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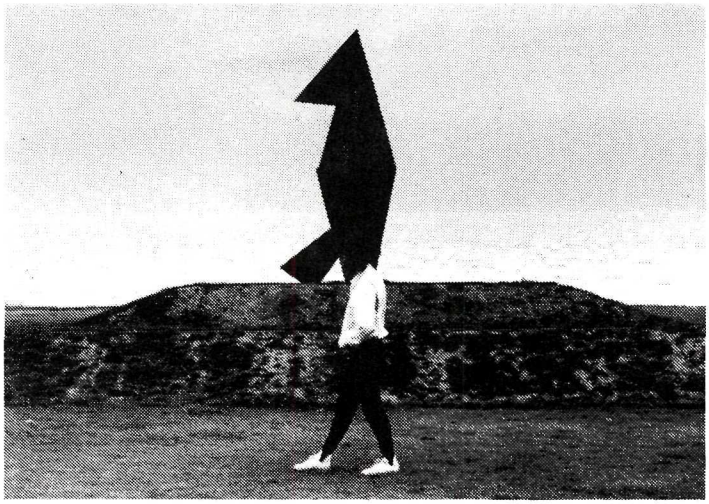

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David Galef

Night Ward

The table fan in the ten-man dorm looked and sounded like a bit of green fuselage, whistling through the night. Upwards in the darkened room, above the reach of the fan, a mass of air hung stagnant like a hot, breathing presence. From the open casement came frequent gusts from the Shanghai Canal, whiffs of rotting vegetables and raw sewage. There were occasional sighs in the chamber, but whether they came from the sleepers or the city itself was unclear. In any event, not everyone in the room was asleep: on the cot in the far corner of the room, Robert Low lay patiently, preternaturally awake, waiting for the next rumbling of his bowels.

The disease had started in Guangzhou with something he had eaten at lunch, a gray, gelatinoec slab that he knew was bad even as he chewed it. That night, riding in what the Chinese called a hard-seat train, his guts began to rearrange themselves into unfamiliar positions, glands and organs all combining as if to form some anatomical funnel. Then everything began sliding down the funnel, and he had started losing sleep. He had medicines; he discovered they were no good. The course of his trip across China began to take on a bizarre interior impulse: in trains, hotels, and waiting rooms, to locate the bathroom as soon as possible, and to replenish his supply of toilet paper. He kept hoping for improvement, like a change in the weather, but the days remained hot and humid and he continued to lose weight.

At first, he told no one, or rather, he wrote no one: his main method of communication was to write Chinese characters on a notepad he carried and hope for a sympathetic reader. Most Chinese could speak no English. Back home, he had had a Chinese friend teach him basic character strokes—pronunciation he garbled hopelessly—and they had settled on writing. In Hong Kong, he had combed through a pocket dictionary, looking for tourist words. *Room fee, train ticket, rice bowl.* He now had two dictionaries and realized poignantly that he should have brought a phrasebook and pointed, like other travelers. Possibly his pen strokes were inexact; sometimes people understood, sometimes they laughed. His pad contained, amid endless starts and finishes, one conversation with an old man in Guangzhou, pages long,

which ended in a long string of incomprehensible characters.

The fuller his pad became, the sicker he got. By the time he reached Shanghai, he had had no sleep for four nights and what had started out as an adventure in China had turned into a prolonged nightmare. It had been hard enough getting a place to stay in Shanghai. Every place was booked and he had been lucky to get a spot in a hotel dormitory. Tomorrow, he told himself—though lately he addressed his remarks directly to his stomach—in the morning, when you've survived one more night and it's obvious you're not getting better, then you go look for help. His fingers in the dark sketched out the two characters for *hospital*: "doctor-institution." A schematic arrow inside an enclosure, a curve like a B, the rooftop radical . . . drawing the pictograms cheered him minimally, though the word *hospital,* in any language, made him feel afraid. His fingers traced out other words—*door, bicycle.*

He looked up from his ghostwriting. The Japanese travel clock by the edge of his bed read two a.m., its dial a vivid green. The cramps now came on the hour. They seemed to come with ever increasing frequency, like labour pains, but always heralded by a liquid rumbling. They came now, moving with alluvial swiftness. Before the pain could set in, he was out of his cot and into his shoes, and with an invalid's delicacy was padding out the door, down the hall to the public facilities.

The toilet was Western-style but hopelessly clogged. The bathroom itself, like the entire hotel, was a relic of the Shanghai of the 1930's. Now, the wooden moldings were swollen with moisture, and the doors wouldn't shut. In the rooms, the fixtures had been ripped out incompletely: a chandelier-hole above a repainted escritoire, a bit of wallpaper with an art deco fish hanging in mid-hallway.

Robert wedged the bathroom door in place and sat down heavily. The room, through frequent visits, was already familiar. The bathtub was a cast-iron monstrosity with a lion's head for a spigot, a runnel of rust down the interior. In a basin, a mass of gray laundry floated like an island. The tilework, where it wasn't whitewashed over, was flecked gold and black. In a moment, the lion's head merged with the tiles and the basin as the whole scene swam together. Robert groaned and succumbed to another body-wracking cramp.

Afterwards, he felt purged but even weaker than before, his thin white legs splayed out like two appendages that no longer belonged to him. His T-shirt was soaked in sweat, his shorts hopelessly soiled. Without any clear transition, he was back in the room again, lying down on the hard bedding, and this was his third, or maybe fourth time tonight.

The fan whirred, the vague sighs continued. Alone in the dark, the

premonition of the next rumble keeping him awake, he began feeling resentful of the others, just inches away, yet asleep. For him, sleep seemed a great distance off—twelve thousand miles off, perhaps, in Boston, where he listlessly pursued a graduate degree during the winter months. At this time back home, his girlfriend Emily would be yawning over her desk. In her second year of law school, she was working this summer for the firm Rogers & Halwell and often kidded him that graduate students couldn't afford to travel on any high scale. "And think of the postage you'll have to waste writing to me." He had written to her just yesterday, in fact, a brief postcard in which he mentioned he had come down with something, though he wasn't explicit. Couldn't be explicit, when he still didn't know what he had.

The bed seemed to poke through parts of his body, though the mattress was hard and flat. He shifted onto his side, but his belly complained, building toward another ominous rumble. He was so tired—if he could only fall asleep, he would be all right for a while, unaware of his body, oblivious like those in the beds around him in this cramped dormitory. Of the nine others, he had talked with only one, a long-faced Scotsman who had offered him a digestive biscuit when Robert lightly referred to his illness. Most were the backpack and tin cup type of traveler, their bags now at the bases of their cots, like solemn markers. The sleeping figures were so still.

Robert took a deep breath and tried very hard to imitate the others. He stretched out his legs, adjusted his breathing, and shut his eyes—just then his stomach protested violently, the familiar tugging sensation at his bowels. He was about to get up again, to begin once more the long trek down the hall, when another spasm made him double up over the sheet. He saw, with the clarity of a dreamer who sees past surfaces, that he wouldn't make it to the morning. He simply couldn't take any more of this. There was even the possibility, not worth thinking about for more than a few seconds, that he might collapse right there. He would die draped over the bed—a final spasm would do it—and no one would notice until morning.

He looked at the clock, almost three now, and thought of the people he would wake up downstairs, the havoc that a sick American would cause in the hotel. Or maybe they wouldn't care, you couldn't tell. Since he had arrived in China, he had been stared at for minutes on end and completely ignored at other times. It was the other end of the world from Boston. Walking in the street, he had been jostled with incredible ferocity, but it didn't seem directed only at him, and on another occasion, he had been helped onto a bus. This was just after one of his attacks, and it had cheered him at the time, though they gave him a seat at the expense of an old woman with a twisted leg. Then the clerk at tonight's hotel had refused him a place three times before

finally admitting there was a bed open. There was little logic in the mixed treatment: he was a novelty item, with all the mixed feelings a novelty item engendered. But to get medical help needed an audience—or at least one attentive reader.

He hurriedly packed a plastic bag with his dictionaries and passport, shorts and a change of shirt, and walked toward the door. At the last moment, he knocked into a piece of furniture looming blackly against the wall, and the crash sent him backwards. Someone sat up in bed; someone else rolled over in the yellow awning of light from the hallway. Robert shut the door and made his way toward the stars. Accommodations tonight were so crowded that there were people sleeping in the far corridor. He saw them now: flat bodies on flat cots. He hurried by.

He moved down a flight of grand ballroom steps, a curved expanse with a marble balustrade, then another and another. Waiting at the bottom, however, was not an orchestra ensemble but a man sleeping on a wooden bench against the main door. His hand was over his eyes, and he gave off snores in fits and starts, like an early-model automobile. Robert approached him, pen and paper in hand.

He tapped the man on the shoulder and then, when he got no response, he shook him lightly. The man rolled over on the bench and muttered something in Chinese. He was the caretaker, maybe, or the night watchman, guarding the premises with his own body against the gate. Robert shook him once more, almost violently, and said aloud, "Wake up, will you? I'm sick!"

The man stirred in his undershirt and looked up, his eyes meeting Robert's. Now was the time to act, to explain. Holding his stomach, he grimaced in pain. Shoving his pad under the man's face, he wrote out in laborious Chinese, "I . . . am . . . sick-condition."

The man looked at the characters on the pad suspiciously. He pointed back up the stairs, talking in Chinese. They all thought that because Robert could write he could certainly speak.

Robert's comprehension of the language was limited to "thank you," "hello," and "good-bye," and this was none of them. In any event, he had no intention of going back upstairs. He shook his head long and slowly, pointing to the pad. Underneath his first message, he wrote, "I . . . go . . . hospital." The word *hospital,* which he had traced over and over on the bedsheet, came out elegantly.

The man read the words and barked out a sentence. Robert gave an exaggerated shrug, the man said something more, and so Robert printed out the only full, grammatical sentence he knew in the language: "I cannot speak Chinese."

Another suspicious glance: this could go on all night, the way one waited for a room, for a train ticket, the way everything in this country

seemed opaque, intransigent. The two men stared at each other. Robert flipped through his dictionary, found the word *necessity,* and jotted it down next to the hospital-sentence. He presented the pad again.

When the man began talking once more in Chinese, Robert pointed to his mouth and shook his head violently. "Hospital," he wrote again. His limited Chinese was useful for only one type of arguing: repetition.

Finally nodding, the man got up from the bench, unlocked the hasp on the outer door and gestured down the road. Catching on to Robert's limited form of communication, he used Robert's pad to write out "hospital." He pointed proudly into the dark.

So Robert was supposed to walk there, and who would guide him, who would give him directions? He shook his head again and sat down on the bench. In any other country, he felt sure, a sick foreigner would be given more attention. He wanted at least an escort there. Sketchily, he began to write "you and I," but the man grabbed his shoulder, pointing again.

"One person . . . no walk!" Robert wrote shakily, hastily—had he written *walk* or *run*? He rubbed his stomach with his hand to bring the issue back to illness. He moaned—credibly, he hoped: he wasn't the dramatic type. Undemonstrative, Emily always said. You have to show what you feel.

The man responded in Chinese, walking down to the reception area. For a moment, Robert thought he had overdone it and was being deserted, but the man was waking up someone else. He came back with a young man in tow, wearing a rumpled white shirt, trying to rub his eyes with his glasses still on. The older man pointed to Robert, nudging, explaining in rapidfire syllables. He took Robert's pad—Robert had just found and finished writing the Chinese for *diarrhea*—and showed it. The two nodded, and the older man took Robert's pen and triumphantly wrote "hospital" in the unused margin.

So he had an escort, or at least someone to accompany him out the door. When he got up from the bench, he had a strong urge to go right back to the bathroom, but he clamped down on himself. Stiff-legged, with the man in glasses ahead of him, he walked out the entrance.

Outside, a postage-size moon hung over the canal, the streets black and empty. They took a right along the canal, and as they passed one long warehouse, Robert could hear the sound of high-speed drills. The graveyard shift: they staggered the work around the clock, he remembered reading, and even now, blue sparks flew from the grated windows, escaping a controlled hum. Robert's escort picked up the pace.

Robert dutifully walked faster, but that made the pains come faster, too, and he had to stop. The man kept on walking, oblivious. "Wait!" Robert cried out, and that at least got the man's attention. Hobbling forward, he wrote the Chinese verb *to wait* on his pad and shoved it forward. The man looked at the message, shrugged, and offered a hand. Robert scribbled again. "Hospital . . . far . . . near?"

The man borrowed Robert's pen and, with one neat swirl, circled "near." He motioned forward, as if encouraging a child. They walked on.

After four more blocks, they came to a large white building set off from the road. A billboard in front had a red cross in the centre, and Robert recognized the word *hospital* underneath. The man stopped, borrowed the pad, and wrote what Robert translated as "Number One People's Red Cross Hospital." The place looked deserted. In the front clearing, an acre of red earth had been leveled and a pile of bricks lay by a scaffold. A glass-paned door, already set in its frame, opened onto nowhere. For one wild moment, Robert thought they were going to go through an elaborate charade in this ghost of a building but they moved on, past a gate where a night guard slept watchfully. Robert's escort nudged the guard in the ribs.

The guard woke up at once, and the escort pointed to Robert, explaining in a flurry of Chinese. He strained his ears, but he could make out nothing. After all his days of listening, Mandarin still sounded like someone talking with straws up his nose. The escort pointed at Robert's stomach, which growled obligingly—and suddenly he had to get to a toilet.

There was no chance: the escort marched Robert toward not the white building but a sort of annex to the left. They walked through an empty lobby and the man frowned at the elevator in back, stabbed a button. The elevator was a long time in coming. Robert crossed and recrossed his legs in an effort to hold back. To divert himself from the pain, he flipped through the English-Chinese dictionary and found the word for *stomach,* which he painstakingly copied out on the pad. He couldn't think of the word for *weak,* though it was one he had written out before. Instead, he prefixed the word *evil* to *stomach* and showed the pad to his escort.

For the first time, the man smiled. He patted his own midsection, his glasses gleaming in the dim light of the lobby. He took Robert's pad and wrote out two characters that Robert deciphered as "fourth level." The fourth level of pain, the fourth level of understanding? The elevator door opened, and he realized that "level" was "floor," and there would be help there.

There was an elevator operator inside, perched on a bamboo stool, another sleepwalker minding his job. He stirred long enough to have a

brief conversation with the escort, both smiling and nodding when they regarded Robert. He let them out on the fourth floor, his head drooping again as the doors swallowed him up. Maybe he trapped himself between floors and slept there.

Down a short corridor was a glassed-in partition with red-glazed lettering. *Ouside*-something and *clinic* were the only characters he recognized, illuminated by a dull yellow light from behind the door. They passed right by, however, and were soon walking down a long green corridor, Robert taking halting steps because he was desperately close to another spasm.

Finally, halfway down the corridor, a white-kerchiefed nurse popped her head out from a room and beckoned them in. Inside was what looked like a consulting room, with a scale, a table and chairs, and a medicine cabinet. Beneath a blackboard in the corner was a shadowy array of bell jars filled with preserved things, translucent white shapes that made Robert queasy just seeing them. There was another nurse, also wearing a kerchief, and she motioned him to a chair.

Robert shook his head. He pointed to his pad, on which he had just written the word *bathroom.* There were two words for it that he knew of: one politely signified a hand-washing place, the other bluntly stood for a toilet, and he chose the second.

The first nurse read what he wrote and smiled—what was so damn funny about his illness?—and said something to his escort. Before they let him go, she gave him a small cardboard pillbox and wrote with elegant care on a slip from his pad a character that bristled incomprehensibly. He had to look it up; he also had to get to the bathroom, and he hurriedly guessed at the main radical, counted the strokes—this was the only way to use the Chinese-English dictionary—and on page 319 he found the character, faithfully reproduced and meaning *feces.* Clutching the specimen case, he nodded and followed his escort to the bathroom.

The glasses-man seemed more impressed with Robert now that he had the official status of a patient. With a deferential wave of his hand, he indicated the facilities and waited as Robert entered the cubicle. The toilet was the usual trough, though the tiled expanse around it was shiningly clean. The Chinese, of course, seemed able to squat for hours, anywhere, on any occasion. It was the world's cheapest seat, completely portable and free. Robert now did the same as the Chinese, though feeling as if he were folding himself over the exact area of pain. The spasm lasted for almost a minute, and when he came out, he showed the specimen box to his companion, who nodded without speaking and followed him out.

Back in the examination room, the first and younger of the two nurses took the specimen box in a clamp of toweling and padded off

with it. The older nurse motioned him to a chair; she handed him a pen and a form to be filled out. Hospitals, it seemed, shared certain similarities the world over. What was the Chinese for Blue Cross? The form was all in Chinese but decipherable through context and the various characters he knew. There was *name,* and below it something like *domicile. Record-country:* "U.S.A.," he wrote, the nurse looking over his shoulder. Then, as a supplement, he wrote the characters "beautiful country," the Chinese for *America. Age* and *sex* were also characters he knew. Below that were a few closely written lines with blanks that would have to remain blank. When he tried to look up the first two characters, they didn't seem to be there—which was what you got for buying a cheap pocket dictionary, he reflected. Suppose his disease, whatever it was, wasn't there, either?

The nurse took the form and walked out of the room, leaving him with his escort. The man sighed and rubbed his eyes. *Tired?* wrote Robert on his pad and shoved it toward him.

The man looked surprised, as if discovered in a secret vice. *Not so,* he returned. He penned again, in painfully exact calligraphy, *You are sick.* Robert answered with a short affirmative, and they passed the pad back and forth among them for several minutes before the doctor arrived. His escort, he found out, was twenty-five years old and unmarried, a native of Shanghai. He liked the city. There were questions that Robert knew how to write, answers he could understand. He would surely have been out of his depth with *long and tortuous love affair,* or *live a quiet but desperate life.* The man asked politely whether Robert's stomach still hurt, and Robert replied politely that it did.

The doctor came in then, white-coated and stethoscoped, looking closely at Robert before advancing. He placed a faded pamphlet on the table as he sat down on the chair next to Robert's. The title read, in English, *Glossary of Medical Terms,* with multicoloured organs arranged in a circle below. The doctor opened to the first page, scanned a Chinese index, and flipped forwards. "Do you . . . " he murmured, keeping one eye on the page, "have pain . . . here?" He poked lightly at Robert's abdomen.

Robert nodded, and the doctor continued his probing. He palpated Robert's chest, his arms, and his stomach, which rumbled encouragingly. At one point, he concentrated on the lower gut, looking to the correct page and asking twice, "Hurt . . . when I rebound finger?" It didn't hurt, and Robert was relieved to answer all the rest of the doctor's questions in the negative. No itchy scalp, no dizziness, no vomiting—they were quite insistent on the last point, and both the doctor and the nurses chimed in on that question. The glasses-man contributed a creditable mime of a patient throwing up.

Robert changed the subject. After six days of running to the toilet,

he was both exhausted and dehydrated. He found both words in the dictionary and wrote them out on his pad. *Dry. Lost . . . 2, 3 kg.,* he added before showing everyone his latest work.

They led him out then, across the hall to a separate room. The entire ward was deserted, which seemed strange, until he realized that they were probably isolating him. They showed him by turned-over palms to lie down on the hospital cot; they mimicked an injection.

The injection turned out to be an intravenous tube: glucose and saline solution to replace lost fluids. The label was in English; maybe that was the scientific language in use. The younger nurse walked in bearing a cup with three pills inside, two saffron yellow and the other an eggshell blue. The other nurse came in then—it was like being royally attended—bearing a glass of water on a tray. They watched with approval as he swallowed everything, and then they hooked him up to the i.v. The doctor had already disappeared; now the nurses left, and Robert was left alone with the glasses-man. He was perched on an armchair, thoughtfully regarding Robert like a relative who has brought an expensive basket of fruit for a patient. He had gone to the trouble of bringing him here, making sure Robert got taken care of, and now he was going to watch over his investment.

Robert lay back against the white sheets, staring at the white ceiling. The rumbling in his bowels was quieting down, the liquid lava drying up. The sensation he had felt for days, that of perching before a void, unable to relax his guard, began fading away. He might almost be home. Friends and relatives might be in adjoining rooms. Lazily, he reached for his pad. *You remain?* he wrote, holding the message up so it could be seen.

The man replied with a set of characters that Robert couldn't read. *Sleep?* wrote Robert, indicating the other room.

Sleep, wrote the man, pointing to Robert, who suddenly felt extremely tired. It was just past sunrise now, and a film of light came in through the gauzy white curtains. The beginnings of traffic noise invaded the chamber: the rattle of carts, a truck starting up. He listened to the sounds for a minute, and when he turned back to write a question, the glasses-man had gone. A breeze moved the curtains, as if to suggest a possible exit route.

He was alone in the white room now, alone but growing invisibly better, an incalculable distance from the streets filling up with people. He thought of the canal, of himself walking along the bank and peering over the parapet into the heavy green depths. The water moved like a tide against the backs of his eyes; he lay back on the cot and slept.

Ravine Creek in December

A frost climbs through the creek
Along the way emptying his coat

Of chrome fenders, crockery,
Children in classrooms, candles with hardening drippings.

Now he comes to the creek source
But there is nothing left of him, only his coat

Which he finds he has slipped out of again
As a whistle out of a throat.

A Door

Opening and closing, a door is crying
an unnameable, contorted creature
blind and lost

It is hiding what is inside it
and what is outside it
and so inside and outside hide from it

But it wants to see
and go finding its own way
in amongst men, gods

The Glassmaker's Shop

Panes, spectres, frames . . . in the hollow of the door
sits a solemn figure, leaning; night
beneath its stocking scratches the foot of the moon
and shadow turns up the collar of the cold: somebody
is brooding on death, but sees only life;
and perhaps the gap between them is in that pale
light's shattering, as it reflects and splinters
the wonders of the shop's back room.

Translated from the Italian by
Richard Burns

Ipswich Colour

To Mel Gooding

Green corn against white sun.
And there
poppy heads are cut, sleep
drops bits of voices in the deaf reflexes
of the estuary, and you'd say the body was sinking
secretly into the soul.
Rough mud
all along the bank withdraws
with a landslide of mist, with boots,
keel tar, and the dead fish too.
Suddenly somebody
moves off in the distance.
Sighing shells dissolve
in imperceptible sounds. And perhaps, the evening
is a crumbling piece of wood, the faintest
gleam in the footprints of spent seagulls.

Translated from the Italian by
Richard Burns

Ivan V. Lalić

At the Tomb in Prague

Earth freezes each winter, leaves fingers of snow on the
stone
And Yehuda Liwa ben Bezalel is scattered among dust
Like the type of a destroyed book.

Mercurius, first firebreath, streaked with verdigris:
Arise now from Saturnus, the black beginning.

A sky of lead and silver is heaped on Prague,
Wind freezes in crystals over the bend in the Voltava,
Slowly the Rabbi dissolves in the solution of his legend,
But the moment, again and again, returns:

Jupiter, true path, from black to blueness,
Paved with opals of fire: sing on, of planets
Greening under glass in alembics of formulae.

Yet, the impossible does not exist; words travel, like stars,
Wiser at each return, but more inquisitive.
The graveyard's dust sparkles, invisible flowers of frost
Bloom into perfume upon the skin of air:

Sulphur, mercury, arsenic, but also something more,
What was measured once, forgotten, but is promised still.

No more than the shadow of your truth, Rabbi Loew,
Whose blood gleams like rubies within the frozen earth; but
The passer-by places a pebble on your grave, and leaves
With the snow, with the wind along the street.

Translated from the Serbo-Croatian by
Richard Burns and the author

W. A. Cram

Bicycles, Shiny Birds, and Other Things That Glitter

Just the Facts

Lester Gordon's colleagues at the government building couldn't believe it. And it surprised Lester too. But hadn't he read enough intrigue novels to qualify as a connoisseur of shiny black shoe agents? Hadn't he endured forty-two damp winters on the island imagining that every tenth tourist was an MI5 agent assigned to sabotage the city's hydrofoil service? What else could he do but emulate his favourite "government" man?

Of course, he hadn't expected all the fuss. It always worked on *Dragnet.* Those block-shaped men in seersucker suits and black shoes knew how to calm some hysterical old bat—right up the wazoo. Especially Joe Friday. And as long as Lester worked for a branch of the "government", he liked to call himself a G-man too.

The people who phoned the Medical Services Plan office wondering where their reimbursement was for hospital care in some exotic land, however, didn't appreciate a gruff voice interrupting them with, "Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts."

More Facts

Lester Gordon has his grade 12.

Someone once told him that he could be a threat to his supervisors—and to the provincial cabinet, because soon grade 12 will be the highest diploma available in British Columbia. But Les doesn't worry about that.

He heard a rumour that people on the coast only have to know how to shovel coal onto Japanese freighters. But Les isn't worried.

He worries about his son. Eleven years old and already wearing black. Studs. One glove. A fad he thought went away a long time ago.

He wonders if perhaps a mother might do Benjamin some good.

He wonders if a mother might not do *him* some good. But the way

he sees it—it's out of the question. When does he find time to date? Up at 6:30 a.m. Showers. Gets dressed, makes the bed. Wakes Benny up, makes coffee and breakfast. Throws some sandwiches together for Benny's lunch (sometimes Benny makes his own, but Lester doesn't think peanut butter and lettuce sandwiches fit the bill). Gets his son off to school. Feeds the cat and makes sure one window is open enough to let Fiver in or out whenever he wants. Straps on a rear-view mirror to his eyeglasses. Attaches the portable bicycle headlight to his thigh and adjusts the white and orange fluorescent-striped helmet. (Benny always says he looks like a Transformer.) Carries his shiny ten-speed down the apartment steps (just an old Schwinn, the first bike he bought after his wife left him and took the Honda Civic). Fits his Hush Puppies into the stirrups, and pedals to the white and silver building where 85% of the employees are women—most of them married.

Seven and three quarter hours of work later, he bikes home and starts supper for the two of them. Every Tuesday and Thursday Lester teaches First Aid at the St. John's Ambulance Building from 7 to 9 p.m., and on Wednesday evenings he volunteers on the phone line at the Detox centre. The babysitter charges more and more as Benny gets older, which Lester thinks is backwards, but then again, Benny may be getting harder to handle. He wonders where it will end.

The Government Office

New shiny building on the corner of two busy streets. A battle for parking spaces. The architect believed in *practical* work environments. The *open* concept. The government believed in lowest bid. So the air circulation system doesn't work, the lighting is a subtle system of neural deprivation, and five stuffy floors of sweat, perfume, and carbon dioxide make several people dizzy. The dizzy people keep Lester busy since he doubles as the First Aid attendant for two floors.

Lester likes that responsibility better than his "real" job. He always says he would be a full-time First Aid attendant if given a chance. But chances are for other people. Les thinks the supervisors have it in for him.

They don't have to worry about their jobs. Oh, no. Lester knows he won't advance to "adjudicator", the claims adjustor for broken bodies. He has completed the training, written the exam, but has a problem with telephone manners. And he knows, to work for the "Government", one must be polite on the telephone.

But two months ago, Lester lost his permanent status and was put on probation. For talking on the phone. Three months of good behavior and he will be classified as permanent/contract status. It's just not fair, he thinks.

So, Les stays in "Micro and Source." He finds files, sorts medical cards, and summarizes medical histories for others. It's a far cry from where he started though—as a "staple spotter." He had to make sure the computer cards weren't "bent, stapled, or mutilated in any way" before entering the machine. He was there for three years, then because of better technology, they did away with "staple spotters."

In his First Aid course, he found something he excelled in. Practical emergency care. How to reassure people that a twisted ankle wasn't the end of their walking lives, that the flash blindness from the Xerox machine wasn't permanent. Lester found his place. Almost.

The Problem

Lester has greasy hair. And he can't do anything about it. He washes it every day and tries to keep it short, but he likes it swept back over his head—Elvis style. G-men and Elvis. Why did those days ever end, he laments.

He knows that some women cringe whenever he approaches to attend an injury. He knows they think his hands are greasy and sweaty—but they aren't. They are powder dry, and smooth. Lester ignores the tittering around him and smiles, says hello to them by name (he remembers names from years of searching through medical files), and completes the First Aid.

The only person who appreciates Lester is Lorna Thorpe, an Out-of-Province adjudicator who works on the same floor as Lester.

The Shiny Bird

Lorna always wanted to be a ballet dancer. She has a poster of Karen Kain on her office divider. "She looks like a bird," she says to everyone who passes by close enough to hear. "She looks like a delicate bird."

Lorna has tapered, dancer's feet, but then her calves explode, swell up to her thick thighs, and her torso—well, a Mason jar has more curves, she always says. Of course, she neglects her huge breasts in her description, breasts that sway when she moves.

Her brown hair is short, like a crewcut all around except at the front where it is long and curly. She calls it semi-punk, a term she learned through her daughter who has eight inch spikes in her hair. And Lorna sort of likes the spikes.

"Orange and blue spikes on a fifteen year old girl is one hell of a lot better than pregnant at fifteen," Lorna says. "I should know. I was pregnant at fifteen!"

Lorna's eyes are a bright blue, and they sparkle and glitter, telegraphing her impending roar. She never gossips about others—

only about herself. When the other catty women start talking about how creepy they think Lester Gordon is, she leaves in a huff of sweat and perfume. The women like Lorna. She makes them all look great.

The Stories

Lester tells stories one sentence at a time. He enters the coffee room, surveys the drawn, grey faces and says, perhaps, "Went to Seattle on the weekend and met the strangest man on the bus," and then leaves. Or maybe he will say, "My son and I went up island to watch a logging operation." The next day he will enter the coffee room, glance at the faces again and say, as if there had been no time lapse, "He had the strangest hole in the side of his nose," or "Good thing I was there because one lumberjack hurt himself."

The women gab incessantly after he leaves. About him. About his wife that left nine years ago. "Serves him right for marrying a dancer," they say. "For five bucks or a nice word or two, she'd dance on a table, on the sidewalk, or right into somebody's bed. Who knows whose son it *really* is?"

Lorna doesn't believe the stories. She believes Les is a good man. And she should know. Lorna's been through several not-so-good men. Her first husband, Floyd, was so good around Trish, her daughter from her first affair, that Lorna thought he was a saint. A dapper, experienced man of twenty-three, he had the potential to become an electrician—or so she thought. He was fired from his first job as an apprentice for trying to strangle his boss with a piece of 3-wire. The boss was upset because he used fifty feet of wire in one room where it should have taken eighteen. Lorna had not known about his temper, but she soon learned that Floyd couldn't be told anything.

After being fired from every job in two years, he began sitting around the house watching game shows and building toothpick houses. She left him after he started whittling the kitchen chairs into toothpicks as he muttered prices for waffle irons and vanity mirrors.

She lived with many men after that but all of them turned out bad. For a time she thought her size intimidated men, made their anger rise and caused them to become brutal. But one day she realized that it wasn't her bulk they despised, it was her simple demand to be loved. Most men, Lorna now says, are just piss-filled little boys looking for a replacement mother.

But Lester? Well, she just knows he is different. Sure he needs someone to look after him, but she believes he needs someone to love too. And she figures she may be just the one he needs.

More Facts

When Lester isn't teaching First Aid or helping alcoholics and drug addicts or worrying about his soon-to-be oddball son, he polishes stones he finds in the Goldstream River. He takes them home and rubs them with emery cloth until the rocks are perfect spheres. Then he polishes them. It takes hours of buffing but they glisten on his windowsill like the moon and the stars.

Les likes shiny things. He polishes the rims on his bicycle every day. (He wonders if his mother ever made him eat dirt when he was a child.) The spokes glisten like tinsel when he rides and Les figures he'll never get hit because his bike is so brilliant that motorists would swerve just to save their eyes. Dressed in his Joe Friday suit, helmet, rear-view mirror attached to his eyeglasses and the headlight strapped to his thigh (always moving to attract attention), Les Gordon glides through the traffic, a sunburst free of worries. Just the facts, he says to himself. Just the facts.

The Shiny Bird

As an adjudicator, Lorna pays people after their medical claims are accepted. So many dollars for a colostomy, so many dollars for a craniotomy, a shunt for ventricular obstruction for hydrocephalus, or so many dollars for a laminectomy for spinal stenosis. Amazed at the number of people with horrible sounding problems, she happily pays and hopes they get better.

A simple keystroke on her computer terminal causes a cheque to be written and mailed, so one day she bought a stainless steel bird, the kind that balances on a pillar and rocks back and forth perpetually, and placed it beside her terminal. It rocks rhythmically like a silent metronome, pecking one key on the computer, while she reads about more "otomies".

Lester likes the bird. He admires the calm precision of its movements. It reminds him of his own shiny bicycle streaking along the avenues, an alternate sense of order in the world, his world.

More Facts

When Benjamin was five years old, he named their cat, Fiver. They both love Fiver very much and Lester lets the cat outside every night, and each morning Fiver is in the kitchen waiting for his food.

But one day, Fiver doesn't come back.

"Fiver, here Fiver," they call.

Benny scours the neighbourhood before leaving for school, but no cat. Les pedals to work along lanes and narrow streets looking for Fiver. But no luck. Outside the building, he remembers he left his keys on the kitchen table. He can't lock his bicycle. Debating a few minutes whether to return home or risk theft, he picks his bicycle up under his arm, and carries it into his work area.

No one says a word to him about it. Business as usual, he thinks.

The Question

In the coffee room, Les surveys the pallid faces, sniffs the perfumed air, and says, "My cat never came back," and walks out. Lorna jumps up and races after him. Grabs him by the arm and says, "Will you finish your goddamned story!" Not knowing what else to do, Lester looks at Lorna's blue eyes. There are no sparkles in them. She wears a necklace of polished stones. It must weigh ten pounds, Lester thinks.

"Where did you get that necklace?" he asks.

"Where did you lose your cat?"

Lester's face goes red. He rubs a palm over his greasy hair. Tingles under his armpits. He wants to relieve himself.

"Why the hell don't you finish telling your stories, instead of dragging them out for days and days?" Lorna says.

Lester looks at the women in dresses and shiny earrings milling about in the hallway. "The cat just never came back," he says. And he turns to walk away.

Lorna grips Lester by the arm and leads him to her desk. Sits him down and says, "Well, I want to know more. A lot more. Can't you tell the whole story to one person instead of one sentence to no one?"

Lester feels as if he is going into shock. His palms sweat, a fever crawls up his chest. He wants his First Aid kit. What does this all mean? he wonders.

Lorna smiles, the light sparkling in her eyes. A laugh rises from her chest. "Les, don't look so shocked. Relax a little. C'mon, lighten up—laugh a bit, Joe. Eh? Joe Friday? 'Just the facts, ma'am. Just the facts.'"

Lester in a cold sweat.

"But, but, how do you . . . ?"

"I've heard you on my phone. Everyone's heard you on the phone."

Had Lorna reported him? he wonders. She wouldn't do that if she feels the way she does, would she? he asks himself. Would she?

"I'll need time to think it over," he says.

Another Question

"Moved from Micro and Source to Out-of-Province have we, Mr. Gordon?" The voice of authority—the supervisor.

Lester jumps up. "No, ma'am. Just on my coffee break. We were talking."

"Coffee break has been over for quite some time, Mr. Gordon. There is work to be done here, not socializing."

Lester turns to leave. The shiny bird nods its head—up and down, up and down.

"There is a matter of unauthorized use of telephones, Mr. Gordon. And a little matter of a bicycle in the work area which has come to my attention. You know there are rules about that. What if everyone followed your example?"

Lester knew it was all too good to be true. "It won't happen again," Lester says.

"Well, there's more. We like to be progressive here. The management, and others," she points above her, "feel the most efficient method of payment involves a re-structuring of the organization, which directly affects you—and several others. Shall we discuss it in my office?"

Just the Facts

Technology, Lester thinks, is too cold, too calculating. A data-base system so the adjudicators can call up their own file requests. More shiny bird keyboard pushers. A two-week notice of termination. "We considered you for several other positions but we're very sorry," he mimics. They were just looking for an excuse, he thinks. One bicycle in the work area. They just have no appreciation for beauty.

"It just isn't fair," he says to Lorna. "I have eleven years here. It just isn't fair."

"Move in with me, Lester."

"Just like that? Snap—in like Flint?"

"I can help till you find another job."

"I need time to think about it."

"Suit yourself," she says, "just remember, there's safety in numbers."

An Answer

Lester Gordon's last day of work. He rides his bicycle through the automatic glass doors, into the foyer, and up the elevator. To hell with rules, he says. He rides along the aisles of each floor, tossing polished stones to people he recognizes, from a canvas bag slung over his shoulder. At Lorna's desk, he pulls out a stainless steel bird placing it beside the other one. He doesn't say a word, just starts the bird rocking, then rides down the hallway past the supervisor's office with his feet and arms waving in an obscene gesture before smashing into the elevator doors. He rides by the breakwater, by the ocean crashing

against the shore with the wind whispering, tingling across his scalp. Sailboats wobble on crinkled water. He wonders what kind of a job he can find. He wonders about Lorna.

Lester pedals harder and harder as if the answer will be found in the blurring spokes. He weaves through traffic fervently until he is lost in the confused street plan of Uplands. Jaguars and Rolls Royce's in front of sprawling mansions.

Head roaring, temples ready to burst. Up and down—up and down. Lawn ornaments seem to peck at the grass. Les concentrates, pumps his pedals, his wheels glittering in the morning light. An ambulance rushes past him, the tremulous siren fading in the distance. He hopes whoever it is attending to is all right. He wishes he was there to help. To reassure the person. It's all right, now, he says to himself. Everything is all right.

And Lester stops pedalling on top of a steep hill where he can see the blue ocean, the green hills of the Gulf Islands, and the snow-capped mountains of the mainland. Wave crests glitter, sparkle, and disappear like motes in a shaft of sunlight. Slowly he dismounts, rubs the wheel rims clean of dust, and pushes the bicycle down the hill. The spokes and rims sparkle as the bike gathers speed and stops wobbling. From the top of the hill he watches it careen straight and true down the yellow line. Lester feels lightheaded; he yells and waves at the sky.

A car slams into his bicycle and he watches the spokes fly apart and scatter on the ground like shards of glass on pavement. He hears the screeching tires, the horn blasts, the crunching of tubular frame against chrome. Turning away from the commotion, he tosses his helmet into the salal bushes next to the road, drops his rear-view mirror into a shallow puddle, and unstraps his headlight from his thigh, letting it fall to the road. He studies the arbutus trees and rose bushes in the manicured yards as if they had suddenly appeared. And he sees what looks like buds, new growth waiting to be polished in the sunlight.

Breathing the fresh salt air, he runs through the forest lot, secretly advancing towards Lorna's apartment. There's safety in numbers, he says to himself, as he marvels at all the cats clinging to cedar shake roofs and trees, all crying out to him, all asking to get down safely.

Glen Sorestad

Along the Promenade des Anglais

From the earth's four corners they bare
their breasts to the seductive sun,
here on this Mediterranean beach;
bare their breasts to the slow stroke
of sun, to the sky and the sea,
these women of every age, breasts
of palest hue or dusky tan,
pendulous or pert, nipples
to the sucking sun they lie
strewn beneath the sultry blue,
fifteen or fifty, a bask of breasts:
magical dreamscape for the old stroller
whose age and cane vanish
beneath the touch of the sun's wand.

Leon Rooke

The Sugar Derby

I thought of the hole my husband had punched into the wall as I ate my sugar. Let me put that another way. As I ate my sugar I thought of the hole my husband had punched into the wall. I left the table and went over for a close look at that wall. It was beige. It was beige all over and you would never know a fist had rammed through it. I ran my fingers over the surface and thought, Now this is smooth, you can't get any smoother than what I have here. Then I walked down the hall to my bedroom. I stood at the door, looking in. You would say as I would that he had never been inside that room. Let me put it another way. He'd been in that room, but looking at it now you would never know it. He'd never been on that bed. Of course the sheets were new, the spread, even the mattress. Let me state it this way: of all the items in that room the mattress had been the first to go. I hung in the doorway, admiring that room, the beige walls, the beige curtains. Admiring the light. Even the floor was beige. I went into the bathroom and stared at my face in the mirror. I was doing all right. It had been three days now. My face was not one bit swollen. I got out the pill bottle and swallowed four tablets along with a glassful of water. Then I went back into the kitchen and sat again at my table and ate more sugar. It was all right with me if the son of a bitch never came home. I like my beige. If he called on the phone or sent around his messenger boys, this is what I would say: You have the wrong party. I am Mrs. Beige. Mrs. Beige lives here. It was my beige that had got him started in the first place. So he said. But let me put it another way: I've got my own ideas.

William Woodruff

Simkin

Dear Mort,

Just a few lines to let you know, first, that Judy and I arrived home three days ago, back from our honeymoon, and second, that I want to see you as soon as you return. Judy, unfortunately, still feels uneasy about you, which will necessitate a get-together somewhere away from this apartment. We'll have to fix a time and place. And I'll have to concoct some story to mollify her curiosity about my staying out late; I hope my imagination doesn't dry up. So jot a note to yourself, the instant you read this sentence, to phone me at school the minute you enter your door.

When I phoned your house, Doris, chillingly polite as always, told me only that you'd gone to San Francisco; on one of your business trips, she said. "No, Mr. Kaplan, I don't know where he's staying." So I sent this letter to your usual motel; I hope it finds you there.

I can now admit that you guessed correctly; Judy and I did go to London. We stayed at the Beachcroft Hotel: an old house, converted to a bed-and-breakfast, of mottled red brick, fronted by roses and facing a tree-lined side street in Golders Green. To remind you, in case you've forgotten, Golders Green lies north of Hampstead Heath, not far from its upper reaches, in the city's northwest suburbs: a long tube ride from Earls Court.

On the way home we stopped over in Brooklyn for a two-day visit with my parents—a tense visit for Judy; she always lets them intimidate her—then flew on to Los Angeles.

In London we spent our days doing the popular spots—we got swindled at a few tourist traps—and spent our nights in robust intercourse in our cold little room, usually on the loudly creaking bed, but once or twice on the scratchy carpet, next to the gas heater. I'll spare you the prurient particulars. Mulling over this sentence, I now see us shivering on the deck of a riverboat chugging and splashing up the Thames; or riding a Gray-Line bus (my hand on Judy's leg) with other camera toters, mostly Arabs, trying to ignore the garrulous guide; or trudging through museums and cavernous antique churches, buying lots of postcards; or lying on the grass (Judy tickling my nose with a

blade she's plucked) in lawny green parks among staid leafy old trees, gardens of red and yellow and purple flowers, rippling ponds patrolled by ducks, and casual ramblers of all ages and races, several tossing bits of bread to the ducks, two or three throwing sticks for eagerly galloping dogs. My poor aching feet. Our poor budget! I promise, with a solemn oath, hand on heart, to bore you to death with our pictures.

During our walk through Earls Court I lead us along Trebovir Road, without telling Judy why, just to give myself a look at number seven, which had become, in my memory of the time you and I lived in the building (Christ, five years ago!), picturesque, local-colourful, spiffily antique. Now, however, it looked drab, surprisingly small, and, except for the grimy black door (I'd forgotten about that long vertical crack; still there, by golly), indistinguishable from all the other buildings on the block. I'll forgo reciting some platitude about memory and the passage of time. Judy didn't even notice the building—she had no reason to—and I couldn't bring myself to point it out to her. Nor did she comment on my reflexive suppression of the shiver that shot through me as we passed it, on my falling back two or three steps, hands in pockets, eyes fixed to the sidewalk.

I wish I could reflexively suppress this damn jet lag. It's muddled things for me ever since our taxi ride home from the airport: our poor budget's coup de grace. My intermittent disorientation and grogginess—protracted and much too severe, according to Judy—which I now offer as my feeble excuse for not writing to you sooner, made hauling the last of our furniture into this our new apartment, yesterday and today, a complete wipe out. Once I had to lie down, the room pitching like a boat. And tomorrow I have to go back to work, back to teaching the little buggers, as best I can, how not to demolish our English language; then, tomorrow evening, get back to unpacking boxes. So, chock-full of self-pity, I'll end here. "Now more than ever seems it rich to die," wrote Keats in one of his limp-wristed moods. We visited his house in Hampstead, by the way. In my present mood, that line weighs a ton.

After we've finally settled in I'll prod myself to resume work on my novella: the weird product of my morbid fantasies, according to Judy. You and my psychotherapist would call it another of my exercises in vicarious self-destruction.

Judy said, looking over my shoulder a minute ago, "Don't write to *him,* Stanny." I had to overcome a reluctance to tell you that. Please, if you can, don't let my blushing bride's attitude offend you, as I don't (ha ha) let your wife's offend me.

Surely, my friend, you and I have erased by now what happened during our student year in London. Judy just displayed, for the ump-

teenth time, her idiotic conviction that I haven't. She misunderstands your and my relationship; we must disabuse her. The possibility that she, or Doris come to think of it, might try to keep me from seeing you overwhelms me with panic. I don't want to lose you! But I don't want to lose Judy either. (Christ, with worries like these popping up now, how long can my marriage last?) "What can I do?" I shout to the ceiling. Imagine me jerking this page's precursor out of my typewriter, and throwing the crumpled wad at the picture of Judy on the bureau.

"Confusion now hath made his masterpiece," wrote Shakespeare, no doubt after scrutinizing a graph of my brain waves.

It seems I've prattled on beyond my ending. And obliged you to read more than "Just a few lines." Please excuse, as you have so often, my garrulity and little emotional outbursts.

I await your call.

Yours always,
Stan

P. S.

A sudden impulse, and a new burst of energy, move me to tell you about the letter, a report of some aunt's death, that Judy should've gotten at the Beachcroft from her mother. That corpulent gas bag, you might remember, distinguished herself at the wedding reception by spilling champagne on the rabbi. Before that all-too-typical faux pas she'd whispered to me, glancing back at you, "So who's the beefcake you got for your best man? Why did you keep him under wraps?"

Mother's letter reached us here today, and some anonymous British postal clerk deserves a nod of appreciation. The address on the envelope, or rather that part of it that Mother wrote, reads: "c/o Beachcroft Hotel, Golden Green, London, England." As you can see, it includes neither a street name nor a postal-zone code, which mail sorters in cold, damp, dimly-lit back rooms always look for first. And I couldn't find any Golden Green in my dog-eared *London A to Z*. Yet the letter found its way to the Beachcroft—the filigreed handwriting of the forwarding address looks like the owner's—then to this apartment. I now see the owner wrapped in her shawl at her rolltop desk, peering at the envelope through her lorgnette.

Imagine our mail sorter: a type if you wish; bald, sallow, paunchy, with trembling nicotine-stained fingers and bloodshot eyes. Call him Simkin. He squints at the envelope, then leafs through a worn *G. P. O. Directory* or his own dog-eared *A to Z*. His eyes glaze as he scans a memory map a lifetime in the making. He squints again at the address. "Bloody Americans," he mutters, his hand penning "NW 11 7DG" in purple ink under Mother's scrawl.

In response my compliment—I've joined Simkin for a drink, on a cold, gray, drizzly evening—he looks down, dry coughing, into his half pint of brown bitter on the mottled ring-stained pub table. "Nothin' sir. All the same. Ever' day. They tell me do it, I do it." His expression, confused, haunted, evokes in me his leaden ache; I know he dreads the loss, the almost certain loss, of someone important. Simkin, mon semblable, mon frère. "Beggin' pardon sir. I've to ring up Harry." He awkwardly arises from the table, scraping back his chair, almost knocking it over, then disappears into the smoke-hazed crowd.

I saw him once, several years ago, as a solitary morning drinker in a grubby New York bar (which explains my placing him in a pub), seated between two mirrors that faced each other from opposite walls, his reflection multiplied to infinity.

Gazing at this blank page, having just snorted a little coke, I now see him an hour or so after his head-down exit from the pub into the cold drizzle. He shoots six .22-calibre bullets into the brain of Harry's sleeping female lover, tries to hang himself from the ceiling light fixture and fractures his hip when the plaster gives way, and dies when the ambulance taking him to the hospital in a downpour, siren screaming, collides head-on with a truck.

Letter to James Joyce

Hitherandthithering
Greatly,
I wend witherward
Atop causeway crags
Upfrom a bay all
Swimmering with finthing.
thereoff, mesee villagethatch.
I tread the roadly mudpath
Howstrewn badfar with pebblethorn.
Lor', me foot it weep!
Here be grazegoat, bleatsheep;
A twain of wagon cows.
Leave me be, ye stinkards! says I.
To the beasts, ye know.
I'll not feed ye.
I feel as old as yonder church.
Skybrows knitting.
Rainsong come.
The land be sunshy
Fer the nonce.

Raven River

Raven river, black black in the brew-black haze
So lumining in the glimmerous moongaze.
Look there, something large and strange arrives by boat.
At the oars is something stranger, toad or goat?
Above are bridges and ridges of bridges,
Against which fog-breathed women, leaning, gazing,
Hum. One woman holds a baby (or a bag).
Another, whiskered and whiskey-warmed, exclaims:
"High time the moon, that bit of chalk,
Got off Earth's back and learned to walk."
A lady with a dog laughs and then says, "Hush,"
As police with flashlights pad through lambent slush.
"Go on home. Night is for sleep," the policemen say.
"Or for dreams," say the women, as they drift away.
The river is white in light of the dim-dawns.
Life's large but elusive, as it on and ons.

I

Run fer th meadow my heady one
th pooly an blackened skies above
an I don need another one

Ready to beat th bushes thru
ready to head th roady down
an I put out my thumb

O mad eyed meadows in bells ahead
an th three side shows
in th whirly hells

Run fer th hilly bowls instead
wher I lay down
my desert bed

Among th quills my longing one
th pooly skies is filling above
wi feathers and pillows on yer skin

In heavy an dopey mows I drowse
take my pearls my lolling one
th skies is filling wi those above

an I don need another one

II

I lap awake
from a dream of seas
th animals rustling thru th leaves

th treez yaking all nite
but could I wish them
to go away

no
tell me of yer secret life
why do you sway

from racey skies
an do you cool
do desert treez be quite the same

I lay awake
in a branchy daze
walk thru th moovies mooving ways

talk to th woodies
in secret codes
in pales of snow

of forest gales an beechy groves
to grow away
an will I die

green in fossils an secret lies

III

To tide wag bottles into th shore
all my lov dog body an sole

wrapped in a note log bogged in foam
could I ask more
of my dogs bone

To mouth wide whales
from a low boat thrown
down my lov dog swallowed whole

bit of note in a bottle form
could slog to th shore
of my dogs roam

shell roar cockles of th ocean floor
wher th letters of sea
build a bottles dome

to sea weep wishes I would never ask more
drowned in lov dog body an sole

Cynthia Flood

A Young Girl-Typist Ran To Smolny:[1] Notes For a Film

Streetcorner in Burnaby.[2] Hot summer day. Time, now. Three young women. One's cute, one's punkoid, and one's neither. She looks as though she's trying to be someone.[3] Some of her clothes fit. Punkoid smokes and Cute giggles. All three carry sheaves of a revolutionary newspaper,[4] subscription forms, pencils. Street: small tidy stucco houses, small tidy green lawns; a few larger, scruffier frame dwellings; some humans at work with hedgeclippers; gnomes and flamingos stand about; curtains[5] drawn everywhere.

Cute, giggling, "Isn't the anarchist house around here?"

Experienced Punkoid frowns. "Yeah somewhere," indifferently.

Unsure, one has millisecond vision of black dwarves massing by the barbecues, TV aerials flaming with black flags.[6]

Dissolve to Punkoid's cross face and sharp voice. "Kate, you take this block, both sides. Meet you back here in an hour. And *don't* get tied up talking, okay?" Cute goes one way, combing her hair, and Punkoid an-

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[1]So says A. J. P. Taylor in his Introduction to John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook The World,* Penguin, 1982, p. xv. NB see if Trotsky or Deutscher refer to her.

[2]Boring bedroom suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

[3]Lots of room here for directorial creativity. Wd. be interesting to see what F and M directors would do. (In the women's dorm at college in the late 50's the phone message book included a column showing initially the sex of each caller. Still done?)

[4]NB devise suitable name.

[5]Priscillas.

[6]Consider music for this bit—in fact consider soundtrack throughout. Shd. be highly patterned. Maybe silences for all the inner visions though?

other, not. CU on Kate, whose Adam's apple[7] jigs as she swallows; not attractive.

The stairs of the first house are cartoonly tall, looming. Kate can tell there's someone behind the glass-windowed and curtained door.[8] Her knock sounds explosive. East Indian woman in sari, festooned with small children, opens.

Kate, brightly, "Good morning! I'm visiting in your neighbourhood to introduce our[9] paper, *Da Da Da Da*[10] [EIW remains expressionless—camera on her throughout Kate's remarks], and I'm sure it will be of interest to you. We cover the international scene from a revolutionary perspective,[11] and each monthly issue also contains [here Kate's voice starts running down like an old Victrola; camera is still on EIW's unchanging face] up-to-date analysis of events in the Canadian labour movement, the women's movement, the. . . . " Behind the EIW appears a handsome teenage boy. He takes a paper from the top of Kate's pile, looks at it, hands it back, says "No."[12] His glance moves over the little bump Kate's right nipple[13] makes in the close-fitting fabric of her shirt, and he closes the door in her face. Immediately Punjabi bursts out within.

Kate walks further down the street.[14]

Next house. Flowers planted geometrically. Razor edge between grass and sidewalk.[15] Door, freshly painted, bears sign in stick-on letters: *The Jone's.* Kate winces. Then we see her from the back as she positions herself at an angle to the doorway so as not to seem invasive to the opener. She knocks gently. Middle-aged man, primfaced, appears. We see Kate's lips moving tentatively and then with more

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[7]Obvious question, but let's ask it anyway: What about Eve's apple? If it's supposed to be all her fault, how come she doesn't even get the damn thing named after her? Or did the apple just slide down her evil throat as smooth as milk?

[8]Shot here through letter-slot, about eight inches from bottom of door—the sari and the bundle of kids' legs.

[9]Note that this is never explained.

[10]Making up a name will be hard. Sarcasm and flippancy are easy, but irrelevant here. Can't use any extant. Many of the non-extant have too many connotations, resonances (go easy on that lit crit stuff, okay?).

[11]The extreme disjuncture between the contents of these two sentences is echoed in the changing tones of Kate's voice. Readers/viewers may feel the impulse to laugh; they are invited, since they are so smart, to think up other and better ways to do door-to-door selling of a revolutionary newspaper in late 20th century North America.

[12]He does all this quickly, decisively, no hesitation whatsoever.

[13]The left is concealed by the revolutionary press.

[14]This sequence can repeat exactly whenever needed. Kate has to look extremely alone. Camera behind her, the long street stretching out.

[15]Could have shot of a man using an edger here.

determination, and come in on, "...women's movement, the anti-imperialist and Third World struggles. We[16] are also active in the NDP across Canada.... " Man disappears. Victrola effect. Kate waits, nervous. Man reappears. Kate's eyes are wide open and eager, the man's narrowed and suspicious.

"We take the *Trib.*"[17] He closes his door, precisely and not noisily.

Kate walks further down the street.

Next house. Geometry and razor-edge again. Kate pauses at first step, arranges sheaf of papers, has pencil ready. We watch her from the top of the stairs this time; she comes up sturdily and rings the bell in a confident manner, stands feet apart directly in front of the door. Woman opens main door (screen door remains closed): early forties, tall, glasses, curly grey hair, big build. Stares. We see Kate's lips moving again, and come in on, "... across Canada. Right now we're offering a special rate, twelve issues for five dollars and three back issues thrown in free. [The woman stares with a little smile. Kate is unnerved but continues.] Or if you like you can buy a single issue now and see if you like it.[18] [The woman's smile widens.] I'm sure you will, you know. It's really a very good paper.... " Victrola effect again, and Kate shifts her feet about miserably.

The woman says, "I'll take a subscription." Kate fumbles delightedly among her papers. There is a mixup over who will open the screen door[19] and whether Kate will give the form or the woman will simply take it off the top of the pile. Kate watches while the woman deliberately, too slowly, fills in the form. There is something not quite right about her manner.[20] Kate connects with this fact at the moment when the woman hands back the subscription form. Her accepting

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[16]Never explained.

[17]Newspaper of Communist Party in British Columbia. Kate's reference to the New Democratic Party tipped her prospect off that her paper is likely Trotskyist. (Though he would say "Trotskyite". Why this curious distinction obtains could be the theme of a very interesting little dissertation. Cf. Marxian, Marxist; economism, economist; racist, racialist; socialite, socialist. Consideration in order once again of distinctions between/among American, Canadian and British usage.)

[18]Mistake. At the training session back at the hall Kate was told only to suggest a single-issue sale if sure the prospect wouldn't take a sub.

[19]A metal screen door, ugly, noisy, with stiff latch and handle. This model, now ubiquitous, is in every way inferior to the woodframed screen doors of yore, the sound of whose closing on summer days has been eulogized by innumerable middleclass writers doing an E. B. White "Once More To The Lake" number.

[20]The woman has a look something like when a person who ordinarily wears glasses goes without them—drugged, lost, out of synch. Her clothing also can suggest mental illness (not the garments themselves but the way they are worn, the movement of the body beneath them).

hand hesitates, indicating her realization that this is not a "real" sub.[21] But it *is* a sub. Kate leaves. The woman watches her go down the steps to the sidewalk and turn to continue her journey.

Kate walks further down the street.

She thinks about that young girl-typist who ran to Smolny, ran with a message of crucial importance that Trotsky had to receive or . . . ? What kind of place was Smolny, anyway? A suburb like Burnaby? Kate visualizes herself running from Georgia and Granville out to Boundary and Hastings. But 1917, in Russia . . . fragmentary images of snow-howling steppes, Lenin addressing the crowd, onion spires, Peter and Paul.[22] Kate shakes her head, annoyed at her own ignorance and romanticism, waves her arm to brush the images away. She says, "I can't see how to see it." And the young woman herself, what is she like? Kate puts her on a country road, straight and flat, files of elms to either side,[23] and dresses her *seriatim* in professional Ukrainian peasant dance costume, Canadian Girls In Training uniform circa 1914, and 1920's flapper style. In all cases she has long blonde hair coiled in braids about her, and she runs with long powerful strides.[24] Kate shakes her head again.

Next house. Frame, three-story, beat-up but handsome still. Children's toys, tricycles, playpen littering front yard. Stacks of beer cartons and old newspapers on front porch. Door with long oval window, *no* curtains. Kate is still lost in abstractions when she rings the bell; she waits, thinking. The runner image again, now in modern Olympics outfit complete with torch. Rings again. Door opens. Young man, plain, intelligent, scruffy.

"Yeah," he says, "don't I know you?"

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[21]"Real" would be when the prospect and Kate had engaged in a brisk, vigorous, informed political discussion *as a result of which* the p. was convinced (not persuaded but convinced) to buy the newspaper. Kate does not believe she is able to carry on such a discussion. For the present she is right; but she will learn.

[22]Also possibly the pram-on-the-Odessa-Steps scene from *October,* and the massed pennanted spears from *Alexander Nevsky.*

[23]A Dutch landscape, Hobbema or Ruisdael.

[24]Kate is thinking of the Modern Library logo, and then by association of the Everyman Library motto, "Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide/In thy most need to go by thy side." Everywoman is not mentioned, though many do use books as armour. For example, the woman to whom Kate has just sold a subscription: The day she ended her marriage, she went to the Kingsgate Branch of the Vancouver Public Library and read Dick Francis's *Rat Race* in its entirety. With that padding of 150-odd pages of cheap thriller between herself and the morning's experience, she felt able to go home and tell her children.

There are limits though. In 1975 gifted British Columbia poet Pat Lowther was hammered to death by her unadjectived husband in the bedroom of the East Vancouver home they shared (you could say). In her most need, where were you, Erato?

"At the demo last Saturday I think," she says. Her face is shimmering between friendliness and urgency to begin her spiel. Young man's eyes drop to newspapers she's carrying. Face changes,[25] lengthens, goes tight, works in an ugly way. Mouth opens.

"Kronstadt!" he bellows. "*Kronstadt*! Trotsky murdered them!"[26] Glare. Spit.[27] Slam.[28] Glass of window in door vibrates.

Kate walks further down the street, her step uncertain. She turns; she has only done four houses; she turns and the long street stretches out.

"Well. That was the anarchist house."

She walks.

"I wonder if anyone knows what her name was?"[29]

Now, a sequence in which we don't see or hear the details of Kate's experiences. She goes up and down steps, from house to next house. A couple of times the pencil and the subscription form pass back and forth, there is briefly a smile on her face, her step is resilient—but essentially what we watch is the strengthening power of routine exerting its influence upon an individual.[30] Kate is passing through her "first time on a subdrive" initiation. She is learning how to do this work of

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[25]This must happen *instantly*.

[26]The sailors at the Kronstadt naval base on the Baltic were among the most loyally revolutionary supporters of the Bolsheviks throughout the revolution, and Trotsky was a particular hero of theirs. In 1929 this relationship turned sour; the Kronstadt navy "mutinied against the Soviet government, and took possession of the fortress and two ironclads. After a bombardment lasting many days, the Soviet troops made a night attack across the ice and the revolt was crushed with much severity." So says the *Encyclopedia Britannica,* 14th ed., 1929. (Incidentally the excellent entry on V. I. Lenin in this edition is by L. D. Trotsky.) The *Britannica* then austerely concludes its remarks on Kronstadt by noting that the port "is icebound for 140 to 160 days each year, from about the beginning of December until April", and does not comment on Trotsky's approbation of the Bolshevik decision to crush the sailors' revolt. Whether this action should or should not have been carried out is a question which has since generated savage and unhealable differences among the left.

[27]He's not had time to work up a good supply of saliva; nonetheless, a visible glob lands on Kate's shirt.

[28]This is a really purposeful slam.

[29]If Trotsky knew, he didn't tell; he identifies her as a "working-girl from the Bolshevik printing-plant" (*History of the Russian Revolution,* Sphere Books, London, 1967, Vol. 3, p. 194). Was she a typesetter, not a typist, in fact? He also says she was accompanied by "A worker" (male, for obvious reasons), and that these two "ran panting to Smolny". NB remember to see what Deutscher says if anything.

[30]This is a tricky concept in revolutionary work. Too little routine in an organization leads to sloppiness and inefficiency. Too much generates an inability to respond to anything unfamiliar. An organization afflicted by this particular type of blindness is said to be suffering from routinism.

the revolution. It *is* work, she now realizes, combining in itself work's too-common qualities of difficulty and tedium. Occasionally there are brief flickering images of the young girl-typist.

Kate finishes one side of the block and crosses the street, and this new side stretches out and out before her. She is just half-done, is already tiring. She starts down the block. At the third house the camera meets her on the porch, a quick approach, nothing special about the building. She knocks. Brief wait. Then heavy sounds beyond the door; it opens. Tall, big-chested old man[31] with crutch under his right arm, newspaper under his left. His check shirt and his jeans are clean and neat but he is not a person who is interested in them. He looks intently at Kate, who speaks without much expression.

"I'm selling *Voice of Revolution,* a monthly newspaper. We cover [the man blinks at the copy Kate extends to him] the international scene from a revolutionary perspective [his eyes widen], and each issue also contains up-to-date analysis of events in the Canadian labour movement, the women's movement [frown of puzzlement], the anti-imperalist and Third World struggles. We are also active in the NDP [his lips frame the initials CCF] across Canada. Right now we're offering a special rate [a smile begins to form on his cheeks and he looks Kate up and down; she becomes self-conscious but is determined to get to the end], twelve issues for five dollars and three back issues thrown in free. Would you like to examine[32] our new issue for a few moments? I'm sure. . . . " No Victrola effect this time; the man's deep warm voice simply obliterates hers.

"The *Voice*! Are you selling the *Voice* then?[33] Come in, yes, do come in, put it down here so I can take a good look. The *Voice* now! I've not seen it in years."

They go past a small fanatically clean livingroom and ditto kitchen and enter a TV room currently metamorphosed to a guestroom. The base is clear but the superstructure comprises open suitcases, books and magazines flung about, a couple of canes, a tobacco tin, some Guinness bottles. A crocheted throw on the hideabed has been tossed back as if by one arising from a nap.

"Now I'm Mac, Mac Ferguson, and what's your name, comrade?"

"I'm Kate Steele." Her face is nervous (inside house of totally strange man, remember that look on the porch); excited (this must be

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[31]Camera can explore this last adjective. Conclusion: this human is not as old as he initially appears. Poverty and hunger do a fine job in achieving this older-than-you-are look. So do the heavier emotions. So sometimes do intellectual struggles.

[32]This should be "look at", but at least she's saying the right thing this time.

[33]This telltale sentence construction is the kind that encourages rightwing Letter-to-the-Editor writers in deploring the too-strong influence of Scottish trade unionists In Our Canadian Labour Movement.

an old member, what luck); shy (what can middleclass Kate possibly have to say to this towering hulk of a worker?).

"Been in long?"

"Just a few months. I joined in the spring, after all the cutbacks demonstrations the teachers had."

"Ah, an intellectual. That's good, the party always needs some. Think of Trotsky himself."[34]

Abruptly Mac sits down on a chair and feels for his glasses. Kate sees them lying on top of the TV and hands them over; he does not say Thank you, just puts them on and is at once absorbed. Kate looks amused.[35] Mac reads, muttering. "This NDP convention now, what's the line?[36] They'll never go for that, the social democrats . . . That's right, tell the leadership where to get off . . . And this nuclear . . . terrible thing, terrible it is. Well . . . never win a strike that way, never happened that way yet on God's green earth. [Kate sits down on the hideabed.] Latin America. Poor damn buggers. Poor damn buggers. Here there's food anyhow . . . Abortion rights. I don't like that now, no no . . . [Kate's face sinks; is she going to have to argue that one with this old comrade?] The International. The Four Eye . . . Ah, the masthead." He reads in intense searching silence, then drops the paper and looks at Kate. Fragmentary vision of the young girl-typist, lights of a town ahead of her now along the narrow road, with darkness coming. "Nobody I know left."

Kate takes the leap delightedly. "Were you a member then?"

"Aye, yes, we're comrades, eh? Not really though. I dropped to sympathizer—oh, years ago it is now." He reaches for a tobacco tin, wincing; quite often in the rest of this scene he shifts his right leg about, seeking comfort. He starts rolling a cigarette. Kate watches his hands. CU to her face; Adam's apple activity again. Then she says, "What happened?"

Silence while Mac finishes rolling his cigarette, lighting it, dousing the match, inhaling, looking at Kate. Quite a long silence, which must establish that there is going to be an answer, that it will be serious and

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[34]Kate does not consider herself an intellectual and is bothered, but does not know what to say.

[35]Such a reaction would be highly suspect in many left-wing and feminist circles. I like her amusement because it shows she has relaxed a bit and is focussed on him, not herself; likely it's a relief after her experiences of the last while *not* to be the object of attention.

[36]This term, meaning here the official opinion or analysis of a revolutionary organization, has been subject to much abuse in the North American left from (a) people too cowardly to accept the political commitment which *having* a line demands, and (b) people unable to move a political inch without the starch of an organizational viewpoint in their spinal columns.

truthful, and that Kate is going to hear things she hasn't heard before.

"Comrade,[37] I honestly don't know if you could understand it without being in the Cold War. I mean, I started with the movement in the Depression, the Left Opposition, I went through the War—how old are you?"

"Twenty-seven," says poor Kate, feeling it a most puny age.

"The Second War. Oh yes, terrible, but the Cold War . . . that McCarthyism . . . what that did to people on the Left. Oh yes, here in Canada too, don't ever let them fool you on that, it didn't stop at the border. Awful divisions. In the movement. We were responding to the outside pressure, you see, it was hard to know that then. Fighting for our lives, we were. Oh, the factions. Comrades dropping out and dropping out, just a few of us left . . . when you're so very few you're precious, see? You love each other and you hate each other too, somehow. Things go bitterly wrong."[38]

"Was it for personal reasons that you left then, Mac?"[39]

"Hard to say.[40] And I was a marked man in the union too, see. They got at me every way they could, the rightwingers, and they had plenty. Fight to be allowed to speak at meetings. Hell, fight to be told the meetings were happening! Fight to get to work. Fight to keep it. And to watch those "labour statesmen" trading up their cars every two years . . . boom, see. Oh it was a bad time. My wife left me[41] [this very quick, *en passant*]. And then I got this," touching his right leg. "At Powell River. The mill. They wouldn't even take on the Compensation Board like they should have. I don't get half the compo I should, not half." Mac is going to develop this theme, but recalls himself with a glance at Kate. Brief image of the girl-typist runner, freeze-frame, as if listening.

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[37]Camera on Kate's face through most of this speech, which comes slowly, with pauses and gaps.

[38]Now to Mac's face, looking at Kate. Shows (a) the gratitude of a deeply lonely person talking to someone who at least understands the terms he's using; (b) consciousness of her youth and his age; (c) consciousness of her sex.

[39]Kate thinks these would be separate from and inferior to any political reasons, no matter how misguided the latter. She thinks so in spite of a year's participation in a women's group and a careful reading of Rowbotham's *Beyond the Fragments* and analogous works. She doesn't even know that she thinks so. Consideration of power, depth, and subtlety of bourgeois ideology is in order.

[40]Mac is not interested in answering the question but in saying what he wants to say anyway. This is true of about ninety percent of all answerers to all questioners.

[41]Throughout Mac's story, speculation is encouraged *re* whether he would have spoken thus, or even considered speaking thus, if the revolutionary salesperson arriving on his doorstep had been male. Interested readers/viewers may care also to imagine versions in which inhabitant of house and salesperson are respectively female and male, or both female. Such timewasting fantasies can be most instructive.

"So it was very bad. This was the early sixties by now, I was still trying to get back to work with this leg, took me another five years to realize I'd never work in the mill again. I was still trying. And we were having a big faction fight in the movement. Was right round when the NDP was forming, eh? No more CCF. Again and once again, the question of the NDP.[42] So at this one branch meeting I got up to speak, and the comrade in the chair ruled me out of order. And—what's your name again?"

"Kate."

"And Kate, you know what I did?" He looks in appeal at her.[43] "I cried. Couldn't help it. It was like everything was all of a piece, the movement, the union, my wife, the rightwingers everywhere. I cried. [Kate sees the girl-typist, clad now in a fifties-style skirt-and-sweater set, running along narrow city streets lined with old European apartment buildings. She must be tiring but she keeps a steady pace. She does not carry any parcel or envelope, so the crucial message for Trotsky must be in her braided head.[44]] And I walked out then, and I never went back." CU on Mac's hands, which are large and thick-fingered; the tops of three fingers on the left hand aren't there. The ropy veins on hands, wrists, arms stand out in high relief. Camera shifts to Kate's face, which shows that she cannot think of a single thing to say.

"Now you'll be wanting your money," Mac says suddenly and heaves himself up. "My daughter, she keeps me short, but I know where her bus-money stash is. No no, none of that, the press has to pay its own way, eh?"

Mac and Kate go into the kitchen's antiseptic neatness and he gets a cocoa tin down from a cupboard and counts out twenty quarters.

"Och yes she'll fuss, but what can she do, see? Next month I'm off to the one in Williams Lake and she's a lot easier on me—so I'll put her

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[42]Kate has heard this sentence spoken with sarcasm and as invective. Mac says the words with plain sadness.

[43]This expression contrasts with Mac's big masculine head and face in a way commonly thought more moving than if it appears on the face of a woman or a child.

[44]Deutscher tells us that on 23 October Kerensky banned *Rabochyi Put* (title of *Pravda* since the July days) and ordered its editorial offices and printing press closed. "A working girl [NB he puts her *first*] and a man from the press rushed to the Military Revolutionary Committee, saying that they were prepared to break the seals on the premises of *Rabochyi Put* and to go on producing the paper if the Committee gave them an effective military escort." (Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879–1921,* New York/London: Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 307.) Deutscher further states that this proposition, "breathlessly made by an unknown working girl, came to Trotsky like a flash."

address on your form." He does, in a clear spiky hand which owes nothing to H. B. MacLean.[45]

"Do you live part of the time with one and part with the other, then?"

"That's right. When I'm not in some damn hospital with this [slams leg]. Neither of them wants me, really, but what are daughters for, eh?" He folds the receipt and gets out his wallet. "I'm useful still, though. Do repairs here, look after the kids there. Her man here, though, he's an awful rightwinger. 'Trade unions are not political organizations' [this in an assumed whiny tone]. Thinks it's terrible when the young Turks now,[46] they bring resolutions on Nicaragua to the meeting. I tell him he should go down Stateside and help Mr. Reagan." Mac and Kate laugh briefly. Mac takes a photograph from his wallet. "Here I was." A young soldier smiling. A casual snapshot. There is nothing to say.

The young girl-typist has reached a large building, windows lit from top to bottom, guards' figures black against the grey of the coming night.[47]

"Will you take tea? Och, I should have asked before. No, you've to get on, I see that."

Kate is out on the front porch. She is down the steps and almost at the sidewalk. She looks down at her own arms and legs.

She sees the young woman now mounting the steps of the big building, Smolny, about to step inside tall ornate doors, about to break the seals of history and vanish nameless. The doors swing open and the

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[45]System of handwriting instruction favoured for many years in Canadian public schools; designed to pulverize any individuality in students' methods of moving pens across paper. Each lesson begins with "Ready for printing—desks cleared—printing materials ready (practice paper, pencils, and compendiums on desk). Pupils adopt attitude of attention . . . All pupils should sit in a comfortable, hygienic position." (H. B. MacLean and Grace Bollert, *The MacLean Method of Writing,* rev. ed., Agincourt, Ontario, Gage Ltd., 1966—67, *passim.*)

[46]The OED says that this term identifies the Ottomans who in the early years of this century tried to rejuvenate and Europeanize the Turkish empire. It also defines the expression as applicable to anyone having qualities "attributed to the Turks", i.e. unmanageability and violence. By quoting a question posed in a 1908 newspaper, "Will the glorification of the 'Young Turk' kill this expression as one of reproach to be used in the nursery?", the OED suggests that the child-classifying expression used in Britain predated the 20th c. political term of reference. A good deal seems to be implied here about attitudes to children and non-Britons.

[47]By one of those ironies Clio frequently produces—so sharp that in any "creative" or "fictional" work they would be roundly condemned as vulgar—Smolny, which was a building in Moscow, had in its previous incarnation been a finishing school for bourgeois young ladies.

typist turns to show Kate's face, an old face, worn, heavy, heavy with the weight of human years. Then she's gone.[48]

"Kate! *Kate*!" Cute and Punkoid are down at the next corner, waiting and waving.

Kate walks further down the street.

She turns in at the next house. She will complete her assignment.

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[48]Trotsky, according to Deutscher, had been waiting for some provocative action from Kerensky, and the seals were precisely that. He sent riflemen and sappers to guard the printing press, the machinery rolled once more, and the next day the rising started. (Deutscher, op. cit., pp. 307 ff.)

Presumably if this specific provocation had not come to Trotsky's attention some other would have, the revolution would still have taken place, etc. However, it did take place in just this particular way because of the thought and action of one particular young woman. For further discussion, see History, role of individual in. Plekhanov's essay is as good a place to start as any.

Knute Skinner

A Small Construction Site in County Monaghan

Two men stand at a small construction site,
one middle aged, bald, lighting a pipe,
one young, in a green jacket, holding a shovel.
From time to time the young man lifts the shovel
as if to do something with it, and with himself,
but the older man, a man in a blue sweater,
is taking time with his pipe.

He has cleaned it and filled it, then tamped it several times,
and he has spent any number of matches,
but the pipe won't burn—or else it stops from neglect
as the man resumes what looks like a monologue,
a stream of words on a palpably serious subject.
And all this time the young man fidgets.
He shifts the shovel from one hand to the other.
He pushes it into a small mound of cement
only to pull it back and then shoulder it.
He is a good if a somewhat impatient listener,
and clearly he knows his place.

The bald man, now, has succeeded with the pipe,
and heavy smoke comes spurting from his mouth.
He places a cloth cap squarely on his head
and turns aside to contemplate their business,
a house in a halfway stage of reconstruction.
It's time, he knows, to stand and look at the wall
where a new window waits to be bricked in.
It's one thing to do what the young man now does—
pour sups of water onto the hill of cement,
then quickly, skillfully fold them in with the shovel—
but the real challenge lies in assessing the window
and the open space along the sides of the timber.

It can't be, and it won't be, done in a hurry.
The space must adjust itself to his measuring eyes,
and some of the bricks will have to be reshaped.
He taps the end of one such brick with a hammer,
cutting it down to just the size that's needed,
working with such absorbing concentration
that his pipe burns out.

In time, when he has the brick just as he wants it,
he ascends a short ladder and stands on a scaffold.
The young man hands him a half bucket of cement,
and the man on the scaffold sets the bucket down.
He transfers the pipe from his mouth to his pants pocket.
He pulls up the sleeves of his old blue sweater.
Then he trowels cement onto a mortarboard.
He turns to the work at hand, so intent he appears
at that moment to be part of the work itself,
a part of something comprising himself and the wall.
The young man stands, a spectator, at a short distance.
He knows how to mix cement,
he is learning patience.

SHED

In their being
unfinished I love
these spaces the wind
enters, bringing a rasp
of leaves, a spit of rain—or
birds come in, their startling a
whirr, a flurry, up through rough
beams open to sky—then,
one feather: white down, still
airborne moments later, suddenly
sunstruck in the stillness of its
down drifting

Sufficient

Or how you close
the chink of sky
between each new plank
and its fellow: with one or two
sure, quick hammer-strokes—yes,
this; and the raw sweet smell
of the new wood, wet
from last night's rain;
even the nails
I hand up to you, cold
and smooth, from a torn
paper bag, shall I not
find them pleasing? balanced
on a beam, here, scooping
the fur of sawdust into piles
with my one free hand?

Reinhard Filter

Dreammaker

ONE

You have to have a face.

Not just any face. Not a hungry face. Not one that appears in papers or news programs. It must not be a living-room thing. You need something sweet. Something alluring and dreamlike. Something challenging and nearly-but-not haughty.

You use a box of smiles.

(It doesn't matter how you feel. When you reach for it, one fits.)

Sometimes, in mirrors, there are images, austere and bleak. You think, without that face you would be a gonner.

This is how you spend your time: walking between shadows, gathering an infinity of inconsequentials, putting on and taking off, setting tables. . . . just so, aware of passages and corridors and minutes bleeding from your wrist.

It is the time that kills. It is the time that, one night, after the clearings away, after the drinking of one last coffee, makes you decide.

After that, in the dim light, in the fragrant light of bars and hotel rooms, in seconds stretched elastic, when you see nameless faces huddled in small corners—in that time—you decide. You stand surrounded (a cacophony of empty eyes, white and round as eggs), carrying a decision like a duffel bag, packing for a trip.

These are your adieus:

three lipsticks, red and pink and beige
an assortment of powders
Miss Clairol

TWO

You spend Mondays walking sidewalks.

All of it is new and you feel younger. You have not opened your jars in days. You are in your promises. Weeks of light and sound.

These are crammed with aspirations. And you take your box of

smiles, the one you used for years, and pack it away. You do this almost lovingly, with determined uncertainty, as though these putting aways are large. Nevertheless, you bind it with ribbons gold and red and blue and shove it into the darkest corner of the darkest room. You tell yourself: I shall forget.

Even as you walk, even as you feel the soft sunlight curl your back, you know that these changes are important. You have money in the bank, in your purse; you have put aside the faces; you are ready. There are streets and crevices to walk. Conversations. There are afternoon coffees in sidewalk cafes. And almonde croissants on ornate plates, steaming with butter.

THREE

One time, in the gentle light that smothers, the light of hospitals and tea gardens, one time when you are feeling right, you sit quietly sipping. That is when it strikes.

That is the first time.

You have to have someone.

Not just anyone. It cannot be a TV thing. It cannot be a pipe dream. It must be someone steady.

And so you keep your eyes ready. You go to shopping malls and cineplexes, to swimming pools and cruises. There is money and time to spare.

One day you see an image in a mirror.

A little later, you see him again. On a crowded subway speeding under early afternoon.

You share a secret.

In those times, he comes with wine. he appreciates supper, and you spend afternoons getting pretty.

For a while, you think you need a car.

At night you listen. It feels the same; vaguely, you remember other times.

For a while, you thought you wanted a car, but he said you did not need one.

FOUR

Someone is shuffling cards. You think you have a good hand. When the calls are made and new cards taken, you lose. After a time, you move to another chair. This is the

peculiar thing: no one objects. The dealer deals. You think you have a good hand. . . .

There are days of dreams. Sometimes you wake up after you have been walking. Hours after you have made lunch and supper and been shopping. Sometimes you do not wake up.

You know it is happening.

You see yourself in mirrors.

In a room dark and empty, behind cases, beside an old bureau lined with newspapers, the box waits. You have never forgotten. Days cascade, and it waits, Dreammaker. It breathes. It promises.

(You must set the table. . . . just so.)

Sometimes in the afternoons, between the washing of dishes and the mopping of floors, you begin to hear the low rumble of heavy glasses sliding from trays. The booming resonance of heavy music. The smell of cheap *parfum* and sweat. (Eager eyes wide and round as eggs!)

These are dreams of memories, oozing beneath doors.

In the nights, you are gone. His hot breath blasts.

Sleep, the numbing.

Someone is shuffling cards.

FIVE

There is a rush of wind; sometimes you think it would not be so bad. It could not be so bad.

(Every Monday you make chicken and candied carrots.)

Three days into the fifth year there is nothing in your purse.

Everything is tight.

You cut yourself.

You make sounds.

Rolf Aggestam/*Untitled Poem*

A candle burns.
Closest to the wick: blue light.
The white on top of the blue.
Little by little the candle burns away.

My body is bent over,
I walk with a stoop
like a sooty wick.

A fierce light
bent my eyes downward
so that I would
look carefully
where nobody else searched.
I was given a stick
to prop myself upright as well as I can

Translated from the Swedish by
Erland Anderson and Lars Nordstrom

Kenneth Radu

A Bird in Hand

It was not at all the way she had imagined. Looking out her bedroom window on the second floor, Natalie saw the Empress of India, her neighbour's parrot, float down the street, its gilt pagoda cage secured to a large wooden base. Down the lake, she corrected herself, for streets had disappeared three days ago beneath the flood water. Everyone had accepted the worst as inevitable after days of torrential rains, ceaseless spring run-offs from northern hills, the melting of record snowfalls, the turbulent rising of the rivers that flowed on two sides of the town. People had packed, left; many scoffed at first, trusting in the river banks, the drainage system, the incomplete flood control project, merciful acts of God. A contingent of college students from the south came up to help fill sand bags, Natalie saw on television, to build dikes, to plug their fingers in holes.

Natalie realized the worst on the second morning of the flood when the birds stopped coming to her feeders. Small animals of the field behind her house, father having built his dream home on the outskirts of town, crawled between the cracks in the foundation. She had surprised two chipmunks under the laundry tub in the basement. Drowned by now, she suspected. Lulu, her fluffy golden Persian cat, never one to stir herself, caught a vole behind the refrigerator. Possibly squirrels, rained out of their trees, many of which had toppled, found refuge and things to chew on in the attic.

The river on the west side of town spilled over its banks first and flowed down—it was mostly downhill from there, the town having established itself like a mess of pottage in a high rimmed saucer. Just flowed down as gently as you please. Nothing at all like the deafening rush of murderous tidal waves that had swept up livestock, pots, entire populations, and carried them, lord knows where, like so many pieces of debris splashing over a waterfall. Natalie, when she was a girl, had seen a flood like that in a movie, "The Rains of Ranchipur." Lana Turner's Fifties-style hair had remained in place throughout the catastrophe, she remembered, patting the loose little graying ringlets on

her own head. Father held her hand during the film because she was frightened. His fingers played between hers.

The calm gradualness of this disaster surprised Natalie. At first people muttered, got their feet wet, took to rubber boots; then cursed in their hip-waders in front of the television cameras as they saw their seed beds washed away. Then, full of lamentation and dire predictions in the eye of the lens, they paddled away in row boats and canoes. The army helped. The anxious ones, those who had been watching the water line rise from day one of the downpour, had left when the going was good. There had been sufficient time to flee with their possessions. Not everyone had.

Instead of moving out, Natalie moved up. Everything of value in her basement: her preserves, jams, jellies, some a few years old; her library of romance novels hidden in the basement because she feared visitors and her mother would see them and, well, make unnecessary comments. People had in fact stopped dropping by long ago. Father could be so discouraging when he was alive. Still, the habit of secretiveness remained. So under the living room sofa went adventures with tall, dark, mysterious men on the Côte d'Azur or Australian beaches. Only a hundred or so would fit there. The others she stacked in the linen closet or behind the dishes. Mother's things Natalie left in their boxes in the basement, and father's. She had been meaning to take them to St. Vincent de Paul or to some clothing drive for Polish workers. Except she could not bring herself to go beyond the front garden gate. Once she had stood there on a summer's day, it couldn't have been more than a year ago, the wind whipping her white, ankle length, cotton dress about her legs, stood there with two boxes of clothes she had carried up from the basement, and watched. Thank heaven for deliveries, she often said to Lulu, for helpful, if pushy, neighbours like Bert and Lydia next door. She had made a mental note to ask them to take the boxes away. The flood intervened.

When the water began seeping between the walls and window frames, and through the cracks in vigorous streams, Natalie acted quickly. She unplugged the washing machine and dryer, didn't know what to do about the furnace so she pulled the power lever to cut the electricity throughout the house. A Coleman camp stove, her father's, and a kerosene heater would have to do. Before a general power failure and the death of the telephone lines, Bert phoned. Evacuation notices had been announced on radio and television all day. Surely she'd heard? No, she would see it through, the house could withstand a major assault, the ceilings did not leak. If need be, she could pitch her father's tent on the roof. Bert did not see the sense of it but he always believed Natalie an odd, twittery sort of person. She had fuel and food to last several weeks and the flood waters would certainly abate.

Nothing lasts forever, she reminded him. Yes, a whole case of tinned soups and jars of vitamins, mother having had a fondness for Oxtail and vitamin C tablets.

In their black van with the bubbly windows and red stripes on the side panels, Bert and Lydia rolled through foot high water up Natalie's driveway. Lydia gave an inventory of the things she had chosen to save even before she told Natalie to get in: silverware, two suitcases of clothes, a box full of houseplants which Natalie thought strange, as if you couldn't replace African violets and peperomia, an electric blanket their portable colour T.V., the console model being much too big to save, their new VCR, the food processor, the toaster, the electric kettle, blankets, three radios, a jolly jumper, a crib. Of course, the baby, asleep on top of their possessions.

"Bert just grabbed a drawer full of clothes, you know men, and all his power tools. At least take a chair or two, Bert, I said, but he went for the chain saw."

That man was forever attaching something to or taking something off his house, rearranging walls and windows, until it looked like a perenially incomplete housing project next door. No loss if the place collapsed in the water. Natalie knew her thought was unkind and, given the situation, dangerous if there were any truth at all to powers of suggestion. She knocked three times on the wooden railing of the steps. Bert's sour milk breath and insistent, grating voice, his habit of barging through her back door, "just dropped by to see if you need anything, Nat," not to mention the familiarity of abbreviating her name to a boy's, made her wish, at times, for, at the very least, an inconvenience to interfere with his life. The flood, however, was more than she had in mind.

"Now, Nat, you can't stay here. Everyone's been ordered out. The power's off. The phones are dead. There'll be looters, sure as hell. If you understood anything at all about water pressure, you'd know the house could collapse if the flood rises, and it will. Trust me on that. Grab a suitcase. You don't have time to take much else. Don't forget your papers. I had to remind Liddy. Liddy, did you get the insurance papers and bonds? Liddy will help you pack. Come on!"

Her feet cold in rubber boots, Natalie held her white dress above her knees, thanked Bert for his concern. "The house won't collapse when the basement leaks as badly as it does. A lot of water will get in." No one was going to overpower her with the laws of physics. She found his habit of chewing his moustache irritating. Once, in the kitchen, while her poor mother was ailing upstairs, he had picked her up, "why, you're no heavier than a sparrow," and had slipped a hand under her dress. Unresisting, she turned gray and cold. He put her down, pulled the end of his handlebar moustache into his mouth with

his tongue, then went out to bring in the rest of the groceries he had so kindly bought for her. Not two months after mother's death, going into the basement to repair the dryer, he grabbed her on the stairs, and gave her a hard kiss, forcing his tongue between her lips, pressing her hand against his stomach.

"Come on, Nat, come on, come on." She went hard as if sudden rigor mortis had set in. He raised her dress above her thighs. His fingers could not quicken her. He let her go, sucked on his moustache, then replaced the fan belt in the dryer.

She couldn't quite bring herself to get into his van. As they backed out of the driveway, she heard Lydia scream, "The Empress!"

"Aw, shit, Liddy."

The wheels churning furiously in the water, the van drove out of sight. Natalie returned to the porch, clutching an afghan around her sloping shoulders. The sky was ash gray. More rain would fall. She waved good-bye even after the van had disappeared, remembering Father's last kiss. She tried to calculate how long it would take the flood to rise to the third step. Not long, as it turned out, for the next morning her feet got wet on the kitchen floor and her mother's Persian carpet lay like a lost garden under a placid lake. Pale red vines wavered around faded blue flowers that looked like translucent jellyfish. As more water flowed into the house, it darkened, thickened. Several romance novels floated out from under the sofa. Natalie picked up three. A woman in a long red dress with a shawl loosely strung over her shoulders and hair like Rapunzel's stared out to a starry sky from the balcony of what looked like the edge of a palace. On the cover of another, a woman in white gauze lay on deep green grass, her body covered by a black haired man wearing riding boots.

So Natalie moved up. Upstairs went the Coleman stove, the kerosene heater; a box of dry novelettes from the cupboard, a dish, a bowl, a knife, a spoon, a fork, a pot, a pan, a cup, teapots, a spatula, food from the pantry, her preserves, the case of soup tins, a can opener; the four afghans she had knitted for her sick mother; her collection of Maria Callas records; but not her father's leather bound volumes of Dickens which she had read aloud to him over the years as they sat together on the porch swing or in the garden; the six oversized paint by number pictures of Lake Louise, Niagara Falls, a kindle of kittens in a basket, the Last Supper, a matador and bull, and two cows under a willow tree, all of which she had painted in her mother's bedroom to keep the dying woman company.

"You paint real nice, dear."

Natalie also hauled up the tool box, originally a denizen of the basement, just in case she needed something for something. She left her

violin case on the piano. Father had taught her to play. He was so gifted musically and used to lead church choirs and the like. They played duets together, some Mozart, some Brahms, mostly Liszt, Mendelsohn, and Stephen Foster.

"Music for the heart," he often said. They played together until the day he died, five years ago, stricken by a massive heart attack that threw his head back first, mouth jerked open, she remembered, then bang down on the piano keys. After the funeral for which Natalie had to buy a dress ("You can't go in white, dear," Mother had insisted, "we're not in China"), mother took to her bed and spent a year passing away in a general decline of will and desire.

"Forgive me, child," she said, holding Natalie's delicate, bony hand, crossed herself, and died.

Natalie did not see the purpose in evacuation, desertion was how she saw it. There was something indecorous about a forty year old woman running away. She had been born in the house. Father had built it with his own hands. She had spent years tending to flowers and vegetables on the acre of land surrounding it. She couldn't bring herself to leave the yellow roses or the maple wainscoting, she told the two men who had proposed to her. Neither one of them felt that he could live in her father's house. Twenty years ago, shortly after President Kennedy's assassination, she sat in a white, ankle length dress (father preferred long white dresses, "my skinny cockatoo," he sometimes jested) on the porch swing to say good-bye to a handsome college student. He had worked for her father and was now an obese realtor with a second wife and five children. He had tried to get her to sell after they buried mother. Who the other suitor was, Natalie couldn't remember. Father had been so negative about them, about all of her high school friends even; so comforting and forgiving when she agreed they weren't worth the time of day. Had taken her on his knees. Rocked her until she had stopped crying. In the middle of the stairs, her arms wrapped around Lulu's wicker basket, Natalie remembered the leathery smell of Father's cologne when he pressed his face into her neck.

"Such a big man, huge, so very big." Tall and firm like a tree, a giant over six foot four. His hands. How could she leave the house, filled with his furniture? He had made all the decisions about what to buy. The house was sufficient for her. The garden, too, that she loved to dig in. When she was younger, Father used to grab one of her arms and legs and swing her around his shirtless body in the summer high over the corn stalks, then sit her on his shoulders and run into the field, pretending he was a hawk and she his prey. Often to the copse of trees out of sight of the house and road. He only stopped when his heart condition forced him to retire early from the contracting bus

ness, which he sold, and mother, during one of her rare moments of protest, said it was not only risky, given his health, but it was also beginning to look odd, playing like that with a girl her age.

His fingers were long, hairy, and very, very hard. After dinner, he used to dip them in a crystal, silver trimmed bowl. Natalie would wipe them dry with her red linen napkin. Father loved a formal setting. She took to reading romances after he died, despite mother's disapproval. She climbed up the rest of the stairs. Only once had he ever struck her. She was in high school, then barely fifteen. Only once had he threatened her, rubbing her wrists raw. After that she always told him how much she loved him and promised never to leave. So, other men, friends, leaving home, entering college, marrying, or getting a job: all that had been quite impossible. Not even the flood could force her out. Mother went strange and silent in the last years. The house would not collapse, Natalie knew, having withstood so much in the past.

The piano could not be saved. Perhaps it would play of its own accord under the water, become a music box for sea horses and starfish.

"How silly of me, Lulu."

Lulu met her at the top of the stairs with a fat, wet tabby, missing the tip of one ear.

"Why, Lulu, you've rescued a friend." Natalie bent over to pat the animal who rubbed his wet fur against her ankle, making her shiver.

"If there's room for chipmunks and squirrels, there's room for your friend, Lulu."

After she finished carting the things she needed or wanted to save upstairs, the kitchen table began to float. Natalie spent most of that night drinking hot cups of black tea mixed with her father's favourite scotch. He had twenty-three bottles in the pantry when he died. Bert bought her more when she requested it.

"Funny thing, Nat, I can't figure out what you do with it. You never seem boozy to me." She had to offer him a drink from time to time. But he always started.

"I wish you'd let me, Nat, Liddy needn't know a thing. You're still an attractive woman." She just went dead on him. Father had started her drinking at a young age. "It makes everything all right," he said, "just fine." When she drank secretly with him in the copse of trees, why, the day just went softer, that's all, softer and easier to take, and the birds covered their heads with their wings. On the day of his burial, mother went to lie down, and Natalie sat still in front of her window, drinking a half a bottle of scotch.

After midnight the rain stopped. The sky cleared. The moon rolled out white and luminous, three quarters full. The houses on her block, all large, spacious, some run down, poorly maintained through the years, rose out of the high water like ships abandoned on a calm black

sea. Moon light floated above the lawns, picking out a submerged car here and there, momentarily phosphorescent under the water. Around the lamp posts masses of wreckage, garbage, caught, eddied, formed islets of debris. Natalie recognized a television set with a smashed screen. A dead dog, a German shepherd, if she judged correctly, caught in the branches of a tree in her front yard. The smell of sewage was so strong she shut the window but the offensive odour lingered in her head. She heard deep and dreadful sounds as if something enormous, hard, were thrusting against resistance and breaking in. The sound made her shake and want to cry out. Looking through the glass, she could almost swear that a house across the street cracked right down the middle and sagged before her eyes. The Empress of India floated by. It was still cool in the night, spring being only a week or two old. Natalie wrapped two of the afghans around her thin body. She chose not to light the kerosene heater, trying to conserve her fuel. Trees, barely in bud, stood above the water: dark, twisted, bereft of birds, branches reaching upward as if trying to pull themselves out of the flood. She rubbed her forehead against the window pane.

"Dear God," she whispered, shaking from cold, raising both arms like branches of the trees. She dozed off but jerked awake in the midst of a nightmare, one she had been having for years, one she blamed on her father's scotch. She always felt as if she were being suffocated and had to waken to breathe. It was still dark. Despite the cold, Natalie opened the window. Father had planted, pruned, trimmed the two maples in the front, their trunks hidden by the water. The mountain ash and the two poplars had fallen and been carried away; but the maples looked like giant tumbleweeds snagged to a standstill. When she was twelve, he had driven with her fifty miles north to a reforestation area where he had dug them up.

"Daddy, can you do that?"

"Daddy can do anything, chick."

They ate sandwiches in the middle of all those perfect, evenly spaced trees. The ground was wet. She remembered the flute-like song of a rosy-breasted grosbeak.

"Take your things off, now," he had said, even though it was early spring and chilly then, too.

The water looked black and smooth. If she were to get on the porch roof, kneel, and look into it, she'd see her face. The dead things floated closer to the house. Another dog, two cats, a chicken or a mop head.

"Could it be?"

Lulu, who was licking a paw on Natalie's lap, perked up an ear.

"Look, Lulu, a fox. Drowned in its den, I imagine, and washed right out." Its fur, dirty red, was the colour of her mother's hair, she noted,

remembering how often she'd had to apply henna rinse to it. Glum she would have answered, if asked, mother had just gone glum even before father died, as if she had to wake up every morning to cold porridge and iron bars.

Natalie screamed. Lulu meowed, jumped off her lap. Natalie knocked a kneecap against the windowsill as she scurried onto the porch roof on all fours and crawled to the edge against which the water lapped softly. She stared hard into the moonlit darkness. A hand, its five fingers separated and stiffly held, swirled among the branches of the maple tree, got free, then floated towards the roof.

"Dear God!" Natalie leaned over the edge. It was a big hand, its fingers long and hard, white as death, seemingly cut off an arm but upright as if held in a warning to stop.

The water slipped over the edge of the roof and wet Natalie's white dress. Caught in a patch of moonlight, the hand glowed then retreated into the dark, then back again into the centre of light.

"Why, it's a mannequin, Lulu. See? There's the arm trailing behind and a body too, twisted in that funny way of store dummies. I thought . . . it's chilly, Lulu, quiet . . . " The cat, who had followed her mistress to the roof, jumped back into the room, leaving Natalie alone talking to the night. The scotch, still in her head, made her dizzy, and she held herself against falling over into the water. She could see outlines of her reflection merge into the mannequin's body. For a moment Natalie saw glassy eyes and a hairless head looking up at her, an orange face with blood red lips, and a complexion as smooth as polished bone.

"It's not real," she whispered. Her dress was soaked from the knees down. An island of branches, furniture, pieces of clothing, floated over her neighbour's lawn. In the east she saw the sky lighten as if someone were cautiously raising a blind. She saw more corpses of dead animals. Some birds.

"Nothing's alive."

Despite the crumbling cement foundation, the water in her basement and on the first floor, Natalie believed the house would hold. The chill sank into her bones but she didn't want to go back in. The dawn was coming and it looked like sun peering through a slit in the sky over the horizon.

"Surely that couldn't be a bed?" She pointed to the other side of the street to a large object sinking before her eyes. Father had carved the vines and clusters of grapes on her bedposts, erected a canopy, too, now ladened with dust. "A bower for my own sweet bird of paradise," he said. He had carried her over the threshold after he put the tools away and took a shower. Fourteen she was. Mother was having a tooth filled on that day.

"Come on now," he had said. Since his death she slept on the roll-away cot in the spare bedroom.

A screech. A squawk. Natalie's skin almost pulled away from the flesh on her arms. Another squawk, hard and piercing. The sky lifted some more. The light of dawn followed the tracks of the moon.

Dazed and headachy, the effects of a pot of tea and too much scotch felt in her brain and kidneys, her dress wet and cold against her skin, Natalie leaned forward to the sound, almost falling into the water. She saw blue and green feathers in a gold cage sparked to a high bright glare by shafts of sunlight.

"Lulu! Lulu! Come see! The Empress has come back!" Father hated birds in the house. An old prejudice, Natalie knew. He had scoffed when Bert and Lydia bought the parrot at a going out of business sale, just a year before his death.

Ragged and sodden, the parrot danced in circles on the perch. Half of the oversized gilt cage was under water, barely kept afloat by its wooden base.

"Poor thing, she'll die." Father's hands had dropped to his sides. She caught a fingernail on the E string from sheer fright. "Mother! Mother!" Lulu jumped out the window. Her gold fur caught the early sunlight that was creeping up the gentle slope of the roof.

A twig of one of the maple branches poked through the bars of the cage. "It's caught. Look how cold and frightened it is, Lulu. How could they have left her like that? Some people are not to be trusted, Lulu. I feel sick."

The sun crept up her body and rested on her face, gray from exhaustion. She breathed in deeply as if gulping for light and heat to warm her bones.

"It will die, Lulu, just become another dead thing in the water." The cat meowed, nuzzled against Natalie's thigh, then toppled over into the empty space created by his mistress when she, not quite elegantly, not quite smoothly, fatigue and queasiness notwithstanding, dove head first into the water and disappeared beneath its shiny black surface.

She rose spluttering, arms flailing, dress ballooning about her shoulders and face, twigs caught in her curls. At first she swam in a circle, then sank again, the dress blocking her movements, and rose again, kicking the mannequin in the face. Swirling like a wounded duck, Natalie beat against the water and, somehow, reached the branches of her father's tree. Grabbed a limb. Lulu sat on her haunches in the sun, winking. Spitting out water, the smell of which made her want to vomit, Natalie gasped for air, freeing herself from the sensation of choked lungs. She reached for another branch, caught her dress. She wrapped her arms tight around the second branch and

pulled herself free, tearing half her dress off.

"Dear God," she gasped, almost yanking an arm out of its socket as she reached for the cage. Her fingers fit between the bars. The parrot, frantic, snatched at them with its curved beak and crunched, cutting through skin, rubbing bone. Natalie screamed but held the cage and jerked it free. Then she let go the branch, holding the cage high overhead, sinking again beneath the water. Up she came, kicked, beat through the flood towards the edge of her porch roof, her lungs wrenching themselves for air. An empty canoe suddenly appeared and almost hit her in the head. The pain in her fingers, for the parrot was still biting down, flapping its wings, made her kick harder. She screamed but water rushed into her mouth, shocking her with its foul taste. The parrot, to gain better purchase, let go for a moment. Aware only of the cessation of the terrible pressure on her fingers, Natalie heaved the cage onto the roof. It clanged on the red tile and rolled off into the water. But Natalie, coming up from under once more, reached the edge and lifted it out.

Her hair a net for bits and pieces of debris, flakes of garbage, her dress torn off, her fingers bleeding profusely, she raised one leg over the eaves, scraped the inside of her thigh, and hoisted herself out of the water. Lulu sniffed around the bird's cage. The parrot squawked; its blue and green feathers, some of which had come loose and caught in Natalie's hair, poked out between the bars.

"Lulu. . . . see . . . it's so good to breathe. . . . Lulu . . . see, I found something alive."

Natalie shook her body and lay down on the porch roof, draining herself of the filth of the flood, swallowing the new day.

Letters from the Baja
Four Selections

Light steps in and out
of the pink stones
the projects of tin
rusting in the foothills.
The children come down
prodding tires like hoops
to the sea.
It's a long way for their legs
and the road they go is burning.

Along the main artery
merchants display blankets
like a wall of frescoes.
When the red wind tunnels
under this sky
wearing shoes of a giant,
batting his cane
our compadres crawl into their huts
and eat dust for a week.

The coastal highway glows
on its trek south
like a necklace of amber,
crude chunks the sea washed up.
It couldn't be hotter than it is
already inside the ruined sap.
If we follow closely
we'll see cities like flyspecks;
remnants of an ancient forest.
A man and woman
standing in its shade.
Islands of colour; houses
projected at odd angles from each other.
The dark smear of a village.
Insects trapped inside
their tiny wings raised to fly.

Even before the birth of the great blowhole
at Punta Banda in the leaded womb of the sea
those who swam up that coast
from someplace invisible were its arms and legs.
For a brief time sun was their raft.
They learned to read the shadows
on the back of its visionary eye.
Sleep forged a candle to warm them
the sky was a cordovan colour.
On land they pursued the tangled kingdom
of bighorn.
Explorers all, life owed them that much.
It danced in their skin like a puma
under an awning of its own steely making.
When a big wind came, sweeping sediment
from the sierras and plateaus it took them
wherever it could. They could not go
fast enough. It swung them instead
like the stars at the end of its pale stick
its pointer, as far as it was able.
The places they'd been showed nothing.
Light went looking for a trace
inside the mouth of the universe
found nothing and again nothing.
Of that invention strapped to its back
. . . not a clue.
At Punta Banda water blows out of the enormous spigot;
midday spits fire.
In the evening, purple shadows grapple
to be first
among their brothers
and the wind goes deep in the wide room
no one tends.

Yellow Canary Whistling to the Industry of Silence inside its Cage

The losses of the others
belong to them
but nip you too.
Look how that coterie
of swallows explodes
out of the gray
apogee of living like a warm vest
onto the freeze-frame
                of dying.
How, like death
the waters of the City
are taking charge
of our lives, converting the sofa
and matching Louis the XIVth;
the initialled peau de soir
draped across our favourite portrait
of the bishop like damp cargo.

If the dead could speak
their wishes would be honoured
by the topography of falling leaves.

Night is good to us, its lovers
and sponsors a kind of Arab bazaar
but doesn't make us happy.
The voyage taken by Columbus
reminds us of the picture postcards;
the events no longer shaping our lives.

Trees shade the port of Maghera
hide small trawlers
angling in the undertow.
Slag heaps shift suddenly
photosensitive as plants to light.
Swallows return to where
they started
                and those others
are taking over
the brilliant Piazzale Roma.

Russian Tearoom Reconstructed beside the Lighted Calli

The artifice of evening, pyramid and spokes.
The joists to which we have ministered
the mortar ministering briefly to us.
Existential pallor issuing as steam
from the neck of the polished brass samovar.
The picture: *Landscape with River Birches*.
The recalcitrant boarshead glares down
at us from under a cocked hat.
With a flourish, the automechanic
leaning way back in his chair blows smoke rings
at the blonde, his wistful companion.
Evenings, more like mummers on parade.
The feeling of being in the world
and of its music.

The eggings . . .
campaign of the night before;
our coming out
to wipe the wimpled yellow
from the hype of dawn.

Tonight the calli seems to go no further
than the hooded light of those smokepots:
the exclusive property of the glass-blower's cottage.

Do his walls have ears?
Let's climb down and pin them back.
The automobile has been banned from inside the City
noxious fumes are spoiling it.

So it's horses; vaudevillians in black-face,
that hoarfrost dances
on the plain of living
like dismantled parlour cars.

The plan calling us to action is cancelled.
The iconoclasts of living, a kind of whiplash
of moments takes over.

Are you living like you're dying?
The painted, wax look of trees
anticipates the formal
convoluted entry
and those small gray putti
posed above the cornerstone
    of the new construction

are not singing, exactly.

Reflection from a Golden Era

The hills are an overstated miasma
of spectral waters
superheated by summer.
The partially drained canals
transmit a sense of paralysis;
Venice has been jacked up

as far as it will go
and responds
to the moisture in the atmosphere
like an enormous salt lick.

Horseflies lace through
sodden gardens, leaving
barely perceptible signatures
on deteriorating pine and acacia.
All this time the milk of existence
has been stirred and the outer
layer

reveals the faded
caravanserai, the tired
camels within.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ROLF AGGESTAM, a well known Swedish poet, editor and journalist, has published three books of poetry in Sweden. He has also translated ancient Japanese poetry, and Walt Whitman, into Swedish.

ERLAND ANDERSON's poems have appeared in numerous literary journals including *Portland Review, International Poetry Review,* and *The Greenfield Review.* He has published two chapbooks: *Piedras* (1978) and *A Hollow of Waves* (1983).

RICHARD BURNS lives in Cambridge where he founded the international Cambridge Poetry Festival in 1975. He has published eight volumes of poetry, as well as criticism and translations. He is co-editor of the new magazine *Margin.*

EMILY BUTLER, a visual artist and mountain climber, has studied art at the University of Edinburgh and the Emily Carr College of Art and Design. She has lived in Winnipeg, Pittsburgh, Baker Lake in the Canadian arctic, and Edinburgh (Scotland); she presently resides in Vancouver.

W. A. CRAM grew up in Chapleau, Ontario and now works in the Vancouver area. His work has appeared previously in *Seventh Wave* and *The Canadian Forum.*

REINHARD FILTER has published one book and is marketing a second. For seven years he has been the fiction editor of *Origins* literary magazine, based in Hamilton, Ontario.

CYNTHIA FLOOD's stories have appeared in a wide range of Canadian literary magazines and anthologies. She lives in Vancouver where she has been active in feminist and leftwing politics since the early Seventies.

DAVID GALEF's fiction and articles have appeared in *Punch, Queen's Quarterly, Event, Grain, Quarry, Portland Review,* and a variety of other magazines.

ALICE HAMILTON writes in English and French. This is her first publication.

KYLE HERBERT, "a native of Putney, Vermont presently residing in exile in Iowa City, contends that the ambiguous depth of creative passion, not the picayune quest for "realism," should be the seminal prompting behind art. Such largess, he believes, is incumbent on the gifts of the artist, squandered or malign if not of an expansive, universal optique—imperative to future human survival."

IVAN V. LALIC is one of the leading poets of his generation in Yugoslavia, where nine volumes of his poetry have appeared. He is also a distinguished translator and critic. His selected poems are available in English: *The Works of Love* (Anvil Press Poetry, London, 1981, tr. Francis R. Jones).

LARS NORDSTROM's poetry has appeared in a number of Swedish magazines and in *Portland Review.* Currently, he is a visiting Fulbright Scholar at Portland State University working on a critical history of American Northwest poets.

KENNETH RADU's fiction and poetry have appeared in many periodicals, including *Arc, Canadian Forum, Event,* and *Matrix.* His first collection of poems, *Letter to a Distant Father,* will be published this spring by Brick Books. His first collection of stories is forthcoming from The Muses' Company.

LEON ROOKE has new stories forthcoming or currently in *TriQuarterly, Grand Street, The Quarterly, Fiddlehead, Mississippi Review, Waves, Story Quarterly, Canadian Forum,* and others. A play written for Caravan Stage Company will open in Spring 1987.

ROBERTO SANESI, one of the foremost poets of his generation in Italy, has published twelve full length collections. His work published in English includes *Information Report* (Cape Goliard Press, London, 1970), and *In Visible Ink: Selected Shorter Poems 1955–1979* (Aquila, Isle of Sky, Scotland, 1982), ed. Richard Burns. He is also an outstanding translator of English and American poetry.

ROBYN SARAH's poems have appeared numerous times in *PRISM,* including *PRISM 13:1, 22:1, 24:1,* and *24:4.* Her most recent book is *Anyone Skating On That Middle Ground* (Véhicule Press, 1984).

KNUTE SKINNER divides his residence between Bellingham, Washington, and County Clare, Ireland. His *Selected Poems* was recently published by Aquila Press. His poems have appeared previously in *PRISM 6:1.*

SUSAN SONDE has had poems published in *New Letters, Epoch, Mississippi Review, Southern Poetry Review, Images,* and others including anthologies. She has one book published: *Inland is Parenthetical* (Dryad Press, Washington, D. C.). She won the Poetry Society of America's Gordon Barber Memorial Award for her sixteen page poem: "Letters From The Poet Zhang Jie."

GLEN SORESTAD's latest books of poetry are *Jan Lake Poems* (Harbour, 1984) and *Hold the Rain in Your Hands* (Coteau Books, 1985).

RUSSELL THORNTON has had poems published in many of Canada's major literary magazines. His work is included in *Vancouver: Soul of a City* and will appear in *Relations* (Mosaic Press). His third book, *The Skin of a Song,* will be appearing soon from Athanor Press.

WILLIAM WOODRUFF lives in Los Angeles, California.

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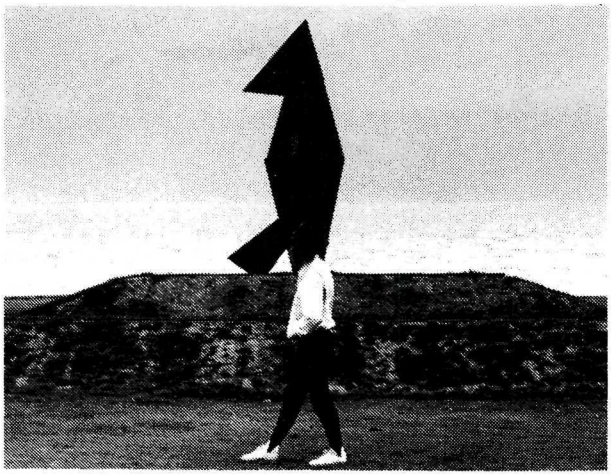

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