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Henry Kreisel

An Evening With Sholom Aleichem

Dear Mister Sholom Aleichem! No, that's not right. It's like I'm writing a letter to you. But I'm not writing a letter to you. Because where you are, there's no post office. I'm talking into this tape-recorder, but I'm really talking to you. I have a feeling that you just walked in the door and sat down in the corner there. You look just like the photo I saw of you once in a newspaper or somewhere. You were standing with a few others and you had glasses and you wore a hat and you had a big mustache and you were smiling a little golden smile. Just the way you look now in the corner there, in the chair.

So, hello, dear Mister Sholom Aleichem! A big hello! Maybe you want a glass of tea, with lemon and a lump of sugar to hold in the mouth? The way my grandmother used to drink tea. You know, it was in my grandmother's house that I first heard about you. That's a long time ago. More than fifty years ago. You were already dead then, Mister Sholom Aleichem, but not too long, and they still talked about you like you were a living man, my grandmother and her friends. To them you were still alive, a guest in the house. Just like you are to me now.

You're sure you don't want a glass of tea? Nowadays we drink tea out of a cup, but my grandmother drank out of a glass. You, too, I'm sure.

And where you are now, do they drink tea also? Out of a cup? Out of a glass?

To tell you the truth, I didn't think about you much after my grandmother died. In her house I used to hear your stories, about Tevye and about Motel and about the *shtetl*, I'll tell you about that soon, but when she died, in 1925, that was the end. I didn't hear any more. And I'm not much of a reader. I don't have the patience. A kibbitzer, yes, a talker, yes, but a reader—no.

So I forgot about you, Mister Sholom Aleichem—more or less. For forty, forty-five years. I was busy making a living, bringing up a family. Who had time for stories, especially stories that happened such a long time ago, in a country ten thousand miles away?

Then they made a movie from your stories. A big musical. *Fiddler on the Roof*. That's what they called it. A funny name. I don't remember no

fiddlers on no roofs in your stories. Maybe you heard about that movie? Yes, I see you're nodding your head. Good news gets around. Bad news even faster, but good news, too, thank God, once in a while.

You used to have a saying in your stories that I always liked. Two people are talking and when one says, "I wish you a long life," or "May you have good health," or "Don't worry, everything will be all right," the other says, "Let it go from your lips to God's ears!" I always liked that. For a while I used to say it all the time. I even got a nickname out of it. Some of my friends used to call me "God's ears." How do you like that?

Anyway, I was telling about that movie they made from your stories. Everybody was talking about *Fiddler on the Roof*, and on the radio they were playing songs from it all day. I used to listen to the songs and I used to hum the melodies. Especially there was a song I liked—if I were a rich man, yabbabababababababa. That was the most popular. Maybe you heard it?

This reminds me of a story I heard once. There was this *melamed*, this poor little Hebrew teacher, he was hardly making a living, and he says, "If I was Rothschild, I would be richer than Rothschild." How so? they ask him. "Because," he says, "if I was Rothschild, I would have all his fortune, but on top of it, I would also have my salary as a Hebrew teacher!"

So anyway, *Fiddler on the Roof* was playing downtown, and my wife wanted to go. I said, sure, sure, Betty, we'll go, but then we didn't go. I come home from work, I'm tired. I'm a salesman, Mister Sholom Aleichem. I'm a great salesman, if I say so myself. I sell men's wear in a store downtown. A specialty store—Mister Big 'n' Tall. I'm only middle-sized myself, but I can deal with a three-hundred, four-hundred pounder. He's big, he's huge, but I have a bigger mouth. I can talk. He wants a brown suit, but I haven't got no brown suit that fits him. I sell him a blue suit. That's the kind of a salesman I am.

So I come home that evening. I feel more tired than usual. Not so good, to tell you the truth. I'm hardly in the door, my wife Betty she calls out to me, "Tonight you're taking me to see *Fiddler on the Roof*. You hear, Barnie, you're taking me tonight."

She's always complaining I don't take her out enough, Betty, God bless her. She has a point, I have to admit. She also complains I don't talk to her enough. She has a point there, too. I talk all day in the store, I come home I'm talked out. I just want to eat and flop down in a comfortable chair, like the one you're sitting in, Mister Sholom Aleichem, look at the paper, the headlines, the sports, watch a little TV—I always fall asleep in front of the TV—it relaxes me. If I go to the movies, to tell you the truth, I fall asleep, too. So I pay for nothing. So you can see, I'm not much of a movie-goer.

But she's been bugging me and bugging me, for two weeks already—Betty, God bless her. And now I didn't have no more excuses left. "All

right, all right," I say. "After supper we'll go and see *Fiddler on the Roof*. We'll make the nine o'clock show."

We eat supper. The two of us. We have three children, bless them, but they're all married now. We have four grandchildren already, *Gott sei Dank*. We eat. Brisket she had made for supper. My favourite, Mister Sholom Aleichem. Ordinarily I would give an arm for a good piece of brisket. But this time it didn't taste so good. I felt like I had a bit of indigestion.

"Have you got some seltzer?" I ask Betty. "Sure," she says. "It's right in front of you, there on the table. Are you blind or something?" So I drink a little seltzer water and it feels better—the indigestion.

After supper I lie down for an hour. I snooze a bit. Now and again a little bit of indigestion wakes me up. A sort of heartburn. But nothing serious.

Then suddenly I feel Betty shaking me a bit. "It's a quarter past eight. We better go, Barnie, if we're going to make the nine o'clock show."

I rouse myself up. I go to the bathroom. To tell you the truth, Mister Sholom Aleichem, I don't really feel much like going out to see a movie, even if it is a movie about Tevye and Motel and Tevye's daughters and the whole *schtick* I remember from when I was a boy and in my grandmother's house they used to hold *ein Abend mit Sholom Aleichem*, an evening with Sholom Aleichem. I'll tell you about that later.

But a promise is a promise. *Fiddler on the Roof*, here we come.

"All right," I say, and go to get my coat. "All right, Betty. Let's go. We'll have an evening with Sholom Aleichem."

And just at that moment, at the very moment when I say, "We'll have an evening with Sholom Aleichem," a pain cuts through me like I never had before. Like a hot knife cutting through butter. Just when I say, "We'll have an evening with Sholom Aleichem." It's got nothing to do with you, Mister Sholom Aleichem. No, no, God forbid. I'm not blaming you one little bit, you understand, only just when I say, "We'll have an evening with Sholom Aleichem", the knife goes through me.

I let out a cry. It must have been a kind of a shriek because Betty comes running out into the hall, and she cries, "What's the matter, Barnie? What happened?"

But just at that moment, a giant, one of those three-hundred pounders I try to fit into a suit, puts his arms around my waist and he squeezes and squeezes. *Oy, Gewalt!* I can't breathe. I gasp for air. But he squeezes and squeezes, and the knife keeps cutting through me.

"Barnie, Barnie," Betty cries, "What's happening? Oh, My God, what's happening?"

I try to say something. but I can only moan, and that roughneck keeps squeezing the life out of me. I try to hold on to something. I touch the wall, but I feel myself falling and falling, and with a thump I collapse on the floor.

The next thing I know, I am in the hospital, in an oxygen tent, with needles in my arms and tubes sticking out all over, and it's a miracle that I'm alive. In intensive care, that's where I am, and it's touch and go for three or four days.

But someone must have put in a good word for me. Betty most likely. My children. My friends. From their lips to God's ears. So maybe some big shot up there, maybe even you, Mister Sholom Aleichem, said to the angel who keeps the records, "It's not time yet for Barnie Himmel! Put him back! Put him back!"

I see you're smiling, Mister Sholom Aleichem. Isn't that how it's done? Who decides, anyway, that this one should live and that one should die? God alone? Or does he delegate the paperwork? You know how it is said, "Oh Rosh Hashonah it's entered and on Yom Kippur it's sealed—who lives, who dies, who by fire and who by water, who from hunger and who from thirst."

One thing I learned. Everything you always think happens to other people, eventually happens to you, too.

But this time I only got a warning. I heard the knock on the door. The angel of death brushed my cheek.

After a week, ten days, they moved me out of intensive care, just on the day when I turned sixty-five. What a birthday! All my children were there. And the grandchildren. And Betty, of course. They brought a cake and flowers and they were going to have a regular party. But the chief nurse came rushing in and stopped all this *Narrishkeit*. "No excitement!" she called out, "No excitement! This patient is still pretty sick."

"So take the cake home," I said, "and have a celebration."

They laughed, and my son said, "We'll drink to your health, Dad," and I said, "Let it go from your mouth to God's ear."

I stayed in the hospital for another three, four weeks, and now I am home. I have a damaged heart, but I am alive, and if I am careful, and if I lose weight, and if I stop smoking, and if I do exercise, the doctor said I could live another twenty years. From his lips to God's ears. You know how it is, Mister Sholom Aleichem. You had a lot of trouble with your lungs. My trouble comes from the heart.

I've already been home for five weeks, and I have to stay home longer yet. How long? He won't tell me exactly, the doctor. So in the meantime I'm going nuts. I'm bored out of my mind. I want to get back to the store. But as soon as I mention it, Betty weeps bitter tears. "I don't want to be a widow," she cries. She wants me to retire. "We'll go to Florida," she says. "Away from the winters in Canada." "I'll die of boredom," I say. "So you'll be a widow one way or another." "Don't joke like this," she cries. It's not a joke, Mister Sholom Aleichem. It's the truth.

He won't even let me go out and play poker with my friends, the doctor. No excitement, he says, no gambling. We never play for high stakes, I tell him. But he says excitement has nothing to do with money.

It's competition, he says. He says I have a compulsive personality. I'm a competitor. A compulsive personality! A lot of baloney, if you ask me. But maybe not. Maybe he's right, the doctor, maybe he knows a thing or two. Anyway, Betty wouldn't let me go out. The doctor says something, that's it as far as she is concerned.

But she's worried about me. How restless I am. How I am going nuts, sitting around doing nothing. So she talked it over with my son David, and two, three days he comes to the house and he brings me this beautiful tape-recorder.

"You're always telling stories, Dad," he says. "So tell your stories into the machine. Tell your life story. Then we can have someone take it off the tape. You don't have to worry about spelling the words or worry about grammar. We'll hire a secretary and she'll do it. Just tell your stories, Dad," he says.

And here I am. A great little invention, eh, Mister Sholom Aleichem! Miracles of modern science. What you wouldn't have given to have a machine like that! Am I right? I bet you could've told twice as many stories if you didn't have to write everything out in pencil or with a pen. I don't even think they had typewriters in your day. Am I right, Mister Sholom Aleichem?

Ah! Betty's calling me. I'm supposed to walk around a bit. Not too much. But I'm supposed to get some exercise. Then I'll have some tea. And then I'll come back and I'll tell you how they used to have an evening with Sholom Aleichem in my grandmother's house. No big fancy movies. No stars. No singing. But it was a lot of fun just the same. So don't go away. Or if you must go away, I'll call you back later.

II

Well! I never got back yesterday. I walked around a bit. I had tea. Then my daughter came with the grandchildren. So I was busy.

I was telling my wife and my daughter that I was talking to Sholom Aleichem on the tape-recorder. I thought they would think I was *meshugge*, that I had gone bananas. But Betty says, "Talk to anyone you want, just so long as you don't go back to the store and kill yourself. I don't want to be a widow."

I don't see you sitting in the chair, Mister Sholom Aleichem. — I'll talk to you anyway. I'm sure you can hear me, wherever you are.

You know, last night I had a dream about you, Mister Sholom Aleichem. A strange kind of a dream. You were sitting on a cloud and all around you people were sitting, also on clouds, and up above all the clouds someone else was sitting, on a big chair it seemed. Maybe a throne. I couldn't see who it was because the clouds were so thick. Maybe an important angel. Maybe — who knows? — God himself. And you were reading stories to them. From time to time there was laughter.

Sometimes it sounded more like a thunderclap. The clouds shook. But you went right on reading. Then you stood up—you were standing right on a cloud, but you didn't sink in.

Ah! Now I see you again. You're back in the chair. Make yourself comfortable, Mister—. Maybe I could just call you Sholom. But no, that doesn't sound right. Not respectful. You were such a famous writer. They make movies from your stories. With big stars. And when you died, I heard, there were maybe a hundred thousand people that came to your funeral in New York. A hundred thousand people! Imagine that! So how could I call you by your first name, like you were my friend? But actually—you are my friend. I've known you ever since I was a boy. Even though I forgot about you—more or less—for forty, forty-five years.

But when I was a boy, I heard your stories every two, three weeks, on Friday nights after supper in my grandmother's house on Maria Street, here in Toronto. That's when the neighbors—ten, twelve people, sometimes more, husbands and wives, daughters and sons, even—came together in my grandmother's living room, and they drank tea and gossipped and told the news from the old country and how they were trying to bring relatives over here, and then someone always said, "And now let's hear a story from Sholom Aleichem," and my grandmother would bring out a book and someone would read a story, and everybody listened, and they laughed and sometimes they cried, and they made comments. They cursed the bad guys and they cheered on the good guys. It was a regular riot.

The best reader was Sam Rabinowitz. He didn't come all the time. Maybe once a month. But when he came, people used to go out and fetch other friends and neighbors. Because when Sam Rabinowitz read your stories, it was really and truly an evening with Sholom Aleichem.

Oh, could he read—Sam Rabinowitz. With feeling and with tenderness, and with humor and sometimes with sarcasm.

I remember he read about a writer who churns out plays like you churn out butter. One a month. But are they any good? Does he sell any? *A naechtiger Tag*. Don't even ask. His wife turns out babies. One a year. Healthy, strong babies. He complains. Every year a baby! *Genug!* "I tell you what," she says. "I make better babies than you make plays. So let's switch. You have the babies and I'll write the plays."

Ah, that brought applause. "Good for her!" cried one of the women. "How does he think the babies come?" cried another. And a third said, "He won't leave her alone, the pig. So let him provide for the babies. He should get a job, he should."

But best of all they liked to hear stories about weddings and marriages. Good and bad. How once seven matchmakers got into the act to arrange two matches—three and a half matchmakers per match!

I see you're laughing, Mister Sholom Aleichem. You remember the story?

How once there was a young couple, and they were already standing under the *chupah*, under the canopy, and the rabbi was just starting the ceremony, when suddenly two young women come rushing into the synagogue, screaming and cursing.

"Stop everything!"

"Don't marry him!"

"That scoundrel!"

"That robber!"

"He married me four months ago, just after Passover. He took the dowry and he left me with a child." And she pointed to her belly.

Oh, the commotion in my grandmother's living room! Talk about audience participation! To this day I don't know how the story came out. But if he escaped with his life, that bigamist, it would have been a miracle, if they had anything to say about it.

Sam Rabinowitz was a small man. He had hardly any hair, but what he had he combed very carefully. When he sat in a big chair, his feet touched the floor, but just. He had a little pot belly. And when you looked at his tie, you could read the menu from the whole week—when he had eggs and when *borscht,* when dark meat gravy and when light chicken gravy. And when prune juice. Prune juice he liked especially because it helped him with his constipation.

But when he opened his mouth, you forgot everything. How could such a rich voice come from such a small man? But it could, and when he read you forgot everything else, and Sam Rabinowitz was like a great actor and he had the audience in the palm of his hand.

Weddings and marriages. Like I said, that's what they liked to hear most. There was another story I remember—a story about a mysterious woman with a heavy veil.

A young couple is just getting married. They're standing together under the *chupah*. A beautiful couple. The wedding dress cost a fortune. No expense has been spared. The bride's father is a big shot. And the bridegroom's father is no piker, either. The guests have come from far and wide. Reporters are here from the newspapers. And photographers, too. All is quiet. The ceremony is just about to start.

At this point, Sam Rabinowitz dropped his voice. He waited. To build up the suspense.

Suddenly she appears. A tall woman. She walks down the aisle as if she is the bride. Nobody can see her face because it's hidden behind the veil. Is she beautiful? Is she ugly? No one knows. Who is she? Nobody recognizes her. But she knows what she wants. She goes straight to the bridegroom's father and whispers something in his ear. He turns pale. He takes her by the arm and leads her outside, to a little room.

Everything stops. Panic sweeps over the guests. The bride's mother is nearly fainting. The young couple look at each other. Nobody knows what's happening.

In the little room, the bridegroom's father asks the woman behind the veil, "What do you want?"

"I was your son's mistress," she says. "In Kiev. When he was a student."

It doesn't surprise the father. Rich men's sons do these things.

"So," he says. "What's the ultimatum?" No fooling around for him. Right to the point.

"Let him marry me," she says.

"Impossible," says the father.

"Then a monthly payment," she says. "And a sum for the baby."

The baby? Where did the baby come from? Suddenly a baby! He'd have a thing or two to say to his son. But in the meantime, he had to make a deal.

He pulls out his wallet. He gives her money. "Tomorrow, come to my lawyer. We'll complete the deal."

With that, he walks out of the room. The wedding goes on.

In my grandmother's living room they could hardly wait for Sam Rabinowitz to finish. Then a big debate began. Some didn't believe it altogether. That the son had a mistress when he was a student, yes, that they believed. But she wouldn't have barged in like that. Oh, yes, she would, said others. How else could she hope to get anything? And how about the young bride? Didn't she suspect that something was not *kosher*? Sure, said one of the men, but she figured it would give her a hammer to hold over her husband's head. And if she ever wanted to take a lover, she would have every excuse. Her husband couldn't say anything. That's the way rich people do things.

Then they turned to Sam Rabinowitz. What did he think?

"It's a comedy," he said. And that's all he said.

A comedy! All of life is a comedy. You knew that better than anybody, Mister Sholom Aleichem. Even some tragedies are comedies.

Now let me tell you about what happened once.

A Friday night again. After supper. Once again they come together in my grandmother's house for an evening with Sholom Aleichem. Sam Rabinowitz comes. He hadn't been for a few weeks because he was in the hospital for an operation. A hernia. That's what he had. They greeted him like he had just returned from the dead. Like a messiah, almost. He was just the same. His tie had a few more spots, but otherwise he was the same.

First he had some tea and a piece of honey-cake. In the meantime, several people went out to fetch others. They knew that everybody in the neighborhood wanted to hear Sam Rabinowitz reading Sholom Aleichem stories.

So more people came. The room was packed. Suddenly two new faces appeared. A mother and her daughter. Mrs. Silber and her daughter Sonia. They had just moved into our street. They lived in Mrs. Goldberg's house and they didn't know too many people yet. So they were introduced and they shook hands with everybody, and when Sonia shook hands with me and looked into my eyes, an arrow struck me in the heart, Mister Sholom Aleichem. I fell in love. Immediately. Head over heels, like the saying goes. For the first time in my life. I was fifteen years old. I had kissed a few girls, even felt them up a little bit, to tell you the truth, but never had such a feeling gone right through me, like a hot knife through butter. Never. Never before and (I'll whisper this to you) never again.

Sonia's eyes were like a deep blue lake and I fell in and drowned. Her breasts were small and round, like little oranges, and her legs were long and beautiful. She was maybe eighteen or nineteen. Maybe less.

She sat down and stretched out her long legs and put her hands in her lap, and I stood against the wall so I could see her and drink in the wonder of her, but so it wouldn't be too obvious. Maybe, maybe, I prayed, she has fallen in love with me, too. Please God, let it be so. From my mouth to God's ear.

Sam Rabinowitz cleared his throat. Someone rapped a spoon against a glass, someone else called out for quiet. They stopped talking. Rabinowitz began to read.

This time it was a story about a girl called Rayzel. This Rayzel was expecting her first child and she was already overdue. Everything was prepared. The midwife was waiting. But nothing was happening. Then suddenly the pains came. Rayzel writhed and moaned. She wanted to die. Her grandmother was standing by her because her mother was dead.

"Scream, scream!" called out the grandmother. "One more scream and with God's help you'll make it."

Suddenly Rayzel calls out a name. (I've forgotten the name, Mister Sholom Aleichem, but you probably remember it.) Anyway, it's the name of her husband. Where he is? It turns out he left her eight months ago. He said he was going to America to look for work. But she hasn't heard a word from him since—not a word. People were already saying that he was gone for good, that he had probably got himself another woman in America. But he left a little souvenir, and here is Rayzel struggling to deliver that souvenir.

"No, no!" she cries out, "he hasn't forgotten about me! He'll come back to me. Where are you, where are you? God! God! God!" And the women standing around her don't know if she's crying for her husband or for God. But why not for both?

Rabinowitz read with such emotion that some people were crying. Some of the women in the room were cursing the absent husband because he could at least have sent a letter. Or even a post card.

As for me, I can't take my eyes off Sonia. I hear Rabinowitz and his powerful voice, but my heart is beating and hot flames are shooting through me.

"Sonia! Sonia!" I want to cry out to her, "I love you, I love you!"

Now that would have been a fine how do you do, eh, Mister Sholom Aleichem?

But meanwhile Sam Rabinowitz is reading about poor Rayzel, who is moaning and crying and pushing, and calling out her husband's name.

Suddenly Sonia's face turns white. White like a sheet. She puts her hands over her ears, as if she doesn't want to hear any more. Her eyes open wide and she stares at me, but I don't think she sees me. Her body sways. And suddenly she lets out a long, low moan, "Ahhhhhh," and then the moan becomes a wail and then a cry.

"Mama! Mama!" she cries. "Help me! Help me!"

"Help her! Help her!" somebody cries out. "She's going to faint."

Here is my chance. I rush forward. I take her hand. I stroke her hair.

Her mother starts crying. People start pushing.

"Give her some air!" someone calls out.

"Help her to the bedroom, Barnie," I hear my grandmother's voice. "Let her lie down. Then bring a wet washcloth and put it on her forehead."

I didn't have to be told twice, Mister Sholom Aleichem.

"Come," I say. "Come, Sonia. Lean on me. Come and lie down."

She walked slowly with me, holding on to my arm, and her mother walked behind us. And I was on a cloud. On cloud seven, as the saying goes. Or cloud nine. Whatever the number, I was on it.

Sam Rabinowitz started reading again, but I didn't go back. So that's another of your stories I didn't hear to the end, Mister Sholom Aleichem.

I helped Sonia to lie down and I held her hand—a little longer than I had to. And then I saw the wedding ring on her finger and my heart stopped beating. It couldn't be. But yes, it was.

I went out to fetch a wet washcloth and when I came back, her mother was talking to her in a soft voice and she was lying there very still, with her eyes closed.

I put the washcloth on her forehead. Then I see the wedding ring again, and I can't take my eyes off it.

I want to say something, but the words won't come out of my mouth. My voice is dry and I can't speak. But finally I manage to whisper to her mother, "Is she married?"

She gave me such a look. I didn't know what to make of it. Then she pointed to the ring. "You see the ring?" she asked.

"I see it, I see it," I said.

"So why are you asking?"

I didn't know what to say.

"She has a ring," she said. "But where's the husband?"

Sonia opened her deep-blue eyes. "Don't, Mama," she said. "Please don't."

What I wouldn't have done to help her, Mister Sholom Aleichem, what I wouldn't have done for her!

"So what did I say?" the mother said. "Where is he, that no-goodnik? I always knew he was a no-goodnik, but you knew better."

I was torn in half, Mister Sholom Aleichem. I could have murdered that guy. I was so jealous. But at the same time I wanted him to come back because my beautiful Sonia was suffering. And yet—if he didn't come back, maybe there was room for me.

"Don't," Sonia said to her mother. "Please don't."

"I have to say what is in my heart," the mother said. "I wouldn't mind so much if he had just disappeared. Good riddance. But he had to leave a souvenir."

"Stop it, Mama! Stop it!" cried Sonia, and she put her hands over her ears. She didn't want to hear any more. Then she got off the bed, and said, "I want to go home. Let's go home immediately."

I was left all confused. Especially about the souvenir. Did that mean what I thought it meant? Well, in a few weeks there was no doubt. The secret was out. Up front, so to speak. But she was more beautiful than ever.

I used to hang around Mrs. Goldberg's house, where they had rented some rooms. I knew when she went to the store and I used to wait for her to come out and then I went with her and carried her parcels. I was always hoping that she would say something that showed that she was in love with me. And then I had a speech all ready. I would leave school and get a job and we would get married—her husband, if she really had a husband, was totally out of the picture. And I would accept the child as if it was my own.

Of course, she never said she loved me, and I never got to make my speech. She always treated me nice—like I was her kid brother. That bothered me a lot, but what could I do?

Soon there was a lot of talk on our street. Some said there never was a husband. And that's why they came here—the mother and the daughter. Some said they came from Winnipeg and some said from Montreal. I asked her once and she said it wasn't true, but she didn't tell me any more.

Then one day they disappeared. She was already very big and her time was close. Mrs. Goldberg said they had gone to Montreal, where the mother had a sister. I don't know if that was true. Perhaps you heard about it, Mister Sholom Aleichem, because that's the kind of story you used to tell.

I was heartbroken for a while, but then I got over it. But I never forgot. Over the years I've often thought about Sonia because she aroused such a passion in me, but this is the first time I'm telling about

it. She would be sixty-eight, sixty-nine years old if she's still alive. And the child would be fifty.

Except—for me she can never be old. She will always be the way she was when I first looked into her eyes. When I think about her it's always spring, the sun is always shining, the trees are green and the birds sing.

I'll play the tape back, and then perhaps I'll wipe it off. My son told me to tell about my life, but maybe he would be embarrassed. And Betty maybe would be jealous. But to you I can tell it. If you want, you can tell it when they all get together up there, on the clouds, for an evening with Sholom Aleichem.

And that reminds me. *Fiddler on the Roof* isn't playing in town any more. But it'll come back. And when it comes back to a theatre near us, I'll take Betty for sure this time. And we'll have an evening with Sholom Aleichem.

It's funny—you were there when I first knew what real love was, when the hot knife of passion went through me. And you were there also when the hot knife cut through me and the angel of death brushed my cheek.

Good-bye for now, my dear Mister Sholom Aleichem. I'll tell more stories some other time. And when you are back there, on the clouds, put in a good word for Barnie Himmel. So with God's help I should recover my health and have a few more good years with Betty, God bless her, and to have joy, to have *naches*, from my children and grandchildren. From your mouth to God's ears. Amen.

THE SOWER

Sixty seasons I have sowed, man and boy,
and I tell you, Matthew, that a seed
can not grow in the heart. No, one may
as well throw it away or feed
the chickens with it. For a fact, love
is something that only the devil
understands. I'd rather put my trust
in stones and reap a quick crop, for ill
or good. That way, you have no roots and
get what you can in a few short suns.
Or take cactus plants—at least a man
sees the thorns and expects to be stuck,
unless he's a fool (some choke on wool).
As for good ground, Matthew, that's just luck.
I've seen other fellows' orchards full
year after year, where no one's lifted
a hand or a hoe except to pull
the ripe fruits down. Some men are gifted.

NOT JUST ONCE

Sand and stars are not enough—
there must be proof,
such as stones capable of love
to raise up children.

A test beyond reason,
in order to move
the incredible mountain
and bring down the sun.

Something uncommon, a sign
of God in man,
not just once, but as many times
as the times demand.

Still nothing satisfies,
human or divine:
the hand that stopped Abraham
drove the nail through Christ's.

Susan Glickman

SAGA

"It's not only his own life that man's body has to endure"
—Charles Simic, *Chorus for One Voice*

We came by boat and on foot bearing tent and blanket
and some of us were old, and some ill, and all
were hungry

And our hunger ran behind us over the dark hills
and taught us to dig and to build
and everything was new then, and green

In those days the land was so big a man
could part the forest like the opening to his tent
and watch the beasts perform their perfect magic

He could watch and they knew he was watching
and went on all the same, for he was still
of their tribe, though upright and full of language

Language was the first to come
then knife, tent and boat
and the forest itself began to hunger

Forest could not run or sail away
the beasts forgot their magic
the green land learned to speak, saying *knife*, saying *knife*.

Margarita Carrera / *Two Poems*

INSIDE ME

Inside of me
a wild beast
watches without serenity
seethes with furor
with hell's dark blood
talons and eye teeth
to devour your solitude
your world
your thighs
your man's body
as tight-lipped time sneaks away
leaving tracks
and secret breathing
surrounds you
awaits your mortal scraps
your tearful shadow
made for my fire
for the passion that watches.

I AM NO LONGER, NOR MY TIME

I am no longer
nor my time

asks the heart that is no longer mine,
asks the wing, the wind,
the absurd dream
no longer, never mine.

I am not sorry for my anger
nor the smile, nor the weeping,
not even my passage of the lost animal.

I am sorry for the wheat
and for the daybreak.

In rags walks the song
of all that was mine,

withered and bent,
all that was mine,

no longer I nor my time.

translated from the Spanish by Leilani Wright

Joseph Bruchac

STONE MAPS

Pulling the first
carrot of this summer
a stone comes up, held in the root hairs
the way a fist
might clench a coin.

The people who lived
this hill before
my feet stood here
traced their lives
in the shape of stones.

Each rock held a pattern,
map of this land
which read right
would lead them home.
In those days,
no one stayed lost forever.

I match its lines
to the shape of my palm,
seeking the chart
behind my eyes,
a road the wings
of a red-tailed hawk
trace across the sky.

I hold it until
I begin to feel
my heartbeat entering
its rhythms, then
bury the stone again
uncertain if I
am not yet ready
for that direction it might take me.

Dennis Gruending

YOU SEND FEATHERS

You send feathers from Canada,
tell me
to ride dreams like white-backed gulls
listen to what birds say
read the flowers.

I see high stone walls
topped with hedges of blue bougainvillaea
and chunks of broken glass in concrete
to protect the parrot
complaining in his cage.

My nights are bruised
by the din of dogs fighting over cans
in dark alleys where stones
break the ground like teeth,
and there are boys in heavy black boots
who ride the backs of trucks
and point guns at the sky.

I dream blue mountains leaning over us
morning streets, hands patting the corn flour
children snug in rebozos, women braiding hair,
and men carrying machetes to a harvest of flowers.

Georgi Djagarov

TRUTH

You trampled down the grass, my dear,
and you suppose it's vanquished?
But it's alive on earth right here.
Livelier now than ever it flourished.

Drinking sunlight, and breathing dew,
and though you don't know where it's born,
it's reaching silently toward you,
to prick you with its green and tiny horn.

translated from the Bulgarian by
Jascha Kessler and Alexander Shurbanov

Luchezar Elenkov

POET

Foliage, bees and flowers. . . walking alone under low skies.
A bug vanishes out of the air down the pigeon's gaping bill.
Without work, life and thought, you could scarcely
make out even a way forward. Ask the twilight,
ask the ones who know you—how long will you last?
A city of names is raised up on posters like obits for those yet alive.
More and more of them. And you barely glance at the next one's work.

A swelling emotion. The world's almost gone from your mind.
  And then—
a tulip seems a sort of bell. And you blare out the news.
Which the neighbors scarcely hear. Go on without them,
to where the dew is fuming over black loam. And in spring or fall
they dig wells, potatoes, turning up punctured skulls.
Start there. Measure yourself against the gods. You'll grow tall
in that other land—the sky above these sprigs.

translated from the Bulgarian by Jascha Kessler
and Alexander Shurbanov

Allen Booth & Steven Bush

Life On The Line (Part One)

A prominent red line transverses the floor of an open black space. In the distance, two musicians play electronic keyboards and percussion: a pervasive acoustic matte of new wave, trance-like music. Each scene has its own rhythmic energy and drive. Occasionally, the music disappears.

A solo actor stands on the line, a shaft of light in the void. The title of each scene is announced, and he speaks: to us, to himself, or sometimes to the musicians. They forward his thoughts, singing in chorus (THE UPPER CASE TEXT IN PARENTHESES).

Bound to the red line, the actor transforms it, redefining it physically within each scene: tightrope, the ledge of a skyscraper window, kitestring, a bed of nails, an isolating wall. . . . He seeks, finally, to walk away.

He shares his story, a series of glimpses into his struggle to cope with the life of the working person; the man or woman whose survival seems always to be in someone else's hands, a life always on the line.

IF

If I get this job. I hope I get this job. It'll be an improvement if I get this job. I'll be in a better position if I get this job. Yeah if I get this job I won't have to worry for awhile. I can buy some things. I can get out of town now and then. I can eat as much as I want if I get this job. Yeah if I get this job I can actually consider becoming a father. If I get this job I won't have to be here. If I get this job I'll have a job. I'll have a future. I'll have a present. If I get this job.

I hope I get this job.

WAITING OUTSIDE

I was standing in the outer office
I was on hold so to speak in the outer office
Waiting for a decision that might never come

And I asked myself
How can I get this job?
How can I win this job?
How can I steal this job?

What position do I have to get myself into
To get myself into this position?

There were other people in the outer office
More or less pretending to read magazines
I noticed that I was more or less pretending to read a magazine
"People" magazine

And I told myself
I can do it better than he can
I'm a whole lot more qualified than she is
I deserve it more than any of them
I'm the best man for the job
I'm the best man
I'm the best

(HE'LL SEE YOU NOW)

Someone was smiling
I realized I was next
I walked through the door
Suddenly I wondered
What if they're waiting for the next big thing to come along?

What if I'm not it?

(HE'LL SEE YOU NOW)
I started blowing the interview
(HE'LL SEE YOU NOW)
I'm missing the point
(HE'LL SEE YOU NOW)
I'm making excuses
(HE'LL SEE YOU NOW)
I'm justifying my existence

HANGING

They told me "Hang in there"

I've been hanging in now for five hours
for five months
five years
fifteen years
fifty years

I just might be ready
to drop off soon

PROSPECTS

oh
a few things
coming up
keeping busy
possibilities
real interest
but
uh
nothing definite

nice talk
encouraging
sounds definite
uh
bad time
slow
needs some time to
said he'd call

call me back
lunch soon

oh
you know
waiting
feelers
future
back burner
up in the air

on ice
at the moment
and
uh
what about you?

oh
a few things
coming up
keeping busy

SELF-ACCUSATION

What do you think you're doing?
You're walking around
Looking at the pavement
Feeling sorry for yourself
Who do you think you are anyway?
What have you done to deserve a job?

You know there's work around
You just haven't tried hard enough
You haven't paid your dues
You haven't squirmed enough

You like to think you're important
"You are an important person"
You're not
Nobody notices you on the street
Nobody knows your name
Nobody remembers the things you've done
If you dropped down a manhole today
nobody would send out a search-party
Why should they?

If you were really the person you think you are
you'd be somewhere else right now
Doing things
You'd be in motion
You wouldn't be sitting around waiting for someone to call
Romance?
Forget it
Who would want to go out with you?
A loser like you

Let's face it
You've been squeezed out
You should get into a whole new line of work
While you still can
You should start over

Cut your losses
Yeah you say you've put so much into this one
So much of your life
So what?
Other people do it
Other people survive
Other people don't have problems like this
Other people don't kick and whine
Many other people have it much worse
Thousands of people would like to be in your shoes
Billions of people have a lot less going for them than you do
But they make it

They make it because they want to make it
If you really wanted it it would happen for you
You must be avoiding it
You must be afraid of it
You must not really want it

Maybe you don't have what it takes

FIRST DAY

I'm running around
All over town
There's purpose in my stride
I know where I'm going
I have clear answers for the people that I meet

Somebody gave me something to do

(AND IT'S THE FIRST DAY AND I)
My attitude is gratitude
(FIRST DAY AND I)
I think I'm coming back to me
(FIRST DAY AND I)
Oops I caught myself smiling
(FIRST DAY AND I)
I know who I'm supposed to be

I'm bounding around
This is my town
Look at this face
You know where I'm going
I'll buy you a drink tell you all about it OK

Somebody gave me something to do

(AND IT'S THE FIRST DAY AND I)
My hair's stopped falling out
(FIRST DAY AND I)
I got that charley-horse out of my leg finally
(FIRST DAY AND I)
Yeeaah My breathing is better too
(FIRST DAY AND I)
Now free time means something
(FIRST DAY AND I)
I actually like seeing other people
(FIRST DAY AND I)
Phone calls from my mother don't depress me
(FIRST DAY AND I)

BETTER NOT SAY "NO"

I'll stay up all night
I'll get this done
Don't worry
(I BETTER NOT SAY NO)
No problem
(I BETTER WATCH OUT)
I don't mind
(I CAN'T AFFORD TO SAY NO)
I'll have it for you tomorrow morning

They think my job is really lousy. My job isn't lousy. My job is OK. It might not be the greatest but it's OK. Now Sam. He's the one that's got a really lousy job. That's a job I wouldn't do if you paid me ten times as much. That is one lousy job. But my job, my job isn't that bad.

What did I just eat?

(I BETTER NOT SAY NO)
It will go on my record
(I BETTER WATCH OUT)
It will go straight into the computer
(I CAN'T AFFORD TO SAY NO)
It will be there forever

I don't know anybody here. Except Sam. I know a little about him. He's a hard little worker. He keeps busy. He's a survivor. He's looking out for Number One. And why shouldn't he? What do I think I'm doing? What wouldn't I do if it came right

down to it? If it came right down to the crunch. If it came right down to him or me.

Maybe it's better we stay strangers.

(I BETTER NOT SAY NO)
Did I pick up my dry cleaning?
(I BETTER NOT SAY NO)
Did I feed the cat?
(I BETTER NOT SAY NO)
Did I change my snow-tires?
(I BETTER NOT SAY NO)
Did I call the fumigator?
(I BETTER NOT SAY NO)
Did I leave the water boiling?
(I BETTER NOT SAY NO)
Do I know where my chldren are?

(Sound effect: Bleep from pager)

Oh
Gotta run

MACHINE AND I

I notice I feel good
I've got somewhere for my energy to go
I don't have to think about things I don't want to think about
Yeah when I'm working I feel like I make sense

Feel good
Yeeaah

I'm not fighting my machine today

My machine is helping me get things done

Yeah I'm really with it

Things couldn't be going better

My machine and I are getting along

I've become one with it

I've become one with the machine

One with a machine that makes things I'm not crazy about

What is this machine doing here anyway?

I notice I feel

not bad

but

Am I missing something?

Did I miss something?

Is that my life

Over there

Giving me the slip

Is this it?

Just wondering

PARALYZED

I reset the alarm three times

Nine times I tell myself to get up

I catalogue all the good reasons
I remain unconvinced

I stare at a spot on the ceiling for literally minutes

I hear the news roll over me but I am not affected

I give myself five minutes more

I realize I cannot get out of bed

I consider staying this way forever

PROMISES

When I was poor I promised myself
when I got rich I wouldn't forget
what it was like to be poor

When I got a job I promised myself
I'd never forget that many many people
don't have one

Yes I promised myself that I'd never
never put anybody down
who seemed to be less fortunate than me

And I just did it
(THANK GOD I'M NOT HIM, THANK GOD I'M NOT HER)
I just did it
(THANK GOD I'M NOT HIM, THANK GOD I'M NOT HER)

Can you believe that bag-lady
in the polyester pantsuit

That man over there
is actually drinking Canadian wine

Don't look now but that woman
is wearing a Barry Manilow button

Did you catch that old guy
in the platform heels

I did it again

(THANK GOD I'M NOT HIM, THANK GOD I'M NOT HER)

I can't believe it

(THANK GOD I'M NOT HIM, THANK GOD I'M NOT HER)

Man down the line	—	bent over double
Woman at that desk	—	she's going blind
Child on my street	—	headed for trouble
Old vet on that park-bench	—	wasted he's wasted his mind

I did it again

(THANK GOD I'M NOT HIM, THANK GOD I'M NOT HER)

Yes I'm doing it again

I can't seem to stop I keep doing it

I promise I won't ever put people who want work from me on hold

No I won't ever turn my back on people who have to panhandle

I solemnly swear that I never will avoid anybody
simply because they can't further my career

Never no never will I put anybody down for not working

There I did it again

I just can't stop

I'm still doing it

I'm doing it now

(THANK GOD I'M NOT HIM, THANK GOD I'M NOT HER)

WHO ARE YOU?

She said

Tell me who you are

Without telling me what you do

....

.....

----- --- --- ----- --

...

???????

#%#%$$@####???!!!!##@#@@%#@###!!!

....-----....----- .. -- .. - ...

..

ONE WITH OTHERS

I looked up from what I was doing
I noticed the other people in the room
I noticed they were busy

I felt we were together

I tried to remember what we were doing
It didn't seem important

(INTO ME AND OUT OF ME)

I focussed on one pair of hands
Moving
Shaping something I recognized
I noticed my hands were moving

I'm going to finish this
I thought
I'm going to finish this
and pass it on down the line

I felt important

There was something about the light in the room

(INTO ME AND OUT OF ME)

I looked up across the room and out the window
I felt I was high up
Looking out that window across the world
Looking at the busy people

I felt we were one person
(INTO ME AND OUT OF ME)

WHAT SHE THINKS

She has a better job than I have
She thinks my job is lousy
She thinks I should be farther along than I am
She thinks there's no future with me

She told me my furniture depresses her

MORE

This could be it
This could be my big chance

I feel good
I know what I want
How can they resist me?
They have to say "Yes"

It's my turn

Men will respect me
Women will love me

My parents will be proud

Yes I'll get a better place
A place that won't look smaller with people in it
I'll buy some new furniture
I'll get it in tortoise-shell to match the carpeting

I think I'll change my hairstyle too
Yeeaah
Let everyone know I've changed
My friends will be surprised by the new me
They'll hate my guts
They'll get used to it

It's my turn

It's just beginning
There will be these religious moments
when I lay all that money on the counter
There'll be weekends with Karen Kain in Acapulco
Dinner invitations from well-known personalities

I'll set up a charitable foundation in my name
To help my friends with worthwhile projects

People will assume I'm well-hung
Yeeaah
I feel good
I know what I want
It's my turn

They have to say "Yes"

GOOD EXCUSES

Uh
My alarm didn't go off

My aunt died

I was captured by extraterrestrials

I knocked myself out

They said I had to stay home all day
To wait for the phone to be installed

The RCMP were holding me for questioning

Actually what happened was

I had this dream that told me to walk to work

CHAIN REACTION

I came home from work

I barked at the wife

The wife hit the kid

The kid kicked the dog

The dog barked at me

I've got to get rid of that dog

PROSPECTS TWO/I'M NOT A WORKER

on hold?

sorry

bad time

busy

working

money

steady

ok

for now

advancement

at some point

future

change

maybe

oh

yeah I'm still here

lunch soon?

next week

uh

looks bad

No I'm not a worker
I'm an expert

No I am not a worker
I run a Mac's Milk store

I'm not a blue collar worker
I'm a management trainee

I'm not a worker
I'm an artist

I'm not a worker
I'm a professional

I'm not a worker
I've got a career

WHADDAYA MEAN I'M FIRED?

CAN'T DO IT

If I tell them I can't do it

they'll say "He lacks motivation"

If I tell them I can't do it
they'll say "Maybe we should get someone who can"

They'll say "He can't deliver"
They'll think I don't believe any more
They'll think I'm a lesser man

I'm not gonna tell them I'm drinking like a fish
I'm not gonna tell them I'm popping five bennies a day
I'm not gonna tell them I've got a heart condition
a perforated ulcer
mercury poisoning
that I've had three accidents on the job
No

And I'm definitely not gonna tell them I've had a vision
A glimpse of our true condition
And I know
I know this is not what we're here for

But I still have to tell them
I can't do it

(CAN'T DO IT)
I can't get to sleep
(CAN'T DO IT)
I can't stay awake
(CAN'T DO IT)
I'm tightening up
(CAN'T DO IT)
I feel like I'm all used up

I bought it, I bought the whole package, I actually believed

that merit and hard work have something to do with success

And I think I'm so smart

If I tell myself I can't do it
then of course I can't do it
If I tell myself I can't do it
that means I'm setting myself up for failure
That means I'm losing my nerve
That means my days are numbered

No I'm not gonna tell myself I can't do it
because if I tell myself I can't do it
I'll think I'm a lesser man

(CAN'T DO IT)
I'm keeping it in
(CAN'T DO IT)
I'm falling apart
(CAN'T DO IT)
I've got to get out
(CAN'T DO IT)
I feel like I'm all burned out
I'm waiting for someone to call

Someone calls and changes my life

On the other side of that door
someone is deciding
whether or not to buy
large pieces of my life

Someone puts me on hold

Now someone places me in competition with total strangers
that I have no other reason at all to hate

I notice someone thinking like a thief
It's me

Someone assigns me to replace someone else

Now I'm sitting on top of the world

Now I'm waiting till someone drops the axe

Someone does

Now I'm waiting for someone else to call

IF (AGAIN)

If I get this job. Do I really want *this* job?

If I get this job I'll have to make a decision. I'll have to change. I'll have to buy some new clothes if I get this job.

If I get this job my time won't be my own. I'll be at somebody else's beck and call. Somebody I don't respect. I won't be doing what I know I should be doing.

If I get this job my friends will know I've lowered my expectations. I'll know I've lowered my expectations. I'll know I've failed. If I get THIS JOB.

I hope I don't get this job.

IRREPLACEABLE

I'm out walking

I'm thinking about — what really matters
I'm ready — I've got so much to give
I'm not a spare part — I'm irreplaceable

(OOH OOH IRREPLACEABLE)

I'm here talking

I'm asking myself	—	Who needs this waiting around?
Who needs this	—	fighting over crumbs?
Who needs me	—	to enjoy fighting over crumbs?
Who needs me	—	wasted?
Who needs me	—	to worry about money?
Who wants us to forget	—	WE are irreplaceable?

(OOH OOH IRREPLACEABLE)

Am I still talking?

I like it up here	—	Anything can happen
It's a good example	—	I need to be reminded

ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN

words by: *Allen Booth & Steven Bush*
music by: *Allen Booth*

LIFE ON THE LINE, a play in two acts, was first performed as a work-in-progress at the Onstage '81 Toronto Theatre Festival.

The current version premieres April, 1983, in Toronto, co-produced by Mixed Company and Young People's Theatre, with the assistance of the Ontario Arts Council.

Actor. . . . . Steven Bush
Keyboards. . . . . Allen Booth
Drums. . . . . Ben Cleveland-Hayes

Director: Alec Stockwell
Set & Costume Designer: Janine Kroon
Lighting Designer: Mark Delorme
Sound Technician: Lianne Cleveland-Hayes
Producer: Simon Malbogat

Paul Edmund Gotro

GHOSTS

These are shapes that swarm the dead hours, swirling.

While the sun's hounds bay all afternoon, these
are the paws of dogs twitching on August verandahs.

These are the broken-backed hands of men, with time
enough left to lay a garden between the cool grey
smallnesses of dusk, exchanging silence for corn.

Martin Anderson

GRANDFATHER HORACE
(1879–1953)

At eighteen
on the Canadian
Pacific bound for
Saskatchewan he drank
most of his
allowance away in
a fit of depression
'Bottlenecks grew
like thistles' he
said' 'on that
long track Everywhere
was desert' Dog
tailed he came
back on Tilbury
dock his father's
eyes flicked
once and his jaws
locked into an
opposition Gruff
and lugubrious
always when I
saw him
afterwards in his
orchard sucking
the wind-falls
with his gums
he sweetened
seldom Yet

years later through
the drugged euphoria
of a hospital
bed bad-coloured
and dying he
grinned at my
"crewcut" and scoffed
at my father's
derision As I
preened his laugh
redoubled through the
ward and one big
hand burst
from the sheets
to tousle my
quickly withdrawing head

WATERSTOP

The boxcar is dark
except for sunlight
squared through the door:
Dalton in silhouette
sitting on an egg-crate, leaning forward, arm angled
to his knee, looking out. We have been numbed
by the train sway, the flat
prairie idleness.

He searches for tobacco, finds it and holds it
between his knees; rolls his smoke.
He strikes a match; cups his hands.

Dalton's face is washed
in that conjured, captured
sunset.

THE TRAIN MAKES AN UNSCHEDULED STOP

Here is a meadow inclined and golden as fine
as fur blown down by wind. Earth's turn stirs
the air; fancy the vortex motions

in the long cannon of sky, my pupils dilate;
the lenses accomodate the distances, discover
focal lengths and focal planes to invert

the sky: a vast blue retina cataracted by
clouds. The sun sets field on fire. Then,
slow night washes down surrendering light: the
gentle dark rub on the meadow renders stars.

Andrew Wreggitt

DREAMER

As a young man, he rode into the bush
to look for a lost horse
the thin poplars leaning their shadows
on the skiff of autumn snow
He rode toward a point in the long prairie afternoon
where a horse stood in a coulee
Cold strips of light hung
in the branches,
the only sound
the fussing of chickadees
the drumming of a blue grouse

In this city
I call up my father from dreams
The years fold on themselves, my broken sleep
a sad measure in the dark
After all this time, I cannot turn aside
my father's face scanning the bald hills
for a sorrel mare
on an afternoon before I was born
I want only to call out to him
shake the frozen tongue out of the prairie sky,
lead the mare out of the poplars
and stand with him in the fading light,
a few words between us
of horses and weather

The young man approaches the coulee on foot
collar turned up, his grey fedora
pulled low on his brow
The mare steps once as a chickadee
lights by its ear
Silently, he slips the halter over the horse's muzzle
and leads it out of the trees
He rides back through the long evening,
the sorrel behind him

In this city
a car passes in the street,
light from a streetlamp
leans across the room
The dreamer calls out in darkness
and waits to be found

Joan Fern Shaw

Transfer

I sat on my cousin's bed in the dark, studying the sounds of our parents in the next room. Four drunken voices, growing louder and more alike every minute, overlapping, repeating.

"I'm going home, Alice," I whispered. "I've got a streetcar ticket in my pocket. Did you hear me?" She didn't answer.

Long lights swept across the ceiling and down over the faces of Alice's dolls, over Alice's face. All their blue eyes were staring at me. Loud laughter came through the wall. It was easy to interpret.

"They're telling jokes on each other now. They'll be fighting in just a few minutes. I gotta go. I mean it."

"But you never really go. You always say you're going home by yourself but you never do and last time you brought a streetcar ticket too but you never went." Alice was afraid they'd blame her.

"Listen, when they come in to get me, just give them this note."

Alice took the note. It was too dark to read but neither of us wanted the light on at a time like this.

"It just says I'm taking the Bloor streetcar home. I put that you were asleep when I left so you won't get heck." I pulled on the fur coat, an old one of Mother's cut down for me. A lot of the hairs had fallen out and it smelled like a wet dog but it kept me warm. I imagined that some day all the little animals in it would suddenly come alive and bite me. "Bye Alice. See you." I tied my Polly-pigtails kerchief with a jerk that helped to make my decision final.

"You really going?"

"Yeah. Listen." Mother had just called Aunt Jessie a bitch and Uncle Jack was bringing up the thing about the money my father owed him. "I gotta go, fast."

Soon they'd be in here, pulling me off Alice's bed, staggering to a taxi, stuffing me in first. Yelling over their shoulders that they'd never set foot in that goddamn house again. The taxi drivers always gave me a sad smile, trying to make me feel better, making me feel worse. Once a cab driver pulled over and told Mother if she hit me again he'd drive straight to the police station. My father passed out. She left me alone but when we got home, I got the beating of my life. And the next morning they

had no idea why I was all black and blue. They just said that redheads always bruise easily. They avoided me for days as if I had a dirty disease.

As I closed her bedroom door, Alice whispered her warning, "They're gonna kill you."

I shot down the stairs two at a time but I had to pee and someone was using the bathroom on the landing. I hid in a little dark place by the banister. A flush. The door opened. It was the old lady who lived in the flat below. She was still pulling up her underwear inside her nightgown. She went down the stairs one at a time. Right foot, left beside it. The way I used to go downstairs when I was a baby. Holding on. Afraid. You grow up, then you keep on growing until you're back where you started.

The toilet seat was still warm and the place smelled terrible. I took a deep breath and held it till I realized that the air I was holding in was full of the woman's stink. I put my furry sleeve against my nose and breathed wet dog instead. When I pulled the cord, water came roaring down from the shuddering tank up near the ceiling. Most toilets terrified me.

Out on Sussex Avenue the air was cold and fresh. I felt released, skipping toward Spadina, watching my shadow grow and shrink from lamp-post to lamp-post. Halfway between two streetlights there'd be two tall faded shadows of me. One ahead and one behind. Directly under a lamp I was a little fat dot. Baby, bigger, adult, double, smaller, baby again. Like the old woman on the stairs. I breathed deeply in case I still had some smell left in my lungs.

Spadina was broad and quiet. I turned toward Bloor. You must cross Bloor to get the car going west. If you don't cross Bloor, the streetcar goes east past the museum with the mummy lying there at night. "They're gonna kill you." I was really doing it. I was really going home by myself. What if there was a blackout? What if Hitler started bombing Spadina Avenue and I was caught out alone in the dark? And even if I made it home they were going to come in a taxi and yell and grab and hit.

Suddenly I couldn't trust the night anymore. Familiar buildings grew shadowy statues; mummies groaned in the alleys. The streetlights flickered. An icy wind blew me across Bloor.

There was a young couple waiting at the streetcar stop and I stood near them so I'd look like their kid. The man had his arm around the woman. She was wearing a smart black coat but something was wrong with her. Like pieces torn off a paper doll. She hadn't any arms. Her coat sleeves were pinned to her sides with safety pins. His arm was around it all.

As she turned toward me and smiled, her shawl slipped off her head, revealing a mass of beautiful auburn waves and curls, long, gleaming under the streetlight. The kind of deep red hair I'd always hoped my carroty orange ringlets would turn into when I grew up. The man gently pulled her shawl into place as our streetcar drew up.

The conductor didn't ask me any questions. I took a transfer from him because the couple did and I followed them down the car. They sat on a long side seat and I sat opposite them. I wanted to be near them so I could look at her beauty all the way home. I remembered something in an art book. A lovely statue without arms. Venus.

There weren't many people on the streetcar. A few tired women, an old Jewish man with a little cap and a bristly grey beard, a couple of soldiers leafing through an address book. The car was very warm and brightly lit.

The beautiful lady sat close to the man. He had a big nose and thick glasses and was not nearly as attractive as she was, but I imagined he was kind and sensitive and played the violin.

Until he dipped his fingers into her mouth and moistened her lips with her saliva.

He did it again and everyone in the streetcar except the driver stared at them. I knew my mouth and eyes were wide open but I had to follow the fingers and try to make some sense out of what was happening. Again they went inside her mouth, wetting her lips. She looked grateful but shy, and kept putting one foot on top of the other. If she'd had hands, I think she would have been wringing them. Still, she smiled up at him when he finished and there was so much love in that little glance that I no longer cared how insane the whole thing seemed.

A party of drunks got on at the next stop. Loud, unsteady, they should have taken a taxi home. Please God, don't let him do that lip business in front of the drunks.

But he did. And they saw.

In the slow, calculating way of people who drink past the point of caring about common decency, they began their attack.

"Lookit the guy stickin his fingers in the dame's mouth."

"Why don't he jest kiss her."

"How about I have a turn?"

Their remarks grew more obscene and each was followed by the kind of laughter I'd escaped from earlier. The old Jewish man began to mumble and rock back and forth. He knew something that I didn't.

The young man stood up and the woman looked down at her lap. Her shawl slipped back again and a long copper curl fell over her breast. I wanted to touch it. She looked up at the man and her eyes pleaded some kind of message.

The streetcar stopped at a red light and the man cleared his throat. He was holding two transfers just like the one I held. I stared at mine as if it were a holy medal.

"Ladies and gentlemen..." He had a deep voice with an accent. Everyone was quiet and the conductor turned around. "...the reason I put my fingers into the mouth of this lovely human being and moisten

her lips is because her lips become dry in warm places. She has no arms and no tongue because she is a Jew and the Nazis cut them off."

He sat down beside her and she hid her face on his shoulder. He tickled her cheek with her long curl and she smiled into his eyes and sat up straight. He said something softly to her in a language I had never heard.

The drunks were quiet now, dozing and nodding to the movements of the streetcar. In the morning they would probably remember nothing of this.

The old Jew stood up to get off and said something to the couple. He put his hands on both their heads and gave them a sort of blessing. The rest of the passengers looked embarrassed.

Bathurst next. My stop. Step down ready for the door to open. No. You never get a second chance.

I leaned over and kissed the face of Venus. And as I did, one of my ringlets slid out of my kerchief and fell on her shoulder. For an instant, the man held both locks of hair in his long musician's fingers. Hers and mine. Two curls exactly the same texture and colour. Deep, rich auburn. Blazing together.

I ran across Bathurst Street and cut through the laneway to our apartment. All the way I kept trying to moisten my lips without using my tongue.

I let myself into the dark and sat for a long time on my bed, fingering the curl that had touched hers. Holding the transfer that told the date and time.

When the taxi drove up and their drunken voices drew near, "They're going to kill you" tried to sneak back into my mind. But it found no room.

CHILDHOOD

Simon dreams he is a bird.
The land over which he flies is verdant,
cut by rivers so clear
he sees the steel fish
nosing along the pebbled bottom.
He has never tried to land
in the fir tree
near the peak of the only mountain
that rises from the flood plain.
When he wakes, dark and heavy
in his curtained room,
Simon pretends he has died
and is in paradise
wrapped tightly in his mother's hair;
when he is aroused from *that*
sleep will split open
like a purple silique
and hang in the sunlight,
a great yellow swallowtail
pulsating, his wings whispering
at the dream he has
of being a bird.

THE ORCHARD

I see someone coming toward me
through the perfect rows.
He calls out.

I see someone coming toward me
through the perfect rows.
He is small
and blond.
He calls out.

I see someone coming toward me
through the perfect rows.
He is small and blond.
He calls out.
It is Simon.
He calls out,
The houses are on fire!

I step from beneath
the tree I was pruning.
The enemy is coming!
I drop the shears.

I see him coming toward me
through the perfect rows.
It is Simon,
perfect and fresh,
always blossoming
in the small, crooked rows
I harvest within myself.

DEATH DURING CHILDHOOD

No one pays any attention,
no one bothers to harass.
Somewhere
a boat goes mad
on a sea
without direction
or shore.

The small face goes blue,
slides into the greyness of slate,
bloats to a full moon.
Inside the ache
that was Simon
a salamander hesitates.

Robert Mallet

FOUR POEMS

To discover without imperiling.

Do not turn over the mossy stone
that you might know its buried face

the order of lives
will never be known
by means of secrets profaned

If, repentant
you were to think of replacing the stone
in its place

consider the eggs of the ants.

Light travels at 300,000 kilometers per
second, sound at 340 meters per second.
One has to believe his eyes.

What I see I do not as yet hear
I go forth in the clamorous shadows of men
but I am already being questioned
by the silence of light.

*

Dead is the furnace
and its charred prey

liquid vapors of sap
on the peaceful brazier

I expect your veiled ardors
to calm me

and here I am consumed by flames.

The woman stared at length at the patterns of birds and foliage in the window of the tattoo parlor. Then she entered.

She entered, yearning for birds
and trees. I imagined her
as bearing wings on some branch
on some scrap of bark of her skin
on one of the buds of her inner secrets
ah, to undress this bird-catcher
to discover the mute song
of her warm nudity
which might be reclothed by caresses
by down in a forest-cage
without shadows, without borders.

translated from the French by Eric Sellin

Hugh Hood

We Outnumber the Dead

Bronson was laughing in a dream. He knew that what was happening was terribly funny because it made his chest heave convulsively, throwing the single blanket and the sheet to one side, exposing his damp pajama top. But he wasn't sure what was taking place: there was a shadow over everything and what he felt immediately was the deep pleasure of the laughter. It was a body event. He felt shaky and weak from a confusion of nervous impulse, and woke up suddenly still laughing but unable to recall any of the story of the dream. For perhaps a couple of seconds the rhythm of his laughter persisted into wakefulness with the extreme physical delight of relaxed limb, and the cleared mind, which are conferred by response to the truly comic. He wished that he could remember what had triggered his mirth but the cue was no longer in his mind. A good way to start the day.

After breakfast he decided to inspect his bird sanctuary, up back of the cottage towards the road. There was a plank walkway through light woods and over a rock shelf, which led to the spot where the family car was parked, and along this walkway were several vantage points from which small wildlife could be observed: chipmunks in legions, porcupines in trees, raccoons, now and then a fox. Bronson suspected that a few wolves remained concealed somewhere in nearby brush. There were infrequent barkings and howls, usually at night, which seemed to come from recesses in the woods where no domesticated dog would be likely to roam. In the space of a decade he had twice sighted deer crossing the road in front of his car, once at night, once just before twilight. There might be many more deer in the wooded area on the other side of the road, or there might not. Seventy years ago there had been great herds of the creatures in these forests. From the beginning of the age of cottaging the hunting regulations had been carefully enforced; no excessive depredations of the deer population had been permitted. Where was the herd now? Deeper in the woods? Gone away?

He climbed a short flight of steps and walked slowly along an elevated part of the walk, below which lay some enormous old rocks, split into separate chunks perhaps fifty thousand years ago, if the worn edges of

the cracks and seams were an accurate indicator of the date of the last major rockfall. Bronson amused himself in the summers by reflecting that though the last upheaval sufficiently powerful to toss five-ton rocks around like ping-pong balls had occurred long ages ago (he had read up the geological records of the township), there was no reason why another similar disturbance should not occur in our own time, from one morning to the next. He realised that very great energies—and extreme heat—must have been in play the last time that newly-sharded boulders went hurtling about the ears of the living inhabitants of this acreage. What a day that must have been, what a once in an epoch morning and afternoon!

No such natural disaster seemed to impend this morning. The birds were going about their routine flights with precision, elegance, and a wholly spurious air of disinterest in Bronson's movements. He had almost got them used to him; he didn't shoot at them or throw things at them, and he had rigorously enforced Bronson's Law. *No grandchildren at the cottage before the age of thirty*. His little clump of woods and brush was therefore agreeably tranquil. He hadn't in any true sense made a bird sanctuary; he had simply refrained from doing very much to disturb natural arrangements of tree, bush, rock, rainfall. The only thing he had done just here was the construction of the walk; it had taken the birds four or five years to forgive him the intrusion. Now, however, they ignored him as he stood leaning against the railing, looking carefully around him at certain patches of brush where, he was almost sure, a pair of American bitterns were living. He knew they must be American bitterns because no other bird he could find in his books had legs that colour. He had returned to the cottage yesterday around three-thirty with the papers, two canned soft drinks, a licorice pipe, three chocolate bars, and two frozen Hungry-Man TV dinners, in a paper sack. He ran the car into the customary space at roadside and climbed out. He picked up his parcel from the other bucket seat and turned around, and there, about thirty feet off on the same side of the road down a gentle slope, stood this nutty-looking bird with its head way back on its neck as though it looked at heaven. The bird had a ham-shaped body and a long neck, which quivered in a swallowing motion as Bronson stood and stared. The bird seemed to be trying to ingest a whole fish, perhaps to lodge it in its gullet for regurgitation and consumption at some more formal meal later on.

It was the colour of his—of her—legs that excited Bronson. They were the colour of well-chilled, frozen solid, lime popsicles. A clear unmixed smooth lime-green without any chalky or scaly whitish or greyish tone, such a green as is only found in one or two kinds of things, lime popsicles being the first things to come to mind. Where else do you find that colour? On some 1980 model Lada automobiles. Russian cars; the colour wasn't used on American makes. Could the lime-green of the Lada be a

reflection of profound cultural peculiarities operative near the Urals? You wouldn't see that almost unique shade of green on anything else that Bronson could bring to mind. The bird gave its neck a couple of rhythmic twists and turns, then walked leisurely into the heavy cover of the ditch, and from there down onto Bronson's lot. You could hear the heavy chunky body moving in the brush. There was probably a mate somewhere around, probably close to the water. A nest, perhaps?

Now and then, from this particular vantage point on the little wooden bridge over the rocks, he had spotted birds that were really out of the ordinary: a huge pileated woodpecker, which isn't a bird you're likely to sight from one day to the next. Two summers ago there had been a great wave of nesting partridges (ruffed grouse, pheasants?) with highly visible young, passing along the roadside over a stretch of two or three miles. Several times he or Viv had had to stop the car at the side of the road where a female partridge (pheasant, ruffed grouse?) had been standing, eyeing the car, plainly waiting to cross the road in safety. They would sit there without even bothering to turn off the engine, and the mother bird would move carefully out of the light cover beside the road, crossing in front of the idling car. And then, like sentries popping out of their boxes, as many as six of her young would follow her, one after another appearing from concealment, forming a line, disappearing onto higher ground in deliberate parade. For some reason this preponderation of grouse (grice?) has never repeated itself.

Not more than a week ago, Bronson had sighted a peregrine falcon, a bird now very rare east of Manitoba. This observation had been deeply pleasureable to him, because conservationists had been declaring repeatedly that the peregrine was on the verge of extinction. In the last couple of years the species has made a bit of a comeback; a few pairs have even been encouraged to nest and breed in downtown Montréal, specimens brought into the city as part of a planned experiment. Bronson's sighting had in no way been effected by his efforts; his peregrine had arrived spontaneously.

He thought he heard the sounds of a pair of large creatures moving around in the bushes below him, down the glen towards the lake, and he suddenly remembered what he had been laughing at before he awoke—the look of the bittern's throat as it swallowed the slithering fish. In the dream the fish's tail had been clearly visible, flipping back and forth as the bird ingurgitated it. He was sure he could hear them, and tried to get a fix on the location of the nest. Crackle, crack, crunch, splitting and snapping noises, which might come from a pair of nesting bitterns but were just as likely to be sounds from a fat old porcupine who hung around in the trees further down the glen, sometimes regarding the earth and the fruits thereof from fifty feet up—an impregnable fastness, unless somebody were to take a shot at him.

The sounds below were suddenly obscured by another noise, much

louder, the engine of a trail bike in third gear coming along the road from the deep woods. This was perfect terrain for trail biking, traversed by nineteenth-century logging roads which had been allowed to revert to wilderness, so that a faint parallel pair of ruts, which disappeared on the many bare rock shelves, was all that could be discovered of the original track. In the last three or four summers, trail bikers had multiplied, not so as to threaten local peace. There seemed to be about half a dozen bikes in the neighbourhood, mostly 175s, one or two 70ccs. Kids rode them. At seventeen or eighteen the trail-biking impulse seemed to desert all but the most ardent enthusiasts. The bike on the road this morning was proceeding at modest speed; you couldn't remain long in top gear on such a trail. There were too many blind curves and short steep rises. Perhaps the experience with the small, low-powered bikes was good for these boys. It would show them that high speed wasn't necessarily the most desirable quality in a powered vehicle. Trail biking was a male sport, Bronson observed. He had seen no woman biker, not even a girlfriend on a pillion. Bikers and birds enacted alike instinctual impulses.

When the bike had passed, he mounted to the road and stared at the whirling cloud of dust left by its wheels. The road surface was very dry and powdery, except where curves had been blacktopped by the property owners' road committee. For most of its course this private road crossed a series of exceedingly hard rock ridges; there was never any question of washout in spring, never any potholes. At the same time, the hard surface was a constant threat to wheel alignment. A summer's driving usually caused pronounced front-end problems, shimmy, shaky tie-rod ends, in passenger cars.

So the cottagers clubbed together and gravelled and graded the roadway twice a year. Even at that, the small amount of traffic was enough after a few weeks to reduce the surfacing to fine greyish dust, unless rain came often and hard. This summer there had been scant rain; the ditches and weed growth along the roadsides were coated with grey powder. The passing trail bike had laid down a very distinct tread mark in the dust, which was thick and caked along here. The marks caught Bronson's eye and he followed the narrow track along the road for some distance. He was amazed to see how thick the gravel dust was and how tacky, how firmly molded in the outline of the tread. Sherlock Holmes would be able to tell you immediately the brand of tire, the size, the sort of nail which had punctured the casing six months before, the material used for repair. Bronson fixed his eyes on the impressions, trying to figure out how much a skilful detective could reasonably infer from these traces.

All at once he was astonished to see a ghostly grey caterpillar moving slowly along the tire tracks, sliding its frame over the neatly squared-off tread marks. Roadway dust gave the creature an other-worldly appear-

ance, as if it might be the essence or abstract notion of caterpillarhood, a Platonic form sent to make Bronson think. Damn' thing ought to be green, he thought. Would all that dust choke it, damage its respiration? Would it have some sort of lungs? It was one of those bugs about four inches long, which seem double-ended like a ferryboat. Unless you look at them very carefully you can't tell which is the front end. They expand and contract in the oddest way. Stretched out at full length—perhaps pulled out in torment by some cruel child—such a creature might be six or seven inches long. They have the look, and very much the action, of a self-propelled concertina, if such a thing exists. An accordion played by a ghost. Bronson began to study the specimen before him with close attention. How the hell could it expand itself and then contract in that absurd way? He fancied the strains of minute insectual concertina music which might issue from such writhings. Did it have feet? It must have feet. After some moments he began to be able to conclude that it wasn't backing up; it was headed somewhere, moving forward. The eyes were up at the front underneath the little horns.

He was at best an amateur field naturalist, had no idea of the entomology involved here. Bug. It's a bug, he thought. Is it an insect? He didn't know for sure. Insects come in three sections, right? Do caterpillars come in three sections? Too much dust.

Call it an insect. This insect—or bug—was for some reason staying right in the middle of the trail bike's track, and if it were to remain there it might very well be crushed to death by the returning biker. Bronson had often noted that it seemed to be a curious point of honour among the trail bikers around here to make only one track in the thick dirt. That is, they seemed to enjoy superimposing their returning track on that laid down when outward bound. He had often watched some of the younger riders wobbling in low gear along their own trails, trying to superimpose new tire marks immediately over old. To confuse pursuit? No rider would violate the principle of this compulsion merely to preserve the life of a bug.

He found a twig which seemed to be long and strong enough to bear away the caterpillar. For several reasons he was reluctant to pick it up in his bare fingers. Jaws! Bites? They may not bite, but they look alarming in full-face closeup. He might just poke one with a forefinger but he wouldn't pick it up. He slid the long twig under the persisting caterpillar, wishing he knew how to communicate to it that he wanted to safeguard its life. He angled the twig to the right, so as to fix the bug in the fork made by a twiglet. He lifted it in the air to the height of perhaps two feet, when it fell off, landing in the dust with an inaudible thump. It writhed about a bit, whether in annoyance or mere agony he couldn't tell.

My God, thought Bronson, I've hurt its insides. He was the more relieved to realise that these contortions were apparently the expression of the caterpillar's struggle to orient itself and resume forward progress.

He had got it turned around when he dropped it, and the horned head was pointing in the direction from which it had come. Somehow it knew this. Bronson was amazed. How could a thing that small see enough to know that it wanted to go the other way? Surely all it could see was the sides of the tire-tread-moldings. How large a world of vision could it command? Now it turned itself around, sprawling across the forms of the treads, and moved forward towards whatever goal it had proposed for itself. It reminded Bronson of some of the people who had gone to university with him. It couldn't be allowed to stay there; the returning bike would crush it. He now began to feel a powerful need or wish to assist the caterpillar. There could be no question of finding out where it wanted to go and carrying it there in his pocket, but he might at least remove it from this track of death.

He shoved the twig under the thing and lifted it high in the air, to about the height of his own waist. He meant to put it down on the vegetation which abounded at roadside. All at once he felt a shivering motion in the twig, and then a snap or click. The caterpillar closed shut up on itself in a snail-like shape as if suffering a seizure or catalepsy. It's died, he thought. I've frightened it to death, and I didn't mean to. Disappointed, and much in sympathy with the bug's indecipherable goals, he dropped the twig, the caterpillar wound tight around it, apparently in the final rigour, and thought bitterly of the need of all the living to league themselves and take up arms against the opposition.

About the year 1972 he had read a number of popular essays in various newspapers and magazines which made great play with population figures and statistical curves tending to either of two conclusions. Either the increase in human population was so rapid and so great as to threaten disaster to existing civilization, or the same phenomenon—the population explosion, as they used to call it—constituted a significant breakthrough in health care, a magnificent victory for humanity. There had been two recurrent headlines, possibly retained in type ready for use whenever one of these somewhat repetitive articles was to appear:

POPULATION RUNAWAY THREATENS PLANET

or alternatively:

WE OUTNUMBER THE DEAD

It seemed in the early seventies that the population explosion, like every other great change in human history, could be given either an optimist's or a pessimist's reading. We were all going to be buried, by the year 2000, under great mounds of humans, some alive, some dead. Or else we were going to share in man's final victory over his mortality, and would be able to choose whether or not we might live forever, or for an indeterminate time up for grabs.

At this time a statistic surfaced in the popular press which gave credibility to the optimistic reading of human destiny. The huge increase in the numbers of the living (never mind what sort of life they might be leading) meant that THERE ARE MORE PEOPLE ALIVE RIGHT NOW THAN HAVE LIVED AND DIED IN ALL PREVIOUS HISTORY. It seemed in 1972—how one remembers it—that a count of all those who had died since humans began to exist on the planet (forget about our ancestors) showed that all of the vast imaginable hordes of history, and even pre-history, the vanished civilizations, the cave-painters, the folk who invented the wheel and discovered the uses of fire, all of them together, including the peoples of the classical civilizations, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the whole kit and kaboodle whom we, uncaring and unthinking, call "the dead," all those underground, or ash, or lodged in urns and mausoleums, were taken together no more than a billion in number (what about the legions buried at sea?) whereas we living, thanks to modern medicine and sanitation, were in all as many as two and a half billion. Precisely. There are more people alive today than have existed in all past time.

Bronson had always known, when he encountered the various avatars of this tale at that period, that there was something bogus about it. Was it in any way verifiable? He thought not. The statistics put forward were never given any close documented support. How much was known for certain about the population of ancient Babylon, of Persia or Egypt? Some inferences might be drawn from the amount of land judged to be under cultivation, the presumable annual rainfall at the given epoch, the movement of rivers, clearing of forests, introduction of land-drainage systems, gradual evolution of desert areas. To move from these more or less checkable observations to accurate statements about the number of people alive at a given time in the past could only be rough and ready guesswork.

But suppose it could be done. A large supposition, but just suppose!

Suppose it were true that up until January 1ST, 1970, say, the sum of human dead could be put at an accurate total of one billion, or—what the hell—one and a half billion, what would follow from that? If the number of living on that date was TWO and a half billion, if we outnumbered the dead by a billion now vital, what did it mean?

Maybe it meant we were coming out ahead. Winning.

That's what jarred Bronson down to his Adidas. Maybe we've found something out, he would hint to himself. On the whole, if the contest between the living and the dead were to be imagined as a game, like a team contest, some enormous soccer match, he felt a strong prejudice for the side of the living. He wanted us to be the winning side. Now if you could draw a curve which gave a true representation of these population and death-rate figures, showing how the living had caught up with the dead and then outstripped them, and if—further to that—you could

introduce into your plotting axioms the growing preponderation of the birth rate over the death rate, you might then be able to argue that for the foreseeable future the numbers of the living would continue to distance those of the dead.

You might get a curve which would predict when practical immortality is going to arrive.

For it was clear that human longevity was progressing to the point where life expectancy would be prolonged almost indefinitely. It wasn't, he thought in bewilderment, that fewer people died. The same number died. Everybody. But they died slower and slower, and more of them were born.

At this point in his reasonings Bronson always began to grow confused about his proposed graph. If everybody continued to die, and yet there continued to be more and more people living than had died, what biological conclusion might be drawn from the curve? It could only be that one hell of a lot of people were being born. He always remembered the famous *Believe It Or Not* proposal when he reached this stage. "If all the population of China were to march past a given point four abreast, at the US Army rate of infantry march, they would never finish passing, though they marched forever." Only so many could march past in a year, and in that year more would be born than could complete the march-past evolution.

WE OUTNUMBER THE DEAD

And then, halfway into the decade, a drastic series of economic upheavals shook the entire world, most of them connected with the price of oil and gas. Mass shrinkage of ambition occurred. People lowered their expectations, were prepared to settle for a chicken in every second or third pot, and Chinese marching three abreast, or even two, or maybe not marching at all. It was ridiculous. How the hell could you ever get all those Chinese lined up for their march? Where would the women have all those replacement babies? In field hospitals? Robert Ripley had died a long time ago, and people didn't care whether they believed anything or not.

In the latter half of the decade, news stories debunking the earlier statistics became common. By 1979 feature editors were eager to run material which showed that, far from beginning to approach the numbers of the dead, humans now alive barely approached twenty percent of the total deceased. Different, downwards-turning, curves appeared with these revisionist estimates, often attributed to exactly the same sources as had earlier proposed more optimistic extrapolations: UNESCO, the International Monetary Fund, other entrenched international bodies.

In our own time, right now, Bronson didn't know what to think. He was left with a few modes of feeling, which he decided to go with. He felt

that recurrent newspaper stories based on long-term statistical records and predictions were probably best ignored. They should be assigned the mental status of myths-in-the-making, like those recurrent tales that the earth's climate was growing colder. Or was it warmer? One or the other anyway. Or the conflict between the steady-state and big bang theories. If you can't say anything about something, you should shut up.

He kept his prejudice in favour of the living, and gave his interests to the others like us, birds, fish, whales and dolphins, thinking to count them all on the side of life, the biological victory. This caterpillar's stroke or seizure, sudden yielding, possible heart attack (do caterpillars have hearts?) unnerved him. He looked at the greyed lump where he had let it fall, curled in a clamped hysterical knot among small pieces of gravel, many of which would seem as imposing to the bug twisting between them as the five-ton boulders under the walkway seemed to him. The bits of gravel, pebbles really, split and tossed about by the weight of passing traffic, were each about the size of a cocktail onion or a ripe olive, much larger than the caterpillar's head. The creature had lodged between two of them and seemed caught, its rear legs now moving slowly without traction, a tiny distance above solid ground. The poor thing had been coated, layered-over, with dust, dropped from a height, trapped between big rocks. It must be thinking that today wasn't its day.

Very deliberately, Bronson removed several of the small pieces of gravel which lay in front of the bug, forming a labyrinthine track which, if followed to its end, would lead to a safe position at the side of the road near vegetation. He arranged some of the gravel carefully beside a deposit of sticky mud left over from the last rainfall. He didn't care to see his friend and ally trapped in a bog. He wished he could spray it somehow, so as to clear its vision, and briefly considered pissing on it, concluding that his urine, in no way poisonous to himself, might prove toxic to other life forms.

As he mulled over this possible tactic, he saw the caterpillar start to move along the track he had prepared. With infinite caution and sharp acuity of sight it inched its way along the winding track, curving and extending its length around the shapes of the little stones. He could form no estimate of its speed. Was there some way he could give it further assistance? How far was it going? What was its estimated time of arrival? Was it looking for company? It was being extremely careful, no doubt hoping that no further extraordinary adventures would occur on this trip. In half an hour or so it managed to work its way out of the gravel labyrinth and onto some dusty leaves at the bottom of a roadside sumach. It hauled itself up onto the lowest of the leaves and positioned itself there with a certain air of assurance. The leaf, an inch or two above the ground, bobbed up and down like a little hammock in a faint air current. Bronson got the notion that the insect was resting, perhaps thinking about lunch. This thought made him realise his own hunger.

He looked at his watch. He'd been staring at the caterpillar for two hours.

So he turned and walked back towards his own property, taking his time, considering a light salad and some chicken noodle soup. He started down the steps and then stood motionless halfway down, at the sound of the returning trail bike. It was certainly the same bike. He knew the individual motors of all the bikes in the neighbourhood by their performance characteristics. One of them had a peculiar high whining note in second gear; another clearly stood in need of a piston job; you could smell the contaminated exhaust of a third. This was the same bike as before, returning from some cruise into the back country, where those abandoned nineteenth century farmsteads lay open to the sky, walls fallen in, lilac overgrown above hidden foundations. He wanted to hide and shrank back out of the biker's line of vision until the boy had passed. Then he scrambled up the steps and ran back to where he had left the bug. He was able to identify the leaf on which it had rested. There were new bites out of the leaf, with ragged edges, almost invisible but there. He spotted the caterpillar eleven feet further on its way and gave it a farewell whistle. Bikers have rights too, he remembered, and started to try to think of what they were.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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HUGH HOOD'S next book will be the collection of essays *Trusting the Tale,* from ECW Press, Toronto, in September 1983. His latest novel, also from ECW Press, is entitled *Black and White Keys.*

JASCHA KESSLER teaches English at UCLA. A new release, *The Magician's Garden And Other Stories*, by Geza Csath, translated by Jascha Kessler and Charlotte Rogers, is now available from Columbia University Press.

HENRY KREISEL has taught at the University of Alberta since 1947. He has published two novels, *The Rich Man,* and *The Betrayal,* and a collection of stories, *The Almost Meeting.* His story *The Travelling Nude* was published in the first issue of *PRISM,* and won the President's Medal of the University of Western Ontario for the best short story published in 1959.

ROBERT MALLET is a French poet in what the translator, Eric Sellin, calls the "cosmic vein".

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PRISM *international* congratulates Jan de Bruyn and Michael Bullock on their retirements from the University of British Columbia's faculty. Both were distinguished Editors-in-Chief of this magazine. Professor de Bruyn was founding editor and Editor-in-Chief from 1959–1962. A scholarship fund is being established in his name by the English Department to acknowledge his contribution to teaching in 17th-century studies and his own generous donation of funds to the development of scholarship prizes. The aim is to raise $5000, to be used for an annual award to a student in literature. Donations (tax receipts issued) should be sent to the Jan de Bruyn Scholarship Fund, U.B.C. Alumni Fund, 6251 Cecil Green Park Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1W5. Cheques payable to Jan de Bruyn Scholarship. During his time as editor, Jan de Bruyn introduced and published young writers who have since become cornerstones of Canadian writing: Margaret Laurence, Henry Kreisel, Margaret Atwood, George Bowering and many others.

Professor Bullock was Editor-in-Chief from 1973–1977. He is a distinguished translator, poet, painter, playwright and writer of experimental prose fiction. He extended the international scope of the magazine, presenting Hans Artmann, Hagiwara Sakutaro, Yasunari Kawabata, Kobo Abe and others for the first time to the Canadian reader. He is a surrealist and founder member of the Melmoth Group. Mr. Bullock has taught in the Department of Creative Writing since 1968 and has been responsible for the translation program.

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