PRISM *international*

JULY 1985

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PRISM *international*
A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF
CONTEMPORARY WRITING

PRISM international, a journal of contemporary writing, is published four times per year at the Department of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1W5. Microfilm editions are available from Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and reprints from the Kraus Reprint Corporation, New York, N.Y.

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Cover design and artwork: Brenda Borrowman

One year individual subscriptions $10.00, two-year subscriptions $16.00. Libraries and institution subscriptions $14.00, two-year subscriptions $20.00. Sample copy $4.00.

All manuscripts should be sent to the Editors at the above address. Manuscripts must be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope with Canadian stamps or international reply coupons. Manuscripts with insufficient return postage will be held for six months and then discarded.

Payment to contributors is $20.00 per page and a subscription. *PRISM international* purchases First N.A. Serial Rights only.

Our gratitude to the Canada Council, Dean Will and the University of British Columbia. Also financially assisted by the Government of British Columbia through the British Columbia Cultural Fund and Lottery Revenues.

Second Class Mail Registration No. 5496. June 1985.

CONTENTS

VOLUME TWENTY-THREE NUMBER FOUR SUMMER 1985

Eric McCormack	*Knox Abroad*	7
Brian Bartlett	*Three Poems*	18
L. A. Whitt	*"Listening Figure"*	22
Robert Eady	*Three Prose Poems*	24
Toni Sammons	*"Travelling"*	26
Bill Gaston	*Gold*	28
Ralph Gustafson	*Two Poems*	35
Derek Robinson	*"Stamp"*	37
Kay Ryan	*Two Poems*	38
Elaine Perry	*"Jenny and Stella"*	40
Don Domanski	*Three Poems*	41
Gregory Cook	*"The Family Cannon"*	44
Anghel Dumbraveanu	*Two Poems*	46
George Bowering	*"Bushy Considerations"*	49
Patrick White	*"On the Day That You Were Born"*	50
Keath Fraser	*13 Ways of Listening To a Stranger*	53

Eric McCormack

Knox Abroad

The voyage is over. John Knox stands, sways a little, with Clootie, his cat, on the forest-ragged banks of the river (more like the shore of the ocean), on land at last. It is October, and this is an alien place. He looks around and smiles. Nothing has changed, even after a wilderness of sea. His shoes touch dead leaves, the discreet vomit of the trees. He observes the paralysis of the rocks. The winds still blast down from directly above, threatening to hammer him, like a stake, into the ground, drive him under, bury him alive. Every night of the voyage, he saw (he has seen the same thing for twenty years of nights) the planets and the stars desert, rush centrifugally away into the outer universe, as though fleeing a plague. In the mornings, as always, the sun searched him out, singed his ever so delicate gray skin. Again he smiles. Even amongst the trees, there is no refuge. He bends over and lightly strokes Clootie's black coat. Together, they turn and walk along the beaten path, fade into the forest gloom.

"An etymological footnote on the name *Canada.* John Knox, the founder of Scottish Presbyterianism, was apprehended in 1547 by the French and sentenced to serve as a galley-slave in the French navy. After eighteen months, he escaped. A Breton legend, however, suggests that before escaping, he served some months on an exploration ship to New France. This is not impossible. A less reliable tradition, however, supplies the information that, many years later, after his return to Scotland, one of his disciples asked him for his opinion of the New World, which had now become a refuge for the persecuted. Knox is said to have replied, 'I *canna dae* wi' it, I *canna dae* wi' it,' thus, albeit inadvertently, giving the country its name." M. Gobert, *Memoires des Ecossais,* (Geneve, 1897).

In the galleys, he was supposed to be the slave, but he was master, he knew it and they knew it. The same on the expedition ship. The mate lacked the nerve to make him holystone the decks alongside the others, for fear of his tongue. No ears could endure the monstrous words (predestination! election! reprobation!) he could hurl against them. Still, he was no burden: when the barber-surgeon drowned in a storm, two

weeks out of St. Malo, Knox took his place—no one else had the stomach for the job. Though he loathed the unbearable closeness of other living bodies on the ship. Give him solitary confinement, a narrow dungeon, and he would have been more content.

The captain, knowing his prowess as a controversialist, tried often, on this tedious journey, to entice him to his cabin for dinner, to dispute on matters theological. Knox spat at him as an idolator like all the others, and refused the bait.

Knox jettisoned the statue of the Virgin. It was on a Sunday, and the crew assembled for the weekly statue-kissing, a good luck ritual. Knox grabbed the statue from its perch by the mainmast and hurled it, head over tail, halo of stars over serpent's head, out into the ocean. Where it sank like a stone. The sacrilege horrified the French sailors, but they kept their hands off him. He joked to his cat: "The Queen of the Sea cannae swim, Clootie." But they kept their hands off him.

Physically, Knox was scrawny. He was an aggressive talker, except to his cat, Clootie, a black creature, sleek, with wicked eyes. It was a growler, a hisser, and in the minds of the sailors, was Knox's familiar demon. Knox, too, was a growler, but never to Clootie:

"Well, Clootie, my wee man, did you ever see a country so naked of churches? It won't do. I can already imagine a forest of steeples along this riverbank. Churches could make this obscene river a lovely thing" (Knox could speak perfectly good English, ungnarled by "ach's" and "dinnae's", whenever he felt like it).

The cat would purr its admiration of his voice, winding itself around his narrow shins. The man would squint about. If they were alone, he would allow the rubbing to continue, melting into it. If not, Knox would boot the cat out of his way, its tail swishing angrily.

Thank Christ I am off the ship at last. That fat pig-wife of the captain's spying on me everywhere with her pig eyes. The only favour I ever did for her was to tear the dead baby out of her by the feet. Now she wants me. The black sows farrowing on my father's farm sickened me less. And thank Christ to be out of that stinking fo'c'scle. Filth and corruption everywhere. Men opening their breeches to show off the size of their organs. Ship's boys acting as their fancy-women.

But during the storms, the truth flared up in them. Fear bulged in their eyes, and I taunted them all, every single one of them, with the burning fires of Hell. I was on deck during the great storm in mid-ocean, admiring the fury of the waters. They were trying to lower sail, when a boom snapped, the sail ripped, and sheets flogged everywhere. A young sailor, the worst balls-strutter of the lot, caught his arm in the grip of a ratchet. The bone was half-broken, like a sappy branch, and all the flesh torn, the muscles severed. I took the surgeon's saw and sawed the arm away from his jerking body, then I carried him below and dipped the

stump in boiling tar. For days, I was the one to bite off his rotten flesh and suck out the pus. I even swallowed it if they were watching. They couldn't match me. As long as I can remember, death and sickness, sickness and death have been my allies.

Now the voyage is over. This was a good place to land. All around me, beautiful sites for churches, plain churches, with plain cemeteries, no flowers if I can help it. I have planted already the men nobody else would touch, who died of cholera on the voyage. I've manured the soil with corpses the way we did with the dead cattle on the farm. I buried their sad priest, sick since we left France. Only Clootie and I attended his funeral. We commended his body to the devil. Back on the ship, I cleaned the shit and the vomit of the sick from the decks. It gives me an advantage over them all, they are so concerned about staying alive.

The sailors presented the natives with pieces of coloured broken glass, brown wooden beads, pieces of rope, and scraps of cloth. The natives seemed uninterested. One gift, an iron knife, they all admired. The captain insisted it go to the chief, Quheesquheenay, to win his favour. They offered the natives pieces of Breton cheese, quite rank after the voyage, which the natives, in turn, gave to their dogs; fried chicken legs (chickens had been kept aboard), which the natives relished; boiled chicken eggs, which they spat out. Wine, they treated as contaminated water, and could not understand why the sailors drank it when there was so much fresh water around. They munched cautiously on some lumps of black bread from the captain's pantry.

The natives gave little in return, no gold or silver, which was really what the sailors hoped for. They did give them amulets full of rats' giblets and bones. The sailors objected to the smell and threw the amulets into the river while the natives looked on. They invited the crew to eat a sort of stewed beef that smelt very appetizing, but the sailors were afraid it was made of human meat. Some of them vomited spontaneously at the very sight of it. The natives watched all this impassively.

The chief's council offered, finally, as a special treat to the captain, a bowl full of fresh assorted testicles of forest creatures, from the huge rubbery testes of the moose and the bear to the tiny soft beads of rats and rabbits. The captain hid his nausea and diplomatically accepted the gift. He took it back with him aboard ship, and, after dark, flung the testes overboard. They caught in an eddy, and floated around the ship for days, swelling grotesquely till they burst and sank.

The male natives were tall, for the most part, well-muscled, dressed in neatly-stitched animal skins. Sickness was unusual amongst them. There were no wenns, no leprosy, no bloody flux, no stopping of the stomach, no gout, no strangury, no fistulas, no tissicks, no spotted fever, no headmould, no shingles, no rickets, no scurvy, no griping in the guts. There were no congenital deformities. There were no pest-houses.

The skin of the warriors was bronze and clear, except for battle scars. They had flashing dark eyes, and they all seemed to be superb athletes, capable of feats the puny Bretons could only envy. They could lope with ease along tangled forest paths, hurl their spears gracefully, paddle their bark canoes at amazing speeds. They wrestled with ferocity, not hesitating to break an opponent's limb if the opportunity offered.

The natives had heard about the French from neighbouring tribes who had been visited by earlier ships, but this was the first time they themselves had seen the strangers. Clearly they were disappointed, for they found it impossible to respect men whose physical prowess was so defective. But they did respect the power of the arquebusses and the ship's cannon, which the Frenchmen quickly demonstrated.

The French sailors learnt to be careful in their approaches to the native women. A warrior's wives were private property and it was death for a stranger to tamper with them. All the other women were available to all the tribe, and were quite free with their sexual favours, even widows and grandmothers. Which was as well for the Frenchmen, since the young women, golden-skinned and lithe, would have nothing to do with them. They had the bodies of dancers. Their clothing was provocative, their breasts dangling loose, their nipples erect when excited, which was often. Their skirts were split to the waist. When they ran, their hairless crotches were visible. Often, while they were relaxing, or were just sitting down, they would finger their groins unconsciously, or sometimes, consciously if they saw the Frenchmen squinting at them.

At night, the warriors would flit around their bonfires, whooping fearsomely. Or they would stretch on beds of skins moodily sucking on their tobacco pipes with glassy eyes. If the visitors were present, there would be an air of tension. The chief of the tribe, Quheesquheenay, would sit there on his deerskin mat, making no effort to communicate, staring intently at the Frenchmen. The solemn beat of drums would resound, echoed by other drums great distances away across the river.

"Oomhowoomareoomtheoomaliensoom?"
"Oomtheyoomstinkoomouroomvillageoomoutoom."
"Oomkilloomthemoom."
"Oomweoomunlikeoomyouoomonlyoomkilloomworthy
oomenemiesoom."
"Oomcutoomthemoomupoominoompiecesoom."
"Oomevenoomifoomweoomcutoomthemoomupoomin
oompiecesoomandoomsewedoomalloomtheoombestoomparts
oomtogetheroomweoomstilloomwouldoomnotoomhaveoomaoomreal
oomenemyoomforoomtheiroompenisesoomareoomlikeoomwormsoom."
"Oomuseoomtheiroompenisesoomtooomcatchoomfishoom."
"Oomtheoomfishoominoomouroomriveroomareoomtoooomsmart
oomtheyoomknowoomwormsoomareoomnotoomthatoomsmalloom."

I have the heathen under control. They despise the others but they fear me. I notice the young braves, showing off to each other throwing their spears at targets, grow silent even when Clootie appears amongst them. Their shaman is terrified of the cat. I am sure he has tried all his curses against me and Clootie in vain, since the time when the daughter of the chief, Quheesquheenay, developed a terrible fever and was clearly going to die. The shaman couldn't cure her, he could only make things worse. The chief was desperate and asked if I could do anything. They believe that those who are indifferent to death have great power over life.

What makes John Knox tick? A question he sometimes asks himself. He tells himself this story:

Once upon a time early in the sixteenth century, a little Scottish boy lived on a farm near Edinburgh. He was a quick-witted little boy, too smart by half for his schoolfellows, who hated his guts. He possessed certain time-honoured schoolboy traits: he liked to pluck the legs and wings from insects to see their reactions. He possessed too, certain other traits not so time-honoured: with an axe, he enjoyed cutting the legs off live rabbits and chickens. From time to time, he would take pleasure in dropping a dead mouse into his mother's stew. On such occasions, he would play sick, and reap the double benefit of watching the others eat the stew, and of being himself considered rather delicate. This gained him additional attention. In short, that was the kind of boy he was. A practical joker.

He had many sisters, some of them quite attractive, and no brothers. His attitude towards his sisters was somewhat ambivalent. He hated their guts and would steal their makeup and pinch their arms quite cruelly. But, he liked to peep at them before bedtime, through a crack in his bedroom wall, admiring the various breasts and pudenda in their various stages of development. Yes, he found that rather a stimulating part of his day.

His mother and father, it should be noted, were honest-to-goodness farmers, and regular church-goers.

(*John Knox always likes the story to this point.*)

One of the practical jokes the boy liked to play concerned rats. He would capture rats in a wooden box. Then, when no one was around, he would head on over to the pigsty, and call out the pigs. There was a small round hole through the wall beside the feed-troughs. The boy would chase the rats out of the box, into this hole, and right into the mouths of the pigs. The pigs had grown fond of such a regular treat. This was one prank the boy really enjoyed.

One thing leads to another. It happened that he was looking after his littlest sister, three months old, while his parents were making jams inside the house. As he wandered past the pigsty, carrying the baby, he wondered how the pigs would deal with a tiny pink infant, rather than

tiny pink rats. He gently laid the baby on the muddy floor of the sty, and called out the pigs. Well, who knows what goes through a pig's mind? Did they even notice the different proportions, the different texture? Four huge porkers seized the baby-limbs, and ripped her to pieces, regardless of her screams, and swallowed her in great slobbering gobbets.

The howls of the baby and the snorting of the pigs attracted the attention of the honest father and mother, and they came running down from the farmhouse to see what was going on. What they saw horrified them. They saw the bloody mess on the sty floor. They saw their little boy looking at them apprehensively.

At that very moment, just then, quite as if by design, the boy found religion. As soon as he saw the genuine anguish on his parents' honest faces, he began to shout, as if by instinct, "O Jesus, O Jesus," and, jumping in amongst the pigs, kicked and slapped at their snouts, shouting, "Begone, Satan, begone," an expression he had often heard from the preachers at the church to which his honest parents took him each Sunday. His father grabbed him by the coat and pulled him out of that sty. The boy said, "I was takin' the babby doon for a walk, when a great hairy black beastie wi' fire comin' oot o' its mooth and its ears pulled the bairnie oot o' ma airms and threw it ower the wa' to the piggies."

He could see that his parents already half-believed him, certain that no human child would be capable of feeding his baby sister to pigs. The boy understood then that all the quirks in himself he had misguidedly thought to be unnatural and perverse were really, if properly perceived, signs of a religious disposition. And so he decided that, as soon as he grew up, he would become a Reformer. And he did. His parents became, in due course, very proud of his achievements, though he sometimes thought he could see a skeptical glint in their eyes. But they all lived happily ever after.

Such is the tale John Knox tells himself: he knows it doesn't cover all the bases, but it is generally quite pleasing. One thing still surprises him after all these years: when alone, religious matters never enter his head. He wonders if the other Reformers are the same, but hesitates to ask.

With my pussycat, Clootie, I went to her tepee. As we entered, a sweaty young man left, hitching up his loincloth. The tepee was all shadows and foul smells, the shaman's smoke. The girl lay on a frame bed of stretched skins staring at the roof. She was naked, and she too was covered in sweat. Her legs were parted and her hand was at her crotch, fingers stroking. The chief, two of his councillors, and the shaman, stood beside the bed. He is a mouth-shaman, and was leaning over her spitting some green mixture into her mouth. I saw her spit most of it right back in his face, and vomit up the rest. The shaman looked fierce with his red and white stripes, but his eyes were anxious. He shook his rattles and

howled, but they all knew, and he knew, he had failed. The girl looked over at me and smiled, the shreds of vomit around her mouth. She lifted her hand from her crotch, and stretched it out to me, her fingers glistening.

She had sweated out her disease, her *furor uterinus* for days, and she would die soon, for they did not know how to save her. All they could think of was to supply her with men to satisfy her deadly appetite and to trust in the shaman's superstitious mumbo-jumbo.

"That hill, over there by the sacrificial stakes, would be a good spot for a church."

"Ah, yes."

"The long-house would be all right as a temporary church, but they'd have to strip away those ornamental scalps and skulls."

"Indeed."

"If we burnt down the whole forest on the peninsula and ripped up the weeds and the flowers, and anything else alive, we could build a whole set of churches, one for every day of the week. Nothing fancy, no ornaments or any of that kind of thing, just plain seats and a stool for the preacher. Cats would be welcome. We'd have plain cemeteries with picket fences for each church."

"Interesting."

"How about a church under that waterfall? Made of fieldstone, very plain. You'd have to carry an umbrella for going in and out. A nice effect."

"Quite so."

I told them I must have absolute freedom in the treatment of the girl or I would do nothing. I ordered the shaman out with his barbarous cures. He mumbled at me, cursing me no doubt, in his heathen way. I wouldn't let him away with that, but I replied moderately, damning him only according to the Scriptures. Clootie, as ever, snarling at him with hunched back, terrified him, and he hurried out of the tepee, along with the chief and the others. I called in two of the older sailors to help me begin this holy work.

First we forced her hands away from her groin. We lashed her hands and her feet to the sides of the crib to stop her thrashing about. She sweated even more and began screaming. I opened my Bible in my left hand, and from under my coat, I unsheathed my whip, which I had brought with me on purpose.

Everything was ready. I ordered the sailors to stand outside the entrance of the tepee, and allow no one to enter. I began to read from the Book of Psalms in a loud voice, uncoiling my whip slowly before the patient's eyes. Clootie jumped onto the bed and rubbed himself against her.

My wounds stink and are corrupt because of my foolishness.
For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease: and there is no soundness in my flesh.
Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron.
The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made.
Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fires and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup.
Then did I beat them small as the dust before the wind.
And I smote his enemies in the lower parts: I put them to a perpetual reproach.

I began to read the verses a second time, more loudly. But this time, after each verse, I lashed her naked body. She screamed as the skin lifted, the welts rose across her breasts. Then I aimed lower on her body, across the thighs and the open vulva. She stopped screaming. She gave great gasps and whimpers, and it was my turn to roar. I shouted the verses and lashed harder and harder. Her body convulsed, and, at last, the demon rushed out between her legs in a liquid gurgle. Clootie, who had been rubbing himself against her all through this, howled, and his hair stood on end. I myself was roused by that evil in her. To ensure it was completely gone, I lashed her several more times. Then I put my hand cautiously towards her groin, fearful of the bite of the beast. With my fingers I could feel nothing at the entrance, so I slid them into the round moist cavern. Still nothing to be afraid of. Unsatisfied, I inserted the long sweaty handle of my whip, turning it, moving it in and out, in and out, the sure way to scrape any remnants of the demon away. Her eyes glazed as she looked up at me, thankful for my precautions. I jerked the handle up and down rapidly, she convulsed again, sighed, and immediately fell asleep. I too was drained by my exorcism, but well-satisfied. I knew that all was well.

I sat for a moment to catch my breath, then I opened the tepee flap and let the chief and his men back in. I sensed their revulsion as they saw on her body the stripes of the lash. Yet she was in a deep, untroubled sleep and her fever was broken. I expected no thanks and received none. The shaman untied the ropes, and covered her sleeping body with skins. I told the chief that somebody must administer the same cure to her each time she fell into that fever. I told him, though I am not sure he understood, that he must build churches, churches, churches, in memory of her cure.

"You tell us we should not eat our enemies, yet the captain says that in France, he and his men eat Jehovah daily. Explain this."

"Filthy heathen, spare me your quibbles."

"Before original sin, did men still fart and shit after they ate?"

"Filthy heathen, you do not understand."

"What good is heaven if all our tribe do not go to heaven? What good is heaven if my wives and my sons and my dogs are not in heaven with me? What good is heaven if my enemies are not there so that we can all reminisce together in heaven about old battles?"

"Filthy heathen, cease your blasphemy."

"How can you hate the women and yet desire them so much at the same time?"

"Filthy, lying heathen. You are one of the damned."

How ugly the aliens are, their skin is wormy white, and marred by scabs. Boils sprout on them overnight like forest toadstools. Their clothing is clumsy and heavy. Their minds are a mystery. They adore their Book, a collection of dead words. We would have annihilated them long ago, but for their guns. We have never before faced enemies who were contemptible as men, yet could defeat us in battle because of their weapons.

Their shaman, the little man, Knox, is the living death. He has made a few converts amongst our people, even my own daughter. Pain was his gift to her. The captain, a simple man, admits that many like Knox will come to our hunting grounds in the future. Our own shaman has dreamed, for three nights, the end of the world.

"I am curious about the function of your shamans across the ocean. Here, our shaman prays for good luck, curses bad luck, sings songs and tells good stories at our feasts, blesses the penis and vagina of the newly-weds, teaches the children how to bind arrows well, how to be brave in battle; he defies the demons of darkness; in times of famine, he fasts and moves his tepee to the forest so that the rest of us may eat well and live in company in the village; he weeps for all the dead, he rejoices at births; he loves the river, the trout, the moose, the eagle, the pack-wolves, the muskrats, the morning sun, the snow in winter; he is the friend of our friends, he admires the ferocity of our enemies; nothing that exists disgusts him."

"He is a filthy heathen fiend and is already damned."

Their stay amongst us has lasted only two moons. They must sail away before the winter storms. They have wiped out all game within six miles of the village—we will now face a hard winter. Some of our children have died of a cough we have never known. As a final gesture, the aliens

say they will kill, for us, with their guns, a village of our neighbouring enemies. I have thanked them and refused their offer. Our shaman is glad they are leaving, but he still whispers to me that he sees only death in his omens.

One night around midnight, while the village fires were still flickering, two huge marauding bears came barging out of the forest. Knox's cat, Clootie, fur on end, charged at them screeching from deep in his throat. The bears, startled, turned and ran. For days afterwards, Knox would wheeze with laughter at the memory. "Ach, Clootie," he would say, "ane wee Scottish cratur is mair than a match for a' the beasties in the New World."

Some thoughts on a brief code of behaviour to be followed by converts after I am gone
A. *Sexual Matters:* strict monogamy is a must, even bestiality is a lesser offence than adultery; sexual intercourse only for breeding; cover the flesh: shirts and trousers for men, underwear and breast-bindings for women; absolutely no kissing, cuddling, or touching of the body of the other sex before marriage; the menstrual abomination to be dealt with in complete secrecy by the women.
B. *Other:* Hunting needs to be organized on a less seasonal basis to keep the men from being idle for lengthy spells; rites of passage for the boys should not be discouraged, the pain being a valuable discipline; likewise the practice of torturing enemies: it teaches contempt of the flesh (much of these heathens' behaviour may be turned to good account).
C. *Build churches, churches.*

The French captain (his wife was party to it) coaxed one of the older native women to be his mistress. She would then gossip with the other women about his fat paunch and his stinking breath. And about how, with his wife looking on, he always made love to her from behind like a dog. Whenever the captain appeared in the village, afterwards, Knox would trot in front of him, barking as loudly as he could. All the village dogs would join the chorus. Some of the native women, inspired by this, would squat on the ground and urinate, as the captain passed, their tongues dangling like hounds'.

We will root out the shaman Knox's followers after he has gone. Even my own daughter. We will saw off their heads with the iron knife they gave me, then we will throw the bodies and the knife into the river. Nothing of him will remain. He longs to return to his homeland where his enemies are more like him. We are too innocent and we are too devious. This alone is certain: we are our only friends.

The day before they were due to sail, a native guide led a group of sailors

through the forest and showed them a mound of earth in a clearing. Knox and his cat Clootie went with them, as always, when there was the prospect of some hunting. The sailors began digging in the mound, hoping to find some of that elusive treasure. Instead, skulls. Hundreds upon hundreds of human skulls. They presumed they were in some kind of traditional tribal burial place. But the skulls, belonging to men, women and children, all seemed recent. Perhaps some disease was responsible. Then they noted that many of the skulls had been split, pierced with sharp objects. They saw too, that the bone had not been picked clean by worms and ants. The guide told them the mound was the top of a shaft, hundreds of feet deep, and that it was the place where they had, for generations, buried the heads of enemies who had been decapitated. Their heads were boiled, he said, their brains eaten. In the last three moons before the sailors arrived, he said, Quheesquheenay's people had beheaded in this way at least one thousand enemies, and had filled the pit to overflowing. On the basis of that good omen, the arrival of the aliens had been welcomed. Some of the men were appalled, but Knox laughed heartily. They lacked faith, he said: it was clear from the Bible that Providence frequently operated by means of a timely massacre or two. Knox secretly suspected that Quheesqueenay had arranged the "discovery" to deter the Frenchmen from ever returning to the New World.

The coastline of France looms in the distance. Knox alone, of those on deck, does not need to be there. He relishes the ferocious cold, the thin snow falling in a gusty wind. The coastal hills are dappled with it, like leprosy. Or is it, he smiles, heaven's vomit? Clootie would have purred at the idea. Clootie who is not with him. Clootie who had to be left behind, prowling, he imagines, those forest thickets, terrifying man and beast for years yet, especially that old heathen shaman. Reminding them of something they would not easily destroy. He thinks of Clootie with fondness but with no regret. The New World was child's play. Now, the battle will be amongst professionals, like himself. He breathes deeply, fills his lungs with the chill air sweeping over the water from all the chill regions of the Old World. His home.

CAT ON A MANUSCRIPT

"To be the ears and whiskers
of this questioning
silvery beast, no sunbather

under my round lamp
asleep on the desk, no dreamer
of small-boned warblers

struck down in the grass."
A rough tongue touches
ink. Poised sentinel

shifting its limbs at the least
scent in the room,
the least nod or flicking

on the wires out there.
Now, more phrases traced
close to those claws, that

body of blood and muscle
breathing on the page—
the world's presence, all

10 lbs. of it
parked at my fingertips and
my trail of wandering ink:

"The desk is a harbour, I
a middleman busy
with whistling arrivals and

embarkations, here
where a cat paces the dock,
eyeing the two-way traffic . . ."

GOGOL'S SAD CLERK BECOMES A POET AND GOES SKIING

This is the moment kicking and gliding
become as easy as breathing on the trail
or as stopping. Shadowed by spruces
he chases brightness born in the sky,
light rolling around in spring snow—
poles light as wings, skis light as air.

The mood in his room last night was an air
played on a hoarse fiddle (no dancers gliding
across his bare floor, just darkness and snow)
but today his eyes and skis make a trail
new as an infant. Quiet props up the sky.
Old frowner, bellyacher, smell the spruces!

Hear the tapping of the dripping spruces!
His pace could be speech—tongue, mouth, air,
a sure rhythm under a cowing sky.
Composing, his mind already goes gliding
around the curves of a poem's trail—
until, toppled backward, he sinks into snow.

But even this is good: a field of snow
turns upside down, and under the spruces
lies blueness perfect but for a jet trail.
Far from his lost coat, his lachrymose air,
his Montreal shuffle, kicking and gliding
he wears a wool sweater the colour of the air.

Who cares about a home in the sky?
He'll be a skier in infinite snow,
blue amidst green. Three syllables gliding
lightly, once heavy as fallen spruces,
"momentum" breezes along like the air—
slow words fleet down his tongue's trail.

His five senses leap, like rabbits, off the trail.
Laughing at the dwarfing sky,
he curses his bosses and all their hot air—
but at twilight he'll see the infant snow
turned grey, while wind whipping the spruces
freezes his dream. Shivering, gliding

to trail those five rabbits white as snow,
gliding home, he'll hear a fiddler's air—
dark as the sky—approach through the spruces.

AN EVENING TRICK

Brahms can wait tonight.
Nothing fine, nothing sublime
tempts me to the concert hall.

Other men's poems, other men's stories,
Dolphy's flutes and saxes,
Celtic reels and hornpipes, bicycles
tracing a blue river's
curve, reckless talk with friends,
walks through snow to buy French bread . . .

now I turn my back
on them all. The watcher's turn to dance,
the listener's turn to speak:

Flinging aside the last clawing branch
he stumbles into a sunlit field.
Thistles stick to his pants, leaves to his hair.
His backpack cuts into his shoulders
with the weight of all he loves.
He breathes the odour of wheat and says:
"Bless French bread, bless pumpernickel bread,
raisin, pita, rye, and five grains."

(The truth is, tonight I went to Brahms.
This is a story, but a good one.)

Many-faced scribbler, busy fool, sleep soon
in some calm, distant valley
where everyone grows only one tree.

L. A. Whitt

LISTENING FIGURE

What betrays its self-containment
is the ear
bent to a stillness so stubborn
it brays and digs in
stupid with resistance

once
over this gesture
strains of Dvorak's *New World* passed
something vast
innate
receding . . .

but now
it is mimesis
a mere summoning of sound
where a listening figure
leans into whiteness

and waits

(Once there were words which
welled up
softly, in resonance
then spilt over,
serene

now there is only
the figure and the
silence
welded together
like the patient prongs
of a tuning fork—
waiting
for a certain fixed tone
to be struck)

FLARAS

Flaras were once a breed of intelligent, deer-like creatures. They developed exquisite feminine tastes and built elegant castles of mica and bone. Their idea of time was based on the rate of the cooling of the earth, which they'd learned to measure precisely. They were deeply religious and melancholy in outlook, believing the moon to be god and the stars and planets, his sons. Endless holy wars broke out amongst them over disagreements concerning lunar eclipses and the succession of kings. Their bones sprouted new sets of antlers, much as a young tree in spring sprouts new limbs. After several million years of battle, their bodies became antlered from hoof to crown and were locked together in a deadly embrace from which there was no escape. The last great herds of flaras resembled forests of leafless briar.

PLASTIC SOLDIERS

Made of garbage bag stuff and of no particular rank, they aim bent rifles, swing grenades the size of hearts.

Their fatal sin, a maddening courage, bland resilience under fire. No hurled stone causes injury. Firecrackers simply blow them over, not to bits.

Till some bored kid squirts lighter fluid and strikes a match. But even in flames they refuse to flinch. I've found them in little green puddles, stretched like taffy and curled on sticks.

THE MINOTAUR

Once the bovine head has been removed, the carcass is the same as the body of a decapitated man. It is considered immoral to eat of the torso or limbs.

The creature however, is still useful to mankind. The brains are a delicacy and the hide is used to make seamless gloves, shirts, slacks and body suits.

Toni Sammons

TRAVELLING

So you scoot out
of the lap of this country
into another

and it's no business of mine. I have
my own face with its print
of distance to get through customs, my own
inadequate passport. And everything
anyone loves
has always been revocable

but in summer I'm not resourceful. Bones settle
more deeply in the flesh, like rocks
in an untilled field, while the child inside
stamps off toward a city morning: damp
sunlight and cold cement
and the cool air full of tricks
and waxy new leaves

because in your presence or absence
valves disconnect and water
begins to rise: an entire system conspires
toward loss and recollection,
a memory detached from time or primitive
as the fish that swim
through my knees; or
when I sink, the bloody wavelets
that push me upright:
I conclude
that we struggle for unity
and settle for balance

and I become
the specialized kind of coward
in love with facts: you reserve

your flights and I
keep to the waiting room and think

of magnolias throwing their red hands
on steep Himalayan slopes

of a small white falcon flying toward Tibet

of tulips growing wild in the Crimea

and finally I bear myself
toward a hot shoulder of land

vineyards crowded with leaves and shadows
on both sides of the white road: stands
of lavender nudged by yellow bees
and myself taking myself
every day into the sea
resinous pine with its lightning slash
healing like a seam

alone at night, I welcome
the loaned heat of the house, of stone;
my own stored questions: does
slow motion make
the shoving continents graceful? that giant face
lifting from the ocean, spitting shells

something near the midpart of my head, that
stubborn affectionate ridge, closes my eyes:
I watch the sea floor spreading, spreading

is this original? You and I one
continent, and breaking

Bill Gaston

Gold

or
The Literary Death of a Latin American Man

for C. Montague

I've met my destiny,
my final South American destiny.
The manifold labyrinth steps
wove through all these years since childhood
has brought me to this ruinous afternoon.

—Borges

Eight-year-old Jimmy Mayer regarded the tiny nugget there in the bottom of his glass. The trace of milk at the bottom would not adhere to this thing which glinted yellow and clean. Jimmy Mayer knew he had found something special. He knew it was connected somehow to the accident with the big car below his apartment window. He even thought he knew what this thing was, but he didn't, not really. No one north of Latin America knows the true nature of gold, nor would Jimmy Mayer ever come to know it, even after his hoarding of it had stopped and his rise to political power was complete. Years later, when he was rich and elected Mayor of Vancouver (his name's quaint homonymy was a help not a hindrance), people assumed these two successes came of his being Jewish and knowing gold. But they were wrong. Jimmy Mayer was in fact aided and doomed in life by none other than what he had this day found at the bottom of his glass of milk.

There are few assassinations in Deep Cove because not many foreigners come to live here. So the assassination of The Honourable Jorge deGarcia was the first assassination anyone in Deep Cove could remember.

Whenever foreigners did come, they brought their foreignness with them. And every story told about them, even the smallest lie, carried its expected foreign ring, like the gaudy scent you expect when you put your nose to this or that ripe flower, for instance the clichéd smell of rose. All accounts of the deGarcia family—all the police and newspaper reports—read like a Spanish cliché.

The deGarcias were the only Colombians in Deep Cove. They lived in the biggest, newest house, a mansion perhaps (though that term doesn't apply to modern cedar and smoked glass split-levels, no matter how large) and before they moved in they'd had the builders add a faintly Spanish brick arch and gate at the head of the driveway. Neighbours assumed them Italian, and expected at any moment the cheap plaster statues of lions and nymphs to appear atop fenceposts.

As if to help the forthcoming clichés, the family had brought with them a widowed great aunt, who always wore black no less, and had her installed in the attic. There she tacked funeral shrouds to the insides of the modern bubbled skylights, and rumour had it she kept boxes of crucifixes, or perhaps an aleph, which she fed with her daily mourning.

The Honourable Jorge deGarcia, the patriarch, drove a Rolls. Though he drove such a car he was not very rich, the car being but an extension of his office with the Colombian consulate. Yet in the wake of his assassination the police whispered "cocaine boss" to one another as they lifted blood samples from the car's rich leather seats. Carefully weighing the corpse's rings, watch and wallet in their hands, they imagined they were now privy to an inner sanctum of money the like of which they had never seen.

The inquest into deGarcia's death took weeks, because how can a member of the Colombian consulate be shot in the head with a golden bullet through bullet-proof glass in a car whose windows were closed tight and which he himself had been driving? The police sergeant nodded "suicide" again and again until it became clear that they could search the car for years and still not turn up a gun. "Impossible," the sergeant said now.

How had this foreigner been shot? There were no bullet holes anywhere in the car, and no holes large enough for a bullet to pass. Though this was the first Rolls Royce he'd ever been allowed in life to touch, the sergeant well knew that such a car would be famous for its airtight design.

The facts were these. The Colombian politician had been shot once through the head. They'd found a hole four inches above his left ear, another hole in the roof of his mouth, and a channel clogged with coagulated blood between the two. The direction the bullet took—up, or down—was uncertain, but one thing about the bullet was clear. At both points where it had smashed through bone, traces of gold were found.

This one wonderfully exotic fact almost blinded the police to remaining facts. That is: no gun, no bullet, no holes nor avenues a bullet could take to enter the car or leave it. It appeared The Honourable Jorge deGarcia had died instantly.

The police were understandably baffled. Though they suspected rightly that the Colombian's death could be explained by his very foreignness, they were at a loss as to where to begin asking questions. To a man, this murder made them feel inept, woefully provincial, whitely Canadian. The chief of detectives delegated the duty of solving the puzzle to his deputies, who in turn passed the job on to their own underlings. Everyone from the mayor on down played hard at nonchalance.

Had any of them met The Most Desirable Woman in the World, the case would have been quickly solved.

They collected evidence instead. They found that, as always, the people of Deep Cove had paused in their affairs to watch the impressive car glide sedately down the main street on its way home. Witnesses had seen the Rolls suddenly shoot forward, then slow to a crawl and finally bump to an embarrassed stop against a fire hydrant. One shopkeeper bragged that he'd for a moment thought the Honourable deGarcia had been seduced to a distracted halt by his display of glossy oranges. But then like the other onlookers he'd seen the Colombian slump forward onto the steering wheel, causing the elegant bass horn to sound until a garage mechanic pried open the door and drew the dead man back. No less than five witnesses exclaimed that the slumped-man-on-horn was "just like in the movies."

Eight-year-old Jimmy Mayer too had heard the horn. He interrupted his glass of milk to look out the window. As he did so he thought he heard a faint buzzing near his head and then a 'plop' in the milk. He didn't think much of this, for too much was going on below on the street. But when he finished his milk, there it was: the innocent, astonishing gold.

The police knew immediately what was wrong. Assassination, of course. Then, suicide. Then a drug deal gone sour. But finding neither drugs, bullet, money, gun, nor text book leads of any sort they decided again that they knew an assassination when they saw one, but one that involved a power, a foreign power, beyond their ken. They were right, but not in the way they thought.

The Honourable Jorge deGarcia had in truth just returned from the hospital, the maternity ward, where The Most Desirable Woman in the World had delivered her first child, a girl. Within that event and no other lay the mysterious cause of Deep Cove's most famous death.

The Most Desirable Woman in the World was not the world's most beautiful. No, what The Most Desirable Woman lacked in beauty she

more than made up for in tools. Not tools, exactly, but a way, an odour almost, for instance that most surprising scent of rose.

She looked of vaguely Spanish descent. Her hair was a warm, midnight lair. The fine blood of Eros waxed just beneath every inch of her skin, which glowed faintly Mediterranean. When she selected a peach or grape in the mirror-lined groceteria (first lifting then easing her teeth into it to test), the fruit could not help but think it had been given a gift. Her walk promised that the innermost urge of human history would satisfy itself in her next step, her next step, her *next step*—but The Most Desirable Woman in the World never allowed fruition, never let the urge leave its eternal edge. On she walked, her full limbs swinging like the Venus de Milo's would have, while the machinery in her hips turned a great, slow gear in the soul of every gender-fixed male in the area, though perhaps none had even seen her pass.

deGarcia had left the hospital where he'd seen mother and child, the latter for the first time. He'd been allowed into her private room, and up to her he'd strode, sweating and nervous. She lay there on her bed calmly smiling, a bit haggard-looking but nonetheless desirable, with swaddled daughter at one breast. deGarcia bent and kissed the woman's cheek, and as he did so his most urgent juices rose to the edges of his lips, swelling them and making them burn where they touched her.

He could not speak. Though he could turn at will to either grand poetry or wit to keep his own family wide-eyed or helpless with laughter, he could never speak to this woman, his mistress. Around her he felt like a boy who knows at any moment his worst dream's secret will be discovered and made public.

He did manage to nod to the child. He forced a smile to his grossly swollen lips. With the air of centuries of casual motherhood, The Most Desirable Woman reached across her breast and drew the blanket from her newborn's face, revealing it. deGarcia bent to kiss. When he did, his lips shrank back to size, and cooled. The baby started to cry.

He returned to his car, carefully sealing himself in against the world to begin his short trip home. He turned the radio to what he called "the businessman channel" and got a subdued string version of *The Days of Wine and Roses.* Though he didn't care for such bloodless music he listened to it anyway, searching for a clue into the peculiar Canadian soul, which he saw to be both transparent as water yet opaque as snow. There was something peasant-like in their naive good humour.

deGarcia lit cigarette after cigarette. He saw he was trembling. It was odd and contradictory to tremble in a Rolls Royce. What was wrong? He knew he didn't want to go home to his wife, four children and mourning great aunt (though her attic did remind him of his homeland enough to make him run to its bosom at times when he was troubled). No, he wanted to return to the hospital, to sit by her side for as long as

they let him, prodding her smoothness with a finger, then hide in the closet all night watching her through a crack, listening to her breathe.

Why should he want to do this? Senior politicians didn't do such things, especially here in Canada. In his own country the suit he wore—charcoal grey flannel—was the inarguable uniform of a very important man, and even in his own country no man who wore such a suit would hide all night like a teenage boy in a lover's closet.

In a surge of what felt like poetry deGarcia realized what it was his lover gave him: she gave him back his teenage blood.

A honeyed voice shouted *a great deal on gold-plated serpentine chains, fifty percent off.* deGarcia turned down the radio. He trembled still. His self-analysis had taken him further now, further than he ever went into the labyrinth of his heart. I am Latin, he often told himself with pride, and as such I don't think, I do. Now, his thinking told him why he wanted to return to the hospital. He wanted to return to the hospital and sit by his lover's side and hide in the closet because this was precisely what she did not want him to do.

That was it. deGarcia began to tremble at greater speed. He could hardly drive. Suddenly a voice just behind his neck began to drone lines of his long-forgotten favourite poet, flooding the car with the tone of deGarcia's lonely boyhood:

> God moves the player, he, in turn, the piece.
> But what god beyond God begins the round
> of dust and time and dream and agonies?

Approaching Deep Cove now, an odd, displaced suburb which lay at the convergent feet of two dark mountains, he saw how much his new neighbourhood resembled a cave, a dismal Canadian cave.

He eased the grand car down the curving hill which led onto the Cove's main street. Then he slowed, cautious. Something was not right. No, something was dreadfully wrong. The sky pulsed a foreboding orange colour. So did the air of the street. So did the elegant air within the confines of the car. His body began to throb. What was . . .?

It happened in one second, perhaps less.

deGarcia had recalled the child's face. Crying when he touched his lips to its flesh. *That crying face! Why did it cry! Yes. Because it was not his child!* His mistress, *his woman, his beautiful, beautiful. . . .*

In the next second he was dead. The car bumped the fire hydrant, the horn sounded, people stared, and eight-year-old Jimmy Mayer looked out the window.

Perhaps only The Most Desirable Woman in the World suspected the true mind of gold, which is aligned to blood, not thought. Perhaps

deGarcia had been wrong, perhaps the child belonged to him after all. But to gold that fact would be of no consequence, gold's lone food being that one much stronger fact: the pulse of belief in the human heart. Perhaps at death deGarcia did see for an instant the true nature of gold as, cooked on the fires of jealousy, his blood boiled and surged and gave life to the gold filling in his lower molar. When the gold tore through bone and the grey pudding of his left hemisphere, perhaps deGarcia's face was that of a conquistador killed on a livid, gold-tipped spear. Perhaps he did come to know gold, and at that instant of understanding his soul was the half-ravaged, half-blissful soul of a virgin tossed to the fires of the bowels of the golden god.

Luis Cruz Fierro, last living Brazilian alchemist, describes the true nature of gold:

> Related more closely to body than to mind, more closely to woman than to man (which is why men seek it), prodded to life when bathed in hottest blood, gold takes to the air in search of a fresh, goldless humanity. It seeks a tantalizing lair: the veins of inhospitable mountains, or a cache, rife with ghosts and curses, hidden under the stones of a dead culture. Or it will fly to the tawny milk of a woman's throat, on her birthday. . . .

Or, one can well see, to the utter innocence of the bottom of a child's glass of milk, to wink at him, as through clouds, like a promising holiday sun.

Once given life, gold will touch nothing not human on its flight to its lair. If it does touch something—a car window perhaps—it will burst to glittering dust and be lost. deGarcia's filling took the easiest route in departing from its host, which was through brain and bone rather than through the inside of a jealous, jaw-clamp grimace. Free, it paused one inch above the dying Colombian's head. Then, wildly, it buzzed within the car like a fly, desperate but touching nothing, its omni-helicopter spin keeping it atoms away from death-dealing surfaces. Buzzing, seeking its destiny, the gold tried empty ashtrays, under seats and dashboard wires, around pedals and the loose cuffs of deGarcia's flannel trousers. Finally, its vigour draining, the gold found the sole exit. Entering an air conditioning vent to the right of the radio, the filling coursed a series of linked conduits, broke into the open blackness of the engine compartment (deafening now with the steady bass horn), and at last slipped through the ornate Rolls Royce grille to find the world of its arch-brother, sunlight.

Up it shot. Almost drained of life, three stories high, deGarcia's filling veered drunkenly through the Mayer's open window.

In the maternity ward of Lion's Gate Hospital, a woman lay suddenly tense, perplexed.

A child at the woman's side whimpered still. In fact it hadn't stopped crying since being burned by the lips of a man.

Ten miles away, the police arrived at the scene of an assassination.

In the kitchen on the third floor of a Deep Cove apartment, Jimmy Mayer swirled the trace of milk around and around in the glass, coating the odd object which would not carry milk for long and soon glowed yellow again.

At the exact moment Jimmy picked the gold out, when he studied it and then loved it and felt for the first time that his life had a purpose, the tawny girlchild in the distant hospital stopped crying at last, sighed from the deepest part of its throat and went to sleep.

And at that same moment the mother felt strangely drained of allure. She glanced to her right, at a child who appeared to be almost smiling in sleep, who wore now on her tiny face a glow and a knowledge that the woman herself had once known. The recent Most Desirable Woman in the World suffered surprising visions of one day becoming a grandmother.

ON THE TRAIN

And the Trento farmer washing his grapes,
Each side the spray washing.
Across the earth the trellis holding
Flowers

Notable for honey-combs. Midnight
Floods the northern Cape with sun.
The bending wader plants his rice;
Porcelain

Temple-bells where the Chao Phya
Flows, slanting, touch. Hot,
The lonely sands at el-Amarna
Are hot.

Nine hours it took to save
The world, no more, a woman
Dying happy, two men
Fishing.

THE RIBBON

And there, was a November moon, enormous,
Exactly round, flat, pasted
On the evening sky, low down,
Held immense before me east
Along the road between two banks
Of slanting snow to the turned end,
The near lake steaming in zero;
South were hills, the valley changing,
One long streak of grey through the red,
One star, above, increasing;
Oh a thousand aggregations
Made impact on me as I walked
But one notice only, halfway
Up the hill, remains as it was:
Where two fir trees are,
Tied to a strand of wire, on the fence,
Marking importance, ribbon, forgotten.

Derek Robinson

STAMP

Even in Canada, where expansive landscape is what we have
And breathe, poets are still alchemists of the interior

Garden, where the lumps of ore lie buried in the loam.
They will always be sorting through themselves, the inner constellations

Of identity, before committing the stones and trees to paper;
Piecing together the broken reflection in the icy stream

To see themselves smiling in the plumbeous clouds,
And listening for the startle of crystal sap

In spring, as to a tentative poem. Therefore, I may be heard.
This masterful stamp of Fisgard Lighthouse, pastel

Sea-blue in the distance beyond the tall snow tower
Emitting signals of light to ships in the strait

(As if it took the pulse of the sea or counted the stars),
Proud of its tiny island encircled by immensity:

Both a final destination and a starting point,
A pinnacle of power, rootedness, yet freedom;

Something solid from which to step off into savagery,
A physical means of transporting the poet and his poems

To affirmation within the sky. That is, Fisgard Lighthouse
Pictured on a thirty-two cent stamp, the oldest lighthouse in B.C.

THE CHILD CYCLOPS

An average looking child
by the standards of the world,
two-eyed,
fed, bicycled, groomed,
a fenced yard,
a room,
a family not given
to atavism.

Why then
the blind touch—
the search
beneath tables
and chairs,
the small fingers
combing and combing
the dog's fur
as though something
visible to others
were hiding there?

THE TURTLE

The camel knows he is
a humped animal
because his neck swivels.
The turtle doesn't know this
and is incurious
about his surface
his legs, or the likelihood of a tail.
Anything not directly before him
is an internal organ.
Thus he concentrates upon his desires
and wills himself toward them,
convinced it is his powerful intellect
that moves him to the succulents
or the succulents to him.
If he is stuck, he is not
a helpless helmet teetering on its crown;
it is some temporary and discoverable error
in reasoning that's got everything
upside down.

Elaine Perry

JENNY AND STELLA

Jenny and Stella paint each other's nails red
Drying takes forever when they want to hold hands
Those long school days when they can only smile or
Write notes and fold them into tulips
Jenny likes the word tulips
Stella says together they have four lips

They predict the future with the pleats in their skirts
And drape them like backdrops for the dreams
That turn the colour of Stella's hair
Stella with her red hair luring men
If she were still a child she'd close her eyes
And make them disappear

Jenny plays Chopin on Stella's shoulders
And watches her fall asleep
While the world turns into a prelude

VISITING THE GRANDMOTHER

it's always the same there
white arms fading into the table
fireflies perched on all the chairs
evil dogs living in the forest

I sit down at her table
to hear the kettles sing softly in the trees
"Just a little music," she says
peeling away the rabbit's
beautiful dress
and we eat the rabbit
throwing the dress
into the fire

soon it rains
as it always does
the skyworks turning the clouds
in heavy circles above her house

she looks up
as she always does
and says, "When it rains, I think
of your grandfather in the doorway
wearing his blue overcoat. Do you
remember it? The one with the little
bloodstain just above the heart?"

I never remember it or the grandfather
watching her hand pour the tea again
and the tea falling each time
like dark corners from a great height
into thin yellow cups.

A SPIDER STANDING NUDE BEFORE A MIRROR

she was made in the shape of Rome
that city of spiders and the gods of spiders
and the spidery light of dead things
drifting down to paradise

how beautiful she looks
beside the broken world
and how graceful
drinking a moth or a fly
drinking the blood of the lamb

and the fortune she has
she has always had
in owning a home
that barely rises out of the shadow
of time or place
in owning a body
that lacks the sadness of a body

that lacks the hesitation of a body
made from a year of rain
and a burnt glove
from a pin
and the spiral heartbeat
of dust on water.

THE FARM AT FOUR A.M.

in the barn there are
two hogs hanging
from black ropes in the air

they are the old weights
the old judgments against us

in the kitchen there's a wife
I don't know whose wife she is
but in the dark grass of her body
an animal moves
to the swaying of her voice

in the well there's a moon
with its song of seven letters
the moon of the inner world
no one knows what it thinks
or what it will finally do

in the apple tree
there are the four gods
the moth the cloud
the dead child and the wind
with its blue mouth pressed
urgently against the leaves
as if it could speak
as if it could speak to anyone.

Gregory M. Cook

THE FAMILY CANNON

Year after year I took my three children to her
to show off the miracle of the blood come back
in the slow way only greatgrandchildren can love

Stories began on the threshold from the back porch
continued at the kitchen stove where she kept warm
with one large potato potted opposite for callers

From pantry to family rogues' gallery she led
past the coat room, along the hall, to the parlour
where all, like memories, was born and bathed for burial

First she marked time by "that was your father before
he went overseas." She never said, he was killed
Her canary, too much to care for, became a toy

Her husband died. She called me by my mother's name.
My children understood, even the day she said
"Sit down here Grandpa, in your chair by the window."

Accepting my beard for my greatgreatgrandfather's
—"I nursed him to his death right here in my bed, there,
and his son; Grampa too, he died in that chair you're in there.

"I nursed them. Your grandfather and his fathers. In my bed.
That cannon on the lawn, looking at the river,
past where the barn used to stand before the big fire

"Captain Francis. (He wasn't really a captain.)
He said, there, on his death bed, 'whatever you do,'
he said, 'don't you let them move that cannon,' he said.

"I guess he would be your . . . your greatgreatgreat Grandpa"
she told my children; called me Grampa
and asked had I seen her mamma when I came by

I said, "no, not since she knit in your same stove chair
there," keeping the memories warm as mittens
she made for thirteen children and their offspring

I asked her permission to photograph my children
astride the family cannon of a sea coursed
in history lengthened with each shot snapped

into the abyss of the cannon's aim
in the direction opposite the women who will nurse
all of the mute gun's lucky owners to death

A PITCHER OF WATER

I've often told myself that it is late,
That time has snatched the candor of my speech,
That somebody keeps coming night after night
To steal my woman
And carry her into oblivion. I've had
To keep looking for her. Mostly I've been alone
On the river bank, carving the adored visage
Out of the wood of a word.
And I can't cry out any longer. "Apparition,"
I'd say, "man or bird, if you're real
Come out on the bank to talk.
This is my fortune: my will to walk,
To see and give my thought a name,
Take my walk, if you will, and my sight,
I'll give up my speech as well,
For, while alive, I'll still see and walk,
And I'll talk with my thought, in symbols unknown to you.
And leave alone my woman—don't spread on her face
A shroud of gloom, do not plant sorrow in her eyes,
Let her walk divinely among my things
And bring me a pitcher of water from the world's end."
But it is much too late, dusk is falling
And I've lost the candor of yesterday's speech
And I sit on the shore of a day, muted,
Carving in the wood of a word
The face of a woman gone
To fetch me a pitcher of water.

THE FOUNTAINS OF SERBIA

To Nichita Stănescu
Petre Stoica, Adam Puslojić
Srba Ignjatović

We're almost all seated at the table
Peter sheltered by his beard of withered grass
Nichita watching his angel with his two patches of sky
Adam who has just locked up God in a bachelor flat
and Srba amazed by the calm wisdom of his own dream
and I instead of complaining that they've sunk all my ships
in the accursed straits of a day
remember how I chased the sun with my hoop

everything would be fine, muses one,
could we still meet
once a century

a piece of cheese is still lain by the bird
in the Carpathian Mountains
and the well bucket still draws out
a green pepper and an onion from Serbia's fountains
and we still can purchase
a fiddler and a boatload of wine
putting verse to verse
even if the moon no longer kisses us on the mouth
when we return at dawn
from the bed of a song redolent of woman
the table is spread on the river
and we don't see one another any more

all would be fine, muses one,
could we still meet among ourselves
even like this
once a century

translated from the Romanian by Robert J. Ward and Marcel Pop-Cornis

George Bowering

BUSHY CONSIDERATIONS

fr Anselm Hollo

What smokes a pipe
shoots a deer, didn't high-tail it over that deadfall
fast enough, blood on the snow,
black on white in the moon
light.

What smokes a pipe & says
this is not a pipe; we infer
a riddle, bones scattered on a roof.

Up to now it's been easy, too easy for thought,
too loud for the wildlife.

On the Isle of Wight there is no wildlife,
only the strange flesh underground,
the other we all feel reluctant kin to.

Nature
has an inhalation it wants us to exhale,
if we imagine all that rising & falling
as somehow human.

What smokes in a pipe is nature,
& some fool has it in his mouth. He
wants to be a deer, see how fast
he can jump.

I saw him beside the road, feet up
on an apple box. What you selling?

Smoke, he says, smoke & pronouns,
they'll keep you alive.

Patrick White

ON THE DAY THAT YOU WERE BORN

for Devora Sugarman

the sky was polished glass
clear blue above
the brittle silhouettes of the leafless maples
the light
was a clean needle and the air
cold flowers in our lungs
you
did not enter with a cry
closing the door behind you like
a quiet choice
stepping out of your mother
softly collapsing
an empty tent falling into the lake of itself
an orchard feeling the weight of its harvest
drop from its boughs
your birth
your being now
someone who can come to the window when it snows and
the clouds are having a pillow fight
were you called
did you hear your name
searching you out among the stars where
you sat to have your hair combed
comet Devora
blowing like a scarf across the dawn before
you answered your parents' calling
to a habitable planet and
opened your eyes
an infant moon
upon the Earth that holds you
Newest
you adorn the humanity you have put on

the sun
adds your shadow to its vocabulary
floors wait
and stairs for you to climb
an entire lifetime of shoes readies itself like a fleet
special hearts are being selected that
will break like fine goblets
for your beauty's sake
already
the wind has started feathering the soft arrows that
will fly from your lips
winter
gathers its elders and plots how to dazzle you on
short notice
spring
runs to tell its flowers
the far kingdoms
of next summer and autumn
hang the news
on their ripening bells
today
dreams awake in the bed of your blood
and the spirit
stirs in the first shock of your body
God the Vintner pouring Himself like
young wine into a new bottle
letting you sleep
under your mother's breast
a swallow under
the eaves of a warm mansion while your father
anxious on the long wharf of his waiting
his love
of your mother perfected in your being

returning from the hospital
too nervous to eat
buys himself an egg-sandwich in the restaurant and
sits down before me
his smile
and the joy that softens his face
wider and deeper than a harbour that's just spotted its first sail

Keath Fraser

13 Ways of Listening to a Stranger

So who CARES *if he's a recidivist* says Howard *so long as he respects the TV News Hour and isn't responsible for the* SMELL *in this house.* Howard won't lock his door. He says Kerby's a shoplifter, not a thief.

What's the diff? Andrew asks him.

Lots says Howard. *Thievery is anti-social.*

Here comes the whale you guys so can it. Old Gerry asking for quiet so we can find out more about whales landing dead on beaches in White Rock. Yesterday we got only part of the story and a full twelve seconds of footage. *Lookit* says Gerry. *Goddamn* WHALE.

Around here we're conditioned to lifting words above TV.

Gerry's divorced and a laid-off sawmill worker in his fifties, *too one-stroke* he says *to do anything else.* He's never had a holiday, outings hardly. The beach, he confided once, he remembers for a memory of his son as an infant. Gerry was tending him in the sand at a picnic like a small fire in the wind. He cupped his hands round the cheeks, banked up the blankets, he didn't know what all he didn't do to keep his son warm in the ocean breeze. He's the only man I've heard admit nursing mothers aren't the only ones who feel sexual twinges breast-feeding babies. *Nursing fathers feel it too, bottle-feeding. Boy, I don't want to sound like a* PERVERT said Gerry. *Just a fact. You feel twinges in your organ.* And he said *You can really love a baby.* He guessed his son would be somewhere in his twenties now. Could barely remember the little boy. Gerry could hardly veil the sorrow coming back to him from a distance, when he listened.

More shots of the dead whale on the beach. *Jesus* says Gerry. Greenpeace has asked an American biologist from the Marine Animal Resource Centre to come across the border to perform an autopsy. He's attacked the whale's carcass with a Japanese flensing knife. Spectators on the pier, on the beach. Guts tumble down the mountain of carcass to hill up in the wet sand. *Lookit the tongue lolling* says Gerry. The whale's tongue is French-kissing the sand and the mouth, like the end of pleasure, curls up in a little smile. Gerry whistles.

Seven or eight of us are boarders here, men without families, taking our supper after the News Hour from Mr. and Mrs. Carlin. Mr. Carlin has muttered he thinks the smell might be a dead mouse, caught between studs in the wall, joists in the floor, rotting. *Keep it under your hat* he says. The Missus is after him to call in The Pest People and not ignore what's getting worse. We all agree with Mrs. Carlin. Call in The Pest People, the Marines, anybody to figure out what the matter is. It's a question of having to breathe shallower and shallower every day now.

On TV Tony Parsons is saying officials fear it's likely too late to matter if they retrieve the liver or not. The whale's been beached five days. Enough time for vital organs to deteriorate.

What was it says Howard *an* ALCOHOLIC *whale*? He'd be surprised says old Gerry. If he wants to hear the dope just listen to what he's being told. Howard watches. We all watch. The American biologist cuts and saws the washed-up grey whale for blubber, blood, and lymph gland samples. *In its last two hours of ignominy* says Andrew. *B-lub-ber* says Howard, popping his lips. This isn't the first whale. Two or three dead whales have washed up at Mud Bay and Boundary Bay in the past month. A helicopter camera shows an aerial view of driftwood on a shoreline, then cutting lower, of bones like a wrecked ship's ribs. Then back to the sawing biologist in White Rock.

When we're watching him who should wander in but Kerby, the shoplifter. He does a long take at the carcass. *That is a* DEAD PARROT he says. *What d'you mean it's a dead parrot*? he answers himself. *It's* DEAD! he screams. *Is* NOT he answers *that parrot is just sleeping.*

Choke it, Kerby growls Gerry. Kerby falls backwards into the pink armchair in a frozen bow.

The autopsy is intended to find out if these whaling casualties might be related to toxins from a rumoured spill at a paint and chemical plant. *Shit* says Gerry. *Should see what sawmills pump into the river. Incredible there ain't salmon dead stiff from here to Yokohama. It's them chemicals, I know it. Chemicals in the water, chemicals in the air, chemicals in our goddamn food. Goddamn chemicals every place. These guys* says Gerry. *Whadda these guys in factories care? They don't care.* He says he feels cheesed off, browned off, and hoofed out. Hoofed out because he got laid off when the lumber markets collapsed. *Thought you were talking about whales* says Howard. *I am* says Gerry. *The pissing factories are poisoning us.*

We might find something says the biologist. *But it would surprise me.* Andrew doesn't disagree with authority. *Another beautiful mammal down the tube to pesticides* he says. But Kerby is back for an encore. PLUMAGE! he screams, rising from his chair. LOOK AT THE PLUMAGE! IT'S WILTED! Kerby can boil up his face like John Cleese.

Gerry glances at him. *Boy, what a jerk.*

Say what you LIKE! shouts Kerby. *I know a dead parrot when I see one*! When this joker leaves us to wash up for supper, Andrew turns to

Howard. *I'd lock my door if I was you.*

Gerry would like to know where Andrew gets his info and fancy words. *Reciddas*WHAT? he says. *Sounds like somebody who does sumpin to little girls in the holly.* Howard thinks we should all gang up on Kerby the next time he wants to watch a Monty Python re-run. But Andrew is cautious. *Let's wait till we're all here and take a vote.* Howard snorts. *Piss on the vote, Andy. Man wants to watch limey fags being funny when they're not deserves* Three's Company. *What*EVER. Old Gerry won't believe Kerby's got a criminal record *and even if he does he wouldn't steal from us.* Howard says Andrew is a worry wart. *I'm telling you* says Andrew. *Lock your doors.*

Nobody does and everyone squawks when a thief visits our boarding house one afternoon a week later. Most of us are out doing the little we do when it isn't raining. The sun keeps us in the streets and little parks longer than usual. Stuff is stolen and Mr. Carlin doesn't know anything about it. TOLD *you* Andrew reminds us all. But even his own door was forced, locked or not, and he has lost some spare change. Howard says it couldn't have been Kerby anyway, *Kerby was working* he says. At least he thinks he was working. Kerby is a sales clerk in Men's Wear at Woodward's, where Andrew claims he does his shoplifting as an inside job. THIS *had to be an inside job* says Mrs. Carlin. *I don't let in strangers, we keep an eye out.*

So there it stands. Thief at large, mistrust, the loitering smell getting worse. Old Gerry says *Imagine if it was a* WHALE *rotting. Pee*YOU. We're not encouraged and don't breathe deeply anymore. In our rooms we've closed the rads and opened windows. It really is a disheartening smell and bespeaks putrefaction. Mr. Carlin has called in The Pest People and they can't find the stink's source. They suggest he hire a carpenter to do a little prying behind walls.

Oh sure says Howard *tear down the walls, turn us into a dorm. Do*RRR*m* echoes Kerby, rolling his R's like Eric Idle mimicking a Dorset farmer. Howard, who lost a fountain pen from his unlocked room, says to Kerby *You'd like that wouldn't you, a dorm.* He's just as mad at Kerby as the rest of us in the absence of anyone else to blame. Howard is a lapsed Catholic who retains belief in the obligation of guilty consciences to *act* guilty.

If we was all WIMMIN says Gerry *we'd of stood up and demanded the smell be got rid of when she first cropped up.* He's serious. *When somebody or sumpin raises a stink we're willin' to put up with it till it's too late. I'm thinkin' of moving but I can't afford it. I can't afford to even* THINK *about moving right now.*

He says he doesn't miss the sawmill so much as a paycheck. His hands have softened since he used to roll hemlock boards onto piles off a greenchain. He shows us his leather apron, worn bright as glass, he even straps it on for old time's sake. *And you wore these oven mitts that smelled sweet on your hands. Afterwards like.*

Not that this takes our minds off our noses. Colin, the womanizer so-called, comes closer with a tale about the peach he's dating. He skins her

fuzz right in front of our eyes, before eating her up and leaving us a scarred red stone when he's through the door for a night on the town. *Boy* says Howard *I didn't smell this place* AT *all when he was doing it to her.* He's shaking his hand as if he just touched the stove. And forgotten he's late for his workout at the Y.

Colin, for all his good fortune with women, is a straightforward man of twenty-six who designs greeting cards, hoping to copyright his own line. He is usually asking Andrew to take his picture, outside on the porch, or in the Park with a nice backdrop in the rose garden, for his dossier. His real prey are distributors. Andrew does his best to oblige. Colin poses, Andrew clicks. Andrew tells us the snaps of Colin all look good, *as good as he can expect,* but Colin's never happy. He won't believe he isn't better looking than what his Polaroid spits out.

It's his spitting image says Gerry when Andrew shows him a snap Colin has rejected. *He's never happy* shrugs Andrew. Mrs. Carlin observes *It's always the prettiest girls who worry and primp.*

This is wisdom we appreciate, can use to justify our own lack of much lasting success with women, pretty or otherwise. *Women want to be considered* EQUAL says Howard *and still think they have to paint their lips and eyes and cheeks. They're bloody clowns sometimes.*

You sound like a misogynist Andrew tells him. Howard looks at him like he wants to swat Andrew in the chops. *Kiss off, Andy* he says. Doesn't know what a misogynist is but knows enough to know it isn't somebody who gives you a massage. *Sounds like a new-fangled word for dame* says Gerry. *Starts with Ms.*

We're all sitting around the parlour the Carlins haven't refurnished in thirty years. Everything is worn down and nearly out. Not like the smell, it's smelling stronger and stronger. Howard keeps wondering if Andrew has insulted him. But Andrew as the most sympathetic of us all is unlikely to hurt anyone. Just the reverse. He helps Mr. Carlin with chores when he doesn't have to, brings Mrs. Carlin flowers, which he picks illegally from the Park, an act of exceptional daring for Andrew, who respects rules and would never even walk against a red light. It's just that he can't afford a bouquet any other way.

Howard says to him *That dictionary of yours is a compensation for something deficient.*

Hey says Dale. *Knock it off.* Mrs. Carlin excuses herself to start dinner. Dale is our latest addition by eight months. More mature and better educated than most men in reduced circumstances, he gives the impression he would be generous if he was better off. He has travelled the world, taught school in Australia, and dodged a war in Vietnam by coming north to Canada. *Don't forget* he calls to Mrs. Carlin *I love raisins.*

He turns to us. *I love raisins in ice cream. God, I would probably love them in meat loaf.*

As if we don't know says Mr. Carlin. *Yeah* Howard says. *Last week it was*

raisins in our cookies. I personally prefer chocolate chips.

So do I says Andrew. Howard looks at him. *If Colin and Kerby were here* says Andrew *we could get up a petition and take it to the cook.*

But Dale is shaking his head. *When you can taste raisins as big as nipples, guys, the chocolate chip is a zit on the backside of a monkey.*

Howard guffaws. He's laughing at Andrew, whose nostrils flare a little to suppress a smile. Dale can be one of the boys when he wants to be. Andrew would like to be, notwithstanding his books and love of order.

On Saturday afternoon I find myself outside Colin's door upstairs watching him rub himself against a men's magazine. *Hey* he says, turning towards me in the hallway. *C'mere.* When I walk into his room everything is tidy, the bed made, his mirror on the wall trimmed with snaps of girls and even one or two of himself. His draughting board sits under the window's light. *Look at this* he says. *Smell it.* He hands me the magazine, a perfume ad for something called L'Homme. I study the advertisement. *Try L'Homme Right Now* it says. *Open flap and rub on wrist. You'll love it!* I sniff the scented fold Colin has been rubbing on his wrists. For a moment the smell in the house vanishes. *Order now* it says *and begin your L'Homme adventure today.* I wonder if L'Homme adventures aren't what Colin enjoys anyway. *Smells nice* I say. Colin sniffs his wrists. *Not bad. I'll get Kerby to pick me up some. Beggar owes me.*

Seems he's on his way out to celebrate the acceptance of a set of Father's Day cards by a major chain of drugstores. *It's a start* he shrugs with false modesty. *Well* I say *that's fan-bloody-tastic, Colin. You told Mrs. Carlin*? He looks at me. *Her father still alive*?

She might cook you a special meal to celebrate.

Jesus he says. *I'd rather eat at Burger King. I'm on my way out with a chick to the Keg.*

Big deal says Gerry, when he hears where Colin's eating. *Listen, this calls for a* SPECIAL *celebration. I'm gonna tell Mrs. Carlin to lay out a nice supper for the occasion. On Father's Day* he says. *Wild* says Kerby, arriving home from work to learn of Colin's success. *Last time anybody besides me around here made money was when Howard opened a cheese shop. Let's hear it for free enterprise*!

What's he talking about? says Howard. *Bloody* CHEESE *shop now.*

Maybe says Dale *he's getting it mixed up with when you tried delivering fliers.*

Howard thinks the biggest rip-off in his life occurred when Unemployment stopped coming and he got ink in his skin for peanuts. *Eff all is what fliers pay* he advises anybody tempted by a route. He'd rather hoist dumb bells at the Y.

Kerby says *You guys'll go on living off Welfare long after this* SMELL *drives us all into the streets. I'm getting T.B. as a result of this stink.*

Old Gerry doesn't say so but you can tell he likes the idea of a Father's Day celebration, and not just to celebrate Colin's success. He excuses himself to go to the toilet. *My kidneys. Chemicals or sumpin on the lumber over*

the years. Gerry's become an environmentalist.

Poor old Gerry says Dale. *He's got bad pipes.* Then he says *Makes you think what the plumbing in the late Glenn Gould's brain must have been like. All of a sudden bursting. You know.*

What? says Howard.

What? mimics Kerby, unknotting his tie. *Typical American, Dale, you trying to throw dirt on our national genius*?

Who's Glenn Gold? asks Howard.

The smell in the house isn't any better, in fact it's getting worse, and The Pest People have come back and still can't locate it. Mrs. Carlin has begun to worry what if we can't locate the smell, what if it's part of the wood in the floors and walls and ceilings? *Don't be ridiculous, woman* Mr. Carlin has told her. But the house *is* old, a boarding house at the turn of the century, still a boarding house today. A lot of men have passed through here. Turrets, gables, some gingerboard left where the weather hasn't eroded it away, the place from the outside looks like the ark. Kerby's theory is a dead pigeon. *You betcha* says Howard. *Seriously, Howard* he says. *Rotting in the attic. Infested with lice.* Mr. Carlin informs him smartly everything is wired tight against pigeons under the eaves. *Well* says Kerby, wheezing. *How come I* HEAR *pigeons every morning in my room? On* TOP *of my room. In the ceiling someplace.*

That's a can of worms says Mr. Carlin *I ain't interested in.* Kerby acts surprised. *Mr. Carlin* he says *you don't believe me?*

Nope. There's a stink all right. Not pigeon stink though.

Parrot maybe?

When Gerry comes back into the parlour buttoning his trousers he turns on the TV. *News Hour* he reminds us. Kerby glares at him. *Just when we're having a philosophical discussion, Ger. Howard here was saying he'll go back to Mother Church if only Glenn Gould would play his organ. Right, How*? Howard yawns.

Dale must be wondering if Kerby's flair for smart-ass talk is any different from being a thief. He's always robbing the house of sensible direction, his selfish ego. Dale decides he's had enough of Kerby's nattering and asks him point-blank if he stole an electric shaver from his room.

Dead quiet. Except for Tony Parsons talking to us, only we're not listening. Even Gerry wants to hear out Kerby. *Nope* says Kerby. His lack of surprise at being challenged disturbs Dale, as if Kerby expected it. *No*? asks Dale.

Nope he repeats.

Let's watch the News says Gerry.

Wars, famine. More shutdowns.

After the News Hour comes supper. It's a long time to wait for supper, and only Kerby approves since it gives him time to get home from Woodward's and freshen up. He never bothers to watch the News anyway. *At twenty-one who's interested in news*? asks Gerry. *Makin'* FUN *of the*

News is news. Mrs. Carlin doesn't say so but serving the meal after instead of before the News makes her feel superior to the ordinary landlady, although her food is definitely ordinary. Maybe she hopes her silver and china will help us forget the bland taste of the food. These heirlooms from her mother are nothing less than exalted, and she keeps them sparkling, watching us hunkered over her Chantilly forks with a sureness that sooner or later some transformation of our manners will occur. This is no more likely than a metamorphosis of her cooking. Sausages, hamburger, greasy lamb chops, stews, boiled chicken . . . *Blubber food* remarks Howard, worried about cholesterol. *What's food anyway* shrugs Andrew *except fuel*? Andrew eats little. *What* OUGHT *to begin in the stomach* mutters Colin *is romance.* Usually Mrs. Carlin, who sits at the head of the table, is too busy explaining to Dale why there're no raisins in the casserole, or complaining to her husband about the smell, to hear dissension about her cooking. We wouldn't know how to celebrate.

Even together we are not interdependent like women in a group. We are irritable having to stand in bank and bakery line-ups on Altamira. We don't trade easily in gossip with strangers, don't value it much among ourselves. Most of us are still young, without prospects in a world that expects us to work and worse, to judge ourselves by what we have. We have the false freedom of the idle. Having to live together gives us a washed-up feeling. And this smell in the house just more or less reminds us of our futures. We don't breathe deeply for fear of forgetting what the past had promised. We've learned to get along on U.I.C., and when that runs out, Welfare. After we pay for Room and Board what's left over is busfare to look for jobs. As if there was someplace left to look. Colin, it's clear, has initiative. He is always saying *I'm getting out of this place when I get a few bucks in the bank.* Andrew is the one who doesn't seem to mind the house. He likes us to depend on him for little things, like Colin for his photographs of himself, Mrs. Carlin for his setting the table and helping serve the meals, Howard for someone to bully. He's the one who supplies womanly sympathy, in place of Mrs. Carlin you could say, at least you can trust Andrew not to ignore your complaints. Kerby doesn't like him much, that's because Andrew doesn't trust Kerby. Andrew is stubborn when he believes he has the right. Andrew believes Kerby's out to sabotage our house from the inside.

Kerby's like the smell we can't put our fingers on says Andrew. *Elusive and insidious sort of.* Andrew worries about losing his small but he claims valuable collection of first editions. Sea stories he treasures. Old Gerry who has never had time for books and big words thinks it wouldn't be a bad thing if Andrew *was* to lose a couple books. But he's joking. Gerry who's lost a wife, a son, and a job is tired of losing and wouldn't wish the same on anybody. He never talks about his wife, and only says he used to have his own house.

It was there in the back yard a crow once attacked his son in a baby

carriage under the pear tree. *I trapped the bird inside the buggy and bust its wings with my bare hands* claims Gerry. *I think the baby thought he'd been jolly-jumpered to death. The buggy had axle springs.*

Gerry says he remembers Saturday mornings because his son resembled a dolphin. Gerry climbed the stairs to his crib. He'd find his son rocking on his stomach, making little squeals, fat, white-skinned cheeks shining and his mouth turned up in a gummy grin. *He had this bulgy forehead* says Gerry *and this bald head.*

Gerry's still in favour of a celebration to mark Colin's success. So is Andrew, who has talked to Mrs. Carlin about a party in June. Mrs. Carlin is too worried about the smell to think that far ahead and thinks we could be driven out by then.

Don't worry about the smell, Mrs. C. says Dale *it'll take care of itself. Smells do.*

No one is so confident as Dale, who goes out every morning before breakfast, to roam the city looking, we guess, for work. After supper he'll leave for the library downtown or go to a movie or walk to the beach. He only has to sleep with the smell. And he claims it doesn't affect his dreams. He just says happily *I escaped Nam and killing Asians.* But that was years ago. What is his story since? Dale is always holding something back, aloof at times, a man who commits himself to parlour life, such as it is, just so far, because he needs a buffer zone to think. A demilitarized zone Colin calls it.

Those of us who hang around the house are beginning to worry about the debilitating effect, in Andrew's parlance, of a smell we can now smell when we're away from the house, downtown, or else in the forest in the Park. We agree it isn't in our clothes so much as in our memory of it. This rotting smell, it seems to penetrate and lock itself into our brain cells, *if you can imagine* says Howard *those cells as microchips.* Gerry says *he* imagines them as jails. *Mexican jails.* It's putrid and depressing. A mouse has died, maybe a rat, and the smell from its small carcass has filled the entire house and infected our brain matter.

Sometimes, Mr. Carlin's feet can smell like rotting salmon if he's been cutting the grass or pruning the holly. But that's a smell we understand and can avoid by leaving the parlour. It's local. *When you lose control over the environment* says Gerry *that's when you get desperate.* Andrew wonders *What's the diff?*

A carpenter has begun prying behind places in our bedrooms, trying to trace the smell without tearing down the walls. But there is no centre to pinpoint. He'll lift a floorboard and sniff between floors. Howard's theory is the smell could just as easily be downstairs someplace, in the furnace even. It smells bad everywhere. *Smells bad everywhere* he says. *We could die from lousy ventilation and lung bugs.*

Meanwhile things are happening for Colin. Women, publicity. A wealthy Chinese girl is after him, picks him up in a sports car that we all

gaze at him slipping into. He tells us *Hey, I ask her to listen to her knees, she does it, eh*? And he's still skinning Peaches, as Howard calls her. Kerby's envy rises. By the time he's Colin's age he'll have a TR of his own he swears. Dale is the one who spots Colin's photo in the evening paper, in a column called We Asked You, about rezoning the West End. *Do you agree or disagree with the city's proposal to preserve the present character of remaining residential houses*? The caption beside Colin's photo reads, Colin Downs, age 24, 1497 Bartholomew, President and Chief Designer of Concord Cards. *I don't see the point of it. If developers are willing to put up new highrises, why not? Too many people are out of work. Those old buildings are rotten anyway.* Dale reads Colin's words out to us in the parlour.

Who took your picture? Andrew asks Colin. *Some guy took it when I was talking to a reporter* says Colin *I don't like it.* Gerry looks at the photo. *It ain't bad, Colin.* Kerby says *Makes him look punk.* Then Howard says to Colin *What're you going around saying they ought to tear down the roof over our heads for*? Colin's answer is that as soon as he gets his bearings in the field he's OUTTA here. Get Well, Good Luck, Happy Birthday, Congratulations, Happy Easter, Be My Valentine: funny cards on recycled paper are where it's at for Colin.

I like the name of your company says Gerry. *Concord Cards.*

The big CC says Kerby. *Day comes when we can say we knew him when's the day he's living in the British Properties looking down on us scrounging a living in the city.* Dale looks at Kerby. *Or pilfering a living*? he asks him. Kerby isn't listening.

Colin asks Gerry why he wants to celebrate the selling of his first greeting card? *I already celebrated at the Keg* he tells him. Gerry says he thought it would be kind of nice to celebrate on Father's Day, kind of appropriate, given the nature of the card. But Colin just excuses himself. *I can't stand the stink* he says *Sundays least of all.* He disappears upstairs to sprinkle himself, I imagine, with L'Homme before venturing out, like some earl from a mouldering castle.

Howard has finally started locking his door. *The anti-social element in this place is beginning to get on my case.* Socks of his have disappeared. And cuff links. *My old man's. Nobody ever saw them 'cause I never wear 'em. I kept the box in my dresser.*

The heat's on Kerby to own up and he won't. He won't even admit to Andrew having once had a problem with the law. *I'd like to know why you think that. I'm no con. Hey, I pinch the odd tie off Chunky Woodward but listen. It stops there, eh*? But Andrew has hold of Kerby like a cat shaking a mouse. *I* KNOW he says *what I know.* Says he's seen him writing with Howard's fountain pen. *That right*? Howard asks Kerby. *Hey, mate* Kerby says to Howard in Cockney *your shirt's on fire.*

After this the pilfering drops off, Howard's pen reappears in the kitchen, though not his cuff links. Dale is still missing his shaver. *Then nothing's changed* warns Andrew. *Keep your door locked.* He sniffs a little,

simpers. *Andy, you got to let the smell escape* says Gerry. Howard looks at Gerry. ESCAPE he says *shit.* Andrew tells Gerry to keep his window open. *I do* says Gerry *we all do. This smell just wears you down.*

It'll go away repeats Dale. We accept his voice as one of wisdom and general experience of the world. And have a good laugh just the same. *Go out* he advises us, smoking his pipe. *Sit on the beach and smell the wind. Clean out your mantras.* Howard snorts. Howard always snorts. *Jesus* he exclaims. Dale came of age in the sixties and subscribes to the wreckage of their ideals. Howard says it's all right for him, he can probably afford to move out whenever he wants. He's got family in Philadelphia sending him money. *Irregardless* says Gerry *we like him.*

Everybody likes Dale, he has his hand on the key to some inner strength that eludes the rest of us. *He's tranquil* Andrew says. *Deep sometimes.* Howard says *For all we know* HE *could be the house thief. Confidence men run deep.*

Smell runs deep.

What's food anyway asks old Gerry *but thought? Hey?* He's trying to come up with a menu he thinks might interest Mrs. Carlin for Father's Day and he's biting the end of Howard's pen he's borrowed. Thoughtfulness, does he mean, or planning ahead? Maybe he means fuel. Fuel for thought. Gerry is putting a lot of thought into the celebration and Andrew says it's touching to watch. *Poor old Gerry* says Kerby *the guy who's lost a son, cooking up an excuse to celebrate Father's Day.*

When a silver fork, then a knife go missing on different evenings, Gerry is the one to rush to Mrs. Carlin's cries of alarm. He is outraged, to put it exactly, as if this kind of pilfering is more contemptible than bedroom stealing. *This is* SERIOUS he says. *Mrs. Carlin's silver's what keeps the likes of* US *alive.* He sounds silly, refusing to turn on the News Hour till he lectures us on our responsibilities to our hosts. Howard snorts. HOSTS! Old Gerry lights into *that* remark. He lights into Kerby, he lights into all of us for complaining so much and doing nothing to contribute to our own order and well-being. Next afternoon Mrs. Carlin discovers her knife and fork in the garbage bag Andrew is about to carry out to the dumpster. *I must of swept them into the garbage cleaning up* she says. *And we nearly threw these treasures out!* Tearing eyes attest to the importance she attaches to these baroque heirlooms.

Don't ya see says Gerry, unashamed of his hectoring behaviour. *We're* FAMILY. *I believe that.*

His support during her two-day ordeal makes Mrs. Carlin a little keener to encourage his Father's Day party for Colin. *That's real nice, Gerry* says Colin, bored to death by Gerry's proposal. *But I don't need any party.* In fact he doesn't even know if he can come to a dinner in his honour. Dale looks at him. *You'll make it, Colin* he says. Colin looks at Dale in a puzzled way. He's got no intention of coming to dinner on a Sunday when he's never here anyway. Peaches cooks for him. Or else his

wealthy friend from Hong Kong takes him dining in the sky somewhere.

Colin leaves the room to attend to his sketches. He shows me one he's working on at the moment, a birthday card on the cover that says I KNOW IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY . . . and when I open it, says . . . 'CAUSE A LITTLE BIRDIE TOLD ME!! The sketch inside is of a muscular eagle smashing a tennis ball with his racquet across a net. Under the net it says MANY HAPPY RETURNS!!! *It's a jock card* says Colin. *For a jock. Got the idea from our pigeons in the eaves.* He wants to know what I think of it.

Nifty. How'd you get an eagle to look happy?

May then June. Trees on the boulevard outside are umbrellas in full canopy. *Fulla crows* says Gerry somberly.

Dale's RIGHT Mrs. Carlin exclaims, sniffing the parlour. *It* IS *going away.* And she hugs us right through the News Hour one evening, before we've begun to notice for ourselves we aren't locked so much into the stink.

It seems unnoticeable at first, maybe because it's stuck inside the way we think of this place every time we come back, so we just close our minds and try not to smell what we think is still here. But it *is* fading. It's going away. Our terrible smell is going away. Mrs. Carlin can hardly contain her happiness, *for what's happiness but relief?* says Andrew.

R—O—L says Kerby A—I—D—S. *Nudge nudge, wink wink.*

We settle down. We dare to breathe more deeply. Compared to the regular News Hour, the Saturday News Hour is more retrospective and the Saturday before Father's Day, Pamela Martin, who's substituting for Tony Parsons, summarizes a Greenpeace report blaming a spill of wood preservatives at a local paint factory for the deaths of at least nine grey whales in the inland waters north and south of the international boundary, between March and June. *Holy crow* says Gerry. NINE. *Listen.* They're showing old footage of the same whale as before, lying sideways on the beach in White Rock. *It's sick what things can happen* says Mr. Carlin. *It's chemicals* says Gerry. *Hear?* He's right.

Authorities estimate forty-three tonnes of pentachlorophenols and tetrachlorophenols from the Cloverdale Paint and Chemical Company Ms. Martin articulates *were dumped into the Serpentine River and washed to sea, where they settled into pools and ravines on the ocean bottom.* Gerry doesn't like the beautiful Ms. Martin so much as he does Tony Parsons. Still, his attention is glued. *The whales come along like vacuum cleaners* she says *to feed and end up sucking toxins into their systems.* Cut to a genetics professor at a news conference, who guesses surviving whales will end up with liver damage and immune systems unable to resist disease. *Or to repair usual-type wounds and injuries* he says. *Plus it will probably impair their ability to reproduce.*

Gerry listens. And he listens when a forensic toxicologist from Oregon predicts nine deaths are just the tip of the iceberg, maybe several

icebergs. *Didn't I tell ya*? cries Gerry. *Goddamn. It's the dyin' of the* LIGHT. *For sure.*

He means it. Deaths of these animals have moved him deeply. Howard thinks Gerry is moved too easily. Andrew says Gerry is probably worried about dioxins in his own system. *A fear is piercing him* he says. Dale wonders aloud where Gerry's son might be. *No one has ever asked him, right*? Howard would like to know the difference between dioxins and toxins.

When we finally sit down to dine on Father's Day Mrs. Carlin generously tells us Gerry has bought the shoulder of lamb out of his own pocket and prepared it with a mint sauce and roast potatoes. She looks on approvingly. Colin has shown up, as Dale predicted, and graciously consented to be our guest of honour. *It's my pleasure* he says like a good businessman. Kerby has contributed four bottles of dry red wine, Howard the avocados, Dale the dessert, and Andrew orange blossoms in little urns. For some of us this is a first taste of avocado pears. We toast Colin, young Colin, as old Gerry calls him with some pride. He wishes him continued success with his greeting-card business. We all drink to that, and eat up the avocados, the lamb, the potatoes, the sauce.

There's no occasion says Gerry *that food can't* IMPROVE *it.* And we drink to that too. *Food is delicious*! we all say. *Food is wonderful*! *Food is life*! And eating this heavenly food we believe fervently in what we say.

After Dale's big chocolate cake, *with* RAISINS he says, after my coffee, when we're all sitting around the lounge smoking Colin's cigars, there's a ring at the front door. Andrew comes back bearing a telegram. *It's for Gerry. Mr. Gerry Turner* he reads.

Old Gerry stands up and acts like he receives telegrams every day. There is dignity in the way he stands there. *Telegrams are always bad news* he says calmly. Nobody disagrees with him. His dignity in the face of inevitability seems quaint. The TV is on, flickering soundlessly in lieu of the boarded-up fireplace, something we can turn to if the conversation goes cold. We all turn politely to watch a car chase in California it looks like.

Then old Gerry is standing in the corner by the door jamb weeping softly and studying his telegram. This makes the whole room uncomfortable. Probably nobody has seen a man as old as Gerry crying before. Our fathers never cried. Mrs. Carlin stands up and says she'll bring in some fresh coffee. Mr. Carlin gets up to turn up the volume. Engines whining. Only Andrew goes to Gerry, he's the only one who knows how.

It's from my son Gerry finally says. *Lookit this.* He hands Andrew the telegram to read. *It's from his son* says Andrew. Andrew looks it over. Then he reads DEAR DAD STOP HAVE NOT SEEN EACH OTHER IN YEARS STOP BUT AM REMEMBERING YOU TODAY STOP LOVE MARLOW

Hey, Ger that's great! says Howard. The rest of us stand up and form a

circle of gentle back slappers, congratulating Gerry and Gerry is crying unashamed tears as he looks at each of us with real joy in his heart. His wrinkled skin just glows.

It couldn't have ended better says Mr. Carlin, happily. *It's like Gerry arranged his own Father's Day, eh Ger?*

Gerry says Colin. *You didn't tell us your son's name was Marlow.*

All Gerry can say, in a glad tremulous voice, is *I musta mentioned it. I musta mentioned it.*

We go to bed happy that night, feeling good that someone among us has thought to send this telegram to Gerry. His room is next to mine and in the middle of the night I'm aroused by a muffled sobbing. It's muffled in the way pigeons coo roosting when night falls.

I get up and put on my dressing gown and go into the hall to tap lightly on Gerry's door. My knuckles rap the old varnish. *Gerry*? His light is on and he's sitting up in his bed with the telegram on the blanket. He wipes his eyes.

Neither of us says anything. After a while Gerry takes some deep breaths and calms himself. *I ain't sad* says Gerry. *I ain't crying 'cause I'm sad or nothin'. I'm just real happy.*

He blows his nose with a hanky he pulls out of his pajama pocket. *I know you meant well. All of you* he says *sending me a telegram and all.* He sniffles. *Thing is my son died real young* he says *from meningitis and the reason I guess I'm mewing is on account of the sheer, I dunno, love I feel for the bunch of you and for some bugger in this place who was* NICE *enough to send old Gerry a telegram on Father's Day. I don't think it was a mean trick at all. I think it was real nice. You guys are family.*

What's the matter with Gerry? asks Andrew, waiting outside the varnish. *Sssshhh* I whisper. *He's just happy.*

These men, I think after, lying in my bed, their voices in my head. An ambulance is travelling up Bartholomew to the hospital, carrying a heart-attack victim through our tunnel of sycamores. And the other sounds, the shunting on distant wharfs of the North Shore, ships leaving one continent in darkness for another. Letting go, I breathe deeply and smell the old plaster and worn carpet thread. I listen. I value these sleeping men. I love them just as Gerry does. God, none of us knows the source of a thing like smell, or where kindness comes from, or where evil dwells. No more than we can fathom the vanishings of these.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

BRIAN BARTLETT teaches a course in Composition at Concordia University and is pursuing a Ph.D. at the Université de Montréal. Earlier this year a chapter of his novel *Fearful Children* appeared in *Fatal Recurrences: New Fiction in English from Montreal,* an anthology edited by Hugh Hood and Peter O'Brien.

BRENDA BORROWMAN, a recent graduate of Emily Carr College of Art and Design, exhibits in her hometown of Vancouver.

GEORGE BOWERING is teaching this summer at The Free University of Berlin and working on a long poem entitled "Delayed Mercy". His latest book of poems, *Kerrisdale Elegies* was published last year by Coach House.

GREGORY COOK lives in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, where he is the Executive Director of the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia. His latest book, *Love In Flight,* is set to appear from Ragweed Press.

DON DOMANSKI also lives in Wolfville. These poems are from his latest book, *Hammerstroke,* to appear shortly from Anansi.

ANGHEL DUMBRAVEANU has contributed a dozen books to the much-discussed "lyrical renaissance" of recent Romanian Poetry. He is currently editor of the Romanian literary magazine *Orizont.*

ROBERT EADY lives in Kanata, Ontario. These pieces are from his just-released book of prose-poems *The Blame Business* (Ouroboros Press).

KEATH FRASER is the author of *Taking Cover* (Oberon, 1982), and *Foreign Affairs* (General Publishing, later this year). This Vancouver writer has two novellas featured in the current issue of *Canadian Fiction Magazine.*

BILL GASTON, also of Vancouver, has fiction soon to appear in *The Malahat Review* and poems in *Ariel* and *The Wascana Review. Gold* won second prize in *PRISM international's* recent fiction contest.

RALPH GUSTAFSON lives in North Hatley, in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. His most recent collection, *Directives of Autumn,* appeared last fall from McClelland and Stewart.

ERIC MCCORMACK lives in Waterloo, Ontario. *Knox Abroad* is from a collection to be published in the near future, *Inspecting the Vaults.*

ELAINE PERRY lives and works in New York City. Her poems will appear in upcoming issues of *Visions, Poetry Motel,* and *Earthwise Poetry Journal.*

MARCEL POP-CORNIS is associate professor at the University of Timisoara, Romania. He is currently Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Northern Iowa.

DEREK ROBINSON of Victoria has published two chapbooks: *Child* in 1975 and *Twelve Poems* in 1980. He now works part-time as a practical nurse to support the "real work" of poetry.

KAY RYAN of Fairfax, California has recently had poems appear in *Poetry* (Chicago) and *The Kenyon Review*. A book of her poems, *Strangely Marked Metal,* is due out this year from Copper Beech Press of Brown University.

TONI SAMMONS lives in Goleta, California. "Travelling" is from an unpublished collection of love poems, *Dancing in a Bear Garden.*

ROBERT J. WARD, a professor at the University of Northern Iowa, has had poems and articles published in America, Canada, Spain and Romania. He is co-translator with Dr. Pop-Cornis of *Eleven Romanian Poets of the Past Decade* (Micromegas, 1984).

PATRICK WHITE lives in Ottawa. His most recent collections include *The God in the Rafters* (Borealis Publishing) and *Seventeen Odes* (Fiddlehead Press).

LAURIE ANNE WHITT, an associate member of the League of Canadian Poets, lives in London, Ontario. She was included in the recent anthology, *New Voices: A Celebration of New Canadian Poetry.*

PRISM *international* is holding a poetry writing contest open to anyone except students currently enrolled in the Department of Creative Writing at UBC. There are no restrictions as to the length of the poems, but all entries must be original, unpublished material available for publication in a future issue of PRISM. PRISM *international* will purchase First North American Serial Rights for all work it accepts for publication. All entries must be typed double-spaced on 8½ x 11 white paper. Entrants' full name and address must appear on the first page of the manuscript and all entries must include a stamped, self-addressed envelope with sufficient return postage. Entries from countries other than Canada should include International Reply Coupons.

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Fiction by: *Bill Gaston, Eric McCormack and Keath Fraser.*

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Poetry by: *Charles Bukowski, Michael Dennis . . . .*

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ISSN 0032-8790