Gumby and Oscar!”

“No, they won’t,” Jack replied. “All the ones we named are on our property. We love them and they’re protected. They’re the lucky ones.”

Jack climbed the three steps to the back door and fetched a set of keys from his pocket. Sure enough, his old spare popped the deadbolt—the Wilsons had changed the front locks, but apparently saw no need replacing the back ones. Thus, Jack was able to pass through the door, the screen hissing shut behind him, and he started into the hall, with the lurch of a sleepwalker who’d found his way home without waking.

Ω

The smell was different inside, a new family’s jasmine-scented effluvi-um. Though traces of the house Jack had known still endured. The telescope wasn’t the only idea the Wilsons had lifted from the way he and
Stephanie kept the house—the living room furniture followed their design to a tee, and the Wilson family portrait hung over the mantel in the spot their own portrait had—Kent, his wife, their bloated-looking son, who was a year or two younger than Maura. But there was also a grandfather clock set in one corner, and they’d never had one of those. It distracted the room’s quiet endlessly.


In the kitchen, the gnarled table they’d left behind was gone, as was the multi-colored floor tiling, replaced with a longer table and uniform linoleum. Jack flicked on the tiny light over the sink and, opening the cabinets, saw familiar cereal boxes—Maura’s Cheerios, Stephanie’s Special K, his own Aunt Jemima, flashing her perfect row of pearly whites. Mrs. Wilson kept her own cacti behind the sink. Jack reached out for them and pricked the tips of his fingers. As he drew his hand away, its shadow played against the wall behind the sink. Quickly, his fingers straightened, forming an alligator’s mouth. The gator jaws snapped open and shut a few times, then his fingers curled and his wrist bent to make a cobra head. The cobra bobbed back and forth, and Jack stuck his tongue between his teeth and hissed. A duck formed next. Followed by a horse. A butterfly-turned-eagle. Then the finale—which had always left Maura doing jumping jacks—the two-handed dog, complete with pointy nose and lolling pinky tongue.

The phone over the counter rang and Jack jumped. Then picked it up.

“Who’s this?” an older woman wanted to know.

“You called me,” Jack said.

“Kent?”

“I’m sorry,” Jack told her. “You have the wrong number.”

“Well… but…”

Jack hung up and turned the sink light off.

He didn’t make it a foot toward the doorway before the ringer blared again.

“Hello? Kent?”

“You’re speaking to the same person.”

“Damn, I must be striking the wrong digit. I get confused sometimes.”

“Well, please be sure next time. A little girl named Maura lives here. She went to see the killer whales in the aquarium today and now she’s getting some rest.”

Jack dropped the phone back on its cradle and wandered into the dining room, which the Wilsons had since converted into a gallery for Navajo art: sand paintings, pottery sculptures, mudhead statues. He didn’t waste much time here; the room held too many foul memories and very few good ones. The first thing he’d smashed inside the house had been in this room—a china plate against the far wall—and the last thing—the legs of Stephanie’s dining table. The first happened when Jack discovered that Stephanie was spending her late nights at work in
Mitch’s hospital room. The last occurred many months later, when Stephanie finally called him from Mesa Springs to say she and Maura were spending the night with Mitch. The china plate had shattered as if it had been made for destruction, but the table took time. He’d upturned it and flung it against the wall and hammered on the tabletop with his fists until his skin threatened to open, and still the table held its shape – its long-dead craftsman, Stephanie’s great-grandfather, must have been rolling proudly in his grave. In the end, he settled for just snapping the legs off, all four of them, one for every year he was happy and could not have back.

Ω

In the second-floor bathroom of the Cactus House, Jack thought about his sunless studio apartment. Two walls of exposed brick, and a third with a window looking out at the next building’s bricks. The fourth wall, the one with a small, good-for-nothing kitchenette built into it, was covered over in paisley wallpaper. On the far left of that wall was a phone-booth-sized closet where Jack’s three shirts hung limp on plastic hangers. On the floor of that closet was a cardboard box, its THIS END UP message pointed at the ground. In that cardboard box sat a nondescript case containing a Smith and Wesson nine-millimeter, its clip loaded with a solitary bullet. Next to that case was a good length of rope, curled up into a snake’s coil – on the other side of the case, a shaving kit with a sharpened straight razor.

In the Wilson bathroom mirror was a man who wished the man staring back at him would go away. In the Wilson medicine chest, there was a bottle of aspirin, the kind of industrial-sized container that only fit on the bottom shelf. Next to the aspirin was a mercurochrome-colored bottle, smaller, filled with prescription pills, warnings all over the label. Jack snatched this bottle and filled the plastic tumbler on the sink with water. A half-dozen pills dropped onto his tongue, and the mirror didn’t bat an eye as he swallowed them down.

Jack tipped the bottle between his lips and took in a mouthful of pills. He pooled his saliva, coaxing the ones sticking to the roof of his mouth into an esophageal slide. He took in another mouthful, only the succession was too quick and the cottony feeling at his tonsils made him cough them out like baby teeth. He gulped the tumbler, mouthful after mouthful. He aided off the building sensation to gag and emptied the rest of the bottle into his stomach. Another look into the mirror and he saw it flushed and sweating. The urge to ram his finger down his throat rose like the color on his cheeks, but he refused to do it, knowing this was all he had. In place of the courage it took to press a Smith and Wesson to his eye and squeeze, of forcing bad dreams on whoever walked into his studio to find him hanging from the closet beam, or draped over his good-for-nothing kitchenette, bled out from the wrists.
The empty bottle went back into the medicine chest, and the face left the mirror before it could change his mind.

Ω

The room upstairs was nothing like it had been when Stephanie still loved him. The Wilsons kept their bed against the opposite wall, and it was amazing how much that one displacement changed the composition of the entire room. Two steps inside, Jack bumped into the corner of the new mattress. Two steps more and he collided with a wicker chair. Then he kicked something on the floor that rolled across the room. He wondered what the odds were of getting to the sliding-glass door without breaking anything and didn’t like his chances.

The night they slaughtered the cacti was also the night Stephanie had told him she loved Mitch again. “I’ve been trying to love you both,” she confessed. “But when Mitch got out of the hospital. Seeing the way he’d picked up his life like nothing ever happened. I couldn’t help it.”

For some reason, Jack had been standing in the middle of the room at that moment, holding the TV remote and switching between CNN and The Weather Channel. He turned toward Stephanie, who was curled up naked in bed, and felt suddenly numb. He’d only asked how Mitch was doing with his therapy.

“You love him?”

Stephanie drew the sheets to her throat. “He needs me,” she whispered.

Jack swallowed. “And what about me?”

“You don’t. I’m sorry.”

“And Maura? Who does she need?”

“It’ll be rough for her,” Stephanie agreed.

And Jack watched the look of sympathy on Stephanie’s face skitter away as the remote rocketed from his hand, shattering a cactus pot on the nightstand right beside her. “Don’t act like this is a big surprise!” she yelled.

“No,” was all Jack could muster. “No.” He lashed out at the object nearest to him, which was another potted cactus, resting on the floor. He kicked it with his bare foot and the cactus cracked in half, its slimy alkaline fluid spewing like white blood, and two of its needles sank into the soft meat of his instep.

He picked up the cactus on the television (Maura had named this one Brutus). “Don’t,” Stephanie said, and he hurled it against the wall. Yellow soil and cactus bits showered the room. Jack lifted a cactus from the dresser, a stout one the size of a human head.

“Don’t you know what it will do to Maura and me?” he kept trying to say, but the words wouldn’t come out right.

“She’ll visit you!” Stephanie cried.
The head-sized cactus fractured the television screen with a mammoth crashing sound, and the news reporter on it was lost in a lightning flash of misdirected electricity. The speakers kept on working though, as if he’d only meant to convert the set into a radio. Downstairs, Maura called out to them.

“How is killing my plants solving anything?” Stephanie said.

“I’m helping you,” Jack said. “It’s less you have to move to Mitch’s house.”

“Fine,” Stephanie said. She picked up a spiky cactus with a two-foot stalk from one of the adobe windowsills and threw it in his direction.

Jack caught it in midair and its spikes ran all the way through his palms, poking out the back of his hands like tiny whiskers. Its pot fell off as he made the catch and he pitched the uprooted remains through the open sliding-glass door and over the terrace rail. He held his hands up, watching the blood trickle from the wounds. Another cactus, a small one with a flower, sailed past his ear and shattered against the wall. Maura cried harder.

“Hit me with as many of those as you want,” Jack said, folding his arms, careful not to tuck his damaged hands into the folds of his elbows. “I’ll still love you.”

Stephanie’s eyes shut. “You don’t love me.”

“I love you!”

And he did, maybe then more than ever.

And Stephanie screamed, a piercing, desperate sound, and smashed another cactus pot against the nightstand. She collected the largest pottery shard from the bunch and held its jagged tip out to Jack. “I’ll tell you once,” she said, her voice trembling like it did when they took the Explorer on dirt roads. “I don’t love you anymore. I need you to understand.”

She waited for his response, the shard pointed, all the time, in the general direction of his throat. Then she lowered her aim and went down to see Maura.

The dirt stains wouldn’t come off the walls the next day. After Stephanie moved Maura to Mesa Springs, Jack tried scrubbing the soil out before the realtor showed the house. But in the end the marks were plenty visible, and it left Jack wondering what the Wilsons must have thought, seeing the house for the first time, falling more and more in love with it the higher they climbed, then reaching this room and noticing those dark stains splattered everywhere. Had they questioned it? Contemplated the last family who lived here, even for a second?

In the dark, Jack bumped their bed again, then against some sort of glass unicorn on the display stand. He caught it just before it took the plunge to the hardwood. The room was an obstacle course, full of pricey knickknacks just begging to be shattered. At last Jack found the handle of the sliding-glass door and yanked it open. Again the scent of
the desert reached for him. Outside, there was the hum of a car pulling into the driveway.

Jack froze, his stomach aching and the nerve endings in his fingers and toes beginning to tingle. Downstairs, a lock snapped and adult voices muttered to themselves. Feet shuffled in the foyer.

Then someone was racing up the first flight of stairs, tiny footfalls creaking each step. The sound carried across the second-floor hallway and up the staircase to the bedroom. Jack turned and waited for the runner to reach the top. He hurried to the Wilsons’ nightstand and turned its lamp on as the figure entered the room. The Wilsons’ son jumped at the sudden light. “Hi,” Jack said.

The kid was four, maybe five. He’d lost the bloated look that the family photographer had captured. His face was round and pale, the kind that would always make him look younger than he really was – an odd trait he would hate the first thirty years of his life and love for the rest of it. “Hi,” he replied, skeptical, “I came up to get my ball.”

Jack glanced around the room and spotted a soccer ball, which he’d kicked while sneaking through the dark. “Here it is,” he said.

Jack drew his leg back and kicked it weakly over to the boy. He was feeling strange all of a sudden, like his blood was water in his veins, like his muscles were liquefying under his skin. The ball stopped three feet short of the boy.

“Thanks,” he said anyway. He collected it in his tiny arms, and started back toward the staircase.

“Hey, wait,” Jack told him. “Want to see something cool?”

The Wilson boy shrugged, still skeptical.

“Look.” Jack made alligator jaws in the lamplight.

“A croc-o-dilly!” the kid shouted. The discovery held simultaneous excitement and fear for him. He took a step backward.

Jack tried to smile, but his lips didn’t respond. “No, it’s not real,” he said. “Look.”

He brought his thumb and forefinger together in a circle and made a rabbit.

“Easter time!” the boy exclaimed.

Jack ran through his menagerie of shadows, his hands slow but accurate against the lamplight. Making a slightly obscene gesture, he gave his horse a unicorn horn.

“What are you doing up there?” Mrs. Wilson called from the bottom of the stairs.

Jack flinched away from the lamp; the lolling-tongued dog fled the wall.

The boy swung around and glanced down the staircase. “I’m getting my ball,” he shouted. “And watching the and-i-mals play on the wall.”

“Get down here,” Mrs. Wilson said. “Your father’s going to eat all the pizza.”

The boy looked at Jack and shrugged.

Jack shrugged back.
“Thanks,” the boy whispered.
“Bye,” Jack whispered. “Enjoy your pizza. After dinner, tell your Dad to fix the telescope.”
“Tell-scope,” the boy echoed and started downstairs.

Ω

Jack yawned, a yawn that dropped his jaw to his breastbone. It seemed to go on and on and, when it finally passed, his head was spinning. He left the lamp burning in the bedroom and stumbled out onto the terrace, the desert night luring him, like always.

Climbing the ladder to the roof, the muscles-into-jelly feeling worsened. Jack clung to the ladder, though he could no longer feel the metal against his palms. Somehow he found the strength to climb up the rest of the way. Then collapsed on the adobe roof. His head landed near a Styrofoam cup three-quarters of the way full of cigarette butts – apparently one of the Wilsons had a dirty secret. Jack’s legs spun underneath the telescope stand and he rolled onto his back.

Desert twilight was over now and the stars stood out in layers of linear brightness, strung across the night like bulbs. “They’re like peepers,” Maura had said, when he’d carried her up to see Orion and the Dippers. “Maybe they’re the peepers of all the animals you make, Daddy. Watching us from outer space.”

“Maybe, hon,” he’d said. “Maybe they are.”

His eyelids were growing too heavy now, the thump of his heart like the tick of the Wilson grandfather clock, seeming to slow the more he paid attention to it.

Jack thought about Maura, tucked in bed by now, miles away. Maura in her new home, hugging her stuffed whale when they gave it back to her.

“Don’t hate me for this, honey,” he whispered. “Life’s not for hating.”

He held his arms up to the peepers above him. There were so many stars he could see the dark of his hands, each shaking finger, against their light. He made the rabbit shape, the duck, the cobra, the turtle.

Gradually, the darkness spread out from his fingers, like black ink from a broken pen. Jack’s arms folded and then dropped, while the darkness kept spreading. The moon’s crescent was swallowed up in it. The desert landscape. Everything.

But Jack could still smell the desert. It was always there for him when he needed it. It lived in you. Like love did when you knew how to find it, and how to keep it. It followed you into the deep-down dark and stayed with you, protected you against all things. Like love did, for the very lucky ones.
Bodies of a Broken Alphabet
(a review)

R. W. Meyer

The Charlatans of Paradise
By Arthur Joyce
New Orphic Publishers
77 pages $16.00
ISBN 1-894842-07-3

IN HIS “Foreword” to The Charlatans of Paradise, Arthur Joyce like Irving Layton sees the poet’s primary goal and task as that of prophet. While most poets would agree, there are many kinds of prophets, those of doom and gloom on the one hand and prophets of redemption on the other. Joyce sees elements of both despair and salvation in contemporary society in this beautifully produced volume.

This becomes abundantly apparent in “Signs of the Times,” the first section of the book. In the title poem, “Charlatans of Paradise,” Joyce pleads for compassion for the

Worn-out souls starving on the sidewalks
of the wealthiest cities on Earth;
Protesters held at bayonet-point
by mirrored helmets guarding the rich
in their feudal glass-towers;
The planet gasping
through a hole in its lungs,
seeping cancer into the summer sky.

There is something messianic about these lines and the book as a whole, for Joyce sees that the “feudal” destruction of the earth is an act of suicide cutting us off from the redeeming powers of Nature, the only power that can save us unless it is we ourselves as suggested in “Christmas Prayer,” one of the most moving poems in the collection.
The second section of the book, “Oasis Earth,” is perhaps the most haunting in that Joyce’s vision of Nature is steeped in the spiritually restorative and supernatural nature of Nature. His ability to recapture that nature in minute detail is his forte. Moving, original metaphors make for lines that arouse and vivify like “…Cloud woman / puffs up her breasts / for all without shame….” in “Untouched,” which makes the pristine wilderness come alive. This is another one of Joyce’s great strengths: his ability in taut language to paint a landscape without befouling it with clichéd metaphors, and the effect is luminous and healing.

In the third part of this book, “Disappearing Souls,” Joyce is at his best in “Conversations with Crow.” In this extended metaphor crow takes on the character of a magician that recalls Haida myth. Joyce’s crow is a trickster, a watcher and healer to the extent that the living vitally connected to Nature must heal the spiritually dead. But doing so is not unconnected from the mysteries of Nature as in “The Insomniac Wells” in which we observe beached whales like the “bodies of a broken alphabet” driven to the beach by “an anguish / we can never comprehend.” It is this kind of anguish which permeates all of the poems in this section of the book.

In the fourth section of The Charlatans of Paradise, “Urban Spiritual,” we find “The casualties of civilization sprawl / on spit-stained sidewalks, knotted faces / begging for coin.” The tone here is distraught and sympathetic to the downtrodden and reminds one of the many such faces forced to make Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside their dwelling place. Here we see the victims of Canadian Social Darwinism in vivid detail. And yet, Joyce’s position in relation to them is equivocal in “Mercury Rising” where openness and vigilance and pain may or may not be the only way to live, for the alternative would be to align oneself with the transgressor and the merciless who like a grist mill crush good people like grain.

It is in “Candles & Blood,” the final section of his book, that Joyce pursues the dilemma. That conundrum is if you can’t lick them, do you join them? He seems to arrive at the point where “existence is about transmuting pain” and suggests that the yin and yang of it are both ways to suicide, for there are after all limits to the pain one can endure. In this poem and last section of the book, Joyce sympathizes and identifies most with human suffering.

But where are the poets as prophets in this malaise? “…chasing echoes of themselves / in the wasting tailwind / of merchant empires” or like Joyce, learning “…to stop burning myself with matches / trying to raise the dead.” In “Candles & Blood,” we find Joyce coming to love and finding it fall short in the way of recompense or consolation where the lover’s spirit burns “like a city of banshees wailing.” Like Thomas Moore, quoted in the beginning of this section of the book, Joyce arrives at the conclusion that “The beast at the centre of the labyrinth is also an angel.”
Dear Herbalist
– for M.S.

Ernest Hekkanen

The melancholy and mystery
of this street,
where I toil like God’s own worm,
has made my nerve-endings so raw
I can no longer
adequately disguise my grief.
When will this harrowing experience
prove to be less painful?
What remedy should I take,
dear herbalist?
Featured Poet

Paul J. Healy

Ecstasy of Water
Having lived a peripatetic, proletarian American life for decades, PAUL J. HEALY searched high and low for poetry where chance was redeemed, chaos was the birthing place of structure, and lamentation a secret paean of ecstasy. His work has previously appeared in the NOR, and has either appeared or is forthcoming in the GSU Review, Plainsongs and The NeoVictorian/Cochlea.

Poetry: Or the Abnormal Personality Through Literature

Paul J. Healy

POETRY IS CLOSE to paranoia, that may be its 21st century fate, dark suspicion the obverse of fearless wisdom, or a sort of cloudy mirror image. The FBI has a law that enables it to scrutinize anything in any way knowable about any citizen whatsoever, without a court order. This law is called the Patriot Act. A Republican Party dominated legislature in lockstep formation supports making the provisions of this law permanent, though the provisions were enacted hastily as temporary security measures after the September eleventh attacks. To be a patriot today means to be willing to sell the work of the founding fathers down the river, in this instance granting Soviet KGB-like powers to the secret police. This is a direct assault on the Bill of Rights, specifically the IV Amendment. And when you add this alarming offense against liberty to the numerous other advances of corporate, military and police powers that are transforming the United States, it is easy to see how in one sense the condition of poetry is that of all the other arts, namely that the fate of a single one will seem of small importance if the freedom underlying them all is lost. I am speaking obviously only of the United States, I cannot speak of Canada, but the suppression of free speech and other liberties here can only have dire effects ultimately for the whole world, since the agglomeration of powers in the American government far exceeds the wildest dreams of history’s greatest tyrants.

Someone may object that a discussion of politics is not a discussion of poetry, and that I am apparently confusing two separate things. To this charge I should answer that most of all I would prefer to describe how as a very young child the first intimations of summer’s beauty and winter’s ice – its stainless gleaming – came to me in sudden flashes, and how even then I knew there was something to be protected from
the demands of arbitrary utility, only one doesn’t go on playing the violin when the tsunami warning siren goes off. The poet is paranoid, he or she suffers a whole class of fears that the general body of the citizenry have little cognizance of, in fact: social fears, fears for the loss of liberty that darken the heart and fill the mind with sudden terror. The poet is the canary in the coal mine, and woe to the workers when the song ceases. Gigantic anti-democratic forces are in motion in the United States, and if the political process can be successfully subverted by right wing fanatics, it will be a calamity of world historical proportions.

From the crucible of the German Occupation, French writers emerged with the conviction that, as Sartre put it, all men are political, meaning that it was inevitable, whether you liked it or not. The incapable existential reality was that the individual was subordinate to the state in a fundamental way. And a corollary of this grim conception was that everything in the past that called itself “spirituality” was in some measure a fraud. The claim of the spiritual has always been that the individual exists apart from the body politic by virtue of some direct inward relation to the divine, however that is conceived. But if the ontological condition was actually and essentially political and social, it could not also be otherworldly and private, there can be but one ontology let us say, and God may be disproved by the fact that men are subject to other men, that Nazis can gas Jews, that one person may wield the ultimate power of life and death over another. If the immortal soul existed it could not bear the shame of having been murdered by a dictator.

The defeat of Nazism, and almost half a century later Communism’s demise, did not restore spirituality to the West, or even the possibility of it. Taken as a whole, the insights of the French intellectuals cannot be dismissed out of hand, whatever errors they may have made in their embrace of Marxism – Nazi Germany was a capitalist system after all, so the thinkers of that day may perhaps be forgiven if they did not roll out the intellectual red carpet for a corporately exploited society – all rabid paroxysms of American jingoistic nationalism to this day notwithstanding. And if you took all the reactionaries in Kansas and stood them like angels on the head of a pin, you could not restore the crumbling foundations of Christianity, because you cannot restore its ontology. Once a world view is exhausted history cannot revivify it, and it doesn’t matter how many billions of people believe in it still, the soberest minds do not. The divine is refuted unless suffering, torture and death themselves are divine. But for those with the religious impulse still gnawing bones at the back of their skulls, poetry may be one of the few refuge points in a world of raging materialism. Poetry does not attract capital.

There is no point in discussing contemporary poetry and going on about it, as if it represented some form of attained greatness. We should not waste time studying ourselves. Rather, we should seek inwardly for those plastic powers that will enable future poets following our exam-
ple to galvanize people’s minds around the problem of their own existence. For of course the crisis of identity in a coercive society goes beyond the present political emergency, and it will be understood hopefully that I employ concepts here that may be no more than metaphors for the author’s own psychological profile. As yet we are no better off than butterflies pinned to a board. But by announcing outright his own paranoia—that he does not love your well-ordered neighborhoods of manicured suburban lawns where the inhabitant is content to profit, whenever possible without asking questions—he removes a weapon from the hands of psychiatry, viewed simplistically in this context as only another tool of coercion. He already understands his own madness from the inside, and the labels of the mental health industry are like thumbscrews for dissenters and those who resist propaganda, and even more for those who follow the unconscious like a river to its source.

Another Parisian wrote that while recognizing that psychoanalysis tells us a great deal about the unconscious, it does so to reduce the unconscious, to destroy and repulse it. This is equally true in its way of the pragmatic empirical approach of American psychiatry, already thoroughly penetrated by corporate interests in the form of pharmaceuticals, and which confines itself to treating symptoms of social malaise that break out in the individual, while reaffirming a status quo whose sinister sneer is hidden by the grin of the clown. One can say a similar thing about the churches, namely that whatever was discovered about the protean powers of life and its self-transformative abilities, they attributed to God, a god who forbids the very thing that human beings require most to reach self-consciousness, and who bans Adam and Eve from paradise with a flaming sword that moves when they move and hovers when they stay still.

In the final analysis the poet is whoever rediscovers paradise outside the Garden of Eden, who invents her own Eden from the here and now, and from the thistles and the abandoned birds’ nests on the dry ground seething with ants, weaves the poet’s living bower.

It is an evening of surpassing loveliness. The pine tree and the big northern spruce stand side by side with the weeping willow, the moist air soupy with a tropical-like infusion of southern heat. The early June lilac is abundant in all the hedges, and the hazy twilight is truly redolent with the sweet perfume of the white and purple blossoms, a real Druid in the Oaks sort of 18\textsuperscript{th} century evening, which reminds me of other evenings when I was young, drinking with those brave companions who would scatter across the world like caravans bearing spices from the little knot of culture that arose on our Queens Street, a belief in adventure that sent all the kids packing. For poetry there is no time left for half measures. It is time for people to live again as poets, to take no more thought of raiment than the lilies of the field, and not because

\footnote{Desert Islands and Other Texts, Gilles Deleuze, Semiotext, New York NY. 2004}
their heavenly father will clothe them, either. At some time poetry will be compelled to abandon its current pretensions, forced to renounce the breathless self-asphyxiation that results in poems that are mute, as if they were whispered by a disembodied voice in a soundless glass chamber. We on the outside must read the poet’s lips through the glass.
1.

**love at all hours**

They see how it arches high  
like a mighty fountain  
a tautly drawn and polished bow  
almost a constant ecstasy of water  
of flow… a silver arrow.  
The trees of gorgeous green described by Columbus  
the beauty of the extreme  
simply sail west until death or the Indies  
that was all it took.  
that was all it ever takes  
until the hero falls to his knees  
on the golden pebbled shore  
then unfortunately to the natives  
gives away worthless beads

from: *White Columns*
trashcan

the meanest rankest days of
august we spent holed up
in the shadow of the three-quarters abandoned mill
(you could see the zombies filing out driving up the hill)
everyone on Ritalin now or Oxycontin
estranged husband tried to steal your son
with thighbone smashed and broken
and both your knees
one arm split above the elbow and below it
an ankle fractured
pelvis cracked
and against collapsing steel your forehead smacked!

it was so incredibly unfair I understood at last
why in scripture pity was a crucifixion
the hallway stunk with greasy foods frying in the heat
there was always someone out there screaming in the street
and then we found maggots in the trashcan.

From: White Columns
'glades

at the end of long hot days
she stood in her doorway
lizards scampering across the ceiling
inhaling the slight coolness
subtle changes in the evening air
every living thing stunned by the sun’s heat
and a swamp odor she couldn’t quite get over
palmetto sagging in the stinky haze
’gators and snakes and beetles the size of mice
and in the shadowed night
a stench of stagnancy
like crime
peppery with an almost sexual excitation
the smell of a far country with talk of war,
vinegary, vaginal
metallic on the tongue like menstrual blood
and when she couldn’t sleep for all the slithering
it was like she could smell baking bread
the aroma of the big brick Wonder Bread factory
when she was a kid,
warm, yeasty,
and inside her crisped and hardened crust
a soft and doughy center.

from: *White Columns*
up and gone

Louder and more savage
than any snarling dog along the way
I growled and snarled back
sometimes bending for a stone
which no dog failed to understand
having closed down the bars
running alone
five miles more or less most any night
through Santa Fe’s darkened streets
no walking cops along my beat
but the ones in cars got used to me it seemed
and didn’t inquire anymore
why a drunken man at half past three
leaned to catch his breath against a tree?
and at what expense of brain cells who could tell?
pulsing whorls of booze in fevered blood
porous interstices of grey matter that couldn’t sleep
like a jet upon the flight deck poised to leap
blue-black void of night and sea beyond
and the woman I loved just up and gone!

from: White Columns
5.

**Brooklyn, 1971**

From the big incinerators a shower of grey ash settling on the wide windowsill on the flaking sash.
It is a wonder people can inhabit this place all cement, cheap plastic, tin.
I lean out the window of the school newspaper a staff of one in an empty wing of an old Dominican convent with a sealed-off room below the level of the street.
I was taken down to see it once.
“These were laid before the Nazi era you understand?” Black inlaid swastikas on a white tile floor, hundreds of them like storm troopers in formation, hidden rathskeller from a time before.
Secret beer hall of …whom? of the nuns? no one seemed to know or cared to say.
Befriended by the priests and brothers, but not in a scandalous way, I think they saw me as one of their own, but what they didn’t see was that I no longer believed I had broken free another atheist in New York City.
Samsara

Kamala pursed her pouting lips pursuant of a kiss
Purple as petunias in the amber evening glow
Her lithe and willing body sweating in the leaden heat
Where thick rose-apples make the current slow
“What are you waiting for?” she almost hissed
Her dark and lustrous curls all come undone
As if a wicked serpent flicked across her painful breasts
A sharp and moistened tongue.

Through the tangled vines and leafy arbors
Wreathing all about us a sweet and hidden space
I glimpsed the fig-ripe moon arise
As warm and avid as her upturned face.
What was I to do?
What about my trusting wife?
For in that aching twilight haze
Almost it seemed Kamala morphed into a slave
A tattooed, oiled, sun-browned thing
And through her labia a tiny silver ring
Sent by mighty Indra into the world of men
To wreck some lone ascetic’s power
Or gaze on broken vows through teased-out lashes
And blossoming with lust my weak soul to devour.

from: Seanchaidh
War Fever

By the monument of all who’d died
in this run-down factory town
with stunning fanfare of patriotic pride
in Biddeford in the state called Maine
they halted traffic on both sides.
Though my brain felt half asleep
I could not get across the street
of coffee thus I was denied.

Graven tablets in a spoked stone wheel
told of all the blood this town had spent
from Revolution to the Gulf
at home and for many a foreign government.

They halted at attention and fired shots
marching bands, firemen and blue-coated cops.
Turning in disgust I walked away
but part-way up the street was stranded in my tracks
I heard the sound of a single bugle
playing taps.

from: Seanchaidh
DIRK VAN NOUHUYS was born in Berkeley and has lived mostly around San Francisco. He has a BA from Stanford and an MA from Columbia. He writes novels, short stories, some experimental forms, and occasionally verse. Forty-seven items of fiction and a few poems have appeared in literary and general magazines.

Animal Shadows

Dirk van Nouhuys

NICKY, who called himself Joe, pushed his mountain bike up a long, steep slope. A well-graded dirt road was climbing through steep hills covered in the gentler slopes with vineyards, above that by dry grazing land with occasional oak trees. They were traveling west, and the sun of a long summer day had just set before them, relieving them of the dazzle and replacing it with clear twilight where the dry grass grew duller, and the oak-clumps became greener. He wore a black tee-shirt with torn-off sleeves that showed his white, thin, bruised and scabby arms and the figure of Joe Camel driving an ornate ’50s convertible over his heart. In the late afternoon he had seen his shadow, his form humped over the bike as if he were himself a camel on a random journey from the Arabian Nights. He was following his pal Muñoz, a Hispanic, younger than Joe and shorter but built heavier. Muñoz’ mountain bike was new, red and flashy, but he wore threadbare blue jeans and a faded plaid shirt, also torn off at the shoulders to reveal surprisingly bulky and sinewy arms. They each wore cross-trainers and carried a backpack.

Their companion, who called herself Mary Pierce, a plump girl with hair dyed jet black, was having hard going on an old-fashioned ten-speed a quarter of a mile down the slope behind them; while they had backpacks, she had a basket with a bundle on her handlebars. Muñoz stopped at a crest. They leaned on their bikes and stared back coolly at Mary. Muñoz pulled out a cigarette pack, took one and offered one to Joe. They had finished the last of their food an hour or so before.

“Would you fuck her?” Muñoz asked nonchalantly.

“Yeah, in the ass,” said Joe, with 14-year-old contempt.
“Shit,” Muñoz added. Mary reached them. She wore black jeans and a black tank top that showed her pliant white shoulders and hung tight over limber breasts. Tiny fences of silver rings and studs guarded each earlobe and part of one eyebrow; a silver tongue ring tingly when she spoke.

“Shit,” she said and stopped to remove one platform tennis shoe and sock and examine her white foot with metallic blue nail polish and toe rings. Muñoz offered her a cigarette and she took it.

Joe needed to piss. He was pee-shy and wanted a place where he could not be seen. The nearest clump of trees was about fifty yards away across a dry field of hay stubble. He dreaded bringing attention to his problem; Muñoz would stand and piss by the road like a horse. But he excused himself without explanation.

“Let’s go,” Muñoz said as if to Mary.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Mary said and removed her other shoe.

Joe walked with big steps crunching in the stubble, on the one hand grateful to Mary, and on the other hand hating her for understanding his problem. He continued around to the other side of the clump of trees where he felt exposed to some unseen predatory eye, then back into the middle where at last he could let go in the shadows. When he came back they were smoking in apparent disregard.

“I’ll race you to the bottom,” Muñoz said, gesturing toward the downslope ahead.

“Anyone can see us from as far back as the New Jerusalem,” Mary said, put her foot down, winced at the gravel, picked it up again and brushed it off before sitting on the ground to replace her shoes, balancing the cigarette in the other hand adroitly all the while.

“Let’s get going,” Joe said. They tossed their cigarettes onto the road and started down the slope.

Ω

The sky was growing darker. Mary saw them pause ahead of her at a clump of small trees by the highway. They were on their bikes now, but her feet hurt, the fuckers. Joe was standing silhouetted against the twilight, gazing into the hills. She knew the tiny town he came from was somewhere up there. Muñoz pointed with silent irony at a small sign beside a gravel road, which only came to view when she reached the others. The sign was an oval of weathered boards with a raised edge painted a faded pink. Within the raised oval faded orange script letters spelled out: *circus fantástico indico*.

“Didn’t you assholes believe me?” Mary said shrilly.

One day when they were sitting on the curb together at 4th Street and Mendocino Avenue in Santa Rosa and Joe was calling out to passers-by in a sing-song voice, “Spare change for cigs,” she had persuaded them that they should try to join the circus. At her father’s house she
persuaded the Evil Princess to give her the address and to promise she would not tell her father where they had gone.

“I believe Anglos different from how I believe other people,” sneered Muñoz.

“I’m no fucking Anglo,” Mary said. “I’m your compadre, I’m your ho.” She had turned a few tricks for Muñoz. It had been a middle-class Hispanic, a relative of his.

Joe envied Muñoz his bravado and physical strength and envied Mary her ready answers. “Come on,” he said, and climbed onto his bike.

Ω

After a mile or so the driveway curved through a bunch of trees, and in hushed, late-twilight among the first stars they saw the circus buildings in the valley. There were three barrack-like buildings, two small houses or cabins, all five built along a main road, and a large van at the near end of the valley facing uphill. Lights came from the windows of one of the barracks, and they could make out someone sitting on the lighted porch of one of the cabins bent over some work. They looked at one another as if to say, ‘This is no more than we expected.’

Despite the crunching of their tires on gravel in the silent air, the man on the porch remained bent at his work until they were straddling their bikes silently in front of him. He was tall with a large narrow head, bald on top but with long hair and with a long beard. He was wearing a buckskin jacket with hanging frills, blue jeans and soft deer-skin boots. They could see he was sewing a large piece of cloth like a yellow sail. Then he looked up and asked them to come closer. They downed their bikes and stepped up before him. Mary recognized him as the man she had met at her father’s party. He smiled at them blandly as if they were expected acquaintances.

“This is Thomas Meunster,” she told her friends, then, turning to him, challenged, “Do you remember me?”

“That’s for you to guess,” Thomas Meunster said. They paused, disconcerted.

“Did you come for advice,” he addressed all of them, “or do you want to join the circus?”

“We want to work,” said Muñoz proudly.

“We’re kind of freaks anyway,” Joe said.

“Freaks.” Thomas Meunster looked thoughtful. “Freak is a stage like being a larva. You guys are all larvae.”

“Is that some kind of bug?” Joe asked.

“You know what that means: you’ll change,” Thomas Meunster said, “and you all want to come and feed on the circus like a big leaf,” he chuckled at his own joke, “so someday you can fly away.” He made a butterfly motion with one hand.
“We can work,” Muñoz repeated. He didn’t know about his friends, but he wanted to show them what he could do.

“Well, you’ll have to tell me about yourselves first.” He put aside his work, and his glance fell on Muñoz. “What’s your name? Where do you live? Where do you go to school?”

Muñoz stood as if at attention and could look down at Thomas Meunster who was still seated on the step. “My name is Carlos Muñoz. My mother is from Michoacan, but I was born here. I lived with my mother and my aunt and their kids in Santa Rosa. I go to Comstock Middle School.”

“When was the last time you were there?” Thomas Meunster asked. “Tuesday,” Muñoz said, speaking neutrally because he was telling the truth.

“Have you had any jobs?”
“I’ve worked after school at Burger King and at a nursery.”
“And maybe done a little dealing,” Thomas Meunster stated.
“Maybe,” Muñoz granted sarcastically.
“And you,” Thomas Meunster turned to Mary.
“My friends call me Mary Pierce, but my dog name is Cheryl Bascomb,” she said and stopped.

Thomas Meunster remained silent, watching her mock patiently.
“I live in Old Courthouse Square.”
“How do you like the music?” he asked. The authorities had recently begun piping classical music into the square to discourage the kids.
“It makes me feel like an insect,” she said with a shrug in her voice.
“Have you always lived in Old Courthouse Square?”
“My mom married a Saint and we lived in the New Jerusalem; it was hell. I ran away to my dad who lives in the Bower of Bliss, but the education police dragged me back to the New Jerusalem, but I got away again and came back to the Bower of Bliss where my father was living with the Evil Princess – you know her: she used to fly on the rings. I loved her but she enchanted my Dad and tried to poison me so I had to move to the square.”

“Where is the New Jerusalem?”
“Salt Lake City.”
“How do you get money?”
“I ask for it.”
“I’ll bet you get more than you ask for,” he said with an intonation meant to end their conversation, but she did not let it end.
“I get the last word,” she said.
He gave her back his attention. “Do you think you can get the last word here?”
“It’s easy,” she said.
“Maybe we can ask some questions you don’t know how to answer.”
“Maybe,” she said.
“We’ll see,” he said.
“That we will,” she said.

He shrugged and turned to Joe. Joe saw Meunster could not stop Mary’s mouth but felt he could stop or start his own.

“What do you call yourself?”

“Joe Camel.”

“That’s cool, Joe,” Thomas Meunster said with a sly little smile.

“What do your parents call you?”

“Nicky MacHenry.”

“Where do you live?”

“I used to live in Buchanan; now sometimes I live with my uncle in Calistoga and sometimes I live in the square,” Joe said.

“His uncle owns a big spa,” Muñoz volunteered.

“He’s a fag,” Joe said contemptuously.

“But you’ve worked at the spa?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you live with your parents?”

“My dad left and my grandma, she don’t have nothing, she don’t know nothing, asked my uncle to take care of me.”

“Where do you think you should be?”

“I’m supposed to go to Comstock.”

“How did you get those bruises on your arms?” Thomas Meunster asked.

“My father did it,” he let himself say.

“O.K., that’s not so cool,” Thomas Meunster said with his little smile; then he addressed the group:

“You know we don’t allow any drugs here. The only highs here are our philosophy and what we get off the audience. Are you guys clean?”

“You can search me if you want,” Muñoz said.

“Clean as the sidewalk after rain,” Mary said.

Joe nodded.

Thomas Meunster rose, stepped across, jerked up Muñoz’ pack, felt it all around, then took a small pair of scissors from where he had been sitting, snipped open the stitching on a side compartment and removed from an insewn pocket three little plastic bags of white, crystalline powder. “I’ll hold these for you,” he told Muñoz. “Get the idea?”

Muñoz glanced first at Mary and then at Joe; neither friend met his eye.

“Yes,” Muñoz said.

“Is that it?” Thomas Meunster continued. “I don’t have time to fuck around with you guys.”

“Yes,” Muñoz said with downcast eyes.

“What about smoking?” Joe said.

“If you stay here you can’t smoke, but it’ll be OK tonight if you do it outside. You’re lucky: there are places to sleep tonight. We’ll talk more in the morning; you’ll meet the others. We may be able to use you. Come on.” He gestured for them to follow him.
He led them to one of the small buildings they had seen from the upper driveway. A single hall bisected a cabin no more than 20 feet square. On the right was an open doorway without a door, on the left another doorway without a door and a second, closed door. A woodstove stood cold at the end of the hall. Thomas Meunster gestured at the open door to the right. Inside, a three-level bunk bed with blankets and sponge-rubber mattresses lined the inside wall. About three feet of air remained between the bunks and the wall, which had a window overlooking the main road. Thomas Meunster pointed out that the other room without a door was the bathroom, and Joe’s bladder clenched. Thomas Meunster explained how to control the airflow in the stove and pointed out a nearby woodpile. Then he said Muñoz should take the top bunk, Mary the middle, and Joe the bottom.

“You have a watch, right?” he said to Mary.
“Right,” she affirmed.
“Breakfast is at seven in the big building. Stay out of trouble.”
“See you then,” Mary said.

Thomas Meunster looked back at her and curled a sly, knowing smile halfway between response and none.

The friends went out on the porch and smoked. They didn’t have much to say. Mary was anxious to hear what the others thought. Muñoz said Thomas Meunster was an asshole and he might leave in the morning. Joe said Thomas Meunster was a great guy and Muñoz should try and stick around. They went back and climbed into the bunks in their clothes. The bunks were softer than the ground in Old Courthouse Square.

Ω

Joe’s bladder woke him in the night. Bright moonlight flooded the window. He listened to the breathing of the others. They seemed to be asleep. They were both sound sleepers. He knew if he slipped out of his bunk and went to the doorless bathroom and pissed, they would never wake or notice him. He believed that Meunster had given him the bottom bunk for that reason. But it did not seem like something he could really do. Or he could sneak outside and go beside the woodpile. People would not think it too strange if he was outside. He waited as the urging of his bladder turned to pain, but then he had to do something. He rolled out of his bunk and stood listening to their breathing. It went on. He picked up his shoes and walked to the door on feet as silent as a stealth bomber. He paused and listened again, then slowly opened the door and stepped on the porch.

He heard a sound at the other end of the driveway toward the truck. He froze. It was a sound like shuffling and mumbling. The moon was low directly ahead of him and the buildings cast long shadows across the road. Gradually three inhuman figures emerged from the shadow of
the truck. They were doing a shuffling dance, which brought them up the road; their long, black shadows spanning towards him seemed to dance with them, flying away when they lifted their feet and stepping back to them when they toed the ground. One by one he made them out: the first figure was a person wearing white and the giant head of a rooster. The rooster pranced, thrusting out its chest, feinting from side to side. A person dressed in black wearing the head of a bear followed. The bear moved comically, shuffling and casting itself down in comic pratfalls. Joe had to stifle laughter. The moonlight was so bright that he could distinguish the color of the third figure as they came near, a person dressed in orange and wearing a large deer’s head with a brace of antlers seemingly four feet wide, an elk. The elk stalked forward lifting his knees high, head and broad chest moving smoothly forward as if on a guideline. This must be Thomas Meunster. Joe stepped forward. As the procession passed, the shadow of the antlers touched him, and he believed that Thomas Meunster saw him and even nodded ever so slightly, trembling the antlers, as if to say, ‘yes, you can watch, even this is for you.’ When they had disappeared into the shadows around the big truck Joe turned, walked back to the bathroom with no door, turned his back to it and pissed unabashedly, as if the shadow were behind him, guarding him.
GREG MOGLIA is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy of Education at N.Y.U. His poetry has appeared in *Patterson Literary Review, Birmingham Literary Review, Black Buzzard Review* and in two anthologies *Earth Shattering Poems* and *Roots and Flowers* edited by Liz Rosenberg (Henry Holt and Co.). He is three times a winner of an Allan Ginsberg Poetry Award sponsored by the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College.

**Greg Moglia / Four Poems**

**The Mill at Lowell, Mass.**

The historian tells of how the girl’s hair got caught in the weaver
No rule about hairnets and the young pretty girls
Reluctant to put up their manes said it was too hot
Someone stopped the machine but too late to save her

A nasty place to work with the dust, noise
And overseers who pried on the young ones
I turned to my smiling newlywed daughter
Guiding me through the sights of Lowell

*You need to show this to your students*
Jennifer nods and I see again
How hard she works to please me
She tells how she had just lost a job

That made it to the second interview
The school’s principal wanted
Someone sensitive, but assertive as well
Jennifer is loving in the world

What does loving look like with every breath?
Oh, get it right, you’re the father
Tell why she didn’t get the job
Be the interviewer and after what do you say

She seems weak, hesitant
As if at the first crisis, sure to collapse
Get it right, you’re the father
What is this weaving machine?

And here in my hand
Could this be my daughter’s hair?
On the Listen

How easy life on the listen here in the suburb Starbucks

*How are you?* he asks
*Oh, we are remodeling the house*
*I’m on my way to Home Depot*
*Choosing wallpaper, what a pain*

How easy life on the listen, the great in-between
Where if lucky my family is healthy, the kids grow well
Bombs and bullets go off someplace else.

*Tonight we’re going to a fundraiser*
*at my son’s high school.*
*Sounds like fun*

How easy life on the listen and me a refugee of those times
Loss of a mother, a divorce the only ruts on the road
Does it help during those days to pose questions of life and death?
To ask about how we live, what we live for, except as asides
Bits and pieces that appear at weddings, funerals

How easy life on the listen and at the home Dad at 91 moves to dinner
Asks the cool confident oldster known as the Mayor

*What’s good?*
*Get the meat loaf.*

Dad says the Mayor doesn’t read the Times
No one there reads the Times
Dad says he’s fed up with the news
He says it calmly, easily and I see his secret
Same secret as the middle years
If one is lucky, you wake up healthy
Bombs and bullets go off somewhere else
You live life on the listen
Thirty-six or Thirty-seven Minutes

The sage had said we are given
A certain amount of happiness in a lifetime

Either thirty-six or thirty-seven minutes
He was not sure

And I searched for my times
In grandpa’s attic listening to the Yankee game

Sweltering heat of a hotel room in Brussels
I enter the woman I loved whose heat made the outside cool

That afternoon in the Jardin Des Tuileries in Paris feet up on a stool
Watching Parisians return from their August holidays

In the Bronx parish church I hear God on my shoulder
Tells me I am blessed with a second daughter

Catch my love curled about a Jefferson biography
On the floor of the Barnes & Noble

A share in a rock crevice in Connecticut
Overlooking Long Island Sound

My hands racing through my love’s hair
As Pavarotti sings Nessum Dorma

A walk in Central Park when a fur-draped matron
Gives a smile at our smiles

Midnight dancing in the swirling snow
On the small town main street

And I wonder why my times
Arrive on tiptoe

Happiness appearing
As yesterday’s surprise
Don’t call, not yet
Brother and mother at each side of Grandpa Pietro
He slumped, head loose on a kitchen chair
Gramps had put in a day collecting newspapers
When the summer sun did him in

My brother just turned an innocent seventeen
Shouts at mother *Mom, call 911 now*
*No wait, let’s see if he comes out of it*
Eighty-four years old and mother says wait

She cared for her father-in-law for eight years
The extra place at the table
Grumpy old man always in the way
Here it just might end
Her home cleared of the burden

When brother finally defies her and calls
It’s too late
Mother had her victory
Today I ask why?

*Did you ever clean his dirty underwear?* she says
*Cook him a supper?*
*Not go on a vacation?*
*For eight years, for eight years*

No mother, but...
You and Brother Ron waiting
As gramps drops down
*I feel a pull towards each of you*
*Ache as the stars might*
*If stars could ache*
ERIC MORLOCK lives in Lynden, WA. He has a strong interest in comparative religion and sacred art, and his writing in recent years has assumed a certain “spiritual” flavor. His most recent stories have appeared in Samsara, The Circle and Thought Magazine.

The Science Fair

Eric Morlock

SISTER ESTHER almost ruined her cowl thing today. It was morning recess and we were out in the yard, with Sister Esther on playground patrol. I was hanging upside down on the monkey bars, as usual. Everything’s more interesting upside down. You can pretend the ground’s the sky and everybody’s glued to green clouds or something, ready to fall into soft fields of cotton. Also you can sort of spy on people ’cause nobody notices you. I spend almost every recess hanging from the monkey bars. It really bugs some of the nuns, too. They tell me it’s childish and probably I’m going to pass out sometime and fall on my head. But not Sister Esther. She says hanging upside down will make me smarter, with all the blood rushing to my head and stuff. Sister Esther is so cool. There’s not one kid in the whole fifth grade that doesn’t like her.

Anyhow, I didn’t get to hang too long today, ’cause little Ruthie got hurt. She’s this little black girl who’s real smart but also kind of a spaz. She’s always tripping and falling down. Most of us like her and try to look out for her, especially on the playground. But today I didn’t see it when she fell off the merry-go-round. I sure heard the crying, though. Then I saw Sister Esther’s skirt go flying by, and a bunch of kids following after.

When I got there I thought two kids were hurt, ’cause Tony Jackson looked like he was going to cry right along with Ruthie. He was sitting on his knees next to her, pounding his legs and yelling out, “Dumb ass! Dumb ass! Dumb ass!” His big round face was about as red as a tomato. We all knew he was yelling at himself, ’cause he’s Ruthie’s best friend and he’s always protecting her from stuff. So even when Ruthie stopped crying and we could all see she just scraped her knee, Tony
kept right on cussing at himself. Then when Sister Esther reached down with a hankie to wipe up the little bit of blood from Ruthie’s knee, Tony swiped it away and did it himself. Turns out he was the one pushing the merry-go-round.

Then a pretty funny thing happened. At least I thought it was funny. When Sister stood up to tell everybody to line up for class, the wind blew her cull deal right off her head. Then it rolled under the merry-go-round, and the merry-go-round was still moving so it dragged that thing all the way around till it finally stopped again right in front of us. I couldn’t help cracking up. But then Tony gave me a mean look, and so I stopped laughing.

It was really embarrassing there for a while, but all of a sudden Sister started to laugh, too. Then she fetched her cowl from under the merry-go-round and started putting it on in different weird ways and making all these goofy faces. So pretty soon we were all cracking up, even Tony. Finally Sister put the cowl on backwards, so it covered her face. It looked so funny, all dirty and wrinkled, that even Ruthie started to giggle.

Ω

Today we found out we’re going to have a parents’ night before the science fair. Sister Esther’s letting parents come around to check out our projects. They can’t help us or anything, just make suggestions and stuff. But it still could be pretty messed up, especially for us kids that aren’t any good at science. People might take one look at my volcano and laugh right out loud. Mom wouldn’t, of course. She’d probably praise me like always, but inside she could be really embarrassed. Crap!

Then Sister Esther talked about art. She talks about art a lot. At the end of the year we’re going to have this big art show, and Sister seems even more excited about it than the science fair. So she said we could get artistic with the science project if we wanted, and get extra credit that way. Like we could paint it or decorate it or write a story about it or something. Sister said all the great scientists had to be creative, just like artists. They had to use their imagination to solve problems and do experiments and stuff. She said science can be really beautiful, especially if it’s used to help all people everywhere and to serve God. Maybe so, but for me science is more like hell than anything else.

To show us how beautiful science can be Sister Esther got out this prism. First she spelled out the word on the blackboard so we wouldn’t think she was saying “prison.” Then she showed us this crystal-clear hunk of glass shaped like a triangle. She said how when you shine light on a prism it bends the light to make all the colors of the rainbow. Then she turned off all the classroom lights and took the prism over to the window. She caught the sunlight just right so it reflected a bright patch of colors on the classroom wall. It went from purple to red with all the
colors in between. Then Sister turned the lights back on and passed the prism around the room. She said it would still work, but you’d have to look harder to find the patch of colors. So we each took turns checking out the prism. But then it got held up a long time with Tony Jackson. He inspected the heck out of it and held it up to the light every which way. Nobody complained too much, though, ’cause Tony’s so big and also he’s a little slow, like my mom’d say. Finally Sister asked Tony if he had any questions about the prism.

Tony hardly ever asks questions, but this time he broke down and said, “So when there’s more light you get more colors, huh? And when there’s not much light you don’t get as many colors?” Sister was real patient about telling how the light doesn’t have anything to do with how many colors there are. There’s always the same colors, it’s just that the colors change intensity along with the light. Sister said you could think of it like black and white, ’cause black has no colors in it and white has all the colors. Sister also told Tony that maybe he should do a project about it. She said it with a little frown, ’cause Tony’s the only kid in class that hasn’t started a project yet. And there’s only like two weeks left.

I remember looking over at my volcano sitting on one of the work tables in the corner. It was just a mess of chicken wire with hardly any shape to it. I had to cut it and bend it just right so it’d look like a big smooth cone. Then I had to cover the whole thing with wet newspapers. After that I had to slop on all this gummy plaster. Finally, when the whole thing was good and dry, I had to paint it to look just like a real volcano. I knew that was going to be the worst part, ’cause I was never any good with paints. I even messed up my finger-painting pictures back in kindergarten. The teacher said they looked like mud pies. So I figured my volcano’d look like crap, too.

But then I got to thinking. If Sister was going to let us go nuts with our projects then maybe there was other stuff I could do to make the volcano look cooler. Like I could put a lot of little trees around the bottom, maybe cut ’em out of green paper and glue ’em on toothpicks or something. And instead of using gray paint for the ashes I could use real fireplace ashes. Then I thought maybe I wouldn’t even have to paint on the lava. Maybe I could find some kind of red goop and have it actually run down the sides of the volcano. At first I thought of ketchup, but I knew mom wouldn’t want to waste too much of it. But then I thought of tomato soup, ’cause it’s pretty cheap I think. Maybe I could pour some around the top once in a while and let it flow down like real lava. So maybe my project wouldn’t be as lousy as I thought.

One thing I knew, no matter how good I could make it, my volcano’d never be as good as what little Ruthie had going. She’s making this awesome mobile deal of the whole solar system. She’s already got half the planets done and they look so cool. She makes ’em herself out of clay and uses different size balls as a model. Like she’s got a golf ball, a tennis ball, a baseball, a softball, and even a volleyball and a
basketball. She paints the clay real careful with these glazes and then cooks ’em in our kiln. They wind up looking like shiny works of art. But totally real, too. Like Earth looks just like Earth, all blue and green and brown, with all the continents shaped just right. And now she’s working on the moon and she’s using different size buttons to make the craters. No kidding, that Ruthie’s too much. I wish I was half as smart as she is.

Ω

Parents’ night went better than I thought tonight. My volcano’s only about halfway done, and I thought maybe some of the parents would give it funny looks, but nobody did. Anyhow, they all stayed pretty much with their own kids, giving ’em tips about their projects. Mom was all pumped about mine, which was cool considering I gave her kind of a hard time before we came. I was moaning about why did I have to go to school at night, and why did I have to wear the uniform, and why didn’t the teachers ever ask us what we wanted to do? I even asked why did we have to be Catholics? But Mom just let it go. She looked at me all bright-eyed and said, “Why can’t Mister Cranky learn to have fun?” What do you say to that?

But now I’m glad we went ’cause Mom really came up with a great idea for the volcano. I showed her how I was thinking of pouring tomato soup around the top for lava, and she nodded her head and stuff but I could tell she was working something out in her mind. Then all of a sudden her eyes got big, like they always do when she’s got a cool idea. She said what if I put a large can of tomato soup right inside the cone, up at the top, and heated it with a hot plate so the soup’d bubble up and spill over just like real lava? She said I could even use yellow food coloring, if I wanted, to make it look more fiery. Well, usually I don’t show it when I get excited about something, but I was so stoked that I told her, “Awesome!” and gave her a high five. And I said what if I mixed some other junk in with the soup, like dirt and twigs and little pebbles? She said, “Way cool!”

Anyhow, Sister Esther was sure glad about the attendance tonight. It seemed like every kid had at least one parent there. After a while it hit me that it was mostly moms that came. Only five or six dads showed up out of twenty-two kids. And I think me and Tony Jackson are the only kids with just one parent. So I wonder why more dads didn’t come?

But I bet Tony wished his dad stayed home. What a loser! They were at the worktable next to mine, and after Mom went over to talk to a friend Tony’s dad started hassling him about his project. He was saying stuff like, “This all you got done?” and, “What a lazy ass!” Then he said, “You better not let me down, fat boy! Not after all I did to get you that damn thing.” Jeez, what a butthead! You could even smell the booze on his breath. The thing he was talking about was this monster eggbeater that Tony took the eggbeaters off of and then mounted on a
big hunk of wood. Nobody knew what he was going to do with it, excep
t maybe Sister Esther. But I bet Tony’s dad stole it. He works at the
bakery, and I bet anything he swiped it from the shop.

Then the butthead said some more stuff that was way worse than
chewing Tony out. First he asked Tony who were the smart ones in
class. So Tony named some names and then pointed across the room at
Ruthie and said she was the smartest of all. He said it kind of proud,
like if he felt special just to be her friend. But then Tony’s dad said,
“What? She’s the smartest? That little coon girl?” Tony tried to defend
Ruthie by saying she was his friend and he liked that she was smart, but
his dad told him to shut up. Then he said Tony couldn’t let Ruthie beat
him at the science fair. He told Tony he had to make a better project
than her ’cause no Jacksons ever got beat by a coon at anything. Tony
didn’t know what to say. He just sat there with his face getting all red.

It was a good thing for Tony when Mom came back, ’cause that
made his dad tone it down. But he did shake his finger and say, “You
better beat her, boy,” before he went to check out Ruthie’s project. I
wished I could tell somebody what all he said, but I knew if I told Mom
it would just make things worse. Mom gets real bugged whe
bigot-type talk. One time she even made a dinner guest leave the house
’cause the lady was complaining about Jewish people. So I didn’t say
anything, and anyway Mom had another suggestion for the volcano.
She said instead of using green paper for trees maybe I could take some
branches off our pine tree and cut ’em into little chunks, and then glue
the chunks onto the toothpicks. I could’ve kicked myself in my own
butt for not thinking of it first.

After a while I went to check out some of the other projects. Most
of the other kids looked like they were doing all right. Julia Franco
hauled in like every seashell she ever collected, and she had labels with
the names of most of the snails and clams that made the shells, along
with information about where they live and what they eat and all. That
new kid Justin was busy messing with the tubes from this still he’s
making. I guess at the fair he’s going to heat up a bunch of chemicals in
the beakers and see what kind of liquids come out. Everybody thinks
he’s a nerd, ’cause lately he’s been wearing this white coat that his
mom made for him that makes him look like a doctor or one of those
pharmacy guys. Anyhow, then I went to Billy Murray’s table, where he
had a bunch of animal skins that looked pretty cool. There was a rabbit,
and a raccoon, and a possum, and a woodchuck, and even a skunk.
’Course he didn’t kill any of ’em, but I guess he really did skin ’em.

’Course the one with the awesomest project was Ruthie. She’s al
most done with her whole solar system, and it looks practically perfect.
All she’s got left is to make the smallest planets and the Sun. But eve
rything else looks totally real. Like each one of the planets looks just
like it does in the satellite pictures. Besides a great Earth and moon,
Ruthie’s got an excellent Venus and Mars. She covered Venus with
gray cotton so it’d look like gas, and she painted Mars with some kind
of pink glaze and then marked it with different sizes of string to make the canals. I guess Saturn and Jupiter were too big to cook in the kiln, so she painted ’em in fuzzy watercolor stripes that kind of blend together. Ruthie even made a swirly red spot for that big storm that’s always going on on Jupiter. Then with those other two pretty big planets Ruthie used solid blue and green glazes, so they looked like the shiny bowling balls my dad used to have. When you think of it, it’s really amazing what Ruthie can do with her hands. She’s like a sculptor artist or something.

I used to wonder why Ruthie was such a good student and why she worked so hard on everything she did. I know she’s naturally smart and all, but she always tries to do everything so perfect. Like I think most kids try to do their best only some of the time, like when they get to do something they’re good at or there’s something going on that’s interesting to ’em. I guess I’m sort of like that. And then there’s a few kids who try to do their best most of the time, ’cause most of the stuff’s not that hard for ’em. But it seems like Ruthie’s got to be good at everything. It’s like if she ever did anything real wrong it’d be the end of the world or something. And I think I kind of know why she’s like that.

While I was checking out Ruthie’s project, her mom was talking to her nonstop the whole time. Ruthie was working on her Sun, which was one of those big white globes that you see on some types of outside lights. She also had this round orange light bulb screwed into a little battery flashlight so she could turn it on and off. She looked like she was trying to figure out the best way to mount the flashlight inside the globe. But her mom was making so many comments it would’ve drove me crazy.

I remember Ruthie’s mom said something like, “You sure you want to use that kind of bulb, baby? You can see the insides of it, you know.” Then she said, “So how you going to patch up that globe so nobody can see the hole in it? Looks damn near impossible to me.” Then Ruthie’s mom started inspecting some of her planets. She grabbed Saturn and said, “These rings look like bracelets or something. Somebody’s bound to think they’re jewelry and take them from you, girl.” I saw Ruthie working on these rings once. She made ’em out of this thin wire and then strung ’em with clear beads so it’d look like ice. Then she had to attach all the rings to the planet with super-thin wire that looked practically invisible. It was a big job. Finally Ruthie’s mom picked up Jupiter in both her hands and just stared at it. After awhile she said, “What the hell is this red spot, baby?” I took off then, ’cause I just couldn’t stand it anymore.

So I figure what with Ruthie’s mom being so negative and stuff, and never being satisfied with anything Ruthie did, then that’s why Ruthie tries to do everything so perfect. It’s like she’s got to always show her mom how wrong she is and also prove to herself that she’s not a screw-up. Seems like Ruthie even tries to act perfect most of the time. Like with a lot of the questions her mom was asking she’d just
say, “Yes, ma’am” or “No, ma’am,” like a little soldier girl or even a robot. It was like she couldn’t tell her mom she was wrong about anything. And that’s totally messed up, ’cause then you can’t be even yourself. Anyhow, I sure am glad my mom doesn’t make me feel like that.

When I went back to my table, Mom said she thought my volcano was one of the best projects in the class. Then she said real quick that it didn’t have to be the best project. Maybe she overhead something Tony’s dad said, ’cause he was back with Tony making sure the eggbeater worked okay. I was glad when we left, and Mom didn’t have to hear any of that racist junk.

Ω

Sister Esther was sick today so old Sister Joan substituted, and like always she didn’t know what she was doing. She talked about stuff we covered last week, but nobody told her ’cause hardly anybody likes her. She’s pretty cranky most of the time, and she also makes kids stand up and answer questions. Like she’ll say, “Mr. Murray!” real loud, and even though he’s got this bad lisp Billy has to get up and spit out an answer to her stupid question. Some kids are so scared they start to stutter. But today everybody did okay ’cause we already knew the answers!

Sister Joan is one of the teachers that hates when I hang upside-down on the monkey bars at recess. But it’s what I do, and I figure it’s not hurting anybody so what’s the big deal? I mean I’m lousy at sports so none of the other guys want me playing ball with ’em, and the swings and the merry-go-round and the see-saw all make me dizzy, so what am I supposed to do? And it’s not like I’m some kind of loner type, either, ’cause I get along okay with the other kids. So when Sister Joan made me get off the monkey bars today I got pretty bugged. I told her she didn’t have the right to tell me what to do at recess. I said I liked hanging upside-down and I should be able to play however I want. But Sister said she could do whatever was best for us and hanging upside-down wasn’t good for me. I said that was bogus. Then she said hanging upside-down was a waste of time. I wanted to tell her she was full of it but I just walked away. Everybody knows Sister Joan smacks kids sometimes.

So I went and sat under the oak tree for the rest of recess. It’s right in the middle of the schoolyard and it sort of separates the playground from the ball field and the basketball court. I don’t like watching the kids play ball so I sat on the playground side of the tree, checking out the kids on the swings, mainly. Some of the smaller kids could really go high, almost scary high sometimes, like they were trying to make a whole loop-de-loop. It made me kind of nervous, ’cause I remembered the time at home when my dad kept pushing me higher and higher and he wouldn’t stop. So I had to bail out, and when I landed I twisted my
ankle real bad. But I knew Dad wasn’t thinking straight ’cause of the cancer in his head, so when Mom got home I told her I did it jumping off the fence. Anyhow, now I don’t go anywhere near swings.

But I could see I wasn’t the only one in the class who wasn’t too crazy about the swings. These days, when little Ruthie gets on a swing she just sits there and stares at the ground. Instead of swinging she kicks at the sand or she takes off her shoes and buries her feet up to her ankles. I watched her like that from under the oak tree, and for a while I thought why doesn’t old Sister Joan make her get off the swings like she made me get off the monkey bars? Wasn’t what Ruthie was doing just as much of a waste of time? But I didn’t keep thinking like that for too long ’cause I knew Ruthie was sad ’cause she couldn’t play with Tony. I guess Tony’s dad said he couldn’t play with Ruthie anymore.

I even felt sorry for Tony, and he’s been acting like a real jerk lately. But I knew he felt just as lonely as Ruthie did. He was over on the merry-go-round like usual. He pushes it fast as he can then he hops on and pulls himself in to the center. Then he just sits down and goes ’round and ’round until it stops. For a while there Tony wouldn’t let anybody else on the merry-go-round. But Sister Esther gave him a little lecture about sharing, and so he had to give in. It didn’t really matter, though, ’cause Tony started pushing the merry-go-round super fast so nobody even wanted to ride it anymore. It’s pretty mean, all right, but I don’t figure he’ll get away with it for too long. Anyhow, it doesn’t matter much to me. But somehow I still feel sorry for Tony, the way his dad made him give up his best friend in the world. I wonder what makes somebody do that to their kid.

Ω

When I think about what happened at the science fair today I can’t hardly believe it. It seems like it must’ve been a dream or something. I mean, it was the science fair! It was supposed to be fun. And it was happening at a school. Not just a regular school, either, but a Catholic school with nuns and all. You got to figure people are going to behave themselves at a religious-type school. I guess it just shows that there’s some people that don’t care at all what people think of ’em at any time or any place. When they lose it, it just doesn’t matter.

Things were going okay for a while. We kids were checking our projects one last time to make sure they looked good and worked all right, and all the parents were hanging out in the hall, having coffee and chatting with each other. The room was all decked out with streamers and balloons, and all our worktables were covered with big yellow tablecloths that hung down to the floor. All the tables were lined up close to the wall on three sides of the room, so the parents could come in from the front and move around in a circle to check out each project. All of us kids stood behind our projects with our backs to the wall. Finally Sister Esther came in the room and went from one worktable to
the next, looking at each project and asking us if we were ready. Then she left the room and we all just waited.

After a few minutes Sister let the parents in. She had them stand beside each of us kids so the photographer guy could take our picture. While he was fixing his camera on a stand I looked around the room at all the parents in their good clothes, smiling at their kids and looking proud. Ruthie’s mom had this flowery hat on and I saw her point at Ruthie’s Sun, which was hanging down like a giant orange in the middle of her planets. Then Ruthie’s mom reached down and patted her on the head. Tony’s dad was looking okay, too, even though he had on a really lame-looking green sports jacket that wasn’t even buttoned up. He was sort of rocking back and forth on his feet with his hands in his pants pockets. But he looked like he was in an all right mood. Finally the photographer called out he was ready and Mom put her arm around my shoulder. Then everybody was saying “School is a breeze,” so we’d all look like we were smiling.

So pretty soon all the parents started roaming around the room to look at the projects. Mom stayed with me for a few minutes so I could get my tomato soup lava flowing just right. I had the hot plate on too high and the soup was boiling too quick, so she turned it down so the soup’d flow over the top nice and slow and steady. It was a good thing we had a big pizza pan to put the volcano on, ’cause you could tell there was going to be a real mess when it was over. After Mom left to take the tour, people started coming around to check me out. Most folks seemed to like the project okay. They’d usually stare at the lava as it flowed down the volcano, then they’d lean over and look at the pool of slop bubbling at the top. Some people’d smile and then move on but other people’d look pretty amazed and ask how I did it. When I told ’em they’d usually laugh, but it was a good kind of laugh. After a while I guess it got around that I was using tomato soup for lava, and so people started coming over and saying stuff like, “Hey, what’s cooking?” or “Is it dinner already?” Thing is, the soup was really starting to smell like soup, too. Billy Murray’s older brother even stuck his finger in the top and tasted it. Then as he left he smacked his lips and said, “Mmm, mmm, good.” What a geek.

Sometimes there wasn’t anybody at my table so I’d spy around the room to see how some of the other kids were doing. Ruthie was getting a lot of attention, like I knew she would. But that new kid Justin was doing all right, too. He was dressed in his nerdy white jacket, whipping up stuff in his still. He’d have a beaker of water boiling over his Bunsen burner, then he’d pour in some chemical and the water’d turn a real bright color. But then when it came out the other end it was a whole different color. I also watched Billy Murray show off some of his animal skins. He’d hold out a skin so somebody could feel it, then he’d talk awhile about it. I wondered how much you could say about an animal skin except, “This one’s from a raccoon,” or “This one’s from a skunk.” You could see Billy’s tongue popping in and out of his mouth
while he was lisping. Then I watched Julia Franco holding up different seashells and I guess explaining where she found 'em and what kind of animals lived in 'em. Sometimes she’d hand one over to somebody so they could inspect it, but usually all people’d do is hold it up to their ear.

Well, the room was pretty noisy with all the action going on, but then I heard a woman’s voice yell, “Hey, cut that out!” I looked across the room and saw it was Ruthie’s mom yelling at Tony’s dad. He was poking his finger at Ruthie’s planets, and they were swinging all out of control. So Ruthie’s mom yelled even louder. “Get away from here!” she said, and she pushed at his arms. But he kept on poking anyway. Then Ruthie’s mom practically screamed out, “You crazy cracker! You get your butt outta here! You hear me?” A few of the parents started talking to Tony’s dad, so he finally walked away. But he was kind of snickering to himself as he went. He sort of pushed his way past some people and headed back to the corner of the room where Tony’s project was. Nobody was spending much time at Tony’s table, but I didn’t really blame ‘em ‘cause his project was just plain boring. All it was was that big eggbeater with this wobbly clay wheel that Tony cooked in the kiln then stuck on the end. He painted the wheel like a pie with six slices, and each slice was a different color of the rainbow. Then when he cranked the eggbeater around the wheel was supposed to turn white. He tried it a million times in class, but it never worked.

Tony’s dad went and stood next to Tony, but Tony looked pretty bugged. He pointed at Ruthie’s table and I guess he started complaining to his dead about what he did, but I heard his dad tell him to shut up. So Tony did and they just stood there alone in the corner ’cause now nobody wanted to see Tony’s project. But then Sister Esther went over there, and she must’ve said something good ’cause Tony’s dad started nodding his head and he actually reached over and patted Tony on the back. So then when Sister left everything kind of settled back to normal.

Pretty soon Mom came back to join me and see what the volcano looked like by now. I thought it looked cool ’cause some of the lava was moving slow and some of it ran all the way to the bottom and took a bunch of toothpick trees with it. But Mom noticed there weren’t any ashes, and I almost said a cuss word ’cause I totally forgot about that. So I grabbed the bag quick from under the table and poured some fireplace ashes all around. That made the volcano look a lot realer, even though it was a heck of a lot messier. But Mom was okay with it and even said it looked great. And so did the next parents who came to the table. They said the project looked excellent. That sure felt good.

But then there was some more loud talking. It was Tony’s dad. He was still standing next to Tony, but now he was trying to wave people over to their table. He was saying stuff like, “Hey, what’s wrong with you stuck-ups?” and “Don’t you people got any manners? C’mon over here and see my boy’s project.” ’Course Tony’s face was red as a beet
and he tried to get his dad to stop, but the guy just wouldn’t listen. He kept on making a fuss, but everybody ignored him, instead. Everybody except for Ruthie’s mom. I saw her and her hat squeezing by all the other parents and I thought oh no ’cause I knew she was heading for Tony’s table.

When she got there she just crossed her arms and waited. Then I heard her say, “Come on, let’s see what you got.” So Tony’s dad made him start cranking up the eggbeater. After a while Ruthie’s mom said, “So what’s supposed to happen?” Tony kind of mumbled something and she said, “What? It’s supposed to turn white? Well, it ain’t.” So then she made some quick little circles with her hand and Tony cranked the handle faster. By now everybody in the whole room was watching what was going on. But the wheel wasn’t getting even close to white, so Ruthie’s mom made some more circles and Tony cranked it up about as fast as he could. You could see the wheel was getting wobblier all the time, so Ruthie’s mom finally told Tony to stop. Then she said, “Nice, try, boy, but all you got is gray.” And she shook her head and walked away. But you could see her shoulders shaking ’cause she was laughing to herself all the way back to Ruthie’s table.

Well, I guess Tony’s dad never even knew what Tony’s project was about, or else he figured it worked okay, ’cause he moved to the front of the table and told Tony to go as fast as he could. Then when he saw the wheel wasn’t getting white he called out, “Faster!” ’Course it didn’t get much better, so he kept yelling, “Faster! Faster! Faster!” until the wheel was so wobbly Tony didn’t have any choice but to stop. But then Tony’s dad said, “Whatcha doin’, boy? Get this thing movin’!” That’s when Sister Esther went over and said that was enough. She told Tony’s dad real polite that sometimes the projects don’t work out like you hope and what really mattered was the work the students put into them. But that didn’t sink in at all. I heard Tony’s dad say, “Like hell,” and he went back around the table and shoved Tony away and started cranking that eggbeater like he was trying to start an airplane or something. “You tell me when it gets white!” he called to Sister Esther. She said, “Mr. Jackson, please!” But he kept on cranking, and the wheel got so wobbly it looked like it was going to fall off. And then finally, it did. It just flew off the eggbeater about five feet into the air and when it landed it smashed into about a thousand pieces.

Tony’s dad just stood there and stared at the pile of clay for what felt like a really long time. Matter of fact, everybody in the whole room just stood and stared. Then Tony lost it. He stepped right up next to his dad and screamed in his ear, “You stupid fool! You broke my project! I busted my butt on that! Do you even care about that? Huh? I bet you don’t, you fool! You stupid, Goddamn…” Then, like some kind of explosion or something, Tony’s dad turned and grabbed him by the shirt and threw him against the wall. “Mr. Jackson!” Sister yelled. And some of the parents shouted stuff like, “Hey, what the hell are you doing?” and “Hey, mister, are you nuts?” Then before anybody could do any-
thing he grabbed Tony by the neck with his left hand and he hauled off and punched Tony hard right in his face. Tony went right to the floor, and his dad stood there hovering over him like some kind of vulture or something.

Then Sister Esther went right up to Tony’s dad and told him to leave. But he didn’t seem to hear her so she actually took his head in her hands and said, “Mr. Jackson! Did you hear me? I asked you to leave here.” Then Tony’s dad sort of snapped out of it and Sister said in a quieter voice, “This may not be a church, Mr. Jackson, but it is still a holy place. Take yourself away from here.” He just stared at her for a while, then he looked around the room with this blank face. Finally he stepped back and buttoned his jacket, and then walked away. There was this kind of scraping of feet as everybody made a path for Tony’s dad while he crossed the room and then disappeared out the door.

All of a sudden some kid yelled out, “Tony,” and we all watched as Ruthie ran up the path and went to see if Tony was okay. Sister was leaning over him but she stepped back when Ruthie got there. Tony was sitting up against the wall with his hand cupped tight over his mouth, but that didn’t stop some blood from running down his chin and dripping on his blue shirt. But Ruthie didn’t look shocked at all. In fact, right away, she bent over and pulled Tony’s hand from his mouth and then she took the end of her skirt and started wiping the blood off his face. She kept on wiping and wiping, until there wasn’t any blood anymore.
ABAYOMI ANIMASHAUN is a Nigerian émigré, who came to the United States in the late 1990s. Currently, he attends the international graduate writing program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Abayomi Animashaun / Two Poems

On Leaving Lagos:
December 28, 1996
(After Cavafy)

As you set out on this journey to leave Lagos,
Wish that the way be long,
Full of adventures, full of knowledge.

Don’t be afraid of custom officers with cocked
Berets and machine guns.
You will not find them on your way.

Wish that the way be long.

May there be many mornings
With such pleasure, such joy,
As when you enter the ports for the first time.

Always keep Lagos in your mind.
But don’t hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts many years.

If you find yourself in that country an old man,
Rich with all you have gained along the way,
Remember, Lagos gave you the beautiful journey.

Without her you would not have set out on the way.
She has no more to give you.

If now you find her poor, Lagos did not betray you.
By then, with all your wisdom, all your experience,
You will understand what Lagos means.
Grief

“How difficult it is to go on Lord,
too many comrades wasting
away in hunger. Their bodies
run thin and ashen from poverty…
their mouths trapped open in a
round ‘O’ as in a cough.

I have walked the length of this city,
holding a thought tight within
reminding myself
whoever believes in You will not starve.

Yet, each day, walking back
from Your house of worship
I come to this woman who reaches
out to me with one hand, and
with the other holds her child.

I speak to her, asking her to
‘give your life to the Lord’
and always she comes
with the same answer, ‘I believe…but
understand, I don’t make enough
for me and my child. I am a cook,’ she says—
always looking straight with a hardened glance—
‘employed at a public school in this city,
and daily I know to kneel in prayer.

But look at me, a single mother, I don’t even
make enough for myself…whom do I turn to
with this child, where do I go…’

Lord always the same exchange
between me and this woman.”

“Coming home from work today, she wasn’t there—
at that place where she stands, among the others,
her face bronzed by the day’s sun pondering
whether to ignore me or reach for the crisp note,
I am given daily at Your house of worship.
So difficult Lord... What to do... How to go on spreading Your word to the ends of the earth, when many fall to the side from hunger... their bodies run through with decay, with no tears shed on their behalf and nothing done to ease their cause. What to do Lord... What to do..."
J. R. HANSON grew up and was educated in North Idaho. Following advanced
degrees at Cornell University and the Sorbonne, he taught English in Europe
and the Middle East. For several years now he has been a full-time writer living
outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with an understanding spouse.

Pendulum

J. R. Hanson

DRESSED UP as though for church, Betty sits, incongruously, in her
own living room, waiting for her son. She could change, but wants the
seriousness her good clothes – her dark blue pumps, her dress suit with
a lace-front white blouse – will lend the moment. One more thing to
make sure she’s got her Philly’s complete attention.

She’s dressed that way because instead of a normal teaching day it
had been one of the new superintendent’s ‘in-service’ days. In the high
school auditorium the principals and administrators and the superinten-
dent himself lectured the town’s assembled teachers about teaching.
Rediscover the joy of teaching, one speaker said, and he wasn’t joking.
No one mentioned, no one would admit, that the kids are getting harder
to handle every single year – just as her own son is harder to even talk
to – as though something in the local air or water were making the kids
in town go wild.

Betty felt like asking – she never came close to actually raising her
hand – sir, when the wild little monkeys in my class have given me a
headache that pounds at my temple like a drumbeat, with two hours of
class yet to go, is that part of the joy of teaching?

But for most of the day, in the crowd of fidgeting teachers, the one
thing on her mind was what she’d discovered that morning. If one of
the speakers did manage to momentarily distract her, that discovery, the
heartache it had brought – Philly, how could you? – soon came surging
back, like a toothache that reasserts itself the minute you manage to go
to sleep. Her closest colleagues noticed, gave her looks of sympathy
and lingering pats on the shoulder, no doubt thinking it was her mar-
riage again.
When she hurries into the house at four, Philly isn’t home, of course, he’s out somewhere — up to what, she doesn’t want to imagine. She sits in the small living room thinking of her son, as though she could will him home before Jerry, and for once it seems a blessing her husband’s been staying longer at the Riverside Tavern after work.

Once, she’d have prayed — please God, send Philly home — but in the past couple of years, God had apparently adopted a hands-off policy as her son and her husband continued their trajectories undeflected by her prayers, her husband a sullen, glowering presence, a permanently sore loser, her son — a conclusion forcing itself upon her that very day — a budding little criminal. Betty remains a church-going woman — it’s simply something you do, like wearing clean clothing and paying your bills on time and she can’t imagine sitting home, idle, on Sunday morning — but she’ll offer no more prayers.

This time, she can’t let Philly off with easy lies. What will Jerry do if he finds out? She sees an image of her husband, face twisted in anger, going after Philly — they’re nearly the same height now, though the son’s rail-thin in comparison. Jerry’s anger these days seems to have a new heat to it, and something about Philly sets him on edge. She has to protect him, even if recently that’s like protecting a dog that bites you whenever you try to pet it. She has to make the entire situation go away, erase it, as though it had never happened. Philly has to understand he’s gone too far this time.

In the silent house she hears the old wall clock in the dining room ticking away, its tick-tick, tick-tick, as she sits waiting, suddenly irritating, calling forth the beginning of a headache. Her mother’d rescued the clock from the country schoolhouse where she taught for thirty years, just as they were preparing to demolish the building, a story Betty’s often told visitors, her mother rushing out of the old school with the clock in her arms. Right now, each tick-tick of the pendulum seems to strike Betty’s temple, and she nearly rises to walk into the dining room and stop it.

Instead, she turns to the mail she brought in, unopened on the table. But when she sees a letter from the bank her headache starts up for real, and she tosses the mail aside and starts massaging her temples. She’s never said to Jerry: I told you so, but of course she doesn’t need to, it’s there in the air, always. Is this for people like us? she asked when he brought the papers to sign, a second mortgage on the house, what if something goes wrong? What can go wrong? he asked. All the local big shots are in on it. For once, they’re letting a little guy in, because I’m the project foreman and they think it’ll make me work harder. It’s the chance of a lifetime, hon!

Through the front windows she sees a fading fall day, the shadow of the house moving across the lawn, where golden and reddish leaves have piled up. A few years earlier, Philly would already have raked and burned them in the barrel out back. He did things like that almost before you asked. But now she thinks of her son, just turned fifteen, as a
snake-like creature, slippery, eluding your grasp no matter how you try to take hold of him. He barely talks to you, answers only "I dunno" or a plaintive "Ah, mom!" He hides out in the basement with his stereo and, if you don't watch him, sneaks out of the house whenever he can.

"Where's that damn kid?" Jerry asks and, as much as she winces at the phrase, sometimes feels like using it herself.

For years, whenever their marital problems boiled over, Betty took refuge in a dream of Jerry disappearing, suddenly, without a trace. Not murdered, nothing so gruesome, he simply ceased to exist, no one knew where or how, leaving her and Philly, the schoolteacher and the perfect schoolteacher's boy. She'd imagine herself, a year or so after Jerry's sudden disappearance, remarried, this time to another teacher, a quiet, reasonable man, who'd take an interest in Philly's education, the three of them leading a quiet, uneventful life.

These days she can't imagine how she'd handle Philly alone. Driving home last month she'd spotted him on the street and had to look twice to make sure it was him, wearing those worn, dirty clothes he likes, walking hunched over, a scowl on his face and - especially disgusting -- spitting every second or third step as he walked along. The kids he was with, older, looked like dropouts and troublemakers. Why can't he spend more time with the one friend of his, Ray, who seems both clean-cut and polite?

Her sister's and her brother's boys still go to church on Sundays (she gave up on Philly two or three years ago) and want to grow up to be like their fathers. What does Philly want to be now - someone who spits on the street? You can't get the beginning of an answer out of him. A few years ago, different answers would come spilling out: Astronomer! Guy who studies dinosaurs! Scientist who cures diseases! Now it's a shrug and "Can I go?" Thinking about it makes her temple throb.

The back door opens and she holds her breath, fearing Jerry's heavy steps coming through the kitchen. Instead, light steps pad downstairs to Philly's basement nest.

"Philly!" she calls down a moment later.
"Huh?" from around the corner down there.
"Come up here to talk to me."
"W'for?" A little closer, still not in sight.
"Phillip, I want to talk to you."
"Ah, Mom--"
"UPSTAIRS! NOW!"

Going into the dining room, she hears shuffling steps coming up. He peers at her around the side of the doorway.
"What?"
"Come sit at the table and talk."
"Mom--"
"I said sit, Phillip!"
He slumps onto a chair facing her across the table. She tries to appear stern, wearing her strict schoolteacher face, but feels more sad than stern. He leans the chair back, bangs his knees together, his eyes flicking back and forth from her face to his feet.

“I know you started taking money from my purse last year.”

“MOM!” He stares at her, wide-eyed.

“Don’t deny it, Philly. I take part of the blame, I didn’t nip it in the bud. I fooled myself, tried to believe I was mistaken, I’d miscounted or spent money somewhere and forgotten about it. The first couple of times you did it—”

“MOM!”

“—I hoped that mentioning it — ‘Philly, it’s funny, I thought I had more money in my purse’—letting you know I knew, would get you to stop. It didn’t, of course. I started hiding my purse, but you usually managed to find it—”

“MOM!” He starts to rise from his chair.

“Sit down, young man. Unless you want to have this discussion with your father.”

He sits back down, no longer slumped but sitting up and, she sees with satisfaction, paying complete attention.

“Philly, you’ve gone too far this time—”

“Mom, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“No more lies, Philly! You cannot take two hundred dollars from the bedroom—”

A strangled noise comes from across the table. Betty plows ahead, delivering the speech she’d worked out that day, her eyes fixed on the wall clock above Philly’s head.

“—and pretend it didn’t happen. How could you think you’d get away with it? Never mind, the important thing now is, give the money back, promise you’ll never do anything of the kind again, and I won’t tell your father. It will stay between the two of us.” She looks at him.

“You already spent some of the money, is that it?”

“It wasn’t me, Mom.” His voice is calm, low-key.

“That’s not good enough this time, you hear me, Philly?”

She finally takes in that he’s sitting there looking almost relaxed, considering her with indulgence and amusement, a very adult look she finds surprising from her boy.

“I didn’t do it, Mom,” he says. “Just so I understand what the deal is, how much money’s gone exactly?”

She’s at a loss for words. There’s nothing of his usual shifty, red-faced denials that cry guilt no matter how stubbornly he maintains the opposite.

“Philly... now don’t try to... you know exactly...” The room, oddly silent, seems to spin. She looks up at the wall clock, sees that the pendulum has stopped. Had she got up and stopped it after all? She can’t remember, and reaches up to massage her headache.
“Mom, are you okay? Look, I really have no idea about this. You said two hundred dollars? Where was it?”

“Philly, you know very well...it was...in the drawer...in the bedroom. I'd forgotten my checkbook, but the grocery store cashed my paycheck for me, so I had all that cash and I...I hid it in a drawer.”

“It's gone? You're sure?”

“Of course, I'm sure,” she snaps. “You think I didn't check again and again? In every drawer? Philly, if you think—”

“Listen, Mom,” he says, leaning forward, speaking slowly. She has the impression he's about to impart a secret. “Let's say I was gonna take money from your purse. Let's say we want to imagine how I'd do that. The times you thought it happened, did you ever think I took all the money there? Or even that I took a big amount?”

Unable to take her eyes off him, as though mesmerized, she shakes her head.

“That's because if a guy like me was gonna take money from his mom's purse, he'd never take a lot. The whole idea is, I mean would be, not to get noticed. I'd want you, like you said, to think you counted wrong or bought something and forgot. So I'd always take a small amount, maybe a five or a ten, at most a twenty, and only if there was a lot there - like right after payday. That's how that would work.”

“I see,” she says.

“Taking two hundred dollars, Mom, wow, that'd be really stupid. It'd be crazy. No way you wouldn't notice. I'd never ever do that, 'cause I'd get caught for sure. Maybe if I was gonna take off for good, hitchhike to California or somethin'. But I'm still here, right? So I DID NOT DO IT, okay, Mom?”

For the first time in years, she believes his denial. The consequences of believing him seem enormous in a way not yet clear, and for the moment she is sidetracked by a realization coming from the cool, she'd almost say professional tone of Philly's explanation: if this is how her son thinks through the chances of getting caught, what far worse things than stealing from her is he up to around town? She sits back in her armchair as though pushed back by the weight of the realization.

Philly's out of his chair, slinking toward the back door.

“Philly—”

“Can I go out, Mom? Just until dinner?” The pleading adolescent is back.

“Where—”

“Just over to Tom's.” Tom, the son of another schoolteacher who lives in the neighborhood, is a safe destination, although she understands Philly won't go there. If she calls Tom's mother Laura in ten minutes, Laura will say, “Well, no, Betty, I haven't seen Philly.” It's happened before. And, of course, all she ever said was: “Oh, never mind, Laura! He's around the neighborhood somewhere. Bye!”

Philly's halfway out the door. “Can I, Mom? Just to Tom's?”
“Be home for dinner, Philly,” she calls. “Your father...” she trails
off, Philly’s already gone. She reaches up to massage her temples, be-
cause her head is throbbing like crazy again, as she suddenly sees the
question looming behind her new headache: if Philly didn’t take the
two hundred from the drawer, who did?

Ω

Two hundreds smackers! Jesus! Philly imagines the roll of twenties, the
bulge it’d make in his pocket, the stuff he could buy – for himself, for
the guys, for girls. He felt good when he’d scored a twenty from her
purse – but two hundred! Even on their best days he and the guys never
got that much. Wouldn’t it be something to go up to Ray and Darrell
and flip that roll out!

Ray, street-mart, he’d be skeptical.

“Sure that’s all twenties?” Ray’d ask. “Lemme see.”

Philly’d hand it over, ’cause though Ray’s older and tougher than
Philly and Darrell, his sidekicks – they walk around town with Ray in
the middle, the three of them fall in that way naturally – Ray isn’t
mean, he won’t take money off you like some guys, and when you pull
somethin’ off together, Ray’s square about splittin’ the take. So if
Philly had the two hundred, he’d let Ray have a look, ’cause it’d be
great to see his face when he saw it wasn’t twenties with ones inside, it
was actual damn twenties!

Philly walks through the neighborhood, looking both ways, watch-
ing out for his dad’s truck. Tom’s house is down Militia Drive there –
what a wimp he’s turned into! Kid never does anything except go to
school and hang around the neighborhood, the same stuff they did two
or three years ago. Doesn’t do dope, looks like he’s gonna wet his pants
if you talk about rippin’ anything off to raise some cash. Philly never
goes to Tom’s anymore, just uses it as somethin’ to tell his mom. Philly
got a good laugh out of the guys, said he was so used to lyin’ to his
mom, even if he was goin’ somewhere perfectly innocent, he’d still lie
about it, just out of habit.

He heads uptown to check out the hangouts, looks for Ray and Dar-
rell. He can’t wait to tell them about his mother gettin’ ripped off – two
hundred! It’s not as good as if he had the two hundred himself, but it’s
still cool – almost makes him wish he hadn’t stopped getting into her
purse. But once she got suspicious, she either kept her eye on the damn
thing all the time or else hid her billfold away somewhere, in her bed-
room or the linen closet. When he has time to look – like when she
goes across the street to play bridge at Mrs. Freed’s – he always finds
it, there isn’t a hiding place in the house he can’t find eventually.
Mostly it isn’t worth the hassle for the few bucks he can take, espe-
cially now that he needs a lot more cash just to get through a weekend.
Christ, what’s five or ten bucks when you’ve got the kind of expenses
he has these days?
Philly’s been hangin’ out with Ray and Darrell about a year now, but last summer was when they really started doin’ stuff to pick up cash. It’s a resort town, and in tourist season it’s almost too easy – God, tourists are stupid! They leave purses in parked cars when they go to the city park or to the amusement pier, they walk over to the beach to go swimming and leave purses and wallets on their picnic tables (the wallets inside pants they’ve changed out of, purses maybe in a picnic basket). Guys leave watches in their cars or with their clothes near the picnic stuff. Like Ray says: candy from a baby!

Phil, Ray and Darrell walk around, cruisin’ through the park, the parking lot near the old stadium (the cops come through the lot on the downtown side too often), the neighborhoods near the park where overflow parking goes on weekends. Walking, looking cool, trying not to look shifty, keeping their eyes peeled for good stuff. Sometimes they do the parking lots of the two big hotels downtown, although you have to watch out for cops there, too. The marinas aren’t bad either, if you get past the attendants, people leave a lotta good shit on boats.

Philly’s best score, the one that really got him in with Ray, was when he hit the changing room of the swimming pool at the Resort. He changed into swimming trunks in the can in the lobby, then went to the pool acting like he was some guest’s kid – the pool staff make a big fuss about keeping town kids out, always ask what your room number is, but that day nobody said a word. He splashed around a while, then went into the changing room, went through the lockers – unlocked! – scored almost a hundred out of two wallets, plus two watches. Ray couldn’t believe it – damn near hugged him!

Cash is best. You can start spending as soon as you dump the wallet. With watches you have to go to a guy at the pool hall who buys no questions asked. Funny thing, Phil’s always been called Philly, just like Billy for Bill, and out here nobody ever thought of the city Back East, but the watch guy, an older guy with a squawky accent, he’s actually from Philadelphia, he got a kick out of hearing Phil called Philly.

“Philly, huh? No shit?” he asked. “Heard of guys called ‘Philly somethin’, like ‘Philly Joe,’ never just straight Philly.” He punched Philly in the shoulder – kinda hard, a short little punch, but it stung – and said, “Yeah, well I’ll call you Louie instead,” and the next time they had watches to sell, the guy remembered, he actually called Philly ‘Louie,’ which was pretty cool, to be remembered by an older guy who did serious business – people said he was on the lam for something, which was why a connected guy was workin’ in a pool hall in their small town out West.

They scored hundreds of bucks each that summer. Philly had to laugh, all summer long, his mom still made a big deal out of his lousy two dollars a week allowance. She’d say: Phillip, no allowance this week if you don’t get out there and mow that lawn. Hey, Mom, he felt like sayin’, I got forty bucks out of some guy’s wallet yesterday, you think I need two crummy bucks?
Problem now is, late November, the tourists are gone, no more easy money till next summer. Ray says the watch guy might be interested in stereos and radios, they should try the summer homes around the lake. Not the cabins, people never leave much there, but recently around the lake, on the hills with a view, people from Spokane and Seattle are buildin' big places, actually furnished houses full of stuff year round, but deserted this time of year. Problem is, none of the three has a car, and they can't walk back from around the lake loaded down with stereos. Let's steal a boat, said Darrell, which Ray made fun of at first, but now he's thinkin' it over. In the meantime they're pretty broke.

Hurrying across Lakeshore Drive into the city park, Philly looks both ways 'cause sometimes his dad drives home that way. His mom gettin' ripped off is a cool story because it's so bizarre -- who the shit could've gotten into the house and taken the money out of the bedroom drawer? He tries to imagine somebody goin' through the neighborhood, checkin' houses out to see if anybody's home -- he's learned from Ray how to think about stuff like that, you'd go to both doors, front and back, to make sure, knock real hard, if anybody came you'd ask if they wanted their leaves raked, or say you were lining up snow shoveling business for winter, then split. Until you found a place you're sure nobody's home. You still have to get inside, although he knows everybody in the neighborhood doesn't lock their houses.

But Philly's house is locked these days, his mom's so uptight and suspicious the last couple of years. Funny he didn't notice any signs of a break-in. How'd they get in? Finding his mother's money in the drawer, that's a pretty lucky break, which seems fishy, or else they did a thorough search, 'cept he hadn't noticed the place looking like it'd been tossed. If his parents' bedroom'd been tossed, it'd be a real mess, that would've bothered her almost as much as the dough. She would've said: how could you make such a mess in your own house? But she hadn't said a thing.

Thinking of his parents' bedroom with the drawers emptied out, stuff thrown all over, reminds him of the summer homes he and Ray and Darrell might do. He imagined they'd go in, see what was out in the open, grab stuff and take off. He'd never thought of searchin' the places, tossin' 'em. That sounds cool, like some cat-burglar movie. Darrell, that stupid jerk, likes to bust stuff up, he'll wanna break things and make a real damn mess, which Philly doesn't like much, but what can you do about Darrell?

Anyway, Ray'll get a kick out of the story, since he's the one, the last time Philly stole from his mom's purse, right after they started hangin' around. Ray was the one who kept Philly's mom busy in the backyard. During summer vacation she likes to sit out there on a lounger in the shade under the chestnut tee, drinking iced tea and reading. Phil and Ray were talkin' to her there, they'd stopped by, she'd met Ray for the first time. He's a great talker, she seemed to like him -- thing about Ray, he always tries to look clean-cut, keeps his hair
trimmed, his shoes shined – and when Philly said he had to use the bathroom, then went in and snuck into his parents’ bedroom where she had her billfold underneath the mattress, Ray kept her talking the whole time. Philly could hear his mom laughing at Ray’s stories through the open window while he had her billfold open.

That day the billfold was thick with dough, he’d gone for a ten and a twenty. Man, they had a great time with that, bought some joints, took a couple chicks to the movies, burgers afterward, even had some left to shoot pool the next day.

Ω

Almost through the park to Main Street, walking through leaves drifted over the sidewalk, Philly stops in his tracks. The missing money suddenly appears to him, not as a story to amaze his friends, but as an actual problem to find an answer to, like one of those practical math problems they do in class – a farmer has so many cows, each cow produces so much milk, if he sells four cows, how much…the kind of problem Philly was good at before he stopped trying in school. Philly has the impression the answer to that problem – who on earth could’ve stolen two hundred dollars from his mother’s drawer? – abruptly reaches out and grabs him.

It’s as though someone stuck a wedge into his gut, and Philly stands there with a sick feeling, starting to feel dizzy, because the one person who knows about his mother hiding her purse and putting her money in drawers, the one person who wouldn’t have to toss the place, is Ray. His tough-guy friend, Ray, with whom, walking down the street, Philly feels cooler and tougher than ever in his life.

That feeling in his gut reminds him of that day, when he came back outside and stood in the yard with the money in his pocket, Ray knowin’ Philly’d just ripped off his mom, grinnin’ at her, her smilin’ at both of them – Philly’d finally brought home a friend she liked, clean-cut and nice. He’d felt a stab of nausea then, too, something inside him said: this is rotten. He’d always felt bad about stealin’ from her, she was on his side, it seemed rotten to pay her back like that, but the raw, indisputable reality was: he needed that money. He couldn’t be a nobody, a jerk sittin’ around broke.

That day, with Ray there, it felt especially rotten, but Philly shrugged the feeling off – his new friend Ray was so cool, they had big plans – and they left his mother reading on the lounger, waving at them as they left. “Bye, Mrs. Morley,” Ray called out. “Nice to meet you!” Once they got around the corner, they laughed and clapped each other on the back all the way uptown.

Philly hadn’t stolen from her since. He was always a little worried Ray’d say sometime, hey, let’s rip off your old lady again. He never did, probably because the stuff they were into after that was bringing in so much more.
But now they’re broke. And the more Philly thinks about it, the more he’s convinced: Ray knows when nobody’s home, where the extra key’s hidden outside, and if anybody’s got the nerve for it, it’s Ray. Philly’d seen a big guy catch Ray reaching into his car for a wallet on the dash. From down the street, Philly watched Ray talk his way out of it.

“This is yours? But my mom’s boyfriend told me to get his wallet – he said it was a blue Plymouth, just like this one.” He flipped open the wallet. “Oh, man, that ain’t him! I’m really sorry! You see another blue Plymouth around here?” The guy bought it, or at least enough to let Ray go. Philly knows he’d never keep his cool like that, he’d beg the guy not to turn him in. Ray’s cool is one of the things Philly admires most.

Philly imagines his mom finding Ray, cool as you please, in the house: Oh, hi, Mrs. Morley, where’s Phil? He said to come down and wait for him inside.” Ray’d have it all worked out. Caught with his hand in the drawer, he might be at a loss, anything short of that he’d talk his way out of. It looks like Ray tried his luck and hit the jackpot.

From where he stands in the park Philly looks over at Main Street and tries to imagine what he’s gonna say to Ray. Part of him hears himself saying: far out, man! Where’s my cut? Philly and Ray’re buddies, tough guy partners, all Ray’s done is pull off another job. But part of him wants to say: you rotten bastard, how could you? How could you take so much, and not care what happens to me?

It’s getting dark. A wintry breeze blows off the lake, swirling leaves around. Philly’s late for dinner, his father will throw a fit, but that hardly seems serious now. He walks over and sits on a park bench. He has to think this through, like one of those problems at school, or like when Ray says: Think, Phil! Don’t get caught with your pants down!

Okay. Philly’s mom didn’t call the cops, didn’t even tell his dad because she was sure Philly’d done it. Now, for once, she believes him – which means she will call the cops. Two hundred bucks gets stolen from your house, that’s what you do. And that’s bad news, because the cops will never buy it. Philly’s never been arrested, but the cops in town know who he is, they see him around with Ray and Darrell, they’ve got a good idea what kinda stuff the three are up to. A burglary at his house, no signs of a break-in, they won’t buy it for a second. They’ll take one look and say: talk to your son, ma’am.

Which is exactly what his father’ll say. No matter what Philly says, his father won’t buy it. Christ, he could get sent to reform school down-state: go ahead, his father’ll tell the cops, take the damn kid away. Guys who get out of reform school do have a certain hardguy coolness, it’s true, but from what Philly’s heard it’s a rotten place to be, gettin’ your head pounded in every day, not just by tough guys, but by mean dumb guys, guys like Darrell. And if Philly doesn’t get sent up, his dad might just throw him out of the house, somethin’ he’s been threatening a lot lately. Philly’d have to quit school and get some shitty job, pullin’
greenchain at a non-union mill or workin’ for some wildcatter who hires kids and works ’em raw. Talk about a bummer!

Philly has no choice: he has to get Ray to give the money back. Philly can’t make him, he isn’t tough enough – what if Ray says no? Rat Ray out, to his parents or the cops? He’d never live it down, plus think of what Ray could say once he started talking. A sick, sour feeling in his stomach, shaky at what’s ahead, Philly gets up from the bench and, somehow putting one foot in front of the other, heads uptown.

Ω

She makes dinner, because that’s what she does every evening, but not much of a dinner, she isn’t up to it tonight.

In the kitchen, cooking, setting the table, she moves as though numb. For years, Philly helped her set the table and talked about what he’d done at school that day. Like the rest, that’s a memory now: even when he’s home, the creature her son’s turned into hides out in the basement until ordered upstairs for dinner.

In the last year Jerry hasn’t had a lot more to say than Philly. He, too, takes the first opportunity to escape from the house – calling from the back door (“Home later, honey!” or “Goin’ out, dear!”), gone before she can reply. The screen door slams, then his truck starts up. That’s most weeknights now, not to mention weekends. He smells a little of alcohol when he comes home, late, but he’s not a drunk, she knows that.

It’s clear to her now she’s done the same with Jerry as with Philly, refused to see what’s going on, hoping bad things would go away on their own. But after the failure of the Lakeview project, Jerry will be working for years to pay off the debt. Everyone else seems to have gotten away untouched, insulated somehow, while he, the smallest fry of the bunch, was left standing there by himself. He could declare bankruptcy but they’d lose the house.

Since then, ill-tempered, arguing with his bosses about every little thing, he’s quit or been fired from one job after another, until the only builder who’ll hire him is his own younger brother, Barry, for whom he does finishing carpentry – doors, cabinets, molding – working mostly by himself, not quite full-time. Three quarters of his wages are garnished, Barry pays the bank directly, that’s the deal to keep the house.

She’s been paying all the other bills, and in spite of the fact that her salary barely covers the original mortgage and the groceries and the rest, Jerry doesn’t offer a cent of what he has left. She guessed it goes on his evenings and weekends out, although she’s sometimes wondered – he’s out so often now – how it can be enough.

Now she knows: it isn’t. She’d been waiting for him to ask her for money, had half a dozen replies ready about not giving her husband a
drinking allowance, not when she was paying the mortgage all by her-
self. He’d never asked. Instead…

She hears his truck in the garage, and her temple starts pounding. Oh, for the time when after a difficult day at school, home was a ref-
ge. Now, the kids are wild, she’s older – fifty just a few years away –
can’t take the stress, and comes home to this. She’d like to close her
eyes and fly away. She hears Jerry’s steps on the back porch and braces
herself against the fridge.

Ω

Philly finds Ray and Darrell inside Freddie’s Burger Ranch, chowin’
down – shakes, cheeseburgers, onion rings.

Ray waves Phil to sit next to Darrell, who makes a face but scoots
over. Darrell’s a flat-faced scrummy guy – but quick, wiry – who likes
to whip out his switchblade and flip it around. It does get your attention
(even Ray’ll say: watch what you’re doing with that thing!), but Philly
doubts he’s ever used it.

“’S’up, Philly?”

“Not much,” Philly shrugs. He notices Ray has a big shiny new
watch.

“Burger ‘n’ shake?”

“Gotta go home and eat.”

“C’mon, they won’t miss ya. It’s on me.”

“Guys seem loaded. Where’d you get all the dough?”

“Shhh,” says Ray with an admonishing look around.

“Damn trap shut,” says Darrell. Philly gives him a hard sideways
look, harder than Darrell’s used to from him.

“Nice watch,” Philly says with a nod at Ray’s wrist. Grinning, Ray
holds it up. Darrell pulls his sleeve back and shows his own new watch,
black with a leather wristband sporting spiky metal studs. Then he
reaches inside his shirt and pulls out an iron cross with a leering skull
in the center, on a chain around his neck. “Got this, too.”

“Looks like you guys hit the jackpot.” It comes out sounding hos-
tile.

“Doin’ all right,” says Ray, shooting Philly a look: cool it, okay?

“Snatch some old lady’s purse?”

“Dammit, will you—”

“Maybe snuck into a house somewhere, stole money out of a draw-
er?”

“’S’matter with you?” asks Ray, looking around at the other booths.
He tosses the rest of his burger onto the table and stands. “Outside,
dammit!”

Ω
They cross the parking lot to a retaining wall where guys hang out watching traffic on weekends, deserted at dinner time on a weeknight.

“Outta your mind, talkin’ like that?” Ray asks, in Phil’s face, close.

“Funny you two got so much cash all of a sudden.”

Ray looks Phil up and down, as though seeing him for the first time. He gives Darrell a look: what’s going on here? Darrell pulls his knife out, tosses it in the air, catching it, tossing it, smirking.

“All right, we scored some cash. Got our hands on somethin’, had a buyer. Darrell hid inside this place, brought some stuff out at night. We’d’ve told you, that’s no biggie. What’s the damn problem?”

Listening to Ray, watching Darrell toss his knife out of the corner of his eye, Philly recognizes one truth in Ray’s story: recently Ray likes to get Philly or Darrell to take the inside risks, while he retreats into the role of planner and distant lookout. Maybe after getting caught with the wallet, Ray thought, hey, why take the risk when Philly or Darrell can do it? With that thought Philly suddenly sees, not Ray, but Darrell in his parents’ bedroom, going through drawers, poking beneath the mattress, looking for money, Darrell, a smirk on his ugly mug, following Ray’s instructions while the tough guy himself waits outside in the alley. Seeing that image, Philly’s mind flares and without a word of warning, he takes a swing at Darrell.

Ω

Jerry’s truck is parked halfway down the alley. He’d backed out of the garage way too fast, barely aware of what he was doing – lucky the truck didn’t take out part of the wall. But halfway down the alley something changed, the anger in him switched off, just like that. You can leave now, a voice said in his head, and he thought: it’s true! and pulled over behind Galson’s garage.

In the house, he’d known he had to leave or he’d kill her. He knows anger well now, just thinking about the project or the damn kid, either one’ll do, and the slow burn starts. But when she accused him of stealing money from a drawer for Christ’s sake, a drawer in his own bedroom, the anger he felt was something else entirely. Get out or kill her, that was the choice, and the main reason not to kill her was that it wouldn’t solve anything. Jail, or tracked down and shot by the cops on some back road – hell, he knows most of the guys on the local force, last thing he wants is to hear them calling his name over the bullhorn. A couple of those guys, cops he knew from growing up, had taken him aside not long ago, word to the wise kind of thing: Jerry, that kid of yours, he’s runnin’ with some bad ones. Better rein ’im in some.

Which was why – it was almost funny – Jerry’d misunderstood when she started talking about money missing from the bedroom.

“That damn kid! How much’d he take?”

“A large amount is missing,” she said stiffly.
He was already sitting at the dinner table, looking at his meal, fairly hungry – though it didn’t look like she’d knocked herself out cooking this one – but he stood up.

“He downstairs?”

“Philly’s not home yet.”

“Guess I better get in the truck and go find him. That damn—”

“I don’t think Philly took it.”

“So...” he stopped in the doorway, on his way to the garage. “What, you think it was somebody from outside? Burglars?”

“Jerry, where do you get the money you spend when you’re out all the time? When your wages are being garnisheed?”

He stared for a long moment, puzzling it out. She was sitting at the table, distant, schoolmarmish, looking at him as though he were some bad element at school.

When he understood, his first thought was to grab the dinner table by the edge and upend it, send her lousy dinner and the rest flying. Then he noticed that damn wall clock of her mother’s, for some reason stopped at four-thirty, maddeningly, and he felt like going over and ripping it off the wall. But suddenly he knew he had to get out of the house. He turned and walked out, not even taking his jacket off the hook beside the door.

Ω

Philly’s punch doesn’t catch Darrell full, but does spin him around. The knife, tossed in the air, clatters to the ground.

“Son of a—”

Philly swings again, connecting this time, knocking Darrell back. He goes to follow, but Ray grabs him, yanking hard – he’s strong, those biceps aren’t all show – then shoves Philly hard in the chest with his palms, like blows.

“Hell’s wrong with you?”

“You guys didn’t pull no job off! You stole money from my mother—”

“You talkin’ about? Ain’t you the one does that?”

“Twenty, not two hundred! You guys did it! You knew where it was, this bastard did it for you!” Darrell, his nose bleeding, is on his knees, groping around for his knife.

“Wouldn’t do that to you, Phil. You’d get blamed.”

“I did get blamed! Two hundred damn bucks! Nobody else knew, nobody else could’ve done it.” Philly hears his voice whining, like some crybaby.

“Can’t help you, Phil. Swear to God.”

Darrell’s found his knife and, getting to his feet, flips it open.

“C’mon, bastard,” he says. “Let’s see—”

“Put that thing away,” says Ray sharply. Darrell stands hesitating with the knife and Ray says even more angrily, “I said put it away!”
“So where’d you get the dough?”
“Sure wasn’t from your mom.” He gives Philly another shove, but with a look of reproach in his eyes. “You think I’d do that to you, Phil?”
“You’re the only one who knew!”
“So you think I would?”
“I…I dunno. I guess…”
“Better guess again,” he says, shaking his head. Then, to Darrell: “Let’s go.” He heads off down the street. Darrell looks at Philly, points the knife at him. “I will catch you later,” he says, then follows Ray.

Ω

Since the project went bust it’s always been somewhere in his mind, like a coal fire burning away underground. Outrage, but also wonder that Leon, the developer – the others, too, the lawyer who’d set it all up, the other bigshot investors – but above all Leon because he’s the one who’d dreamed up the project with condos and a cinema and shopping center and marina on the old Rebus lumberyard site on the river, Leon who recruited Jerry to be his foreman – partners, buddies at first, that hadn’t lasted long, and now Leon won’t even look at him – outrage and wonder that Leon came through untouched, still owns the restaurant out on Owl Bay, has the big house on a hill overlooking town, the cabin cruiser he keeps at the Resort, while Jerry’s going to spend the rest of his life like some John Henry, owing his soul to the company store.

He had a pitiful number of shares compared to the others – at their ‘investor’ meetings he felt like hired help invited to sit at the dinner table – and even that was possible only by taking a second mortgage on the house and his truck. Throw Jerry a bone, he imagines Leon saying to the others, make sure he gets the job done. And in fact Jerry’d never worked such hours in his life, had toiled on the project night and day, but there was one problem after another, the commercial tenants never lined up, and finally the damn EPA discovered heavy metal tailings throughout the site from the railyard that had served the mills. The Lakeview site now – he knows because he sometimes drives down and sits in his truck there – is a maze of foundations and block walls in a sea of mud sprouting weeds.

The others lost what they’d put into the shares but were rich enough to shrug it off. Jerry’s looking down a tunnel with no light at the end, working for the next twenty years to pay off the debt. His loan was secured by the house. If he defaults, Betty and the damn kid will be out in the cold.

Again and again, the idea has come to him: load up the truck and drive away. Leave the cold schoolmarm and the worthless kid, head for Alaska, work on the pipeline. He knows guys up there, they’d help him get hired; he knows one guy, Mike Hatfield, who ran away from some
trouble in town, has a new name up there. “Hatfield?” a guy in the tavern said one night, back from up north. “Yeah, I ran into him. Calls himself Mike Harris now.” Sounds good to Jerry.

But skippin’ out never seemed right. The truth was, he didn’t even like her much anymore, it still didn’t seem right to leave her with his mess. But if she’s accusing him of taking money from her damn drawer, if after all these years she doesn’t know sneaking money like that is a thing he’d never do, he feels she’s just given him permission to leave. He imagines himself heading on up, driving his truck mile after mile through the Canadian north, on the tree-lined road to Alaska. In the morning, after she goes to school, he can load up his clothes, his tools, and be off. She’s a schoolteacher, a public figure, the bank’ll work something out: they won’t simply put her out on the street.

Sitting in the cab of the truck in the dark alley, Jerry catches a hint of movement further down. Squinting, he sees someone approaching, staying close to the back of the garages on the opposite side, keeping low, peering as though casing the houses there. He hadn’t for a second believed that anyone other than the damn kid took Betty’s money, but for an instant he is dumbstruck by the possibility that it might have been a burglar after all, that he may have spotted the culprit and even be able to get his hands on him.

Then he recognizes his own worthless kid, sneaking down the alley like some delinquent. Usually, especially since the failure, just seeing the kid – the ragged clothes, the scrappily hair, the way he sneaks around and won’t look at you – is enough to get Jerry boiling. Now, with the road to the Yukon beckoning, the feeling he’s seeing this place for the last time, the kid just looks ridiculous. If that’s how he wants to look, let him. But hold on, at least Jerry can give the twerp one last surprise.

Philly’s creeping down the alley, trying to see if his father’s already left after dinner. If not, it’s almost seven-thirty, the old man’ll be furious. Christ, if his mom’s told about the money, maybe he shouldn’t even go in, instead try and find somebody’s place to spend the night – it’s too cold to sleep out now. He passes the houses at the end of the block, big old Victorians, crouching, keeping close to the garages.

Out of nowhere, beside him, a truck starts up, the headlights suddenly glaring full on. He’d seen a truck parked in the space behind Galsons’, no big deal. With the headlights on, his heart surges: his father’s truck!

His dad reaches over and rolls down the passenger-side window. Philly stands frozen, ready to run.

“C’mere!”

Philly doesn’t move.

“Come on, I won’t hurt you.” His father waves him over.

Philly inches toward the open window, poised to flee.
“Let’s cut the crap, twerp,” his father says. “You don’t fool me, but I gotta hand it to you, you got her fooled. How much’d you get from her?” A tone so casual, it might be Ray talking.

“I… I don’t, I didn’t—”

“Don’t gimme that,” his father says. “I just hope you’re happy. That money’ll have to last you a while. From now on, you can tell her any story you like, won’t be my problem. She’s all yours now.”

“What… I don’t—”

“I’m takin’ off. You tell her I’ll come by in the mornin’ after she leaves for school, get my stuff. You tell her that?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“I guess this is so long, twerp!” He leans over and offers his hand through the window. Philly stares at it, fearing a trick. His father sighs – come on, now – and Philly takes the hand. After a quick, light handshake, his father rolls up the window and gives a mocking wave. Philly stands, heart pounding, and watches the truck disappear down the alley.

Ω

Philly and his mother sit in silence at the breakfast table, later than usual because his mother called in sick today. He’s never seen her look so awful, years older, puffy-eyed. She barely slept that night and she cried a lot.

She’d responded angrily, as though stung, to the message Philly passed on. Right then and there, she decided to pack Jerry’s belongings for him, put every last thing in boxes. That way he could take his pick in the morning and everything else would go into the garbage as soon as he left.

“This is the last night anything belonging to your father will spend in this house,” she announced. From the basement, Philly heard her, talking to herself, laughing, going back and forth between the house and the garage, stacking boxes of his father’s things out there.

Sometime in the middle of the night, removing a drawer to make sure there was not even one item left belonging to her husband, she came upon the envelope containing the money, in her new hiding place, which she remembered immediately once she saw it. She’d gone downstairs, woken Philly, and hugged him, sobbing, apologizing for ever doubting him, for accusing his father.

The envelope, a long tan one, lies on the breakfast table between their plates.

“It’s the stress of everything – the kids at school, worry about you, the bills, your father being out all the time. It affected my mind. I’m not a young woman anymore,” she says, explaining yet again. “I don’t know how I forgot hiding it behind the bottom drawer of the dresser. I’ll never trust myself again. Philly, never let me forget that we’re all fallible.”

“I won’t, mom,” he promises.
Around nine, through the kitchen window, they see the garage door go up and the truck back in. She reaches over and squeezes Philly’s hand, closes her eyes for a moment as though praying for strength, then stands, cinches her robe tight, and walks out the back door toward the garage.

The elation Philly felt at the prospect of his father leaving – he’d be able to do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted – has dissipated. Through the window, he sees his mother enter the garage, then shut the door behind her.

Philly reaches for the envelope, removes a twenty, then – why not? – takes another. He tucks the flap neatly inside, just as it was, then walks through the house. In the dining room, he sees the old wall clock stopped at four-thirty. Keeping the clock wound and set was one of his childhood chores, one he hasn’t done in a while. He walks over, winds it up, sets the time, flicks the pendulum in motion. Its tick-tock resounds through the room, familiar, reassuring. Then he goes out the front door, thinking what he’ll say to Ray.
M. A. SCHAFFNER’S credits include Prairie Schooner, Shenandoah, Agni Online, and The Rialto, the collection The Good Opinion of Squirrels, and the novel War Boys. Schaffner works as a civil servant in Washington, spending lunch hours feeding the lineal descendants of the squirrels fed by Ambrose Bierce a century ago.

M. A. Schaffner / Three Poems

Fair Weather

No evil here, only a teething heat that cries from time to time but invariably retires in sullen peace. And the cars pass in their habit-forming way, and people return from churches or bars with their souls secured in the back seats and their futures suppressed in the background as they turn to the made-for-TV movie of. And grills offer weekend sacrifices to gods in natty suits, the devotional hymns making the sidewalks and porches tremble city-wide. Come sunset the heat remains like an uninvited relative or half wild pet whose scent fills every room. It’s great if you can sleep or your old LPs still retain their sacramental fervor. Otherwise you’re on an unwelcome ride at the hasty carnival in the mall, your guts being pummeled by cotton candy and your eyes deceiving you with the kid with the dangling smoke and hands on the switch and more tattoos than any life should grow.
If Everything

If everything in the garden has a name
I should go and introduce myself. I’ve
begun to wonder if god is really
all that Christian. Life is hard. Rum and Cokes
are soft but life is hard. That’s what she said,
and it sounded witty and intelligent.
Which shows you what beauty will do. It must
have been years ago in another kingdom.
Here in the garden of the palace, things
are more prosaic. The animals yawn
and scratch at mangy coats. The Parks workers
come by each week to mow but never weed.
Sometimes the king will come out for a walk
with his half-dressed, ill-armed guards, and we stop,
hands on our hearts, nodding as he passes.
It is better that things should end this way,
I think in the evening while walking home.
We have time to meet our flowers and pray
to basically harmless deities while
barbarians move next door and set up shops
selling goods we never needed until now.
This day is the last of my life as I knew it, for all I know, and I don’t know much. Tomorrow anything can happen and probably will, somewhere. Eventually everything gets touched by lightning or the end of a rainbow, at least figuratively. Then the planets collide and we all go to sleep. I don’t want to wake up on my birthday no more but keep on dreaming of a younger age when less was behind me stalking, and more was on the trail to a white space on the map – an illustration of gryphons or rumored tribes, a quaint ignorance unashamed to point forward, undaunted by time. That time is less over than disappeared; dispatched by order of the secret police. So secret we can’t imagine who they could be working for. But from the back seat where the doors have no handles you know whatever is past is truly done and when at last you stop and they take off the blindfold, and tell you not to turn as they drive off, your eyes will take whatever they can and call it beautiful.

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The Maquette

Ernest Hekkanen

ROUGHLY NINE MONTHS after the announcement that a War Resisters Monument would be unveiled in Nelson, B.C., Brian Sorkila was walking along the former Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway line, located on the mountainside high above the center of town, when he looked up from the forest floor off to his right, where a patch of trilliums with white blossoms had caught his eye, and noticed, at that precise moment, a tall man in a camouflage jacket coming toward him. Moments before, there had been only the lonely stretch of railroad right of way; that, and nothing more. A feathery drizzle was coming down and so Brian didn’t think it unusual that the man had pulled the jacket’s hood up over his head. Nor did he think it odd that the man’s hands were tucked into the jacket’s pockets, although it wasn’t, by any stretch of the imagination, cold.

He must’ve stepped off the trail to take a pee . . .

Brian was wearing a dark blue Mountain Equipment Co-op jacket that breathed well on moist days, while on his head he was wearing a red baseball cap, with Search & Rescue stitched into the fabric above the bill. Three or four times a week, after finishing work in the office/studio attached to his house, where he plied his trade as a freelance illustrator, he would go for a two-hour walk along the former railroad line. Near the 10th Street Campus of Selkirk College, he would veer down the hill to the West Arm of Kootenay Lake, walk along the shoreline through Lakeside Park, pass by the Chahko-Mika Mall, then trudge, rather exhaustedly, up the hill to where he lived on Observatory Street, in a house that commanded an unimpeded view of Elephant Mountain.
Incidentally, that morning, he had been working on an illustration for a pharmaceutical product designed to ameliorate fears associated with paranoia. It depicted a man holding aloft a lantern in a dark forest, with some huge boulders up ahead. The lantern not only lit the way for the man who was holding it above his left shoulder, it also lit the way for his female companion whom he had reached back to grip by the left elbow. The two were pressing on ahead in a tentative but courageous fashion, through what approximated the dark, rough terrain of the forested subconscious; indeed, the terrain depicted in the illustration was not unlike the terrain along the former Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway line.

When the man coming toward him along the former railway line finally drew up across from him, he said, in a baritone voice, as if making an inquiry:

“How did you find out about me?” Brian had asked him.

“How did you find out about me?” Brian had asked him. “The Craft Connection. A couple of your paintings are on exhibit, there. They told me where I could find you.”
“This is highly irregular . . .”
At that point, the man had glimpsed Brian’s wife behind him. “I’m sorry. I should have phoned, first. Next time, I will.”
And that had been the end of that conversation . . .
And now, the man was standing across from him on the former railway line. “You’re sure you don’t recognize me?” he asked.
“You’re the man who came to my door not long ago.”
“Think back even further than that. Think back to the boys you used to play with when you were a kid. Think Art Hanson, for instance.”
Art Hanson. Yes, now Brian did recognize him. Well, if it wasn’t Art, Art Hanson, one of five Hanson boys who had lived on the far side of the subdivision from his parents’ house. They had gone to school together. They had both belonged to the Black Dagger Club. They had built a tree house in the woods belonging to Brian’s parents. Later, if Brian remembered correctly, Art had been drafted by the New York Yankees. Later still, he had become a paratrooper and had gone to Vietnam. From what Brian had heard through mutual friends, Art had had his legs shot out from under him while in the act of jumping from a helicopter into Vietcong-held territory. He had been in Vietnam for less than a month, when he was shipped back to the United States to a VA hospital, destined to receive a Purple Heart.
Brian’s face widened in a grin; however, his grin quickly faded when he saw Art pull a revolver equipped with a silencer out of the right-hand pocket of his camouflage jacket.
“I knew you would remember me . . .”
Brian was startled more than anything else by the heavy, invisible blows to his chest and stomach, blows which hurled him backwards against the granite outcrop of the hillside. A look of incomprehension formed on his face, and his mind, in the last few seconds of life, as he was sinking knees-first into the water-filled ditch at the foot of the granite outcrop, found one last image to hang onto and that image was, of all things, the maquette which stood on a pedestal in the living room of his house.

Ω

When his friend, Ira Richler, a recent immigrant to Canada, had first broached the subject of the War Resisters Monument, Brian had been rather cool toward the idea. They had been sitting in the window seat of the Dominion Café, a coffee shop that Brian jokingly referred to as Ira’s office, and because Brian had left the States rather than serve as a soldier in the Vietnam War, Ira had mistakenly assumed that Brian would be enthusiastic about the idea.
“A monument to draft-dodgers?” he had said, wincing in an incredulous manner.
“Memorials have often been used to heal past wounds,” Ira had informed him, tilting his head to one side and beaming his now famous smile, which Brian found a little too saccharine for his taste.

“I don’t want to discourage you, Ira, but the monument you’re proposing to build is liable to cause a lot of old wounds to be opened up again. After all, the Vietnam War is still a sore point with a lot of people.”

“Is that true of you, do you think?”

“No, I have nothing to heal from, as far as that war goes. For me, it was simply a matter of avoiding a nasty bit of business that was being perpetrated by a bunch of wrong-headed fools – Lyndon Baines Johnson, Robert McNamara and that gang – followed by Nixon and his pack of White House nitwits.”

“You sound like you still have some pretty strong feelings?”

“Damn right, I do. The people in those two administrations were little more than war criminals. They should be standing trial in The Hague, right beside Slobodan Milosevic. Those are my feelings, anyway.”

“I guess I won’t be able to get you to help me come up with a design for the monument, then?”

“Sculpting isn’t my forte, Ira. However, I’ll give you the name of someone who, with the right opportunity to strut her stuff, might become as famous as Auguste Rodin or Edgar Degas. But, no, I’m not the guy you want to execute something like that. Definitely not.”

“I’m hoping to get the director, Michelle Mason, to do a documentary film on the war resisters who came to this part of Canada. Is there any chance you’d like to participate in that?”

Brian had worked with Ira in the Kootenay Fellowship of Reconciliation, in the Rice for Peace campaign designed to persuade former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien not to join the U.S. of A. in its invasion of Iraq; and later, in a letter-writing campaign aimed at persuading current Prime Minister Paul Martin not to get involved in the Missile Defense Shield. Both campaigns had met with success.

“Sure, just as long as it isn’t some sort of feel-good exercise,” Brian had told Ira.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, I don’t want to get involved in something that’s simply a backslapping exercise. If your film’s designed to take exception to the way America bullies other nations in order to get them to adopt its disastrous foreign policy, then fine, I’ll participate. But if it’s going to be about a bunch of over-the-hill guys who came to Canada to avoid going to the Vietnam War, well, I don’t see much point in something like that.”

Eventually, Ira had persuaded Brian to sit on the Our Way Home Reunion Committee, as a symbol of support more than anything else. Brian was the head of a subcommittee designed to help former war resisters get in touch with those who had assisted them during the early
days of refuge in Canada. For Brian, it felt odd to be chairing the sub-committee, because he himself hadn’t received any support. He had hitched a ride to Vancouver, British Columbia, with a pet-food jobber by the name of Fred Sawyer, who was about to go on a selling junket into the backcountry of the province. He had had five-hundred dollars in his pocket and no prospects of landing a job until he obtained alien-resident status. He had found a place to live on Main Street, not far from Hastings Street, which, at that time, had been a lower working-class neighborhood rather than the slum it eventually became, with drug dealers openly selling crack on street corners. The room he rented was in a ramshackle, two-storey building above an empty storefront. When you looked at the building from across the street, you could see that it was listing to the north by four or five degrees.

One rather cold night, after the fire had died in the cookstove used to heat his room, he was awakened by hammer blows on the outside of the building and threw up the window sash to find out what was going on.

“What the hell’s happening out here?” he had half-yelled, noting that an extension ladder was propped against the building and a man was standing near the top, nailing a sign to the clapboard siding.

“An election’s going on. Haven’t you heard?”

“Is this what a Canadian election sounds like?” Brian had retorted.

“Sounds more like hammering to me.”

“Sorry. We didn’t realize anybody was living in this dump.”

That had been Brian’s initial acquaintance with things Canadian, and for a middleclass kid who had attended the University of Washington, but who had had to flee before graduating, it had been quite an education. When you were poor, or living in the midst of poverty, your windows could be covered by elections signs that shut out the sunshine.

The next morning, Brian had gone across the street to survey the work of the election crew, and although the signs had been secured to the outside of the building in a more or less level fashion, the building had come to resemble a billboard promoting the Social Credit Party.

In the early days of his exile, Brian didn’t realize that the Social Credit Party had governed British Columbia for almost thirty years, and that it was the strident voice of free enterprise.

On September 7, 2004, the Our Way Home Reunion Committee held its first news conference at the Vienna Café on Kootenay Street, in an early 20th century building located on a steep grade just below Baker Street. It was a crisp, sunny Tuesday morning. Deciduous trees on the surrounding mountainsides had begun to turn yellow and red, but at lower elevations, summer stubbornly refused to submit to its fate.

Later, everyone on the committee would express surprise at how many members of the news media were present at the event. At least
ten radio, television and newspaper reporters had gathered in the café to listen to Ira unveil the mission of the Our Way Home Reunion. Even the Mayor of Nelson, an early supporter of the project, was spotted in the audience, comprised, for the most part, of individuals whom Ira had cajoled into sitting on the Reunion Committee. They had come to show their symbolic support. It had caused Brian to remark to one of his fellow committee members: “My God, it must be a really slow news day. Look at all the reporters.”

Brian remembered feeling anxious standing behind the long table where information packets about the Our Way Home Reunion weekend were being displayed in a manner reminiscent of when he had manned the SDS information table at the Student Union Building of the University of Washington. On one occasion, in the mid-60s, in a fit of exuberance, Brian had stood on a table and openly harangued a trio of soldiers sitting at a nearby recruitment table, an incident that resulted in a picture of him being splashed on the front page of the student body newspaper. He recalled that incident, as well as many others, some involving protest marches and incidents of civil disobedience, while Ira, the director and coordinator of the reunion event, read slowly and with exaggerated emphasis from a prepared statement. In part, Ira was stalling for time. Naomi, who would be sculpting the larger-than-life War Resisters Monument, had yet to arrive with the maquette.

“The Our Way Home Reunion will celebrate the experiences of those who came thirty years ago as well as those who find themselves resisting current U.S. militarism by seeking safe haven in Canada. The weekend will honor those who came to Canada and resisted war through a range of activity, from burning their draft cards during the Vietnam War, to fleeing army barracks and to escaping the current war in Iraq. . .”

Every now and then, Brian would glance to his left at the other members of the steering committee, to see if they were feeling as nervous as he was, but only one of them, Ned Folsom, seemed to be displaying the sort of nervous anxiety that riddled his own body and which he was certain everybody in the Vienna Café must be aware of just by looking at him. Indeed, he was feeling quite weak in the knees, largely because he was no longer used to getting up in front of crowds. He was no longer used to turning himself into a focus of attention. In fact, in the intervening years, he had become something of a recluse, a man who prized his privacy.

At the far end of the table from him, Brian noticed that Murray Maki was tapping his fingers against his thigh, just below the pocket of his jeans. When Murray noticed Brian looking at him, he raised his eyebrows in a rough imitation of Groucho Marx. Murray was a well-known author of genre fiction. He lived near Hills, B.C., on the western shore of Slocan Lake, not far from the northern-most tip. Brian knew him well enough to say hello when they passed each other in the street; however, they very rarely spoke for any length of time. Brian consid-
ered Murray a man of odd contradictions. A local spokesman for Ducks Unlimited and a member of the Rod & Gun Club, Murray was both an environmentalist and an avid hunter-fisherman. Brian had once gone to visit him at his A-frame house that looked out over Slocan Lake, where a dock jutted into the water, with a canoe moored beside it. Brian had been commissioned by a U.S. magazine to do a watercolor portrait of Murray.

Upon seeing the portrait, Murray had announced, with rough exuberance: “Is that how I look to other people? I don’t seem to be a man of much charm, now, do I?”

Brian found it difficult to reconcile Murray with the idea of his ever having been a draft dodger. Murray was in charge of media relations; in fact, he had coordinated the September 7th news conference. Next to him stood a man of medium height and square build, with a large handlebar mustache. Ned Folsom would be donating his ranch for the site of the Our Way Home Reunion. Back in the 1960s, he had worn a marine uniform for a brief period of time, before going AWOL. Ira, who was standing roughly in the middle of the group, had now begun to present the members of the working committee. To Ira’s immediate right stood the director Michelle Mason, whose film, The Friendship Village, would be shown later on that evening, at the Capitol Theatre. To her right was the coordinator of the local Amnesty International working-group, Chuck Neidermier, a fellow with close-cropped hair and a steady, unflappable manner. He would be liaising with international peace groups, as well as the local Vietnam Veterans of Canada.

Brain stood to the right of Chuck and was now being introduced as one of the founding members of the Students for a Democratic Society.

“Were you tuned into the news back then, you might have seen Brian standing beside Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panther Party, at a news conference announcing the United Front Against Racism and the War.”

Instantly, several television news cameras turned toward Brian and a reporter piped up, “Eldridge Cleaver promoted violent confrontation with the police, police whom he routinely referred to as Pigs, did he not?”

“To understand the formation of the United Front Against Racism and the War, you would have to have lived through those times . . .” Brian began.

“You’re not answering my question. My question was, didn't Eldridge Cleaver promote the use of violence?”

Fortunately, at that juncture, Naomi arrived with the maquette. She held it aloft as she pressed her way through the knot of reporters in front of the information table. In the jostle of reporters and the swinging of television cameras, it looked, for a brief moment, as though the maquette might topple from her hands.

“Excuse us, please,” Ira said, raising his normally calm voice. “There’ll be plenty of time for questions and answers after the presenta-
tion. Right now, would you please make room for the artist to get through to the table. She has the model for the War Resisters Monument in her hands.”

Ω

The original clay maquette depicted two frightened-looking war resisters, one of each gender, crossing an invisible border into Canada. The male draft dodger’s lower left leg was about to finish stepping through a piece of Plexiglas and the female war resister was looking vastly relieved to be in a safe haven. On the Canadian side of the border stood a welcoming figure, arms outstretched. In reports that appeared in newspapers during the following days and weeks, the war-resister figures would be variously described as cowardly, frightened, fearful, furtive, and slinking. Irate members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars indicated that they might have to go on a search and destroy mission up to Nelson, in order to ‘pacify’ the town. During the Vietnam War, soldiers ‘pacified’ an area by killing just about everybody living there, so the threat was unambiguous.

Two days later, in a telephone conversation, Brian had tried to tease Ira: “See, you should’ve gone with my idea for the monument – three draft-dodgers pulling down their pants and mooning the Americans on the other side of the border.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that would have gone over a lot better.”

Brian glanced at his wristwatch. In the background, Sibelius’s *The Swan of Tuonela* was playing on the stereo. The melancholic refrains of the tone poem seemed to create a space where his imagination was able to wander at will. “So, why are you calling me so early in the morning? It’s only a little after eight.”

“I think we’re going to get a lot of negative feedback about the reunion campaign and I want to make sure you’re ready with your letters of support.”

“Don’t worry. I’m looking after my end of things. I’ve already got the initial letter ready to go. I’ll run it down to the *Nelson Daily News* later on this morning.”

“Thanks. I think we might be in for a pretty rough ride, judging from the way that one reporter kept trying to tackle you.”

“You can’t expect everyone to be on our side, Ira.”

“I know that. Just be ready, is all.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll do my part, and I’ll do it as well as I can.”

By the time the tsunami of negative comment had finished pouring over them (it lasted for about six weeks) Brian had written a total of six letters to the editor of the local daily. A constant clamor of negative input was being directed at the Our Way Home event and its organizers. Some of the feedback had included thinly disguised death threats. Staunch defenders of the former Vietnam War openly encouraged President Bush to put an end to the reunion by placing an embargo on Ca-
nadian goods. Most of the criticism came via the local Chamber of Commerce, which was acting as a conduit for right-wing voices down in the States. Indeed, the head of the local Chamber of Commerce was now warning Nelson it might end up losing lots of American tourists, if something wasn’t done, and done rather quickly, to put an end to the War Resisters Reunion and Monument.

One of the letters that Brian wrote to the *Nelson Daily News* pointed to the underlying tensions in the community:

I would like to reply to some of the letters expressing concern for the sensitivities of our U.S. neighbors while at the same time worrying about possible economic difficulties that might arise due to a lack of tourism and, of course, the almighty U.S. dollar.

Such arguments are spurious at best and morally destitute at worst. The reason the U.S. went to war in Vietnam was to protect the rubber plantations of some very wealthy, offshore individuals, and because the U.S. suspected there might be oil off the coast of that Southeast Asian country. The reason the States went to war in Iraq had very little to do with weapons of mass destruction and everything to do with the economics of oil. The reason the States has interfered with the sovereignty of so many South American countries has to do with the precious resources down there and America’s access to them.

Individuals, as well as countries, that are morally destitute tend to hold economic concerns in higher regard than the lives of innocent people, who are viewed as collateral damage in wars fought to secure resources.

I’ve noticed the economic argument being used by a number of individuals in the pages of the *NDN*.

In the case of our MP, it comes as no surprise. Jim Gouk’s thinking is determined by men like Dr. Tom Flanagan of the University of Calgary. Flanagan has been guiding Stephen Harper’s thinking and career for many years now. He is an American whose mandate is to form an intellectual beachhead in Canada, the purpose of which is to move us toward the American model of economics, and that means putting Canadians firmly in the back pocket of American foreign policy.

Those who espouse economic interests above moral issues demonstrate how deeply Flanagan-speak now permeates the thinking of Canadians in our riding, and such thinking is revealed in responses to the war resisters monument.

If need be, I’ll donate my front yard as a site for the monument. My house is located on the heritage-viewing circuit.
During the pretend battle that was being waged against the invisible army of Santa Anna, Lieutenant Art Hanson discovered that an enemy soldier had crept through the lines of defense and was now passing himself off as a Texan. Incongruously enough, even though they were fighting Santa Anna’s much larger forces, the Black Dagger flag (black, with a white skull and crossed daggers) flew high above the pitched battle that had been raging for at least twenty minutes now. In their boyish imaginations, the siege had lasted for several days. This time, where Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie had failed, the Black Daggers would succeed and so manage to rewrite the course of American history.

“I found this traitor trying to sabotage our munitions cache, General Sorkila.” Art Hanson had one arm flexed around his younger brother George’s neck. With the other hand, Art was yanking George’s right arm up so high behind his back, actual pain registered on George’s face.

“A spy. You know what we do to goddamn spies,” General Sorkila replied in a gruff voice. “We try them and then we hang them as soon as the battle is over. Throw him in the hoosegow, Lieutenant Hanson.”

“Aye, aye,” replied the Lieutenant.

The battle raged for at least another ten minutes. When they grew tired of fighting the invisible army that kept trying to overrun the fort, the boys arranged some apple boxes in the rough configuration of a courtroom and put George, the saboteur, on trial.

“I’m innocent. Totally innocent,” George kept shouting. “You’ve got the wrong man. I’m one of you. I’m a true, blue American. Really, I am.”

“No, you’re not. You’re a turncoat. Isn’t that right, Lieutenant Hanson?”

“That’s right, your Honor. I caught him red-handed, myself.”

“See, even this man, your brother, knows you’re a goddamned traitor.”

“This isn’t a trial. This is a kangaroo court,” George yelled, “and you’re the biggest kangaroo of them all.” And at that point, George spat, actually spat, at General Sorkila, who, by this time, had become Judge Sorkila.

“Okay, for that, you’re gonna die, you lousy turncoat. Hang him by the neck until he’s dead.”

And then, they had actually hung George – not by the neck, but by wrapping rope around his torso and stringing him up from a tree just outside the fort, as a warning to anyone who might think of attacking them ever again. Then they had gone on a search and destroy mission designed to rid the woods of Santa Anna’s troops. Twenty minutes later, when they returned to the tree where they had hung the traitor from a stout limb, George was screaming bloody murder that he was going to tell his mother what they had done to him and that she would believe
him, too, because of all the bruises that had appeared like coils around his chest and under his arms.

“My God,” Brian’s father railed at him later on that evening. “You might’ve killed little George. What if that rope had slipped? He’d be dead right now, and you’d be a murderer, Brian. My God! How could you do something like that?”

“We were just play-acting, Dad.”

“When things get to that point, it’s no longer play-acting. You could’ve killed little George. I want you to think about that, and think about it hard!”

“I will.”

“You bet you will, because I’m going to give you lots of time to think about it. From now until the end of the month, there won’t be any fun and games after school. There won’t be any baseball, either. You’ll come straight home and you’ll confine yourself to your room, and you’ll work on an essay about why play-acting shouldn’t be allowed to get out of hand. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Yes, sir. I do, sir.”

“Good. Go to your room, and get started on that essay, right now!”

Ω

On a cold, but achingly brilliant day in February, 2005, Brian pushed back the door of the Nelson Daily News, where he had dropped off a press release announcing an exhibition of his work at the Kootenay Art Gallery in Castlegar, and headed north down the street. After a big dump of snow in late January, it had rained rather heavily for a week, with the result that there was very little dirty snow left in the streets. Then the weather had turned cold. Sunny, but cold. The cold seemed to tighten the skin around Brian’s cheekbones.

Strolling rather absentmindedly down the sidewalk, with the intention of going to Darwin’s Produce to purchase some Greek olives, goat feta and an Uphill Bakery baguette, he spotted Ira coming toward him, beaming his normally broad smile, a cloth bag dangling from the crook of his right elbow and a large Styrofoam box clasped in his hands.

“So, what have you got in there?” Brian said, drawing up to him.

“A bomb?”

“A publicity bomb. Do you want to see it?” Ira lifted the Styrofoam lid high enough for Brian to glimpse the bronze maquette of the War Resisters Monument.

“I’m glad to see you didn’t scuttle the monument.”

“Would you like to have a better look?”

“Sure, take it out of the box.”

Ira glanced around them. “Not right here. Let’s go down the street a little ways.”

Due to the winds of controversy that the original clay model had whipped up, the news media had come to assume, quite erroneously,
that the War Resisters Monument had been permanently shelved. Indeed, at one point, after the mayor had officially withdrawn his support and the Nelson Daily News had pronounced the monument a monumental fiasco, several members of the working committee had come down with cold feet and had since deserted the group. At one point, when the criticism was quite vitriolic, Brian began to fear that Ira might scrap the idea of erecting the monument. He expressed the opinion that the controversy only testified to how important it was to proceed.

“The monument’s become not only the vehicle for your campaign,” Brian told him, “it’s become the fuel that powers it.”

“I’m worried it might end up offending a lot of people in Nelson.”

“Look,” Brian went on. “I myself . . . I’m tired of apologizing for my existence here in this country. I’ve paid my dues. For thirty-six years! I no longer feel like I have to sleep on a mat behind the stove. I no longer feel like I have to say, ‘Thank you, master, for giving me a nice, safe place to lay my head. I promise I’ll keep my yap shut; I promise I won’t offend you.’ I don’t feel like I have to act like that, simply because there are a lot of trembling, fearful mice in this community, mice who are afraid the sky is going to fall on them.”

Ω

Ira was undecided where to unveil the bronze maquette. He hesitated at this intersection and then at that one. His paranoia amused Brian. To him, it was exaggerated to the point of being quite hilarious. At last, they headed down Kootenay Street and stopped in front of an early twentieth century apartment building that sat on a prominent embankment looking out over the industrial flatlands and the West Arm of Kootenay Lake. A concrete balustrade kept people from precipitating to Vernon Street far below. There, behind a hedge, Ira set the Styrofoam box on a hillock of compacted snow.

Before removing the lid, Ira looked around to make certain no one was about to descend on them. “My God, Ira, anyone would think you were about to sell me a kilo of Kootenay bud. What are you so worried about?”

“I’m worried about causing another furor.”

“If you ask me, you’re acting way too paranoid. Let’s see the damn thing.”

Nestled in rags inside the Styrofoam box, the bronze maquette resembled an inoffensive child’s toy more than it did an objet d’art capable of whipping up a storm of controversy. Brian felt it would make a great centerpiece for a toy village surrounded by papier maché mountains. In his mind, he saw a toy train coursing around a looped track, through tunnels and along valley floors, miniature human beings strolling across a plaza where the monument was erected outside a toy train station, with lots of fake trees dotting the landscape.

“So, what do you think?” Ira said.
“To tell you the truth, from this vantage point, the figures look like three blind mice standing on their hind legs, begging for a piece of cheese.”

Brian’s assessment seemed to horrify Ira. His jaw dropped and his eyes became very round. Brain dug him in the ribs with his left elbow. “I’m kidding, Ira. Simply kidding. Take it out so I can have a better look at it.”

“I’d rather not do that. Not right here.”

“My God, what are you so afraid of?”

Ira pretended not to hear him. “You said, several months ago, that you’d be willing to buy one of the finished maquettes . . .”

“Oh, so this is a sales job, is it? You devil, you. You never pass up a good opportunity, now, do you?”

“The artist has spent a lot of time getting the maquette to this point and, well, I’d like to see her realize a small return on her work . . .”

“How much are you asking for it?”

“Initially, I was hoping to sell the maquettes for three or four thousand dollars a piece.”

“I thought that was going to be the price for the first three or four of them, and after that the price would go down. I thought I was eighth or ninth on the list, when the price was going to be around a thousand bucks.”

“I think it’ll be difficult to sell them for three or four thousand dollars. I think the price will have to be a lot lower.”

“How much are you thinking in terms of?”

“Twelve or, possibly, thirteen hundred bucks.”

“Tell you what, let me give it some thought. I’ll get back to you later on this evening. However, before I invest any of my hard-earned cash, I’d like to have a good look at what I’m going to be getting.”

Ira’s expression turned to one of sour defeat.

“Come on, guy, you didn’t expect me to fork twelve hundred bucks over to you right here, did you?”

“No, of course not.”

Brain cuffed him on the shoulder. “Don’t look so glum. I’ll call you later on this evening. Around eight.”

Ira’s look of defeat haunted Brian for the rest of the day. During a grocery-shopping trip to Darwin’s Produce and a brief stroll over to the Craft Connection to pick up a check owed him for a painting that had sold, he couldn’t forget how crestfallen Ira had become upon having been told that he wanted to give the purchase some thought. Brian remembered, and remembered quite vividly, telling Ira that he didn’t want to pay any more than a thousand bucks for one of the maquettes. And yet, because he had given Ira the name of the artist, he felt obliged to purchase one of them. Naomi possessed a substantial talent that deserved not only encouragement, but exposure. When some of the other committee members had expressed the desire to scrap the idea of the monument, because of all the negative feedback it had generated, he
had spoken up in its defense. Murray Maki and he had come to verbal blows. Murray was all for trashing the original design, in favor of something more abstract and, in effect, innocuous.

“You read the reviews. Naomi’s war-resisters were described as furtive and cowardly. Is that the message you want to convey to the rest of the world – that war resisters are a pack of cowards?”

“I think the figures can be made to look less obsequious,” Brian had told him, “but I don’t think the basic design should be scrapped. Moving toward something more abstract will only make it look as if we’re bowing to pressure. And don’t forget, images are approximations, rough approximations, and that’s true of Naomi’s piece as well. For instance, I didn’t receive any support when I came up here. I didn’t find any Canadians waiting at the border, ready to lend me their assistance, but I’m not going to argue with the spirit of the portrayal. After all, Canada did offer me a place of refuge. No, if we change the design now, in order to placate the concerns of all the trembling mice in this community, we’re going to seem even more fearful than they, for God’s sake.”

“Do you like being depicted as a coward?” Murray shot back at him. “Maybe you do, but I certainly don’t.”

Murray’s aggressively furrowed brow and jutting chin caused Brian to recall the traditional Finnish knife that Murray had shown him while he was working on the watercolor portrait for the cover of the U.S. magazine. Murray had been quite proud of the fact that his grandfather, his uncle and even his brother (a Vietnam veteran who had mysteriously disappeared after returning to the States) had carried the knife in to hand-to-hand combat where they had used it to slay the enemy. “See those rust stains? Those were caused by human blood,” Murray had told him. The pride in his voice had struck Brian as inconsistent with his having been a draft dodger.

“Like I said, I think Naomi can make the figures look less toady-like, less obsequious, but I would strongly object to scrapping the original monument. That would strike me as being awfully cowardly, if you want my undiluted opinion.”

Ω

That evening, Brian telephoned Ira to let him know that he would buy one of the bronze maquettes, for $1200. However, before he forked over the money, he wanted to see the maquette in the round. Ira said he would drop by Brian’s house at 10 o’clock the following morning. The next morning, Ira phoned to say he was running late and wouldn’t get to Brian’s house until eleven. Eleven became eleven-thirty and then twelve noon.

“You sure know how to test a patron’s patience,” Brian told him, opening the front door. “What if I’d had a doctor’s appointment? What
if I had been called out on a search and rescue mission? What would you have done, then?”

“I would’ve had to come back tomorrow, I guess.”

Brian invited him into the living room, where Ira divested himself of his wool hat, winter coat and navy-blue mittens. Ira was now carrying the maquette around in a cloth bag with sturdy straps. He set the bag on the round table and looked out the living room window.

“I never fail to be impressed by the view from your living-room windows. It’s stupendous, simply stupendous.”

The plate-glass windows looked out upon Elephant Mountain – now sugar-coated with snow, humpbacked, with its knees planted in the West Arm of Kootenay Lake.

“Yes, we’re extremely fortunate. We bought this place when it was fairly cheap. Now we’d never be able to afford it.”

Just then, Brian’s daughter chose to come downstairs. She was wearing a mauve dressing gown and was wiping sleep from her eyes. Brian watched Ira’s gaze take her in.

“Daphne, my daughter,” Brian informed him. “Back with us for a few days. To attend a friend’s wedding. Daphne, meet Ira. Ira, meet Daphne.”

“How nice to make your acquaintance,” Ira said, smiling broadly as he trundled over to where Daphne now stood in the hallway to the kitchen. Brian knew that Ira was always on the lookout for suitable female companionship.

“Forget it,” Brian told him. “She's too young for you.”

“Now, now, now,” Ira gently admonished him. “That’s no way to talk to a friend.”

“It is, if you know your friend’s propensities.”

While Daphne and Ira were politely chatting to each other, Brian pretended to examine the bronze maquette. The figures stood in roughly the same configuration as they had in the clay version. However, now they were clothed and the right elbow of the female war resister looked as if it were being drawn through the Plexiglas pane symbolizing the border with the U.S. The three figures looked less stooped and less fearful, but far from heroic.

When Ira finished talking to Daphne he came back to the living-room table where Brian had grown tired of pretending to examine the maquette.

“I didn’t realize you and Renate had such a lovely, brilliant daughter.”

“She spends most of her time in Vancouver, studying.”

“That’s what she told me.” He tilted his head, a look of interest on his face. “What degree is she pursuing?”

“A law degree, so don’t get any illegal ideas about striking up a relationship with her, eh, padre?”

Ira gave him a friendly wink. “At your age you should know you can’t fence in the human heart.”
“Yes, I’m aware of that, Ira. Very well aware, as a matter of fact.”
Ira nodded at the maquette. “So, what do you think?”
“It looks a lot better than the clay version did, that’s for sure.”
“Did you notice that the male war resister bears a strong resemblance to you? Naomi did that on purpose, she said, to thank you for the faith you’ve shown in her talent.”
Brian bent down to examine the male figure. The face did bear a vague resemblance to his, but that could have been accidental.
“Oh, come on, Ira, you don’t expect me to believe that, do you?”
“That’s what she told me. Cross my heart and hope to die.”
“You’re such a liar, and a bad one at that,” Brian told him.
Brian was in the habit of saying things that allowed him to gauge other people’s reactions. Ira hung his head a little lower.
“I think the maquette is rather effective now,” Ira went on.
Brian felt it necessary to disabuse Ira of his naiveté. “Maquettes are never great works of art, Ira. Nor are monuments, for that matter. At best, the artistic qualities are serviceable.”
Ira didn’t seem to understand what Brian was trying to tell him.
“Does that mean you won’t buy one?”
“No, I’ll plunk my hard-earned cash down for one of them. However, I want you to know I’m doing it in order to encourage everyone to stay the course, not because I think the maquette has a lot of artistic merit.”
Ω
The day prior to his departure to Canada, back in the spring of 1969, Brian took a nostalgic walk through the woods where he had spent so many pleasant hours playing as a youngster. The rich, loamy, fir-scented fragrance always had a way of soothing his jangled nerves. He found it difficult to believe how dramatically things had changed in eight years, how one could go from waging mock battles to being embroiled in the real thing. How naïve he had been, how full of childish delusions!
That day, the towering trees and the damp smell of the forest floor failed to have its usual calming effect. He sat on a rotten log and stared at the tree house he and his friends had built many years ago. He remembered how the Black Dagger flag had flown above the mock battles waged against invisible enemies like Santa Anna, Nazi Germany, Japan and finally Korea. How easy it had been to draw lines of engagement, back then. Tomorrow, he would be hitching a ride with an older man from the Edmonds Unitarian Church, a pet food jobber who would be dropping him off in Vancouver, B.C. Fred Sawyer had asked him not to mention the trip to his parents or to anyone else.
Since Tuesday of that week, Brian had been a fugitive, after declining to step forward into the embrace of the military, at an induction ceremony held inside a fenced compound in Seattle, near the shore of
Puget Sound, not far from the U.S. Naval Reservation. As of yet, no one had come to incarcerate him. But that would only be a matter of time . . .

After staring at the tree house for a long while and trying to imagine his unimaginable future, Brian decided to take a walk over to Art Hanson’s house. He cut through the Cherry Hill housing project and took the trail along the hillside to the back of the Hansons’ property and there, below him, was Art Hanson, pitching a hardball into the glove of his younger brother, Johnny. Art had grown into a tall, well-built young man. Rumor had it that the New York Yankees were seriously scouting him. Over the past four years, he and Brian had grown distant from each other, due to being on opposite sides of the Vietnam conflict. It had strained their friendship. The Hanson household was quite religious, quite patriotic. At the Tradewell supermarket in Lynnwood, Washington, Art’s mother had confided to Brian’s mother that her son, upon seeing Brian on television, standing beside Eldridge Cleaver, had said: “I don’t understand. How could he think of doing something like that? We used to play together, for God’s sake. Now he’s a goddamned traitor.”

Brian shouted down the slope. “I see you’re keeping the old pitching arm in good shape.”

Art looked up the hill at him. He squinted in the sunshine. “Yeah, I might have to use it one of these fine days. Never know.”

Art was a year younger than Brian. He didn’t have to worry about the draft for yet another twelve months, when his deferment at Pacific Lutheran University would end.

“I hear the Yankees are interested in picking you up.”
“Yeah, if the army doesn’t get me first. How about you?”
Brian fluttered his hand. “I’m getting my B.A. in June.”
“Your four years are up, huh?”
“Yeah, officially they’re up.” Brian declined to tell him that his deferment had already expired. In total, his draft board had tried to draft him on three separate occasions. It had been eager to get him off the street and out of the SDS. He had garnered too much attention traveling up and down the West Coast, organizing against the war. According to one of the officers at his final pre-induction physical, Brian was designated to go into the marines.

“So, why are you telling me that?” Brian had shot back at the beefy-jowled man in the army uniform. “Are you trying to frighten me, Sergeant Pig Eyes?”

Red-faced and now spitting-mad, the officer began to shake his jowls at Brian. “I can hardly wait until we get you in a uniform, you rabble-rousing, little prick. Boy, are we ever gonna kick your ass into shape.”

“Fuck you,” Brian told him.
“What did you tell me to do, soldier?”
“You heard me. I told you to go fuck yourself up one side and down the other.”

Art and Brian didn’t have a lot to say to each other on the day of their final farewell. Their attitude was constrained, formal. Brian stood in an awkward, uneasy pose, watching Art pitch the hardball to his brother. After about fifteen minutes, he said goodbye to Art and headed for home. Several weeks later, he would think how fortunate it was that he had taken that nostalgic walk through the woods and over to Art Hanson’s house, because, when he got back to the driveway winding down the gentle slope to his parents’ house, he saw two police cruisers and what might have been an unmarked FBI vehicle parked in the front yard.

Brian had surreptitiously turned on his heels and walked down 196th Street. Where 196th Street met Olympic View Drive, he had veered into the woods. He had walked through the woods to an abandoned gravel pit across the paved highway from his parents’ property. He had circled up around the gravel pit and followed a high-voltage power right of way to Lynnwood. Forty-five minutes later, in front of Albertson’s Supermarket, he had telephoned Fred Sawyer to let him know there had been a slight change of plans.

Ω

After feature-length articles in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, ABC television news came to Nelson, B.C. to interview some of the local draft dodgers and war resisters associated with the Our Way Home Reunion campaign. At one point during the interview, Peter Asper turned to Brian and said:

“From what I understand, you’re one of Canada’s most passionate critics of the Iraq campaign. However, isn’t it true that President Bush has met his objectives by bringing democracy to the Iraqi people?”

“Democracy!” Brian had snuffed in a dismissive tone. “Bush didn’t bring democracy to the Iraqi people. He brought corporate feudalism to them.”

“Corporate feudalism? What do you mean by that?”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but America is no longer a democracy. It’s a corporate feudal state. It’s a country *of* corporations, *by* corporations and *for* corporations. If you don’t believe me, follow the money trail. Do the forensic audit. Who’s getting rich off this war? Not the American people. They’re going into debt. Nor are the Iraqi people benefiting. Indeed, they’ve barely got enough to live on. No, corporations like Halliburton and the Carlyle Group are getting rich. So are the oil and chemical companies and, of course, any firm associated with the military-industrial complex. But that’s how things work in a corporate feudal state. The corporations win, the people lose.”

Later on, while watching the interview on TV, Art Hanson turned to his wife and said, with an edge of bitterness in his voice: “I knew that
guy when I was a kid. He hasn’t change one little bit. He’s still the same goddamned traitor he was back then.”

“You knew him?!” Darlene exclaimed.

“Yeah, he was a fucking coward then and he’s still a fucking coward now.”

Art had quietly monitored Brian’s daily comings and goings for a period of nine days. Brian was a man of tremendous routine. Between four and five each morning, he made a pot of coffee in the kitchen and took it to his studio at the back of the house. The studio looked like it might have been a fairly recent addition; it had been built with two outside walls composed of double-glazed windows. It was never a good idea to shoot through double-glazed panes. Too often, double-glazed panes ended up deflecting even high-velocity projectiles, thus forcing a sniper to take several shots. That, in the end, made it more difficult to get away, unseen.

Brian’s wife, Renate, left for her teaching job in Salmo at roughly 7:30 each morning and so it would be easy for Art to walk, unimpeded, right into the house and shoot Brian at point-blank range, because the Sorkilas very rarely locked their doors, even when they went out for the day. However, whacking Brian in that manner came with its own set of difficulties. Many of his neighbors operated home-based businesses and were nearly always at home or else out in their gardens. When Art discovered that Brian was in the habit of taking long walks along the former Burlington Northern Railway line, he decided that would be the best place to take him out. His first attempt had been spoiled, by the barking dog and the couple who had appeared at the bend in railroad right of way. That day, on the way back to his SUV, he kept repeating to himself: “Boy, were you ever lucky, Brian, old buddy. You missed out on being a dead man by only a few seconds.”

Art Hanson was a member in good standing of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in the United States. When news of the Vietnam Draft-Dodger Memorial first broke on Fox News, he had helped to organize the onslaught of negative feedback. “I don’t care how harshly you say it, just make sure you let the Chamber of Commerce in Nelson know what you think about that goddamned monument,” he had written in an e-mail to fellow members of the VFW. “Contact everyone you know. Get to work.”

In addition to owning and operating the All-Seasons Sports Store and Gun Shop in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, he was a member of the local Chamber of Commerce, a card-carrying supporter of the National Rifle Association and was affiliated with the Lewis & Clark Militia, which conducted night maneuvers once a month. The motto of the militia group was: “Lock and load. Your home is your castle. Guard it with
your life.” It was a simple, but effective message, and that’s what America needed in the fight against terrorism.

In effect, that’s how he saw Brian and his fellow draft-dodging, our-way-home candy-asses: They were terrorists. Threats to the American way of life.

After shooting his childhood friend, Art had turned on his heels and headed down the footpath where he had previously been lying in wait beside the Burlington Northern Railway line. He had zigzagged down through the trees to where the path joined a street not far from L.V. Rogers Secondary School and walked three blocks further down the hill to where he had parked his SUV. Half an hour later, on the ferry ride across Kootenay Lake, he leaned over the railing of the car deck and let the handgun surreptitiously spill from inside his black suit jacket. The gun missed clattering on the steel hull by a matter of inches, before falling into the foamy wake kicked up by the ferry. He breathed deeply and easily, then he turned around to lean his back against the railing. For a fleeting moment, he wondered how his buddy, Corky Veysey, was progressing with his assignment. Then he went upstairs to the cafeteria on the second deck to have some blueberry pie à la mode and a cup of black java.