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Shirley Cox

Out of Thin Air

Across the brief stark daylights of my early years, my mother and I moved back and forth in listless argument, unravelling outworn sweaters to stuff pillows for refugees, raising chickens that died of the croup before ever laying an egg, weeding patches of barren ground that we would never plant. We might have been alone in all the world under that bright hard sky. The distant planes that criss-crossed the blue with furry trails were of no more significance than droning insects. My mother would glance up briefly and scatter another handful of chickenfeed from her apron pocket. "Ours," she would say, or occasionally, "Theirs." Everything around us was still.

But when the dark came down and my mother went about the house drawing blackout curtains, dim shapes began to stir in corners. Restlessly, they hovered in doorways or paced the stairs to the attic, waiting for my mother to tuck me up in my blue iron cot. As she lit the lamp and settled herself on the stool by my bed, they crowded into the room and approached the flame. She talked in a still clear voice and their faces lit up. It was as if my mother, tired of snipping ravelled threads and cropping the heads of brussel sprouts gone to seed, turned her scissors at night on a sheet of brightly-coloured paper and strung rows of dancing dolls across my attic room.

There were Thumbelina and Rumpelstiltskin and Rapunzel, Rapunzel, letting down her long hair. There was a dog with eyes as big as saucers, and also King Midas who turned his daughter, as I thought, into a marigold. But the brightest and dearest of all these nightly visitors was my grandfather.

My grandfather was a baby in a cardboard box. Pinned to his swaddling clothes was a message: 'I am hungry. I am Patrick Seamus O'Daly.' Some strangers had signed their names on a piece of paper to prove my grandfather existed. The priest took him in with the milk at six o'clock in the morning. It was frosty and the priest was embarrassed. It is embarrassing for priests to have babies, so he was glad to give the child away to Granny Toohig who had an old boots stall in the street market.

My grandfather grew up under the stall until he grew so high he came out in the street. He danced in the street in Granny Toohig's old boots

and everybody wanted to buy those wonderful boots to wear at the Palais on Saturday night.

Patrick Seamus O'Daly was a magician. Selling old boots was small beans to him. He could magic away a frog before your very eyes and then find it squatting in your pocket. He could blow up a whole flock of balloons that would fly from his hand like wild geese and everyone held their breath till they were quite gone in a clear sky. Pearly Kings and Queens came out in all their shiny buttons to see him. Old men who sold furs waddled up from their basements into the sunny street, policemen took off their helmets to scratch their fuzzy heads, and harried little men from Hounslow and Houndsditch leaned on their umbrellas in neat rows, wasting time shamelessly. King Midas turned his daughter into a marigold, but my grandfather turned frogs into princes and creepy-crawlies into dragonflies that shone blue in the sun and suddenly sailed away for a year and a day.

While he was busy with these things, my mother and grandmother lived unobtrusively in other people's homes, hiding from bailiffs and rent collectors. O'Daly impersonated Hitler and Mussolini on the street and broke eggs and put them back together again. He made people laugh and he frightened them half to death, he sang 'One Fine Day' from Madame Butterfly and he came back to his family in the middle of the night with a wind-up gramophone and three yards of hand-made lace. They were staying with an Italian ice-cream man in Soho at the time. It was very warm in the hay with the donkey who pulled the ice-cream cart. My grandmother cried and my mother stayed up all night listening to the music with round eyes.

My grandmother was a remarkable woman in her own way. With a few yards of lace she could transform a pasty-faced young factory worker into a bride. Her mouth full of pins, she would crawl around the pale legs in their lisle stockings, turning a hem to perfection. Then on the day itself she'd stand at a decent distance, scattering confetti and dabbing at her eyes with a polka dot hanky.

So the morning after O'Daly's spending spree, when the donkey had been taken out into the yard, she set the new gramophone down gently in the hay and spread out the delicate coffee-coloured lace on the rough table. "It's just the thing," she said, "for that girl from the gasworks what's got to get married quick." She stood my mother on a chair, tied a pillow to her front and started to drape the cloth around her.

The bedding hay had already been swept back into a corner and the air was full of dust and golden chaff that gradually settled on the window. A shaft of sunlight struck the glass, making it a speckled mirror where my mother saw her own pale face. 'I am a spell-bound princess,' she thought, twisting an end of lace round her head and gazing mournfully into her own dark eyes.

"Need a cushion at the back too," said my grandmother. "She's got more bum than you 'ave."

Through the window my mother could see the ice-cream man harnessing the donkey to the gaudy cart. Then they moved off, clopping and rumbling down the cobbled alley. "Isa creema, isa creema," came the man's voice.

O'Daly knelt in the hay winding up the gramophone.

"Are you going to play that thing till we all starve to death?" asked my grandmother, but her hands ceased their work and the tape measure coiled and dangled in the dusty air as the trembling voice filled the room again.

"Holy Christ, woman," cried O'Daly. "It's the bread of life I'm giving you here. Just listen to this music. Here's Pagliacci—he's killed his wife that he loves with all his heart, but he's a clown in the circus and he's got to go out there and be *funny*." He sighed deeply. "'On with the motley'—or 'Vesti la giubba' as they say in the Italian."

At last the wavering tenor voice broke down and was drowned under the music of the orchestra. My grandmother let the violins have their say right to the end, till there was nothing but the monotonous click of the needle turning in the last groove. Then she seized her dressmaking shears and made a bold cut in the lace.

"It's all very fine," she said, "but it won't put food in this poor child's stomach." She stuck several pins fiercely in to the padding on my mother's tummy. "Won't put boots on 'er feet, neither, so's she can go back to school."

"What's this? Not in school?" My grandfather leapt up and glared at my mother.

"Well, you can see 'er there before your very eyes, I suppose. Takin' in all this stuff about foreign murders and can't even read and write the King's English, I wouldn't be surprised."

"She goes back this very minute."

"Not without boots, she doesn't. I'm not 'avin' it said a child of mine was in the street barefoot, and you out at the races throwin' your money about."

"Once in a blue moon I have a little fling," moaned my grandfather, tugging at his mop of black hair with both hands, "and she makes me out to be a monster."

"Where'd that come from then?" asked my grandmother, pointing an accusing finger at the gramophone.

"And that too," he cried, indicating the lace. "I see you're not above making use of it." He put on his jacket. "I'll go to Grannie Toohig and get her some boots."

"I asked 'er already. She 'asn't got any small sizes but she's lookin' out."

He felt in his back pocket and came up with a crinkled ten-shilling note. "Just let me get to the bookie in time for the three thirty. When I come back, she'll have boots that'll put all the other kids to shame. Gold buckles and everything."

It was several days before he came home, which gave my grand-

mother time to finish the wedding outfit without interruption. As she trimmed the last loose thread and stood back to admire the dress, there was a gentle tap at the door.

"I'm Sister Mathilda," said the nun softly. "From the convent school." In her hand she held a small pair of old-fashioned boots. "These were left in the poor box," she said apologetically, "and I wondered if they might fit your little girl." Her eyes made the briefest journey around the room, no doubt taking in the flattened hay, the neat pile of donkey droppings, the wick burning in a dish of oil before the picture of the Blessed Virgin. Finally they came to rest on my mother who stood with grotesquely distended stomach modelling the wedding dress.

"Beautiful boots," said my mother all those years later to me in the attic. "Buttons all the way up." She seemed to be listening for something, but there was only a plane droning in the night and maybe far far away a dismal hooting sound like a sick owl. "You had to do them up with a spoon," she said, "and when you took them off you could see all the loops perfectly on your leg. Being as I didn't have any socks underneath."

I saw my mother in her wonderful boots. I saw her stooping in the hay to stroke the soft grey ears of the donkey. Then O'Daly came flying in as if he'd only been gone five minutes.

"Rose," he cried, his face flushed from a lucky day at the track. "Put down your needle, girl. It's oysters and champagne from now on."

"Is that so," muttered my grandmother, plucking a pin from between her lips and serenely fastening a pleat.

"Just take a took at this. Twenty pounds, my girl." And he fanned out the crisp green notes.

"You'd not talk so loud," she said, "if you'd seen the bailiff what's camped on the back stairs."

It was a Friday night, and it was in those days when gaslights sang and spluttered in the streets. They didn't have the blackout then, and on Friday everyone went to the market. I saw the long dark shadows of an aimless crowd, pale faces that brightened in a sudden flame and turned towards my grandfather. O'Daly was spending his twenty pounds, turning it into things the bailiff couldn't take away: candy floss and toffee apples for everyone in sight, a lilac shawl with fringes for my grandmother, two china bookends and various small snacks of cockles and whelks. The crowd flocked after him to the fruit stall.

"Give me that one," said my grandfather, pointing to the middle apple in the bottom row of a vast rosy display. "For the Rose of my heart." It was amazing how he could talk like an Irish poet though the nearest he ever came to Ireland was the Crown in Cricklewood Broadway.

The greengrocer wasn't interested in poetry. "Don't arsk it of me, guv," he cried. "The 'ole bleedin' show's gonna come down, i'n it? Look, O'Daly, 'ere's a lovely apple for your missus." He picked a perfect apple from the box underneath.

"It won't do. That's the one I want," said Patrick Seamus O'Daly, rising up on his toes, the better to be seen by everyone. Among the craning heads was one wearing a policeman's helmet.

"What's the opinion of the law?" asked my grandfather. "Can I buy any article here I so desire?"

"That you can," said the policeman. "If it's on display, you can buy it." He winked at the crowd. "If you got the money."

There was a burst of laughter and someone shouted, "Show us your money, O'Daly."

"Ah, it's all disappearing money with 'im," cried someone else. "Puts it in your 'and, and next thing you know it's back in 'is pocket."

My grandfather produced his last pound note and a dozen hands stretched out to feel it.

"You'll 'ave to sell 'im that very partickler item, I'm afraid, sir," sighed the policeman. "If 'e's got 'is 'eart set on it."

Now, my grandfather could have taken that apple out so you wouldn't even have seen a space in the row, but when the greengrocer snatched it out with his big hairy fist, the whole display collapsed and rumbled all over the street. Grumbling and cursing, the man dived after his fruits in the gutter before they should roll away down the drains.

"Too big for 'is boots," muttered Granny Toohig from the stall across the road, her eyes shining like two of her own boot buttons. "Forgets 'e come to me in a cardboard box wiv nuffink but a pair of safety pins to 'is name."

"Now, there's gratitude for you, my friends," cried O'Daly, waxing Celtic and spreading his dramatic soul under the warmth of the hissing gaslights, with the fine audience all around him. "Didn't I wear me poor feet to the bone dancing on that very spot?" A small child leapt aside from his pointing finger and hid behind a woman's skirts. "And didn't I sell every boot you could lay hands on, even the odd ones? And isn't it the Queen of the Market you are now, with your own little house and a privet hedge and front gate and all?"

"Oh, yes. I remember it very well, you wearin' out all me boots before I could sell 'em wiv your crazy dancin'," said Granny Toohig. "But you mark my words, Patrick Seamus Big-Boots. You'll go out of this world the way you come in. Won't be nuffink left for that poor kid of yours, and they'll 'ave to bury you in a cardboard box, I shouldn't wonder."

My grandfather had no intention of dying a pauper. What with the horses, and later the government, he had it in mind to be a rich man. He laid the foundations for his future life of affluence with a sporadic enthusiasm that burst over the neighbourhood like Roman candles and Catherine wheels. In a moment's darkness everyone held their breath, for there were green stars and gold stars surely yet to come, or a long long falling pink fireball to light up the pale faces and sizzle away behind the factory wall with a slow soft sigh.

He started with such small signs of wealth and eternal joy as the wind-

falls of the track might provide him with: Tosca on 78's, a straw hat with everlasting flowers for my grandmother, occasional visits to the Music Hall, where he would always seat his family in the grandest box with purple hangings and gold braid.

The frequent presence of the bailiff on the back stairs threatened to interfere with my grandfather's life-style. He felt it was undignified for a man with such a fine future before him to have to enter and leave his dwelling place by the window. Also, it was inconvenient to be forever hiding his gramophone in the hay in case it should be confiscated. So he decided to transfer his family to the top floor of an abandoned warehouse.

He hired a small Turk to pull the handcart upon which my grandmother's sewing machine was placed in great splendour, and insisted that the boy wear a turban. To add further dignity to the occasion, he hung various little bells about the cart.

My grandmother had been prevailed upon to sit up at night concocting fine costumes for the procession. "It's the 'ay as makes me cough," she apologized as she stitched away the late hours with her head bent close to the lamp chimney, but she always covered her mouth and kept her own cup separately in a brown paper bag in case it might be catching.

She dressed my mother as if for her first communion, though in fact she remained unconfirmed at this stage since the money for the priest was lacking. For my grandfather there was a small pair of satin trousers, an order that had been uncollected owing to the cancellation of a wedding.

They got away without complications since the bailiff had grown tired of lurking on the stairs and gone home for his Sunday dinner. The procession moved through the market at a slow march while my grandfather twirled a cane and strewed money about among the buskers. He had them play 'Home Sweet Home' and 'Yes, we have no bananas' till the crowd tired and the musicians disappeared into the pub. Then he sang 'Vesti la giubba' in the darkening street, holding up the cortège under a strategic gaslight. My mother shivered in her white dress and the limp violets dropped one by one into the gutter as Pagliacci sobbed out his grief and desolation in the market.

The way the government came into his calculations of future wealth was through some devious plotting on the part of my grandmother. She had a new dressmaking client, a grossly overweight woman with a passion for sateen and taffeta and panne velvet in shades of puce and chartreuse. Mrs. Golightly was fortunate enough to be the spouse of a Civil Servant, which meant that she could afford to dress in such fabrics. She appeared one day in their vast new quarters over the warehouse, gasping alarmingly from climbing the four flights of stairs.

"Such trouble I've had with dressmakers, Mrs. O'Daly—you wouldn't

believe," she cried, fanning her mottled face and heaving herself into the nearest chair. "If ever a woman had a cross to bear." It seemed that all her previous dressmakers had tried to squeeze her into vertical stripes and sober colours, hinting at her 'full figure'. Now, she was a woman with a little brain in her head, she said so herself, and their tact had not deceived her for one moment.

"Fat, is what she's telling me, dear," she said of the last one. "Skinny little rat of a creature she was—jealous of my bosom, is all."

My grandmother, fragile by nature and already beginning to fade away to nothing, overlooked this remark. Maybe she didn't even hear it—her eyes were fastened on the velvet that spilled out of the brown paper parcel on her work table. In the glow of the oil lamp, it seemed that a field of Parma violets had suddenly blossomed in the bare room. Her bony finger ran across the cloth, ruffling the thick pile, and came back trembling to rest in her lap.

"Beautiful," she sighed. "You'll look like a queen in that, just like royalty, you will."

Mrs. Golighty, whose bearing was nothing if not regal (hadn't she said so herself on innumerable occasions?), was very touched. She decided she'd found a gem in my grandmother, even if she did live in a most peculiar place.

My grandmother was accustomed to being brought remnants picked up cheap in the market. "Can you get me a dress out of that, luv?" a ten-stone housewife would ask, holding a scrap of seersucker hopefully in front of her. Or sometimes it was hand-me-downs, and she would be expected to take snippets from here and put them there, to take account of the bulges that moved from one generation to the next. It was only when weddings were in the offing that she was furnished with quality stuffs, crisp new muslins, sprigged for the bridesmaids, smelling sweetly of size. But never anything like this, and so much of it, too, that there would be no call for false hems or plackets: every last inch of this magnificent dress, seen or unseen, would be real velvet.

As a result of her involvement with Mrs. Golightly, my grandmother began to speculate on the advantages of being the wife of a Civil Servant. Standing alone in the great empty room, she draped the sumptuous cloth over her thin frame and a daydream came upon her. She saw O'Daly in a pin-striped suit, a gold watch-chain looped across his waistcoat and his hands full of important papers. As she watched, he began to juggle these papers so they flew like white birds into the air, and each bird, fluttering down, became a pound note, a ten-pound note, a hundred-pound note.

"Ah, that's the life," she thought. "Money out of thin air."

So she began to work on both parties to bring her dream to reality. To Mrs. Golightly she would say, as she draped the cloth in ample folds, "Now, if only your poor overworked 'usband 'ad a man like my Patrick standin' by to 'elp 'im. A way 'e 'as with paperwork like you wouldn't believe."

"Oh, if only," sighed Mrs. Golightly, and a great tidal wave swelled and broke on her velvet bosom. "Neglected something terrible I am, Mrs. O'D. You have no idea, the late hours."

Of course, my grandmother had some idea, but she smoothed the heaving shoulders very gently in passing as she pinned the slimming darts around the bust.

Her task with my grandfather was infinitely more difficult. It wasn't just that he thought money could be plucked effortlessly from the hairy ears and nostrils of strangers on the street. No, there was the added complication that she couldn't entirely disbelieve this herself. So many times the bailiff and his eager assistants had been about to lift a piece of furniture and make off with it in lieu of payment on a debt. So many times O'Daly had appeared as if by magic in so many doorways, riffling large sums of money casually through his pale fingers.

"Ah, but think of the rich man you could be," she cried one morning. "And wearin' a collar and tie every blessed day of the week."

She got no answer. No doubt he was frowning from the concentration of keeping four willow-pattern plates revolving in space. Juggling was his new act on the street and he practised every day from nine till eleven.

She soon learned not to address him on this subject when he was so preoccupied: for one thing, it was very hard on the plates. A better time, she found, was when he came home late from an unlucky day at the races and suddenly hung limp and haggard between her and the lamp. She'd jump as if she'd been thoroughly absorbed in turning a length of piping right side out. In fact, she had heard his footsteps coming up the stairs through the hollow building, and had turned the lamp down very low so the place would appear at its most squalid and my mother would look like an abandoned waif huddled on the one mattress in the corner. She was well aware he'd had a bad day and that he'd gone somewhere to drown his sorrows afterwards, but she was not going to ask about it.

"Mrs. Golightly was 'ere today," she began. "Got a pianner now, they 'ave. 'Oldin' concerts in the front room next thing, I shouldn't wonder."

"Ah, yes," he said sourly. "I can see it now. All the nice people in Mr. Golightly's parlour. Ostrich feathers and talcum powder. Miss How's-your-father from Clapham wailing 'Pale hands I kissed beside the Shalimar', and the piano-player vamping with both feet on the pedals."

"Yes, and you there with your nose in the beer jug and fine ladies oohin' and aahin' at all your card tricks," she said, perceiving in this speech a certain despondent envy that might bear working on.

"Hm." He seemed to brighten slightly at this idea so she went on.

"I'm sure Mr. Golightly would be very 'appy to get you in where 'e is. 'E needs a man of talent to 'elp 'im, and just think of it—a Civil Servant!"

"Civil," declared O'Daly, "is one thing I'll never be, may God strike me dead."

"A rich man overnight," she continued calmly, ignoring his blasphemy.

"Hm, there is that," he sighed, gloomily turning out his pockets and finding nothing there but a melted gob-stopper and some balls of fluff.

My grandmother's plans were aided by an extraordinarily unreliable horse in the Grand National, which put O'Daly in what he called a state of temporary financial embarrassment. When Mr. Golightly offered him a place on His Majesty's payroll, he decided to give it a try.

So one morning he got up in the dark as the milkman's cart came clattering down the street. He put on a very fine waistcoat he'd acquired at the Church Bazaar and spent some time arranging a length of chain so that it disappeared cunningly into his pocket. Then, with his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his waistcoat, he marched up and down clearing his throat. "Take a memo, Miss What's-a-name," he said, staring sternly at the ceiling. When it came to eating his porridge, he tucked a piece of toilet paper in his collar and held his spoon very daintily between two fingers.

"Get along with you," cried my grandmother, giggling like a young girl. "They'll 'ave to make you the boss if you carry on like that. You look grander than Mr. Golightly 'imself."

So he went off to work in His Majesty's Service with a light heart and a feeling that it was only a matter of time before the King himself would come to hear of his remarkable new Servant and request his presence at Buckingham Palace. Would it be for tea, or for one of these new-fangled cocktail parties, perhaps? He practised a few deep bows in the dark street and took the steps into the grey building three at a time.

At five o'clock my grandmother laid out a special tea. There was Hovis bread, sliced very thin, and a jar of Shipham's anchovy paste. Only one willow-pattern plate remained from O'Daly's juggling exercises, but this was nicely displayed in the centre of the table and on it a number of little cakes with brightly-coloured icing. Granny Toohig had closed up early at the market in honour of the occasion and had arrived for tea wearing her best black bombazine. She sat stiffly on a straight-back chair with her bonnet on and her vast black handbag firmly clasped to her chest.

"You mark my words," she muttered. "'E won't last in this job. 'E's never lasted at anyfink. Born wiv itchy feet, 'e was. Could of 'ad a nice stall down to the market by now, but think 'e'd listen to me? 'Go in for onions and spuds,' I always said to 'im. 'That's somefink what's always called for.' Or cabbages, there's a nice livin' in cabbages. . . . "

It was dull for my mother, just looking at all that food. Her face was scrubbed shiny and her hair was plaited so tightly she couldn't put her eyebrows down.

"Why can't we eat, Mum?" she asked. "What are we waiting for?"

"We're waiting for your father," said my grandmother sharply. "They must be workin' the poor man to death."

Granny Toohig sniffed. "'E's in the local, more likely."

This was something my grandmother would not hear of. She thought

it was quite obvious that the government had been sorely in need of O'Daly and that he would have to put in long hours for a while, till he got everything in order.

When he finally crept in, very late that night, with his tie dangling from his trouser pocket and his hair all on end, she said, "A long day it was, then."

"Ess'*tror*dinary mess down there," said he. "Never did find out what they ashually do."

She noticed the chain that hung across the front of his waistcoat. "Where'd you get that watch?"

"Oh, that. It's not ezackly what you'd call a watch."

She tugged the loose end out of his pocket. "There's nothin' on the end," she said, astonished. "'Ere, this come out of the lav, didn't it? We 'aven't been able to pull the chain all day."

My grandfather never was able to discover the point of the activities that went on from eight to five in the Government Department, though he did notice that sleight of hand with papers and small items of stationery played a large part in it. After he started work there, the office consumption of string, rubber bands and paper clips increased remarkably. He became adept at the use of evasive language and showed a veritable genius for cat's cradle. He kept everyone in the office amused and, since it was the Civil Service after all, it was some time before anyone noticed how little was actually getting done. In fact, at first it was generally thought that O'Daly was an exceptional worker: the number of memos and interdepartmental notes originating at his desk was staggering. The trouble was that it was eventually observed that they had absolutely no connection with anything contained in any known file.

"I'm afraid the man may be a lunatic," confessed Mr. Golightly to his wife.

"Well, they do live in that very odd place," she admitted with a sigh, realising that she was going to have to look for another dressmaker.

For several weeks, Mr. Golightly spent nine hours a day working on the problem of how to get rid of O'Daly without putting himself in a bad light for having hired the man in the first place. He kept his office door closed and groaned a good deal. He spent the mornings tearing up the memos that came from my grandfather and the afternoons going through the overflowing waste-paper basket to make sure he hadn't thrown away something important. One day he was flipping idly through some files to while away the dull hour between elevenses and dinner-time, when he came upon my grandfather's birth certificate—or what passed for one. It was the paper that had been found with him in the cardboard box on the priest's doorstep. It was a most unorthodox document, scrawled on the back of a Chipperfield's circus programme. Mr. Golightly's eye lit up.

He sent O'Daly a memo, explaining that a man whose birth had been

recorded in this slipshod fashion could hardly be said to exist, at least in so far as the Government was concerned, and therefore could not of course continue to be a Civil Servant. He was sorry it had only just come to his attention, but there it was, and unless he could produce a proper certificate, they would have to let him go.

My grandfather was naturally very relieved to be offered this easy way out, since he had a terrible hankering to be back on the street, but my grandmother didn't mean to let it rest there. She was determined to make an honest citizen of him by finding his parents, if they should still be alive, and having them sign a regular birth certificate. She had always felt that the circus programme was in itself of significance, and since it happened that Christmas was approaching and Chipperfield's had set up on the common for their annual show, she decided to go down there and make some enquiries.

In the ringmaster's office, she spread out the crumpled programme. "These people 'ave gone missin' for nigh on forty years," she said, tapping the dim brown signatures gently with her pin-pricked finger. "But I 'ave 'opes of findin' them."

The ringmaster directed her to two shabby caravans parked side by side on the edge of the common. In the first of these, she sat and watched the old man wipe off his greasepaint smile. "Ain't nuttin' to do wit' me," he said, his black eyes glowing like poison berries in the mirror. His Irish brogue made him hard to understand. She smoothed her brown dress over her thin knees and coughed discreetly into her red and white hanky.

"Did you or did you not," she began, determined to have things businesslike, "leave one Patrick O'Daly, my 'usband, on Father O'Reilly's doorstep in December, 1899?"

"The saints preserve us," he mumbled through the towel. "Would you ask me to remember sometin' that happened a hundred years ago?"

At the second caravan she was not invited in. The woman stood on the step, holding a red dressing-gown around her varicosed legs. "How old is this baby now?" she asked.

"Thirty-eight come Christmas."

"Ah, time flies," said the old woman, sighing in the dark. "I won't sign nuttin'. I signed before."

"But it's not a proper birth certificate," explained my grandmother.

Afterwards she said, "It was 'is feet. 'Is feet was standin' there, starin' me in the face. The same long toes and everythin'."

"So your grandfather went back on the street," said my mother in the attic. She got up suddenly to adjust the blackout curtain. There was a herd of planes roaring over our house, but I thought I heard her say, "On with the motley."

The lamp spurted and my mother's shadow leapt up on the wardrobe door. Motley means life, I said to myself in the sudden dark, and all the frail restless figures of that nightly carnival rustled around me, jostling for space in which to play the gestures of their eternal pantomime.

In ragged procession they circled my bed. I saw Granny Toohig, waxen-faced and lying in a box, her handbag clutched to her sunken chest. The box was heaped with Parma violets that overflowed around her onto the ice-cream cart, and the donkey turned his gentle gaze on me for an instant and sniffed at the air. Confronted thus with mortality, my grandfather absent-mindedly drew a dangling length of chain from his waistcoat. Mrs. Golightly emerged panting from a pink cloud of candy floss, her purple face bearded with spun sugary wisps, and her husband darted in and out among the mourners hunting an elusive memo.

Shifting and drifting at a respectful distance came all the lonely grey lodgers who were to invade Granny Toohig's empty house, to glide through the gate in the privet hedge each morning with a packet of sandwiches made by my grandmother and return at night for stew and dumplings. In the wink of an eye, I saw them dipping their spoons in the mutton gravy around the table in the front parlour, while my grandmother and her family, installed next door in Granny Toohig's kitchen, threaded their way through a maze of beds and cooking pots and frothy half-finished trousseaus.

In a far dark corner, my grandmother turned wearily from a mound of dirty washing. The faded petals of her face and hands were faintly luminous in the dim light of the scullery. As she poked the long-johns and vests and rubber-buttoned liberty bodices into the copper with a stick, she spoke in a frail voice that mingled with the rising steam.

"I want to see you settled," she said to my mother. "Before I go."

My mother didn't know any men to marry, except the lodgers. My father was the only one under fifty, so she married him. "Wasn't much choice," she said.

On the wedding day, my grandmother died. My father took my mother away to a house of their own, our house with the attic and my own blue bed. The other lodgers melted away and O'Daly stayed on alone in Granny Toohig's house and sang arias behind the boarded-up windows. The privet hedge grew wild until it covered the blank windows and the little gate disappeared under a tangle of leaves and sickly white flowers. My grandfather never came out of there again.

He didn't die a pauper. He had seven empty rooms around him in which to sing and dance. He had two pairs of boots with laces all the way up and the complete operas of Puccini on 78's. To suggest that such a man died of starvation, as the doctor did, was obviously ridiculous, and many of the street merchants found themselves a new doctor when they heard about this nonsense. The coroner was equally inane and warbled about balance of mind. He thought O'Daly had fallen, or perhaps thrown himself, down the stairs while in a weakened and confused condition. That coroner had evidently never been to the market and seen him dance like a bird without ever so much as slipping into the gutter.

My father came home from the war to help my mother arrange for the funeral. He was very shy and stood in the hall while I talked to him through the banisters from the upstairs landing. I had the measles and he didn't want to catch them.

"Are you a good girl?" he asked, twirling his khaki beret in his big brown hands.

"Yes," I lied, and got my head stuck between the posts so he had to come up after all and saw the staircase in two to get me out.

He tried his best to get a good price for Granny Toohig's little house, but no-one wanted to pay much for a building that might get bombed by the Germans while they were signing the papers. It was eventually sold for a song, and after the undertaker had been paid and a host of creditors satisfied, there was very little left.

When the postman brought the money and my grandfather's boots to the back door in a cardboard box, my mother cried two small tears. Then we caught the train to the nearest town and had a lovely time spending all the money.

I was lifted up on the counter of a shop in the middle of the town and from the window I saw pink neon lights crinkling across the wet pavement. I was bundled into a new coat. There was velvet on the collar and my mother's eyes were feverish.

"And a hat to match," she cried in a wild gay voice. She had them wrap everything well because of the rain, and we ran madly through the town, ransacking every shop for pretty dresses, teddy bears and winter shoes. We bought a packet of sparklers and lit them all at once on a street corner. Round and round in the air we waved them and all the silver stars fell into the puddles.

We were very tired when we came to the butcher's shop, with only a little time to spare before the train left. My mother heaved all the parcels on to the butcher's wooden counter and decided we would have a leg of lamb for dinner. I had never heard of eating lambs before, but all the people in the shop looked very impressed we were spending so much money.

"Carry me, Mummy," I said as the butcher wrapped up the meat. "I'm too tired." She picked me up and ran for the train. We scrambled in just as it moved away. The lights of the town disappeared from the wet windows and my mother began to tremble. "The parcels," she screamed, jumping up and trying frantically to open the door. "I left them on the counter."

An old man stopped her saying, "You can't get out here, madam. The train is moving."

She sank into a corner and flattened her face against the headrest. She cried all the way to our station. She was wearing a purple crêpe dress and sensible brown shoes, the kind that are good for walking in the mud. In her right hand she held my yellow rain hat.

The butcher said over the telephone that there weren't no parcels in his shop and he didn't know nothing about it, so we went home and put the lamb in the oven and my mother and father had a fight in the front room. They were so long about it that smoke began to pour out of the scullery.

"It's all burnt up," I said, staring miserably at my plate.

"You'll eat it and like it," said my mother fiercely, dabbing at her face with a hanky. "That's all that's left of your poor grandfather."

When she put it like that, nobody else felt like eating either, so we sat quietly at the table for a decent time and then my mother took me up to bed. My father waved to me from the bottom of the stairs because he was going back to the war that night.

"Tell me the story again," I said to my mother as she tucked me in, but she just stood there in the attic. She seemed to have forgotten how it went.

"Not tonight," she said.

She took away the lamp and the dark rattled across the bars of my cot. My grandfather rose up on his toes in a rush and his black eyes spread like lakes and drowned the whole room. A long hollow note rang through the house as the lamp shivered away down the stairs.

ORION

Insensible within
the dark and winter
rose, the Hunter drifts
beyond our changing,
his motion sketching all
of change that we can
understand, not lost
in even the silence before
speech.
It is by
their anticipation only
that simply they are known,
the question its own poise
and resolution here,
the dark and the determining;
and the limit of each urge
and new beginning
is question again.
In
the deep night identity
renews. Notitia.
The seed again sorting,
re-sorting; the iterant
here is in-cry of how
the long lake reflecting
moonlight;
and
he blacked from white now
stands like a cormorant
on the hill of skulls.
His witless eye
contains the five stars
turning in an empty air.

MISSA SINE NOMINE

Too sharp for their own truth
to be repeatable, brick corners,
dead neon, the plump shop faces
swelling beyond the first certainty
that is not yet any shadow
of the changing day; hold, till
the speckled dividing bones
of each articulated minute
merge through a stagger of frozen
grape vines, fence mesh, over these pock-
white fields; till the light falls
remembering into what place

and walk again through the wet forest
of the grail, between now glimpses
of my loosened sight.
                Word
though the limit met;
or coming too quickly awake
as the uncertain light
outlines splinter of grey-
crisp oak bark, berry
summer between my hands;
milkweed, the stammering birds
confess each innocence renewing
in this year of only my time
known now, and the one lost carol
again as this small bee feeding
beyond the pale grass.

My hands crinkle with dew.
I sleep, and wake again;
and stand for a minute
in this winter rain,
and walk between the selfing
shadows of my bones.

THERE IS . . .

There is a full moon licking its own chops
high in a tree at the dinner hour.

There are pandas tragically mating
in boxes in zoos, thinking of Chinese candy.

There are one thousand and one nights
dealt out in twos and threes, first come, first served.

There is truth already uttered, even now
being edited, soon to be aired.

Back in the boondocks, there are women
decently naked, filling boxcars with handmade dice.

There is grammar. Oh, there is grammar: grammar
for order and for distinctions; for things running down.

On the seabed is a devilled crab. It is somebody's
lunch but it's convinced it ate the sea.

SENTENCES OF CHINA

Third month of winter: woods a violet scribble.
Clouds rise from ravines; the same clouds ride
the updraught over tenements.
The City of the Emperor is stiff with frost.
High in a forest of fire-escapes, I study bare poplars.
For a year a man worked at ivory.
The forests are burned, slashed away; now sets
a smoky moon.
These persist: trees, few and ornamental; sky;
cloud; squared house timbers; white stone.
Turning from one wind to another, I rearrange the room.
Snow falls, slowly as kites.
The chairs shuffle and talk: wild, the tropes
of furniture.
Li Po dawdles some days distant, in Tai-t'ien.
I wait as though carved; wind and winter hold, fretting
the bones.
Clouds drift by tenements; two long-winged birds
rise there to fly.
No time for business of court—Li Po
leans against a pine; disconsolate.
Where, how, for whom we wait: these can be partly answered.
Like fine silk caught on roughcut pine, this day
hangs from a splinter.
If time did not direct us all one way: a knife
through ivory.
Tai-t'ien—east beyond suburbs, the world buries
in cloud.
Li Po dawdles some days distant; around him parks
lose their colour to snow; should he behold them and know
he has many times crossed their dark to go home?
In an ivory box, a figure carves the wind; on his outflung
arm, a falcon; above, the scud of clouds.
Slow as kites, a new snow.
Like fine silk caught on roughcut pine, this day
hangs from a splinter;
Time and its cares no longer move.

Ken Mitchell

LI CHAO—*An Interview*

In the spring of 1981, working as a Foreign Expert teaching English at the University of Nanjing (or Nanking) in the People's Republic of China, I read a story by a remarkable young Chinese writer working in the city. I was introduced to Li Chao by a student of mine who had been a high school classmate.

Li's father was Feng Zhe, who became well-known in the 1950's for one story in particular, "Going Out of the Mountain". He was persecuted as a rightist following the liberal "Hundred Flowers" period of the late 50's, and was exiled to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. In 1979, after he was allowed to return to his home in Nanjing, he published his first story in twenty years, "Hidden Traitor", in *Beijing Literature*. It was awarded a top prize by the China Writers' Association. He died six months later, at the age of 49.

Li Chao, at 23, works as an editor for the national literary magazine, *Youth*. The main editorial offices are found in a crumbling office building, directly behind the parade reviewing stand in Gu Luo Square, in the center of Nanjing. During the 60's and 70's, the square was the scene of massive tributes to Mao Ze-dong. Here were fought huge battles between factions of the Red Guard movement. But the portraits of Mao and Hua Guo-feng were painted over in 1980. The parade stand has become no more than a convenient place to watch market traffic bustle past.

I find Li in his third floor office: a bespectacled, serious young man who is capable of a sudden wide smile. He works at a small wooden desk, one of about ten in a large open room. As the interview begins, a few of his co-workers cluster around. I first ask for more biographical information.

"I grew up in Nanjing. During the Great Cultural Revolution, my family settled in the countryside in south Jiangsu province, and I went to work on a commune as an 'educated youth'. When I finished (high) school I became a worker in a handicraft factory, making bamboo doghouses. Because of my education, I was later given a job as an editor in a radio broadcasting station in Hong-zi County."

Was this an improvement?

"Of course. I was in a position to read books for the first time. I in-

dulged myself with a lot of philosophy, history and literature—especially Classical Chinese. During this time, my first story called "Feeding Ducks", was published in a Jiangsu newspaper.

"I went to a teacher's college in 1977, after the Smashing of the Gang of Four—when the children of intellectuals were allowed to attend universities. Then I became an editor of *Youth*."

Tell me about Youth. *What sort of magazine is it?*

"Well, it's the largest literary magazine for young people in China. The circulation is presently about 48,000. That's been built up since it began two years ago, so you can see it's been rather successful."

What accounts for its success?

"China has a huge population. If people like the kind of material we publish, they will buy it. It's actually fairly typical of its kind."

Can you describe your average reader?

"Our readers tend to be young city workers, fairly well-educated. Both boys and girls, about equal. Actually, I think it's more popular among the girls. But it's intended for a general audience, not for young women."

How is it edited? Are you open to submissions?

"We get about four to five thousand stories a month, from all over the country. I am one of seven regional editors, so I handle all the submissions from North China, perhaps three to four hundred every month. I select about one percent of these, then the general editors pick the best ten stories each month for publication."

So it's not easy to get published?

(Laughs) "Where is it easy to publish?"

Do you ever ask for revisions?

"Sometimes. Mostly, the stories are published as is."

You do offer payment, though?

"Yes, but not a lot. Most people are publishing for reasons of prestige, or just the chance to demonstrate their ability. The payment is usually between eight and ten yuan for 1,000 words. The average might be 120 yuan ($80).

"There are very few professional writers. Most are happy at the chance to be published. We publish mainly the work of novice writers seeking their first publication. However, we also have a few regular contributors."

How is the magazine distributed?

"Mail subscriptions account for about seventy percent of circulation. The rest sell over the counter in book-stores. It sells for thirty fen a copy."

Is it an independent publication?

"Not really. It is financially self-sufficient—in fact, it makes a profit—but politically, we are responsible to the Ministry of Culture."

Are you politically controlled?

"Of course. There's a very close relationship in China between literature and politics, as you know. However, things are loosening up. As

writers, we all want to find a way around political controls, just as western writers somehow have to avoid the pitfalls of commercial writing.

"Anyway, it's better than the newspapers. I think the reason magazines are more popular than newspapers is because they're not full of propaganda. People who seek a more accurate impression of life usually read the magazines."

You mentioned a profit in your operation. What happens to it?

"We have been earning about a 20,000 yuan ($14,000) monthly profit after expenses. This money is being put in a fund to build a house for our employees. Most of them now have to live in hotels."

So you're treated well?

(Smiles.) "Well, not as well as a chauffeur. But our work is valued, yes. Since the Gang of Four."

Can we come back to your work briefly? Tell me about your story "The Green Land of Lost Hope".

"After I joined the staff here, I became very enthusiastic about story-writing. In 1979, I wrote and published three stories, of which "The Green Land" is my favourite. I think it's more artistic, less political.

"My motive was simply to evoke the past. It is not about me, but expresses the feelings I had when I returned from the countryside. During the Cultural Revolution, only the children of party cadres could return to the cities after a short time, through 'back doors'."

It's not autobiographical at all?

"Well, I did have three dogs in the country. We suffered together. You know, the country people found it very strange that I could have three dogs and not eat them!"

Your father must have been proud of your accomplishment.

"I don't know. Actually he disapproved of my writing at all. Out of concern, he tried to prevent me from writing during the Great Cultural Revolution. But when my story was published, he did say it was better than any of his. Of course, it wasn't, but it was very good of him to say that. I think he was pleased."

So what is *the story about?*

"Ambivalence. You know the line of Pushkin's? 'Although the past is intolerable, when you think of it, you feel both sorrowful and warm.'"

Li Chao

The Green Land of Lost Hope

The long-distance telephone line crackles and hums. The city at the other end, hundreds of miles away, sounds lost in a heavy storm.

"Hallo!" I shout at top volume. "Sister, it's me!"

As the storm advances along the wire, continues to assault this little town stuck out on the plain, I feel cold. *Aah, what's wrong with my head? It's early summer.*

"I'm coming home, Sis! Tonight! Can you meet me at the station at nine?"

"Thank goodness! You're really coming home at last? Do you have a lot of baggage?"

"A lot. I'll bring it all with me. I'm leaving my place empty."

My place. "Home". My heart stops beating for a second. Silence rules the receiver. My lips can feel a mist on it.

The sound of the storm rises in the telephone again. "Brother? Mother has already arranged to get you assigned to a supply and marketing office—in the centre of the city! An office! A white-collar worker! Aren't you happy—&"

I open my mouth, murmur something, put down the receiver.

Outside the county telephone office, mist is drifting just as it did in the mornings when I first arrived in the countryside.

My dog Black rushes ahead, bounding. He suddenly stops, pricks up his ears. The whistle of boats can be heard from the lake. Black sniffs the damp air and barks several times at the foggy world. Then he comes back, to wipe the dew from his fur onto the bottoms of my pant legs.

Yes. Black is still a baby. It's all so wonderful when you are young: a lamb, a puppy, a baby. Then you grow up and become as dull as a piece of worn-out plastic. Especially if you're a human being. When a man becomes old, his brain might grow larger, but his mind grows narrower. *To hell with it! Why bother?*

I suddenly feel exhausted. Of course, it's because I walked all night long. Maybe I am getting older. *The fog is colder than moonshine—No! Today's a happy day. Why should I feel so low? Strange.*

"So—you're leaving, huh?" A hand with large knuckled joints falls onto my shoulder.

I know this hand better than its owner's face. The face of the Director of the Office for Educated Youth is always flat, difficult to read. But his hands are firm, direct, powerful. I shrink back. I've been under his hand for too damned long. *Why does it still want to grasp me?*

"Yes, you should have gone back long ago. You've already been here for ten years. Where will you work when you get back to the city? The oil and chemical plant? Good. Very good. What time does the bus leave?"

I suddenly remember the village market, very noisy and full of vegetable stalls. Here I strike a bargain with an old man who has haggled furiously over a one-cent difference in price, and he puts the vegetable into my basket. He takes out his purse to give me the change and murmurs cheerfully, "Who worries about a penny or two, anyway? Even if you gave me a dime or two less, who's to complain? I can't fight over every gram. What? Leaving? 'Bye now. . . . "

The fog drowns the market place. I turn to the Director with a smile.

"I take the eight o'clock bus," I say, "Is there much longer to wait?"

The firm grip suddenly trembles and retreats. "Ah—unfortunately, I don't have my watch."

But I have already caught sight of a blue gleam on his wrist. No mistaking it. It is the liquid crystal watch, the one I got from Hong Kong. I presented it to the Director as a "toy" for his three-year-old son two months ago.

I smile to myself.

Fog. Fog. I am swimming with Black in the sea of fog.

The whole world is strange. It seems that I've been waiting several lifetimes for this chance to return to the city. Listening to the cold rain beating at the window, through the dim light of the oil lamp. Waiting outside the endless offices with a beggar's ironic smile. Licking the soul's wounds alone like an animal.

Sometimes I felt I'd go crazy if I didn't leave the next day, that on the day of my escape, I'd embrace every man and woman in the street. And now the day has come at last, but things are not what I expected at all. Today my job, my city, even my girl friend, are within reach. *But why am I feeling so low, distracted? My mind is like this misty plain. What is this quiet, unending cloud over my heart? Do you know, Black?*

Black's eyes wink at me in watchful consideration.

We students had a time when we were as carefree as Black. When we first came to the countryside, the bus took a whole day to cross the great plain. Our songs flew out the window like sparks, spreading over the boundless green sea. It was already night when the bus pulled abruptly to a halt: *"Here we are!"*

I jumped out of the brightly lit bus. The dark landscape was spread out before me, honest and mysterious. No sounds. No lights. No edges.

I felt that it was waiting to deliver some miracle, that it would erupt with wonders.

"Look at all the stars in the sky! Many more and brighter than in the city."

"What ? How do you know?"

"Did you count them already?"

"Tell me why they glitter like that."

"They're winking!"

"No, they're swimming!"

While my school mates joked, I pushed through the crowd, going ahead to explore. Across the dark plain, I could see a smooth grey road stretching in the distance. But as soon as I stepped onto it, I got a cold shock. All around me, reflections of the starry sky shimmered. I had stepped into the canal.

Convulsed with laughter, my friends pulled me out. "Old Uncle" and his daughter, the nearest of our new neighbors, sent us over some firewood and a brazier. As I dried my wet clothes, my friend Zen-zen commented drily, "The stars, eh? They're swimming in the sky!

"The poet, eh? He's swimming in the canal!"

Gazing at her, I thought, *And the fire-light is swimming on the girl's face. The poem is swimming in the fire.* But I did not dare to speak it aloud.

All that laughter which brought so much delight. . . . *Let the past go! What's the use of raking it over? It only makes you miserable.*

I seize the end of my cigarette with yellowed fingers and throw it away. The butt floats on the surface of the ditch. *How does it die without making any sound?*

Seven o'clock. An hour before the bus. The sun is up. *It shines like a silver coin floating in milk.*

When did this strange feeling begin? I felt only happiness when I finally received my notice to return.

Oh, it began with . . . Uncle and the team leader sitting across a table and holding their wine cups toward me. "You're the most honest of the lot of them," they said. "Now you're the last to leave. And as there's none of your school friends left to give you a send-off, we'll do it! Bottoms up!"

"Wait a minute, Uncle." I covered the cup with my hand. "I have to tell you something before I drink." Silence. "I'm not such an honest character. It was me who stole your chickens."

"Aaa, you're drunk, boy! I don't remember losing any chickens."

"Please, let me finish. One was white, the other was barred. In the east wheat-fields. I jumped on them."

"Brave fellow! Just for that—bottoms up!"

After taking a drink, Uncle picked at both ears with his fingernails, then casually laid the dirt on the table. Slowly he said, "Actually, I knew about that. It made me mad, so mad my teeth ached for a week. One day I was hauling manure past your house, and I saw your jacket in front of the door. Right then, I decided to fill your jacket with shit."

Uncle grinned like a boy. "But I raised the scoop a few times, only to get soft-hearted and put it down again. Thinking about you kids, living so far from your parents and never having enough money to buy meat or fish. I know when you're feeling low, mistakes do happen—"

"Forget it," said the team leader. He touched my cup with his, his eyes level with mine. "You've suffered through a lot with us the last few years. I remember the time when you went to transplant rice seedlings. You had malaria, and got caught in the rain and were burning up with fever. In my opinion, the two chickens died gloriously—in the cause of your nutrition. Cheers!"

A drunken elation crept over me—though in fact I hadn't drunk much. Standing up, I said to Uncle, "Where's your daughter? I want to propose a toast to her!"

"Out cooking in the kitchen. Absolutely refused to come."

I took a cup and went back to the kitchen. Silence hung over the room, except for a bubbling sound at the cauldron. Gui-lan was sitting stiffly, facing the oven. In her eyes I could see two dying fires. I went over as casually as I could. "I'm leaving soon. Come out and have a drink with us."

No reply. A drop of steam fell hissing on the cauldron.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Hypocrite! You knew all about her sorrow!

I felt awkward, standing with the cup in my hand. I reached out and touched the top of her head. "Hello. Drink or not?"

Just then I felt the tremor of her scalp under my palm. Perhaps she had been waiting a long time for this impulsive touch! A strange feeling lodged in my chest.

Finally she broke the silence. "Clothes are wrapped in the bundle. Change your clothes before getting on the bus. Be neat and clean—make your Mother happy!" Her mouth twisted into a smile, but the sound she made was a sob.

I couldn't count the number of times she had brought me laundered clothes after my friends had left one by one, and after Zen-zen had abandoned me, gone back to the city and married an army officer. . . .

One day after transplanting rice seedlings, I returned to our shack in my wet muddy clothes, gorging a bowl of cold rice I had cooked that morning. I chewed and chewed. The bowl got heavy and began to shake in my hand. It wasn't all that heavy, but I was exhausted. Sleep would have been a joy—to be free of care, to fall into lassitude.

Then she came in and put a bowl of cooked bean-curd on the table, quickly snatching her hands away and sticking her fingers in her mouth.

"Burned?"

She grew red in the face, refusing to look at me. "No, eat it at once," she said in a low voice. "Bean-curd is best eaten hot."

Then she carried my dirty clothing away toward the river bank.

I couldn't eat, so I followed her and stood silently behind her. I saw her put the clothes into the sunset-tinted river; I saw her wash the dirty

collar, then frown, and smile again without reason; I saw her splash water on the swimming ducks. Smoke from the kitchen chimneys circled through the dark sky, slowly drifting down and settling on the earth. The plain darkened and grew somber. The girl's features were silhouetted against the reflection of shining stars in the river. Her bare calves flashed white in the darkness.

She was in love with me, distantly and secretly. Was it because of my loneliness, thinness, and melancholy? Or because I allowed my imagination to run wild and wrote obscure scribblings? It was baffling. Her love was written in her eyes, though she never dared to look directly at me. No doubt she saw herself as a country girl; she could neither read or write. And I who couldn't even look after myself—*what could I say to her?*

At night, her hair spun through my dreams. The moonlight washed her sunburned flesh white and smooth. I stroked her full breasts and her graceful legs. She lay beside me with affection and embraced me in a passion, nuzzling her smooth face against my whiskers. *The dream! What was left for me except the dream?*

And during the day, I answered her affection with stupidity. I could see that she would willingly give whatever I wanted. But as I would never marry her, I couldn't grow indulgent and hurt this innocent child.

"All right. Don't cry any more. Stand up."

She stood obediently, her eyes closed, a rice straw clinging to her forehead.

I embraced her in silence, kissed her eyes. They reminded me of the sea, so deep that its colour was lost in darkness. A tear drop trickled onto my lips, salty and hot.

I don't know what I said at that moment, my voice turning all hoarse. Perhaps I would never be loved so deeply, either in the past or in the future.

"Gui-lan is sick. Can't come to see you off." On the day of my departure, Uncle stands outside my shack. Two chickens are struggling in his hands. "Take these with you."

"No Uncle. I can't—!"

"Be quiet! Us peasants don't have fancy things to give you. These two chickens are a token of our feelings. Gui-lan says you are going far away. It'll be hard to get back here and steal chickens again, even if we invite you." His little eyes twinkle.

I take the chickens and go out the door. Door? No, the House for Educated Youth has had no door for a long time. A straw mat hangs in its place. The window pane is broken; a clear plastic sheet is pinned over it. The shack is empty. All the furniture has been moved away. There is a strange echo inside.

I have a sudden clear sensation of our hearty laughter and accordion music floating from the house, the trim window, the glare of the warm kerosene lamp. The cat's endless assault on a group of hens. Smoke rising from the roof, waving to the young people in the fields. . . .

I stop and turn. The house is still empty. Like a pale old woman, it looks at me from its broken door and window. The wind blows the matting. *Bang, tang*—

I hear a sharp sob. No, I don't really hear it, but the sob is there. I don't know whether it is the empty room crying, or if it is Gui-lan somewhere.

Suddenly a thread snaps in my heart, and it stops beating for a second. *Dead silence.* I stretch my arm, trying to keep balance, like walking on ice, leaving my 'home' behind, leaving Uncle and leaving her, without turning back again.

My pup follows me, running happily, his head and tail wagging.

That winter was the most desperate of all. Premier Zhou had died. A boy from a high-ranking family had taken my place in returning to the city. I nearly went crazy, surrendered all hope. One day, I sought relief by riding out on my bicycle, Black running happily behind. Suddenly an insane idea jolted my mind: a ride to the death, either for myself or for the dog. With a wild laugh, I took off.

I drove my bicycle furiously. Black trailed behind.

Dusk—a few hazy lamps in the distance—dark shadows in the trees—the river choked with dead reeds—I drove madly, without direction.

"Follow if you want! Go on, chase me! For all I care, you can run yourself to death." I rode on, grinding my teeth. I could hear Black's monotonous panting.

After fifteen or twenty miles of one long sprint, Black was suddenly missing. I turned back to look for him.

Lying on the snowy ground, Black blinked his red eyes at me, his head in the dirt. I tapped his head gently, feeling as though an electric current had jolted through me. I remembered that he was only a year old.

"Forgive me—please." I knelt and lay down beside him on the deserted plain. "Black, my pet—my son!"

The morning fog gradually clears. The roofs far and near, the trees on the plain, become real as the fog vanishes.

At 7:30, the passengers' tickets are examined before boarding. "No dogs allowed on the bus," the conductor says curtly.

I beg piteously, offering cigarettes, all sorts of flattery—but in vain. A crowd of people arrives, including the director.

"Director, I have to take my dog with me," I say. "Don't you understand—my companion in misfortune?"

"No!" people shout. "Don't let him take a dog on the bus!"

"The dog's dirty! It can bite people!"

"Then let me take him as luggage! I don't care about the cost."

"Huh," one passenger sneers. "It's not enough that these 'educated youth' want to carry peanuts and river crabs all the way back to the cities."

"Well, dog meat's pretty tasty!" another says. "But these loafers only

think of money, what do they care about eating?"

"Shut up—you mother's cunt!" A shout I don't recognize as mine rips from my throat. I feel blood surge inside as if it will burst from my eyes, and I spring at the two passengers, fists swinging.

I am taken to the station master's office and fined three *yuan* for fighting. Then I am escorted back to the bus. My dog has disappeared in the turmoil.

The engine starts. As it roars, I see my 'home' collapsing in the distance; at the same time, the big white poplar tree is burning like a huge cross. Under that tree, I kissed Zen-zen's lips for the first time, clumsily knocking off my glasses. And under that tree, I ended my first short love affair.

Suddenly I throw myself at the bus door. I shout at the gawking crowd with all my strength: "Little Black! Gui-lan! Zen-zen!"

No reply. Of course they are not here. People look at me with cold curiosity. Even I don't know what I shouted, or why. It is not until now that I realize I was shouting for the land which I couldn't bring with me, for the youth I had lost forever in the Green Land of Lost Hope. I really loved her, that Green Land, though she tortured me endlessly.

As the bus drives off, I see a black dog running behind in the dust. One of his legs seems injured, and he runs unsteadily.

I turn back violently and close my eyes. But it is too late. A tear is rolling down my cheek. And the dog runs on.

The wind is blowing hard, but the fog has vanished. Outside, the fertile land flows past like a stream. The noise of the city grows louder and louder. No fog, no green plants, and no stars alight. But that dog still runs.

I stagger home and fall to bed, supposing the dog is still running.

He is running on my page as I pick up a pen to write. I know and believe that he will follow me to the remotest regions of the earth with his broken leg, until I am old and dead.

Richard Lemm

WHILE YOUR NATIVES
(for Libby)

Waking into this only now
world of soft tropic tongues
and the long-legged bird
sleeping on the estuary
between your legs, deep
breathing the thousand-mile river
flaming with orchids and rainbow fish
to the heart of the sun. Rising
between your banks, I am evolving
fins in notorious places, new
eyes all over my body,
plankton in my blood that will spin
my whale drunkenly from floor to sky
until it spits me back on your shore.
Mud-man, this morning, only
now do I feel bones growing.
While your natives
step from the trees, rattling shells,
and call back the sea.

J. Michael Yates

THE QUEEN CHARLOTTE ISLANDS MEDITATIONS

20

Like geese and teal and widgeon and certain other animals of water and air, certain of us pause from flight here, uncertainly, to eat and drink whatever there is, to fuck what is now and then willing, or doesn't, momentarily, care—then, again, fly.

46

It is not that island time means more dimly than all other time.

It is that the form and energy of this island Yakoun River resemble the breath and depth of no other river.

Because of Yakoun time, nothing is landlocked. There are no non-searun fish. No non-searun dreams. All things living, eventually, voyage toward the sea. Nothing is landlocked here. Except, possibly, a man, consenting. Possibly a man like me.

Time here frequently suspends. Or slows toward cease, as all sound seems to cease when, dim and deep in the interior spell, the drumming of a single grouse erases the huge boom of a falling seven-hundred-year-old spruce.

62

March, Yellow Point: a less populous place on a more civilized island. Hiding here from my other island.

Dear Outside (Mainland):

Today is the first high sun of the cold solstice. Heavily sweat-

ered, stiff as the lawn-chair I fill, I note that shapes of the tame surf here restate themselves in stone. Splayed before me and beneath high, chilly light, these horizontal pillars of basalt tonguing the hem of low tide could be abstracts by Giacometti. If Giacometti could be said to do abstracts. And if his tools included bubbles in magma and time sunken far into the mind of sea.

Yellow Point is the moniker for this watering place of cringers. I've heard "Pointe Jaune" and " Gelb Punkt" in the past while. "While" passes as time's name when the usual notations do not apply. Yellow point: the designation is ill-at-ease in every language—like the name of a disease one whispers for fear it might hear and presume itself summoned.

I'd rather say I've gone for R & R to the Yukon, Kluane Lake, Destruction Bay.

Yellow gives the whole of the damn spectrum a bad name. Think of death in Lorca and Lorca in it in '36, in my mind the man died in yellow light, that yellow of Picasso's "Guernica," the death yellow in his own *Bodas de Sangre.* Yellow was the last colour Borges saw before the shutter of his sight slammed.

Yellow Point: a couple of words for a couple of hundred beach-front acres on an island voyaging through the magma and bubbles of time and space. Good handle for whatever it is that kills you or has been killing you from the beginning, whenever it was or was not. To pursue the point would be to say something for or against DNA, then work forward or downward to the guy up the way a hundred yards in a beach cabin alone with his case of rye. His manner stinks of medico, specialist, big loot. Classic alcoholico taking the geographic cure. El Borracio by eight at night. Me, I'm fine, useless as the tits on the "Marine Venus," but righteously, virtuously dry. Me, I'm fine (just wanted to see if I could write it out again). Just fine.

Long, long is the tradition that a sickness be taken to a place, a place different from the place of its beginning, if that place is known. They bring their sicknesses to this place from all over the world and speak of them, when at all, in languages not understood by the maladies they bring. In this way, it reminds me—not to excess—of my old *Kurstadt,* Wiesbaden. A haunt beloved by Dostoievski; he gambled heavily there, at the *Kurhaus* and on the page, the poor-house never distant from his seizures, his excesses, his rage. My good growing up was there, during the occupation and after. They came even then for the cure, whatever it was,

stepped around the small mounds of piled paving stones and peered through unusual holes in bombed gothic walls. Just coming to look was possibly part of the cure. A cure-town is a cure-town; you can't bomb and strafe away a cure.

Anything is a cure, or can become one, and any cure can invent a sickness to fit.

Syphilis, epilepsy, and consumption: by tradition, only these three ways to die find favour in the literary eye. And I don't qualify. They don't make diseases as they did in the old days. Or cures are better than ever.

In any case, Yellow Point is no Berghof; a Hans Castorp wouldn't hack it here two days, let alone seven years.

Most of the diseases transported here are vague, nameless, non-specific as a socked-in island afternoon, and most have been socked-in.

What ails me has a name, many names. It is more certain, more fixed to my substance than the high resolution of my shadow at two p.m. in the first high sun of the cold solstice. To name a complaint is not necessarily to quell it.

I am where will and lack of it equalize. At a yellow point, you might say. Only hesitant air blowing, only this squinty sunshine, and everything getting over-with at roughly 4500 heart-spasms an hour. Fear of not moving keeps me moving. I must move now, now, now, move on.

There is a cure for me. There is a cure for magma. It is called rock.

Alison McAlpine

MOON I

They say
God forgot to grease the pan
and he scorched up
tarpaper black
And so
he got his angel woman to scrub
God being raised in the South
he said wipe that slate clean
he said bend down those knees
And the angel woman steelwooled it
the halos hoola hooping like empty pipes
They say
you had to clap your hands to your ears
with all that noise, the howls of the Lord
the halos greasing loose, collaring down
to wring tight those angel necks
'Cause God was mad
God wanted just one peephole of light

And again
They say
all was tarpaper black
until
God broke down
until
his tears went up
and danced, frying
like mother's oil drops
on the old coal pan
And then
just like a fish hook had ripped the tarp
like a whiff of cold air belted your lungs
like acolytes first collecting from the gold plate
it all began

A little spice, a little life
it all began
in the skillet
like the last hatch of mayflies had made it
all the way, weee to mother's pan
God laid eggs all over the sky
And they say God
all marble-mouthed and bug-eyed—
my God, there was light—
he wanted more
He had the moon sounding on the tip
of his tongue
At first, no bigger than an earwig
one of God's nosehairs, the moon no bigger
than a piece of floss in God's teeth
after a cornfeast
when, when
God stuttered
and the moon fell down the crack of light
like an adam's apple had hit the drain
like a jawbreaker that'd been banging around
in God's brain
They say all that
That God made Moon

H. C. Artmann

from AND THE SUN A GREEN EGG: On the Creation of the World and its Things

So many thoughts arise in my head
of long known things; old thoughts,
but becoming altogether new when
one has to put them into words.

[Rasmussen, *The Netsilik Eskimos*]

In the time when people already considered man-eating immoral, there lived a young man with his grandmother, who had raised him. One day this young man fell in love with a girl. He dressed in his finest clothes; he put on his best hat; he said to the grandmother: 'I have fallen in love with this or that girl, I want to go to her and ask her for her hand.'

The grandmother said: 'Do what you must, but don't come complaining to me later.'

The young man could not or would not understand his grandmother's words; he went to the house in which the girl lived and made his proposal to her.

'I have fallen in love with you,' he said, 'I want you to be my wife.'

The girl laughed: 'Don't you have a mirror at home?'

The young man had never seen a mirror, which did not yet exist. 'No,' he said, 'I have never seen myself in a mirror.'

'If you had seen yourself in a mirror,' the girl said, 'you would certainly never have come to me with your proposal.'

'And why not?'

'Because I am beautiful as a small sun and you have the head of a man-eater!' the girl said.

The young man felt insulted by these words, but he said nothing. He left the girl's house and returned to his grandmother; he sat on the threshold; he threw his hat to the floor and ground his teeth.

'Why do you throw your hat to the floor and grind your teeth?' the grandmother asked.

'I have a man-eater's head,' the young man said, 'what can I do about it?'

The grandmother said: 'Didn't I tell you that you were not to come complaining to me later?'

'Advise me, grandmother,' the young man said, 'I am your only grandson!'

'I'll give you a piece of advice,' the grandmother said, 'but I don't know whether it will be good for the girl.'

'If it's good for me,' the young man said, 'it will surely be equally good for the girl!'

The grandmother gave her grandson this advice: 'Go into this or that forest, after one year you will reach a clearing that will have a spot from which blue smoke rises. Go to this smoke; it will issue from an open window set into the ground; it is the window of a subterranean house. In this house lives Imook, the old spirit who exchanges heads. You must jump down to him and ask him to give you another head.'

The young man went on his way: he reached the said forest; he traversed it for one year; he finally reached the clearing the grandmother had spoken of. He found the spot from which blue smoke was rising; he lay across the window in the ground and looked down into Imook's subterranean home.

A voice called up: 'Is a cloud darkening my home, or is it a man?'

The young man called down: 'I am a man and would like to ask a favour of you!'

'Then jump down to me!' called the voice from the bowels of the earth.

The young man hesitated; it seemed far too deep to jump. 'Don't you have a ladder?' he called down.

'You climb up with ladders,' the voice responded, 'to me, you jump down!'

'It's too deep.'

'Either jump or walk back home!' Imook said.

The young man jumped through the hole into the earth; the home quickly met him; it met him from below; he did not jump a yard; he stood before Imook, who exchanges heads.

'You want to change heads,' Imook said.

'If you'd be so kind,' the young man said.

They walked around this subterranean home; Imook showed the young man many heads sitting on shelves; none pleased him. Imook did not grow the least impatient. Finally the young man cried: 'I want that one and no other!'

Imook said: 'It won't look bad on you, it's yours.'

He tore off the young man's head and set the requested one in its place. Then he led the young man before a mirror and bade him look.

'What's that?' asked the young man.

'That's the mirror which has not yet been invented,' said Imook and place the severed head on a shelf. The young man regarded himself; he asked: 'What do I owe you for this new head?'

'Go on,' Imook said; 'one day I will come by for lunch.'

The young man thanked him and climbed up a ladder from the sub-

terranean home of Imook, who exchanges heads. After one year, he reached his home again; no one recognized him any more; only his grandmother said: 'Now someone has to invent the mirror.'

The young man returned to the girl's house; he neither dressed in his finest clothes nor put on his best hat; he thought it unnecessary now. The girl was no longer in the house. He asked: 'Where is the girl who used to live here?'

'She is dead,' said the people in the house; 'someone from these parts, whom we have long suspected of being a man-eater, dragged her into his forest and devoured her.'

Now the young man knew what Imook had meant by *lunch*. He married another girl; he became a mirror-maker and invented the first usable mirror.

Translated from the German by Derk Wynand

Roger Finch

A GIFT OF ELOQUENCE

Imagine our wonder when she stepped through the door and the first words she said to us were diamonds, heart-red garnets, pearls as large as quail's eggs, a honeyblond topaz of the first water set as a solitaire. Mother gasped. She gasped, too, began to cry when even speechless sounds brought forth another dribble of jewels.

Six hands scrabbled frantically through the dust on the floor, hers, Mother's, mine and three inharmonious minds flashed here for the first time on a single thought: Would she say jewels again? Mother ordered her to tell how she had this uncanny power. "Speak!" she said, and for answer Sister spat one fine ruby.

When she saw what costly compounds she could utter, a secret look masked her face, and she, who had been so talkative before, suddenly went silent, smothering her laughter as a king's ransom erupted into her scarf. Mother tried everything. Where she was unkind always in the past, now she was indulgent. Still Sister would not speak.

Mother's inborn ire flared up again. She shut Sister in her room, warned she would starve her. We heard the chime of rings, the rattle of golden chains, as Sister chuckled to herself. When threats failed, Mother tried cajolery. Nothing worked. At night, as soon as Sister saw we were asleep, she spoke treasures. We never found them, though we traced the trail of vowels and diphthongs she drawled behind her.

At first, we tried to keep watch; but vigilance failed when after a daylong search our limbs, drained of wakefulness, filled with languor. How clever she was! She knew we would not guard her so close if the morning sun dazed on a lawn dewed with real diamonds. She could spare such careless largesse; she could afford a few sparks from the torch of her priceless monologue.

Then Mother guessed from the events of the day Sister got her gift that faery intervention was behind it, set about to reconstruct the same story, sent me to the same well with a silver flask, ordered me to give a drink to "a fair lady in a splendid gown."

When Sister heard this, she laughed, the jingle of high, bright bracelets, as though to imply I certainly would fail. There was no richly dressed lady, there was only a poor old woman in rags who asked for water. After she drank, she said, "Bless you, child," and vanished. She was the only one who came that day, though I waited until nightfall, fearing to face Mother's wrath, and yet I must, so at last I left.

On the way home, the sun dissolving in mountains began to crosshatch the sky with fire and I sang out. Snakes and toads slid suddenly from my mouth, and I knew I had my gift.

This is how I speak, mailing legends eastward from exile, filling them with creatures that no one will ever touch.

WHATEVER IT IS

it burns the opium of human flesh

Each thought like a leaf flourishing in sun-wind
is a small clashed cymbal for its celebration

It leaks from my body
bedizened like a Christmas tree with pain
It leaks from between your legs
like an after-birth
It looms over the future
a livid thunderhead
rising from its nest of messy horizons

Especially with you
it has supplanted me
and would tear the roof from your brain
because nothing can stop its love

It escapes the nets of substitutions
(including metaphor)
I cannot buy it off
and like a goat it devours everything

The Psychiatrist calls it names, the Priest, and
the politician
but it has already torn language limb from limb

Of the body it has made this fuse
Of the mind this ridiculous calendar
the pictures of which (of endangered species)
no one can look at

GARMENT DREAM

Kimono, collapsed on a power line
shed skin, or a bat stale with blood
fruit of the night

A hanged woman
dangles the warning of her body
for all the possible critics
of the regime

This kite, whose memory of blue
has been stolen, sleeps
in a nest of wires
nightmares Orpheus
jolted on the electric lines of his lyre

Lost angel, whose wings are the whole unfolded city

Lucifer, tonight, golden threads
are pulled from my back

NIGHT ON MEDITATION MOUNTAIN

Her half of the furniture goes off
into the snow like a Turkish caravan
in the Himalayas, leaving my books
in a pile in the centre of the floor
as if awaiting an architect, or a torch
The snow keeps falling, deciduously
a recitative, the torn pages of
poems let go into inhuman time

Then, at the apex of this pyramid
of litter good literature makes, there
flickers suddenly, with a headdress of flame
your calyx of corrosive light that
douses the rest of the room in a darkness
so complete there's nothing to miss, or write

Lawrence Russell

Camouflage

The sun had just come up and I guess we made a good target in that field of corn. I guess we did and we knew it. Listen I says to Phil take her towards those trees over there. I could see the trees very clearly. They were tall and silver like the alders down by the pumphouse where we were earlier today, if you recall. They got trees like them all over Italy.

Keep moving I says to Phil towards them trees. I looked them over and decided that was the best place to head. Well it seemed like the best place to head at the time. You don't wanna be out in the open too long. A tank in a yellow field makes a good target and it gets better as the sun keeps risin. I scanned the field with the binoculars and was just lookin back towards the sun when I sees the plane comin at us. Man it was low—it shot POW out of nowhere over the hedge.

A Messerschmitt 109. Naturally I couldn't do a thing. He was on us real sudden like—there was no way I could get off a burst from the machine gun, no way. Thought for sure he was gonna chop the turret right off the tank, eh. Here's this little Nazi sitting in there wearing his fancy goggles and his fancy black gloves and he's got his fancy thumb on the fancy firing button, eh. This is it I thought *this is it.* But he passed us over without firing a round. Of course old Phil he didn't know what was happening. He just felt the tank sway as the plane passed over. Then thru the slit he sees the bastard open up on the trees. He strafed the area good because he was low.

Well he fires up them woods real good and I think Holy Mackerel some of our boys must be in there. We watch for the plane to come back but he's gone, he doesn't come back. When we gets to the trees, what do you think? There were about a dozen Nazis. Dead. The plane got them. That's where I got that Luger I used to have—remember it? I don't know what happened. Maybe the Nazi in the plane made a mistake about the Nazis in the trees. Maybe that's what happened. Maybe he made a mistake. Maybe it was an Italian in that Messerschmitt. That's a good possibility. That's the way it might have been. I've thought of all kinds of reasons. I've thought maybe it never happened. Maybe it was something I saw on television, eh, I thought maybe I was gettin it confused with the time I was in Italy movin thru that field of corn.

Phil says he remembers it though. The other day when we were work-

ing on the roof I says to Phil Phil do you remember that time in Italy? Phil was lyin on the shakes with his shirt off taking a rest. Gettin some sun. George Phil says I remember it. You don't forget things like that. I'll never forget those dead bastard Limeys. They must've been sleeping below that camouflage net. Never knew what hit em. Limeys? I think Phil has made a mistake. Phil I says they weren't British they were Germans. No says Phil they were British. The Six Sutherland Regiment. Aw . . . Phil and I get into these arguments all the time. We've been friends for the longest time you know.

Listen I knew Phil from before the army. I knew him when he was workin night shift in Capozzi's lumber mill. He had a lot more hair then than he's got now and of course he didn't have the ulcer, tho mind you he was well on his way then. I remember he kept a bottle in his hip pocket, a mickey, a mickey at all times. Phil I says to him how could they be British? You remember the Luger pistol I took off one of the high rankin officers. You remember it. It had a pearl handle and I figured it came from the Afrika Korps because there was sand in the barrel and you figured this was a trick to make the gun explode and destroy the hand that pulls the trigger, right? You're not talking about the Luger your Uncle Hans gave you for your birthday are you says Phil. No no no I says to him I'm not talking about any goddamn Luger my Uncle Hans gave me, I'm talking about the goddamn Luger I got when we were in those buncha trees in Italy, you know what I'm talkin about Phil, you said you remembered the time. Listen George says Phil I remember the time I got malaria in the Po valley.

Well . . . I guess maybe I was gettin a bit exasperated with old Phil by this time. I guess. I mean he had malaria alright and he had it pretty bad but I wanted to know whether I had the Luger or not. Recall that we were still on the roof at this time. Recall that Phil had his shirt off and was lying on the shakes gettin some sun and that he had a mickey of Canadian Club in his hip pocket. Recall that I had just told him the story I have just told you and told it pretty much the way I'd told it to other people here and there thru the years . . . and then you can get some vague idea of the situation. Phil I says I agree with your detail about the camouflage net but as far as I'm concerned they weren't sleepin. George he says they were on their backs, surely you remember that. He offered me a drink and ah—just for the hell of it, eh—I had one. I like rye, as you know. It's the best drink this country makes. I've drank it since I started drinkin and I'm still drinkin it. In fact I often carry it. Keep a flask in the glove compartment of the Edsel. I drive better when I've had a couple of snorts. Sets you up, eh. Of course there was no rye available in Italy. Strictly wine in that country. Good wine mind you. The best. We never went into action without it. Every time we hit a castle or monastery, we made sure we got ourselves some vino. Kept a jerry can in the tank and a few extra casks wrapped up in our sleeping bundles. Once they got hit and the damn stuff soaked thru all the damn blankets and we had to sleep sitting up in the damn tank all damn night. I think it was the

night we found those dead Nazis beneath the camouflage net. The Nazis were lying on their backs as Phil says. As he says they were on their backs in a circle, arranged like the spokes of a wagon wheel. But I disagree with Phil when he says he got the sextant and recorded the azimuth of the sun in relation to the circle which they formed with their bodies. I don't believe you can do that with a sextant can you? I knew how to use one of those things. When you were movin at night sometimes that was the only way you could move. When you moved, you moved with the stars.

I guess the whole thing is kinda strange. I've thought about it many times and it seems kinda strange. The Eye-talian in the Nazi plane shooting at those trees. Tall trees. Silver in appearance. I believe they were painted with aluminum paint. Leastways that's the way they appeared to me when I got there. Just like alders the way they reached up for the light.

Go easy I says to Phil or you'll startle them. What a beautiful sight. A true hunter's dream. There must've been about twenty-five of them. Easy. They were sittin in a circle in the grass. You could see the antlers of the big ones and the glint of sunlight in their eyes. I had my Luger but I didn't have the heart to use it. Phil passed me a mickey and sure, I took another swig. What beautiful creatures. Call them noble. Listen George whispers Phil I believe this is a pagan ritual. Look at that circle, look how it's divided into segments, look how the sun comes thru in a straight line.

Old Phil knows about such things. He's a millwright you know. A damn good one too. If only he could come to grips with his drinkin. But this business with his wife, ah it's no damn good. The divorce is just about thru. That's what I hear. He never tells me anything but that's what I hear. She says he just keeps drinkin all the time. Well Phil's a bit of a drinker I won't deny that. Two of this brothers were killed in Italy. I think I pointed out their names to you in the Legion a while ago. His family took a beating. I guess he never got over that. Pretty tough business you know and I guess drinkin is just part of it. He hides bottles all thru the woods, so when he goes hunting he can get himself a drink anytime he feels the need. Smart, eh? Good thinkin, eh? He had malaria you know. Really brought him down. They put him in hospital in Florence for about six months. A beautiful city as you know. We saw all kinds of statues and water fountains there. The Italians were great for water fountains. Of course their architecture is out of this world. As I recall it Phil kept insisting it was a pagan ritual. Listen I says to him this is no pagan ritual. You know and I know that the plane got them. No no no says Phil you said give em a rattle with the machine gun but I thought to meself, what the hell, I bet there're more of the bastards behind the trees, so I lets fly with the flamethrower. Phil I says to him talk sense, we had no flamethrower in Italy. What says Phil was that long tube I carried? That was a bazooka I says. I know what a bazooka is like says Phil and that was no bazooka I carried. I had a cylinder on my back at all

times, at all times, remember? I remember no such cylinder says I and this is true, for if anybody would've remembered it, it would've been me. I carried a cylinder on my back at all times says Phil and you goddamn well know it. Phil I says real casual Phil the only thing you carried was a mickey. Ah screw off George says Phil quit trying to twist the issue. I'm not trying to twist any issue. Well if you're not trying to twist the issue you tell me what *did* we have. I had a Luger with a pearl handle and you had a Messerschmitt 109 I says is my memory correct or is it not? Hah he says I remember: the one Uncle Hans gave me. For Christ's sake I says Uncle Hans gave you nothing. Anything you got you got in Italy and you damn well know it. Well Phil he sits up and he looks me in the eye and he says: *I never was in Italy.* You're drunk I says. No he says *you're* the one that's drunk. O I says deciding I better humour him I guess maybe I am drunk at that. You're drunk he says goddamn pissed to be exact. Now just a minute I says just a goddamn minute. You think I'm drunk he says because you're drunk yourself. Phil . . . listen to me Phil neither of us are drunk. It all happened just the way we said it happened, right? Are you sure says Phil. Of course I'm sure I says I was never surer than I am right at this moment. Jesus Christ says Phil I hope you're right old buddy I sure hope you're right, you know I don't like to be pissed. Well Phil you're not pissed certainly not pissed in the classical sense, if you know what I mean. Yes yes he says I know what you mean okay but you said I was in Italy and that's not true and you of all people know it's not true. No Phil no *you* said you were in Italy not me. Ah shit let's quit this arguing George he says my ulcer's beginning to act up.

Well, this was okay with me. Of course I didn't wanna argue in the first place. Argument is not my style. I believe in seeing things clearly and I can see that corn field clearly and I can see those trees even more clearly altho Phil says they were all covered with camouflage. I have a sore back occasionally as you know. Well it was sore right then from workin on that roof so I decided to call it quits. Well maybe it's the shrapnel. Sometimes it doesn't exist and others it just moves right in and cripples me all up. It's a Nazi bomb. They've tried to locate it just like I've tried to locate my Luger but hell it just keeps movin and so none of us knows where it is or what's happenin.

Douglas Delaney

Home to Pigalle

I imagined Napoleon on the toilet. His fat pyramid hat falling backwards off his head, the wide white belt and shoulder strap tucked under his chin and pinned against his chest in rough wool layers, his thick sword caught between his thigh and the wall and giving him problems. I could cope with him then. You're human now, you son of a bitch, I thought and laughed at his gondola wood coffin.

"What's so damn funny?" Carol said. "There's a dead man in there."

"I know."

"People are looking."

They were. A small group of January Parisians had assembled on the other side of the coffin, grey and scarved, tight like clams and pissed off. Carol pulled me outside, apologizing with her eyes to the indignant locals.

"Why do you have to act like such a tourist," she said.

"I am a tourist. So are you. Why don't you start acting like one."

"I was born here, raised here."

"You're more from Topeka than here. Don't deny it."

"Lived here for seven years," she said, and rattled off thirty seconds of nonstop French.

"That's nice. But even one year in Kansas cancels out seven in Paris."

She punched me on the arm and crossed the street. It hurt. It always hurt but I never had the guts to tell her. I ran after her, dodging tiny cars left and right.

"Don't be like that," I said, grabbing her coat. "I was born in a whorehouse in Atlantic City. What does that make me?"

"The son of a whore," she said, not turning around.

I stopped.

She stopped.

I pouted.

"You don't love me anymore," I said.

She apologized.

It was raining. We had been in Paris three days and it rained on each of them. I didn't mind the continuous near-freezing drizzle at ground level, but Carol coaxed me up to the highest points in Paris, explaining I couldn't truly appreciate the city unless I could take it all in with one

wide glance. So I nearly froze to death on the second level of the Eiffel Tower, cowering in the elements against a broad steel girder while Carol did happy little pirouettes along the rail, squealing, "Isn't this wonderful?"

"Love it. Can we go down now?"

"I'm so excited. I don't know what to do next."

"How about a drink? Let's go for a drink."

She wasn't listening. She was sliding through shallow puddles on the slick metal floor.

"Maybe something to eat?" I said, peering around the girder. Carol was at the edge. Eyes closed, both hands on the rail. She was smelling the city, her face stuck into the wind.

"A cup of espresso?" I shouted.

Espresso was the key word. If I had just said, coffee, Carol's love affair with the post card view of Paris would have lasted all afternoon. Espresso was just European enough to get her down out of the clouds and into the cafe. I picked the one on the corner of the Rue Violet and the Boulevard de Genelle because the windows were sweating and I knew it would be plenty warm inside—it was also the first one we came to.

Carol cupped her coffee with both hands and held it an inch from her nose. I rubbed my hands over mine, shivering—wet.

"I can't believe we're really here," she said. "Oh, J'aime Paris!"

The bartender heard her and smiled.

"I promised you," I said.

"I know. But—"

"I know. You didn't believe me."

"It's not that I didn't believe you. It's just that—"

"You didn't believe me. I understand. I know I've made a lot of promises. Most of them I didn't keep. But this one—this was the big one, right?"

"Right."

"So I'm a success?"

"You're a success."

In Paris I had to make love to her three times a day—something we hadn't done since we were married. It was the mood, she told me. She couldn't help it. I didn't mind. My libido was always a bit more voracious than hers so I felt like I was making up for lost time. When we arrived in Paris our sex life was banal to the point I was engineering a plan to slip away and visit the famous whores of Pigalle. I had heard about them since I was nine years old, tottering about Stella's Room and Board like most kids in the playground.

Stella's Room & Board was probably one of the least expensive brothels in Atlantic City—six blocks from the boardwalk, two stories up and crammed between a cut-rate liquor store and the Knights of Columbus #217. It stunk of sex and baby powder.

"One of these days, sugar, I be struttin my stuff up-down Pigalle," Bernice, the dark one, would tell me. She was tall, thin as a cricket, towering over me naked and damp. "That'd be the place in Paris, France, where they treat ladies such as myself with some respect." She ran the cloth across her stomach and thighs, then dropped it in my bucket and gave me a dime. Bernice always gave me dimes, and sometimes, when she was drunk, quarters.

"Boy, I need you here!" Stella yelled from across the hall. Stella was old and always dressed. "Get a mop and take care of this," she said. Some john had blown his lunch all over the floor and dressing table. Stella sat on the edge of the bed and watched. Behind her, half way under the covers, a new girl sat looking bored and disgusted.

"Hell of a fun house you run here," she told Stella.

"Then leave," Stella said.

"I will," said the girl. "When I'm ready."

Stella waited until I was almost finished before leaving. She put her hand on my shoulder for a moment as she walked out the door.

"This is the boy," she said. "Treat him good. He's our little man of the house."

The girl pulled her hair back behind her neck.

"I'm Alice," she said.

"Yes, mam."

"Sweet Alice."

"Yes, mam."

"Y'know—from Pike?"

"Mam?"

"Pike."

"Is that like Pigalle?"

"Pigalle?" she laughed. "Hell, no. Pike—that's a song."

"Yes, mam."

"We're a long way from Pigalle, boy. Who told you about Pigalle?"

I pointed across the hall to Bernice's room.

"That nigger tell you that?"

"Bernice told me."

"That's what I said."

"Yes, mam."

Alice walked around and sat on the edge of the bed, wrapped in a sheet. "C'mere, boy," she said.

"I'll get another bucket."

"No, no," she said. "C'mere."

I did.

"Listen." She put both hands on my shoulders. "Pigalle—that's a nice place. Much nicer than here. But I'll tell you this—you can't get nothing there you can't get right here."

"Mam?"

"I said you can get it right here."

"Get what?"

"This, boy, *this.*"

Her body moved like a recliner, her head falling back onto the bed and her ass skidding up, forward along my stomach. The sheet fell open and I was caught, chest pinned, pulled into her crotch, her hands tight behind my neck.

I had seen it before. I had seen it many times but never that close and it scared the hell out of me. I broke and ran panicked from the room and down the stairs. I heard Alice laughing when I hit the street and I didn't stop running until I reached the shore.

I sat under the boardwalk, beneath the coin-operated telescopes and waited for nickles to fall. I watched the couples moving across the sand.

"Dammit," Carol said in a loud whisper. I was standing in the hall of mirrors imagining Marie Antoinette picking her nose. When I asked Carol to imagine it she got all upset.

"Dammit, what's wrong with you?" she said. "This is Versailles, for Christ's sake. Don't you know what this means?"

"To who?"

"Me."

I thought about it.

"Sorry," I said.

"Honestly, don't ruin this too."

Carol felt I ruined things—lots of things. I ruined my job, ruined our relationship on several occasions and all in all ruined our chances for success in Topeka, Kansas City and Chicago.

"I'm young," I told her. "There are other cities."

"But, my God, if you can't make it in Topeka?"

"It's not a question of making it. It's a question of enjoying it."

"Enjoying what?"

"It. Whatever it is."

It was my job. Any one of them. In Topeka it was a small ad agency where I met Carol. Kansas City was the larger firm of Himpel and Himpel, Inc. In Chicago it was the *Tribune,* pasting department store ads on graph paper. All three jobs had the same degree of difficulty, zero, which is why Carol gave me such a hard time about not being able to keep one for more than a year.

"I just can't understand you," she said, on one of our moves, where we'd load up the car and drive from town to town, checking want ads. "You never finish anything. A few more years and we could've bought a house."

"I don't want a house."

"Well, I do."

"Alright, we'll get a house."

"When?"

"When I get a job."

"You just had a job."

"Another job. Something . . . different."
"I liked Kansas City."

Carol liked anywhere she could put down her suitcase for more than a month. Her father was a troubleshooter for Ramada Inn and spent most of his time, and her youth, at, or on the plane to, some hotel in any of thirty countries. He managed the Ramada in Paris where Carol was born. I met him once—at our wedding. He flew in and out the same day. Carol cried all through the honeymoon, overcome with the gesture. Carol's mother didn't make it to the wedding. Carol cried about that too.

"I haven't seen the woman since I was three," she said. "You'd think she'd have at least sent a card."

We sent a wedding invitation to mother's old address in Paris. It came back marked in the French equivalent of Return to Sender. Carol tore the invitation up and threw it in the garbage.

"Maybe she's dead," I said, trying to cheer her up.

"Dead? That's a horrible thing to say."

"Which would you rather have—your mother not coming because she's dead or because she couldn't give a shit?"

"What kind of choice is that?"

"The only one. Shitty, granted—but better than nothing."

"It is not."

"But you don't even know the woman. She left when you were a kid."

"She did not."

"No?"

"No. She didn't leave me. My father threw her out."

"You don't know that."

"He told me."

"When? When has he been around long enough to tell you anything?"

"On the plane going . . . I don't know—somewhere. He had a few too many and said he threw her out."

"That's it?"

"No, that's not it. He said he threw her in the streets, 'where she belonged.'"

"Then?"

"He fell asleep."

"Terrific."

"Don't be a wise ass."

"Don't be selfish."

"Selfish?"

"Selfish."

"You're a bastard, you know that."

I knew it. But I liked to think of myself as an orphan. It was mainly Bernice's idea.

"Sweet Jesus, boy!" she said, taking the paper bag from my hands and

hurrying me into her room. "If you don't cut out this mama-papa shit you gonna get your ass thrown outa here and quick."

I had just asked some john out in the hall if he was my father. Bernice sat on her bed, took out the bottle and drank.

"You got my change?" she said.

I gave it to her. She took another drink and gave me a quarter.

"Listen up," she said. "Stella was kind enough to let you stay here after you's born. Stella that way. She got a kind heart. But she got a business too. And if push come to shove—business come first. Do you see what I'm tellin you here?"

"No, mam."

"Dammit, boy, you got to quit askin every whore in the house if she your mama—every john if he your old man."

I stared at her. She had a kind face.

"Heavens, child," she said, "If one lady here ain't your mama, it's me."

"But—?"

"But nothin." She drank some more and walked over to the window. The bottle was half empty. She opened the blinds and let the sun in. She came to me.

"They're dead, boy, dead," she said, softly, rubbing her hand on my cheek. "Let them be dead."

I think I started to cry. Bernice held both my hands and squeezed them hard.

"But who will—?"

"I will," she said. "I will."

The next day Bernice came into the lobby, all dressed up. She went upstairs and called me into her room. She showed me several sheets of paper. Showed me the places where she signed them, then put them under the magazines in her nightstand drawer.

Carol stood on the balcony outside our room and marveled over the early morning view of the Latin Quarter. She was naked except for the towel around her waist.

"You're going to freeze to death," I said, burrowing into the blankets.

"You have no sense of adventure," she said.

"That's adventure? Showing Paris your tits. There's plenty of tits in Paris. What makes yours so special?"

"Don't be silly. It's still dark out."

I think it turned her on offering herself, like some bright-eyed virgin, to the city of lights. She lay on the bed. Her nipples poked my back, cold. Tiny red bullets.

"Get up," she said.

"Not now."

"No, I mean get up. There's a bus tour leaves at seven and I want to be on it."

"Paris by bus? That doesn't sound like you."

"I know. I don't feel like walking today."

She put on her robe and went into the bathroom, singing. I took notice. I couldn't remember her singing in years. I listened and realized she hadn't gotten any better at it. She was still as bad as the first time I heard her—at the office party, Christmas, in Topeka. She was a receptionist for the firm and I had seen her before, but never looking so desirable. She lay across the Xerox machine spilling wine from a plastic glass and groaning "Oh Come, All Ye Faithful" at the top of her lungs. We left together, went to a party at one of the exec's houses. It was a very uninhibited affair. They had stocked the living room with enough booze and dope to kill us all. Carol spent most of the party between me and a ceramic white bong modeled after the Tolkien character, Gandalf. She alternated sucking on my lower lip and on the tube sticking out of Gandalf's head like a mortar barrel. Sometime during the night she spilled bong water all over herself and it made her sick. It made me sick too. It smelled like bayou backwash.

When I awoke the next day the room was dark and blurry, heaving, the walls leaning in. My throat was coated with a thick paste that, if I could've seen it, I knew was green. I would've gone back to sleep but something moved, there, at the foot of the bed. The blankets rose and fell. I moved fast, sighting the lumpy object and beaning it with my clock radio.

Carol still has the scar.

"Something to remember you by?" she said in the emergency room, as I dabbed at the cut on her head with my shirt.

"Merry Christmas."

We were married a few months later. I made a lot of promises that day too. All of which I broke—except two. Adultery and Paris. The first I swore never to do and the second, to do as soon as possible. Providing was another thing. Soon after the wedding I was fired from the agency in Topeka, for being tardy. A year later I got the sack from Himpel and Himpel, Inc. of Kansas City, for drawing a picture of one of the the Himpel's scratching his ass. Carol said it was juvenile.

"What about responsibility," she said. "What if we had a kid? Then what would you do?"

"I don't want kids."

"Well, I do."

"Then, we'll have kids."

"When?"

"When I find another job."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

The bus tour of Paris was short and boring. It took us to sights we had already seen. Carol seemed less interested in them than the ride. She stared out the window, reaffirming to herself the city was still all there, thankful it hadn't lapsed into complete modernity since she was seven.

We got out to snap some pictures at the Arc du Triomphe. Carol translated all the wars for me, then decided we should walk back to the hotel. Along the Seine we stopped and Carol had her portrait sketched in charcoal.

"Leave the scar in," she told the little, woolen man. "My husband the sadist thinks it's sexy."

It was. She was, still. And she was beautiful. Since we arrived in Paris she took on a glow, radiance from top to bottom. Her hair, short and straight like a pixie cut, seemed blonder, brighter, and attracted stares from the men on the street—making me proud.

And she was happy. Happier, I think, than she had been her entire life. Happy, to the point where it was so noticeable it was almost alien. Three weeks earlier she was ready to either kill or divorce me. Three weeks earlier she ruptured the aquarium in the living room with an ivory elephant that was meant for my head.

"Jesus Christ Almighty!" I yelled. "You could've cracked my skull!"

"You lied!" she screamed.

I told her I had been laid off from the Chicago *Tribune.*

"You lied to me!" she screamed.

I avoided her, picking up fish from the carpet and rushing them to the toilet.

"Nevermind the damn fish," she said.

"They'll die."

They were jumping off the rug like popcorn. The Oscar had flopped his way into the kitchen and Geromis were everywhere. Carol sat on the sofa, steaming, until all the fish were safely circling in the toilet.

"You bastard," she said, meaning it. "Don't you ever lie to me. You quit, didn't you? You quit or you were fired but don't you snow me with this 'laid off' crap."

"I was going to tell you after supper."

"Bullshit. And what now? We got bills to pay just like anybody else."

"We'll manage. We always do."

She was shaking.

"I'm tired of managing. Why do we have to manage? Why can't we lead a decent life?"

She was crying. She wiped her eyes and mascara rubbed in dark streaks across her sleeve.

"We have a decent life," I said. "We're not starving. We're not naked."

"We don't have a dime in the bank." She searched for the Kleenex, found it in the kitchen and blew her nose.

"What do you want from me?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing at all," and stormed into the bathroom. I grabbed a beer, sat on the couch, then remembered.

"No!" I yelled, sprinting to the bathroom. Too late. The splashy roar and gurgle resounded throughout the house, then faded. Carol was sitting on the tub, obviously depressed.

"Well?"

She locked herself in the bedroom. I heard her sobbing through the door.

"I want an apology," I said.

There was none.

"I loved those fish," I said and left, slamming the door behind me, wandering out into the street and wondering what it would be like never to come back.

I slept in the car that night. Not because I wanted to but because slamming the door also locked it. It wasn't my first night sleeping in cars. They afforded me many comforts during those cold Atlantic City nights when Stella needed my room for a 'guest' or I had missed the three o'clock lock-up. If it wasn't for cars, I probably would have frozen to death those few weeks after Bernice and Sweet Alice finally had it out.

It had been a slow night. Bernice was in her room getting quietly blitzed, singing soft, low guttural. I had just finished the floors when Alice called me in.

"When you gonna fix the damn window?" she said. "Stella said you'd have it done last week but I don't notice any difference." It was stuck about a half inch open. I knew it had to be fixed but was avoiding the room, waiting for Alice to leave. But she was always there. I had been avoiding her for years. But she was always there. Always.

"I'll get it later," I said.

"Like hell you will. You'll get it now. I'm freezing my ass off and Stella don't want that now, does she?"

"No mam. I guess not."

I inspected the window, keeping one eye on Alice. But she didn't grab my ass, or start sucking on the back of my neck like I had grown to expect. She just sat on the bed, combing her hair. I concentrated on the window, relieved at her sudden lack of physical affection. I got the window closed, not due to any specific mechanical knowledge but by ramming it down with an iron doorstop I liked to use as a hammer. When I turned to leave there she was—defiant at the door. Her robe open to the floor, hands on hips.

"It's a give and take kind of life," she said, widening her stance and pulling the robe behind her back. "All this time you think I'm trying to take something from you. All this time . . . Well, you fixed my window. You gave me that. And this, this is for you."

She put both hands on her thighs, high, and rubbed her hair, that satin black veldt that spread almost to her navel, with her thumbs. And for a minute, she wasn't Alice—Sweet ass-grabbing, crotch-pinching Alice. She was beautiful and I got hard.

I went to her. Kissed her. Her robe fell to the floor and she groaned. She began to push me back toward the bed, each step a little faster, each push a little harder until she became Sweet Alice again and was practically wrestling me to the bed. I resisted. Nothing had changed. On her last big push I caught my leg on the bedpost and went tumbling to the floor, hitting my head on the iron doorstop. I yelled. She tore at my shirt. Bernice scrambled in and kicked Alice in the side of the head.

"Good Lord, girl," Bernice said. "You're the whore, dammit, not him!"

They took to the floor like cats. I crawled to a neutral corner, feeling

the lump on my head—still dizzy. It was Stella who broke it up, hauling Bernice off of Alice by the hair, standing between the two. She threw me out that night, because I was coming between her girls. "Dissension in the ranks," she called it and showed me the door. Bernice went to her room and cried. I cried. Stella wouldn't even let me say goodbye.

Out in the street I hung around the Knights of Columbus trying to decide which way to go. Bernice called me from her window. She was waving the papers.

"You got to let me know where you at," she said. "You got to."

Then Stella shut the window.

I woke to the neighborhood dogs barking and looked forward to making up with Carol. As I stumbled out of the car the mailman greeted me with a handful of mail and an inquisitive smile. I would apologize. What's a few Geromis when my marriage was at stake, I thought. Carol opened the front door and walked past me—suitcase in hand.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"Leaving? Me?"

She threw the suitcase into the back seat of the car and went back into the house. I followed.

"What about breakfast?"

"Make your own breakfast," she said. "I'm leaving."

I sat on the couch and watched her go in and out, filling the car with half a dozen blankets, the placemats from the table, the coffee pot. She took three or four ashtrays, the bad paintings we had gotten at a garage sale in Topeka, the Kleenex, the toilet bowl cover, some pillows, the wok and the broken ivory elephant. I went through the mail, trying not to notice. In the small pile of warehouse magazine ads, circulars and bills, was the letter from Atlantic City.

The envelope was limp and beaten, post-marked three times going back a year and a half. First Topeka, then Kansas City, then Chicago. Inside was a check for $7,542.55 made out to me. I read and re-read my name in the "Pay to the order of" slot. It was signed by a name I couldn't make out, representing Metropolitan Life.

Carol stood at the door, holding the car keys and a huge, whale-shaped ashtray.

"Goodbye," she said.

She said it again.

"Don't leave me," I said.

"I'm sorry."

"You can't. Bernice is dead."

She walked to the car, trying to find the ignition key.

"We're going to Paris," I said.

"That's not funny."

I showed her the check and she dropped the whale on the driveway. It broke in half.

The windmill at the Moulin Rouge turned slowly, or rather seemed to

turn. It was all done with lights, flashing here, then there—an illusion of turning. Carol stood beneath the illusion as it lit up the street and the night, the people around it. She held my arm, tightly.

"I like it here," she said.

"So do I."

We moved with the crowd, slow but deliberate. The cold night air kept the streets alive. We stopped to buy crêpes off a small wheeled cart.

"Just like hotdogs," I said.

Carol ordered a crêpe layered in chocolate. She nibbled on one end and stared up at me, looking like a child.

"They were beautiful, weren't they?" she said, referring to the jiggly girls from the *Folies Bergères*. There must have been thirty of them, galloping around the Moulin Rouge more naked than not. Carol insisted we see the show—insisted we visit the spiciest district in Paris.

"So this is Pigalle?" I said.

"Yes—isn't it *naughty.*"

We walked a wide street—the widest one I'd seen in Paris. Down the center was an island with booths and stands, brightly lit and set up like a long, narrow carnival. Carol bounced from stall to stall, challenging games nobody ever won, costing me franc after franc until she grew restless and pulled me toward the metro station at the end of the street. She walked with one foot in the street and one up on the curb. Giggling, rising and falling.

"Let's not go back," she said.

"It's still early. Where do you want to go?"

"I mean let's not go back at all. Screw Chicago—let's stay here."

I tugged her up onto the sidewalk.

"That's crazy," I said.

"Why?"

"Well . . . what will I do? How will we live?"

"Since when has that been an issue?"

"But I can't even speak the language."

"I can."

"What about the car, the furniture?"

"Screw that too." She spun around and stuffed her hands deep into her pockets. She smiled.

"You really mean it, don't you?" I said.

Carol stood perfectly still. "Let me put it this way," she said. "I don't think I could love you in Chicago."

She skipped the rest of the way to the metro while I followed slowly behind.

I looked down the side streets, slim lanes serpentine and cobbled, laced with bars and houses and prostitutes draped in mink to their knees. They leaned against the little cars. They smiled.

We sat on a bench in the empty metro station and waited. The tunnel was white, shining and tiled, quiet—like some strange chute to outer space.

certain ants

certain ants
in seasons of rain
cluster together
into ant balls
that tumble over
troubled waters
till they touch
dry land

in this season
of much drowning
much clutching
and clustering
it is enough
to breathe
occasionally

fish poem

moving into the slow
pool beneath the voices and
moving down quiet into
the still garden into
water where
all daytime wars
are cloud shadow
air games—what
matters here in this cool
inverted sky are the small
darting fish like
coloured cues shimmering
past the hooks, beneath
the nets, succulent
and safe and
swift as prayer

Lisa M. Steinman / *Two Poems*

ACCENTS

"Suppose the eye were an animal. Then seeing would be its soul. The blind eye is not an eye, except only in name."
—Aristotle, *De Anima*

"The tongue is an eye."
—Wallace Stevens, *"Adagia"*

The sun and the city turn an unnatural pink;
palm trees stud the horizon like sequins and cars tumble down the freeway.
You sit in your too-long, baby blue parka at the kitchen table,
weighing less and less, a gymnast defying gravity.

We delve into the secrets of beer and making lists
of post office and grocery runs,
avoiding your lightness that marks an allergy we all share to where we live—
earth, city, home.

That traitor, my tongue, in what it will not say names over and over
the cold your parka will not stop.
The stories of what you've seen today rush through your laugh
that begins, also, where your life is making raids on silence.

Who will show us how to live well?
The eye creeps off into its lair, refusing food.
The tongue attempts an architecture, evolving a city for the eye.
The streets fill slowly with speech:

the man near the repair shop chatting up an empty car,
a boy riding his bicycle fast down the road,
a third wheel on the handlebars,
talking loudly to the world his pedaling blurs.

DOOM SOUNDS MILDLY IN THE MIDDLE DISTANCE

Last week,
a bird appeared in my house after days of rustling in the fan.
I am still surprised at the materialization & that
I accept the impossible with aplomb.

Russell says an emotion destroyed by mathematics has no value.
But I am only content when the world bends to my passes through
it.
I let the bird out & it leaves.
Thoughts scuttle away, like pheasants unwilling to be flushed,
There's nothing more to be said.

I introduce Bertrand Russell to my grandparents.
They are all polite;
my grandmother tries to feed him.
The candles on the mantle, in the shape of pilgrims, sag.
The ashtray in the iron folds of a woman's evening gown is never
used.
A music box piano completes their high society in miniature.
Meanwhile, Russell declines poundcake.
They are all very calm.

I am not calm.
I am seriously upset that Phyllis Schlafly had gone into
government,
& look forward to the day when—
if poems are still read—
Phyllis Schlafly needs a footnote.
My lovers turn into southern belles & waltz away.
My grandfather is dying.

The world smells of hickory for no good reason.
It is also dangerous for us.
It's been raining for so long the gulls traverse the city
uncertain of what is land.
Something seems to have died.

In Trinidad, they have birds with names like gargoyles:
blue-crowned motmots,
toady flycatchers,
real lulus.
We've only gulls only feeding on the grass.

The question is how we feel about this.
The answer is:
badly
and not well.

Byrna Barclay

Air Craftsman 2

Snowing. May 28th, and it's snowing. No planes flying today, the 11:00 o'clock arrivals and departures have been stopped: the runway is wet and slippery, visibility less than one mile. Through his corner window on the ground floor of the Home, Wylie can see the Terminal beacon, its light whirling through the downfall, a laser beam zapping the ghosts of last summer's fattened mosquitoes, a mechanical sun's rays lashing the snow. The wind that yowls around the corners of this last highrise on this last avenue before the airport was stilled early this morning. Snow drifts, floats down from clouds shaped like bruised faces; they hide a wounded sun. Branches, burdened with unexpected snow, droop and sag, their purple-tinted leaves the color of the dress Amelia wore the first time Wylie saw her, — right there —, on the sidewalk: she dropped her suitcase and ran, hop-skip, to lift her face to the Ornamental Crab, her hands cupped to catch the bright petals, to catch the sunlight. She twisted off a sprig, tucked it in her hatband, a feather in her cap, and later she gave it to Wylie on his supper tray. He told her to "Stick it!", so she poked it into his belt buckle, "You stick it. Up!", leaving him fumbling and cursing the sight of her.

Now, it's snowing, but Wylie isn't surprised. The winters have stretched on, longer and longer, since he first came here, since the city planted the flowering crab trees in a row along the easement separating the Home from the airport runway. The last snow falls later every year. What can you expect from a country where the dollar keeps falling, the interest rates rising? If it had snowed yesterday Amelia would have told Wylie three times, "It's late coming. This Spring. For sure there's an Ice Age on its way. We're in for it." She was never one to say something once and be done with it, but Wylie would have set her right, "It's all Ottawa's fault. Like everything else." But today is tomorrow, the day of the Spring snow, and Wylie can't tell Amelia anything now.

Amelia wasn't here long. Only as long as it took the fruit trees to bloom; one week and the savage wind tore the petals and scattered them like ashes. She didn't sit in her room and cry, like General Gene did when he was signed in by the family, wallowing in it, over and over: why they had dumped her here. Right away she was carrying trays from

the meal cart to the solarium, making up a wheel chair parade down the dining room and singing, "Oh when the saints, Oh when the saints go tooling in—." Sometimes she called it playing train, she was the conductor of course, shoved General Gene to the head of the line as engineer, even got him chug-chugging, "Toot, toot! Off we go!"; and she got them rolling, fast, into a head-on collision with a laundry cart.

Right away she was in trouble with Matron and with the sisters because right away she started chasing Wylie.

He couldn't run from Amelia now, not even if she were here tickling the back of his neck with the flowering sprig. Wylie is encased, for the first time, in a geri-chair. The flannel soaker between his legs wet, rubbing, and he shouts, "Toilet!", although he doesn't have to go to it now. They don't come. They only appear when he wants to be left alone.

He blows his nose, it's the blood pressure that makes it red; he blows and blows but he can't get rid of the smell of her, it's enough to give him a stroke, and that was the whole trouble with Amelia: she didn't smell old. Not even a whiff of Yardley's Lavender, which was the best you could expect from those Daughters of Old Regina Families those rotting tomatoes those mothers those bridge-playing—DORFs! Whipped Crisco for dry skin. Burastol applied with hot towels under their sagging breasts, the skin cracked and pealing when the Aides rushed through the baths and didn't wipe their creases. They reeked. But Amelia smelled—of what? —it was so fresh. Like watermelon. Or cucumber. No soap took away the smell of Old. No perfume. You can't cover up one smell with another. What did she use to get around Wylie like that, get under his skin, inside his nose?

That was the trouble with Amelia, she always got around Wylie, got to him, like now: the way she's swinging on the lowest branch of the Ornamental Crab. It's hard to tell where the leaves of her print dress end and the purple-tinted leaves of the tree begin, but she's not hidden; Wylie can see her out there: one braid pinned tight on top of her head, the other unravelled and hanging, a long grey mass of Spanish moss, a wild air plant. A woman is getting old when she stops changing her hairstyle and goes back to wearing it the way she had it cut in her 20's, then never changes it again. Amelia pinned her braids on top of her head or arranged them in a loop at the back of her neck. At night she let them down, brushed them into waves, then rebraided her hair, and it was a miracle the way the ends, untied, never loosened. Now she's swaying back and forth, laughing, scuffing her pointed-toe shoes in petal dust; and Wylie shakes, he's laughing back so hard, his shoulders shudder, he's crying so hard. He can't believe she died. She didn't die in his bed like they're all saying in the dining room. Wylie can just hear them:

"Serves her right," Dorfie says, stuffing a bun in her purse and a napkin in her mouth.

"At her age. She ought to have known better." Bill, the knife sharpener. He's got thirteen kids but none of them ever visit him. When Amelia met him she said, "William the Conqueror, I presume." "Yeah,

Babe," Bill growled, "but when I came, I saw you and I went blind."

"Whose getting something we're not?" Dorfie says, snatching oatmeal cookies from Bill's tray and stashing them in her purse.

"Wylie did," Bill says, "for awhile." Bill is blind, his food is arranged on his plate like a clock. "I can't believe she's gone," he says.

"Wonder what she had," Dorfie says. "Must have been her heart. To go that fast."

Wylie squeezes his eyes shut, NONONO, pounds geri-chair arms, NONONO, stamps his feet. "I can't see!" Like Bill, he's gone blind, and fear flutters in his chest like robins flying up from the nest in the crab tree. "No!" he yells, "nononono." His knees jerk, hit the tray, and he hears, can't see, the crash: plates and cups and glass smashing, shepherd's pie and jello splattering on the floor. Another mess for Julie; he didn't see or hear her bring him his lunch tray, won't listen to her. "You've had a shock. You're not blind, Wylie. Open your eyes." He grinds his fists into his eyes, yells, "Shaaad-up! Shad-up!" What's she saying?, he's mad at himself, for what?, sticking his tongue out at her, "Beeek. Plooooook!", he is so mad at Julie. For putting him in soakers, in the geri-chair. What's she saying? He's mad because Amelia died, "Ged-ouddddddda here!"; and he isn't crying, he's shaking only because he's cold, the back of the overalls open, and "No! I don't have to go." He can hold it. Wylie's got control now. But, yes, he'll tell her when, call her back from the Never-neverlands. Amelia called her that, Julianna of the Never-neverlands, the kid from the university who is only here in the summer, she's so skinny it's a wonder she can lift those dead-weights. It's not strength; it's knowing how to lift and roll and shift the bodies. Yes, he'll call her. He lets her unclench his fists and fold his hands around his Dayton-Wright. Later, later, maybe he will work on a new design. "Shut the door behind you."

In the hall, in front of Wylie's door, Mary-anne hangs onto the walking rail and swings her foot, mouth agape. "Nap time," Julie says; and the door shuts both of them away from Wylie. Mary-anne was a ballet teacher, and Amelia always practised positions with her. Mary-anne is afraid of bugs in her bed and sleeps in a maroon wartime chair she brought from home. Amelia gave her long white evening gloves to wear when she winds her clock, but they stop her from scratching that nervous rash she has all over her neck and where her breasts were before the operations.

Amelia, Amelia, she bought red ballet tights for Mary-anne to wear under her dress.

It's past 12:00 High, chairs wheel back from the dining room past his closed door. Darlene thumps her posie bar and sings in her coarse voice, "*Nar* nar, Nar *nar*," no recognizable tune to the garble, but Amelia caught on: it was *Auld Lang Syne*. When Darlene's head dropped onto her chest and her mouth opened to snore, Amelia sang, "nar-nar, nar-nar", into Darlene's ear and started her up again. Wylie had to hold his own ears, yell, "SHAD-DAAAP!", as if it ever did any good. Now Darlene

sings in her sleep. They can hear her all the way up on the fourth floor. They're all crazy up there, so it doesn't matter.

Next, General Gene, with Frieda pushing his geri-chair. Everything they say sounds like *Geeka* or *Dee-dah*, must be Greek. Frieda is either Lutheran or CCF. It's a wonder the sisters hired her, except for someone who can understand General Gene. "Genie!" Amelia yelped, the time she sat on his knee, felt something hard, jumped up, her hands quick feeling his overalls where they covered the towel-wrapped urine bottle. "Genie in a bottle," she said. "You got magic, Gee-gee."

Everyone's down for naps now. The ground floor is quiet, except for the rumble-slosh of the sluicing machine: Julie washing down sheets before dumping them down the laundry chute. The only time Wylie ever went into that room he had been off, on one of his famous runs, up on his toes, arms curved for a leading edge, and he came in on a wing and a prayer, Amelia chasing him, too close behind him. Julie wore a mask and gown, she was gagging, spraying soiled sheets, her coke-bottle glasses steamed, so she didn't see Wylie skid, side-slip to the ground, his rudder must have been turned without banking; and Amelia, laughing, caught him, she pounced right there in front of Julie, threw herself against him, laughing, lifted her skirt. She never wore underwear but not because she needed soakers. So the throttle was up, Wylie only pretended to be shot down; he did the Vrille tailspin, banking his machine sharply and diving through the door, immediately straightened out, zoomed down the hall to the dining room, Amelia on his tail; the same manoeuver repeated in a series of loops like the action of a plane out of control, until he almost crashed into Matron. But, up on his toes, arms in a trailing wing edge, he flew around the tables, "Lookit! Lookit!" the throttle between his legs: it's up, really up for the first time in—well, in years—. Amelia twirling, her skirt swaying and swishing around her knees. "Lookit what Amelia gave me. Lookit what Amelia did for me." Matron made Wylie go to his room, she always did that, when it was Amelia who was bad, grinning now—Oh boy was she ever bad that night in Wylie's room.

Matron would never believe it, but all they did was play Hotel. Amelia never called this place a Home, she wanted to pay for her meals, tried to tip the Aides; and that night she blew into the buzzer and called room service for a bottle of Blue Nun, a carton of cigarettes, and two safes. Julie took Amelia back to her own room. "Rounds are every two hours," she told Amelia who smirked and whispered "I'll get around them." And she did: at twenty-five to the first hour she snuck into Wylie's room and at twenty-five after the second hour she crept back to her own room. All night.

The next day, Wylie was so tired from staying awake to yell Gedoudda here that he fell asleep between naps, nodded over his model airplanes so the glue stuck his fingers together, and the Immelmann turns he faked at the end of the solarium sent him slamming into the bridge table instead of back out the doorway. He was taken to his room, locked

in that time, but he was let out at five for supper. He hunched over his tray, picked raspberry seeds from his teeth, and there was Amelia coming at him again. She sang, "Flyyyyyy me to the moon—" and swooshed her skirts so he could see she didn't wear panties. Then: she tossed her skirt over Wylie's head, and he tried to beat it off, but she kept twisting and dancing around him, "... among the stars... to Jupiter and Mars.", until he was tangled in silk and so mad he blustered, "She's crazy. The lights are on but nobody's home." Amelia plunked down in a chair before General Gene and spooned raspberries into his mouth. "Two men called up," she said, "and they are coming to get all the sex they want." General Gene thumped his posie bar: "Bread, please." The bridge club, the DORFs, squealed for the shame of it, and one tattled to Matron who marched Wylie back to his room. "She's crazy. Crazy," he insisted, but Matron gripped the back of his neck, shoved his head into the sink and scrubbed raspberry juice from his face with a hot washcloth. He stamped his feet and god-damned Amelia's twat. Matron shoved the cloth into his mouth. He was so mad, all afternoon; he broke a wire controlling the left aileron on his model K-T of a Dayton Wright. He was so mad—Amelia said he had a Jimmy Durante nose—he forgot to watch the runway and missed the 6:40 flights, he was so mad. She had got his throttle up, twice in one day, and he couldn't get it down, not even with a heavy volume of Lindberg's biography in his lap.

Amelia didn't chase Wylie for a whole day after she got him in trouble with Matron, she said she was sorry for that, but this place was sooo boring after circus life, she was shot out of a cannon, after the lion tamer bit her neck she lived for a while with the man who operated the roller coaster, and Ohhh the crab trees were in full bloom now, why didn't they sit outside on the verandah and just talk. He fussed about catching cold, it was too early, it might rain, but Amelia said he could watch airplanes land and take off,—how did she know he did that?—well, maybe he would show her his model planes in his room if she would tell him what she really was before she came here.

No one here has a former life, what you were isn't important. The days drift by, slow as the snow outside Wylie's window, each one the same as all the others; and nothing to do but refine the old designs. What you did for a living, how you shaped that long ago life no longer matters, and just try to tell anyone that this model plane isn't a toy. Wylie's models are not toys any more than Rose's soft sculpture are dolls; they're works of art.

"Art who?" Amelia said, she went too far, so Wylie almost didn't tell her yes, he supported his family and his art by designing model planes for a Chicago company. His Great War models sold so fast he couldn't keep up with orders for new designs, and it got him down; it was like a nose dive, when his real work, designing and building miniatures, didn't go well or was interrupted by all those kids needing braces and glasses and outings to scout camp and rides to swim meets or music lessons. Amelia was the only one who ever understood, the Model K-T was her

favourite too, and Wylie was going to give it to her on her birthday next week. She saw at once that it wasn't a plastic toy, not a popsicle stick design. The cabin cruiser was a two-seater with windows in the roof. "It's a regular sun parlour on wings," she said. "Fly me! Wyli-oooooooo!"

"The pilot sits in the front with the control stick between his knees," Wylie said, and of course she stroked him. "The lever has four motions," and Amelia was swift to grasp it: forward, the plane dips down, backward, it soars; right banks to right, left banks to left. He showed her how he built the framework from spruce or steel tubing, how he covered the spars and ribs of the wings with strong linen, painted them with varnish called "dope" which shrinks the cloth until it is drawn tight, proof against rain and snow. "But what keeps them up in the air?", the same question Wylie asked his father in 1918 when he returned from overseas.

Again, it was Amelia's fault, always wanting to know everything. She made him go back to being nine years old, hiding in the caragana, shuffling his feet, back and forth, rubbing the dirt until he dug in: a hollow, a nest. He watched the men march to the war, to the train station, they were off to join the RAF and become pilots, every one of them, like Papa; and it was better than having a father who was a hockey player or fireman. At the last moment, Wylie jumped out of the caragana to run alongside, one of them swooped him up and carried him on his shoulders. At night, waiting for Papa to come home from the war, Wylie built bi-planes from toothpicks, complete with tiny machine guns mounted in front and timed to fire between the whirring blades of the propeller. In the real planes, 400 hp Liberty motors turned the propeller that churned through the air like a screw of a ship through water; and Amelia told Wylie to "Get it up in the air again, my Willie-Why-leeee!" She knew why the plane stayed up: a thing that is lighter than the bed it lies on cannot sink into its bed; and rolling over and up, she did bicycle legs on Wylie's bed. He talked her down, showed her the Pusher, a bi-plane with a rear propeller. It was just like the one Papa flew when he was shot down over France.

In the Second War, Papa taught the enlisted men how to fly at the Collegiate; he never saw action the second time because of the old war wound. Wylie, too young for the First War and too old for the Second, was near-sighted and rejected by the RCAF. He started building miniature Lancasters and B-52's and Mosquitoes.

Amelia, at the window, nodding: the earth pulls everything towards its center. It tugs at the crab tree. It shouldn't be left with untrimmed branches overhanging; it needs support.

Wylie didn't want to put Papa in the Geriatric Centre in 1959, but there was no room for him in the two-bedroom wartime house, not with five kids and another one on the way. Every Sunday, Wylie visited Papa at the converted barracks, had to search through rows and rows of beds, barely enough room to walk through them, finally found Papa in the middle of a mass of broken bodies in what had been a gymnasium. The old man, coughing and wheezing, a bit of shrapnel festering in one lung,

didn't know Wylie; he thought he was Dimytro, the Ukrainian farmer from Smutts, the A.C. 2nd class, who couldn't speak English; and he raved, on and on, about how Sgt. Bedford had ordered the men to scrub Dimytro's ass until he couldn't smell barn, until there was no skin. Drunk and chanting, "Smutts, Smutts, with rubber nuts!" they wire-brushed the screaming man until he died, coiled in a metal tub, an earthworm bared after a summer storm.

"I've seen worse places than this." Wylie told Amelia. But, she was only interested in flying; she couldn't believe he had never flown in an airplane, not a fighter—a bi-plane like this one—, a Lancaster or a DC-9. Amelia clapped her hands and bounced on the bed, Wylie couldn't shush her, and she decided they would fly to Edmonton or Winnipeg, it didn't matter where, it was the flying that counted; and calling the desk, she asked for reservations at the best hotel, a double room. So Frieda bounced Amelia right out of Wylie's bed and down the hall to her own room. Within five minutes, after rounds, she was back; they went on planning their flight, both forgot to watch the clock, and they fell asleep.

The next morning, after a frantic search through the wing, Amelia was found sleeping, curled around Wylie's back. The residents thumped trays and shamed them both, the DORFs wouldn't speak to Amelia or Wylie, and the outraged Matron went right to the top, to the sisters who surprised everyone: they suggested the pair be encouraged to be discreet and arranged to have Amelia's room placement changed. She was moved into the room next to Wylie's so she could sneak into his room and stay all night. Staff pretended they didn't know. Until this morning.

Amelia has left her perch in the tree, she's still outside, but Wylie can feel her wanting in, wanting to snuggle into her wooly bathrobe, wanting him to wrap her feet in the comforter. She was too high last night, even for Amelia, and Wylie had to bring her down, had to yell, "You're a liar, know that? You're an incurable liar."

It started well enough. Amelia twirled into his room, "We're going to have a dance, Wylie. What do you mean you hate dancing? We'll put on some records and dance. You don't think so, sure you think so, you'll dance with me, won't you Wylie?" It started out well enough, he showed her the long central body built of rods called longerons which taper off towards the tailend and are joined at the rudder. But he pinched his thumb with the flat steel clips gripping the wires fastening the cross struts from corner to corner. He swore, not at her; he was grumpy because it was a new model and he wanted to finish it, paint AMELIA on the rudder. It started well enough: making love was like the Virage, the ninety-degree bank, with the wings perpendicular to the earth, but this time Amelia was top dog—that's what it was, a dog fight—; she must have climbed three thousand feet, too fast, her head thrown back, crying, so General Gene heard her and hammered the wall with his fist. At the height of it, Amelia flopped on top of Wylie's chest, twisted around, straightened out, wimpering. She had never done that before,

and when Wylie asked her what was wrong, she slumped against the headboard, hair swinging around her face, hiding it.

It wasn't fun anymore, they said—the DORFs and Bill—that it wasn't true Amelia had seven husbands and outlived them all. She hadn't been a street walker or a spinster. They knew she came here from the Wing; they saw her taking Lithium with her high tea.

Wylie knew that, and he tried to tell her she brought it on herself, it was all the crazy things she did and said: she was a social worker one day, an archeologist the next, then a criminal lawyer, a school teacher, even a truck driver. No one knew why she was even in here. She was able to look after herself and more: she knew how to fold hospital corners. And what about the story she told about Julie's initiation last spring when the nurses gave suppositories to everyone but didn't chart it so Julie administered them during the next shift. The floor was rolling in it, the ward was flowing, and Julie spent the night at the sluicing machine gagging. How did Amelia know that story?

"It's all true," she said, "and none of it."

Not that Wylie cared, she had brought something to the Home, Wylie couldn't name it, but it was the same as loop-the-loop. "Don't listen to those old farts," he told her. "Don't answer their questions. It doesn't matter anyway." She had Wylie doing things he'd never done before, not in bed, just little things like sitting outside after dark and not being afraid of catching cold.

Why did he think she made up all those stories about herself, gave names to everyone? She wasn't like that before, never chased anyone before—or not so often—certainly not every day. Now she had to fight it, her own kind of nose dives, because if she ever accepted the place as it really is she would fall down a well with no bottom and never climb up to the top again.

So Wylie tucked her in bed and held her until she fell asleep; he finally turned over, left one arm flung over her. It was starting to snow.

When he woke up, Amelia held him so tight she hurt his ribs; he couldn't breathe, and he had to force her to let go, roughly. She was rigid, her face so white, cold, her skin blue. Amelia looked old. He yelled, "Nurse!" Where were they? Amelia. He shivered, naked but not caring. He shook Amelia. Her head flopped on the pillow.

Wylie had never lost control before and he was almost more afraid of what was happening to his own body, sweat breaking out and streaming down his neck down the insides of his arms down the backs of his legs: then: the bursting bladder; he was almost more afraid of that loss of command over himself than of what happened to Amelia. Someone caught him from behind, before he pitched forward and fell on top of Amelia. He felt himself lowered, slowly, into his chair in the corner, here by the window. Staff in his room, one mopping up the mess, two wrapping Amelia in a sheet, the Matron screeching, "Found. In Wylie's bed. Again."; and the blanket draped around his shoulders, the ends not covering his nakedness, the throttle between his legs; "It was his fault."

Yes, his, not Amelia's; he should have kept running from her, but it was the old member's fault, one last high-flying call of the wind, the body fine and strong, smooth and easy against the air, rigid or flexible as Amelia's need may be; the throttle controls the speed by increasing or decreasing the flow. Then: the stretcher wheeled out, Amelia gone, and Wylie left to refuse the tea, there is no comfort, whispering, not yelling this time, "Shad-daap. Leave me alone." He didn't feel the long arm around his shoulder—the Matron's?—only smelled the lavender inside her elbow. He jerked his head up, "God?", couldn't answer, "Yes, life goes on," searching the sound-proofed ceiling tile, "God?", what was she saying?, as if it hadn't all ended for each one the moment of entry into this place that always smells of wastes: old skin, steamed food, starched sheets, stench of cancer; nodding his head, "Get dressed", no way through the tiny holes in the tile, "God?", no way down to the dining room. So the Aide, must have been Julie, the one with coke-bottle glasses, who dropped General Gene, let him slip right to the floor—plop—into his own pile of it when he refused to stand up and put one leg then the other into his overalls—she must have tried to dress Wylie in his own clothes, but each time he rose, up on his toes, arms flapping, the floor tilted and he pitched forward. Julie wheeled in a geri-chair, wrapped a soaker between his legs, then this overall: the back cut out, right down to his knees. In case he wets. And he will. He'll let loose whenever he feels like it. Show them, Amelia. Amelia—

Wants him. She's at the window now, beckoning, pointing, what does she want? It's still snowing, the beacon searching for planes. Now: Wylie knows what he must do. He shoves the tray away, he can't remember Julie bringing him supper, but—no, it must have been Frieda. He'll have to be careful, she's not easy to slip by and she knows what you are going to do before you do it. He's out of the chair, up on his toes, silently to the door, it pulls open, not even a squeak.

No one in the hall, the nurses and aides are putting everyone to bed. "PERMIT ME TO RISE," yells General Gene, and in the next room Darlene sings, "nar nar nar nar." The tile, cold under his bare feet, the ends of his overalls open, flapping, but Wylie isn't bared to the world behind him; he's wearing plus-fours, a white scarf with fringes, a leather cap and goggles. Red light ahead, over the Exit door. Dark solarium. Mary-anne's door ajar: she's winding her clock. He slips through the double doors into the solarium, praying the door out to the balcony isn't locked; he fumbles with the latch, it's stuck, tugging now; the hinges need oiling, they creak as he slides the door open, slowly.

Snow. Light. The eye of the airport blinks. He grips the balcony railing. A new wind plays with the flaps on his overalls. Snowflakes dancing, the light weaving through them. Trucks at the end of the runway, two small white figures. She is there, he can't see her yet, but he feels Amelia: she is the falling light, the shifting grey clouds, the dancing snow. Branches sway and lift, tossing; the trees turn circles down the row. The wind, a caress on his face. Motors churning. Propellers

whirring. Wheels bumping, bouncing on the runway. Lever to the left raises ailerons on the left and pulls down ailerons on the right. Turning the rudder with the footbar. He's up, banking now to the left; and rising, lifting higher and higher, over the Terminal over the Home over the Ornamental Crab, its leaves clapping; and over the City, Wylie is flying. He soars.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ROBERT ALLEN is an Editor with *The Moosehead Review* (Ayer's Cliff, Que.). His recent publications include *The Hawryliw Process* (a novel from Porcupine's Quill) and *The Assumption Of Private Lives* (poems from New Delta).

H. C. ARTMANN is a regular contributor to *Prism*. Born in Vienna in 1921, he now lives in Salzburg and is widely regarded as one of Austria's foremost literary innovators.

BYRNA BARCLAY is the author of *Summer of the Hungry Pup* (a novel from NeWest Press); her short fiction has appeared in *Northward Journal, Salt, NeWest Review,* etc. She lives in Regina, Saskatchewan.

ALLAN BROWN was born in Victoria, B. C.; took his B.A. and M.A. degrees from U.B.C., and now lives in Kingston, Ontario where he edits *Quarry* and continues to produce his jewel-like poems.

LI CHAO is editor of Youth (Nanjing, China). See interview, this issue.

SHIRLEY COX of Vancouver, B.C. is a musician and fiction writer. Current projects include a novel, *Gone Tomorrow,* and more stories. "Out Of Thin Air" marks her Canadian debut.

DOUGLAS DELANEY of Winfield, Kansas recently won First Prize in the Louisiana College Writers' Conference Competition. This is *his* first published story.

ROGER FINCH holds a B.A. in Music Theory and a PhD in Linguistics (Near Eastern Languages). Currently teaching modern poetry and linguistics in Tokyo, he has had work in *Beloit Poetry Journal, Waves, Kansas Quarterly, Prairie Schooner,* etc.

BRIAN HENDERSON is well-known to readers of Canadian poetry. *Migration of Light* has just been released by General Publishing. His previous collections include *Paracelsus* (Coach House) and *The Silent Viridical Planet* (Aya).

JOY KOGAWA is the author of three collections of poetry (most recently, *Jericho Road* (M&S)) and the award-winning novel, *Obasan.*

RICHARD LEMM is Head of Poetry at The Banff Centre School of Fine Arts. Pottersfield Press published his first collection in 1982; his next will appear in 1984.

ALISON MCALPINE recently appeared in *Prism* 22:1 (her debut). She is currently studying and travelling in Ireland.

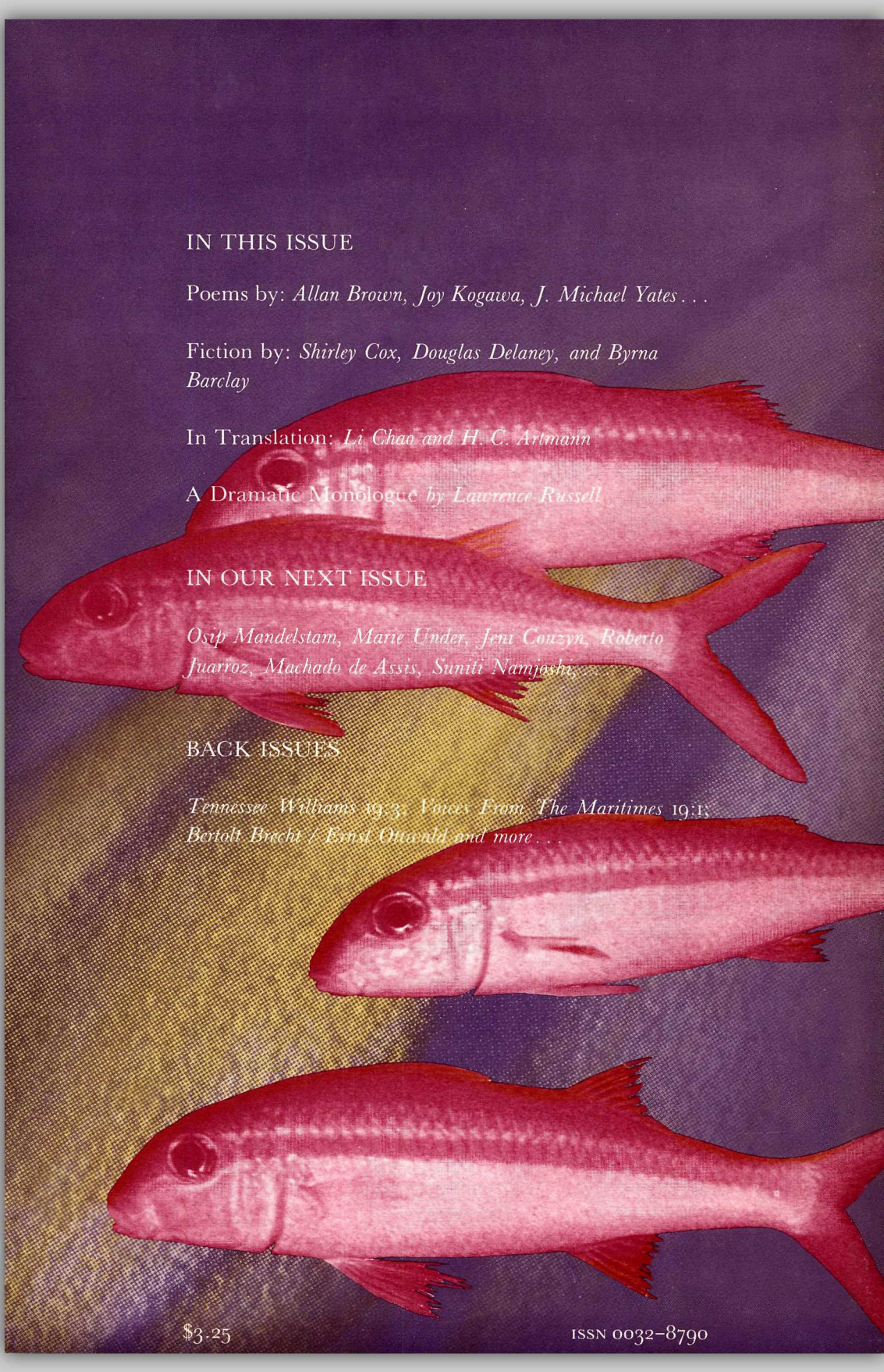
KEN MITCHELL is currently working on two new plays; one concerning the life of Norman Bethune; the other, Gabriel Dumont. He teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Saskatchewan, Regina.

LAWRENCE RUSSELL first produced "Camouflage" as a monologue for voice and electric guitar on the stereophonic tape magazine, *DNA*. His plays have been performed in most cities and drama centres in Canada. Currently he is working on a new novel and teaching creative writing at the University of Victoria.

LISA STEINMAN is the author of *Lost Poems* (Ithaca House) and teaches English at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Her work has appeared widely in such magazines as *Epoch, Chicago Review, Tendril,* and *MSS.*

DERK WYNAND is the author of *One Cook, Once Dreaming* (fictions, Sono Nis Press) and the recent *Second Person* (poems, Sono Nis). Another collection, *Fetishistic* will appear in 1984. He teaches creative writing at The University of Victoria.

J. MICHAEL YATES recently added *Fugue Brancusi* to his long list of highly innovative and essential texts. *Insel: The Queen Charlotte Meditations* (Penumbra Press) is imminent as we go to press.



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