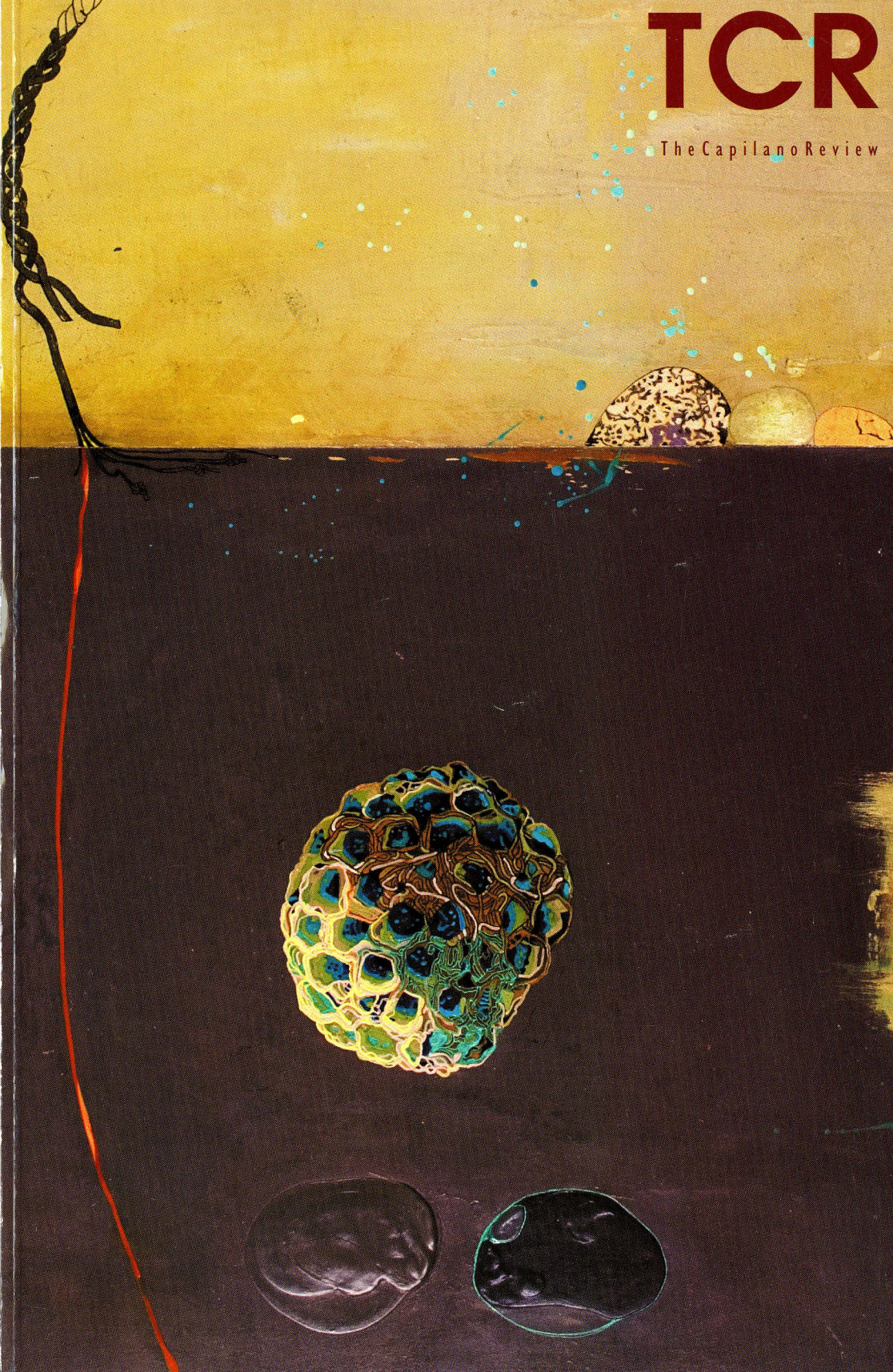


# TCR

The Capilano Review





... a distracted, a dis(at)tracted narrative perhaps ...

— Daphne Marlatt



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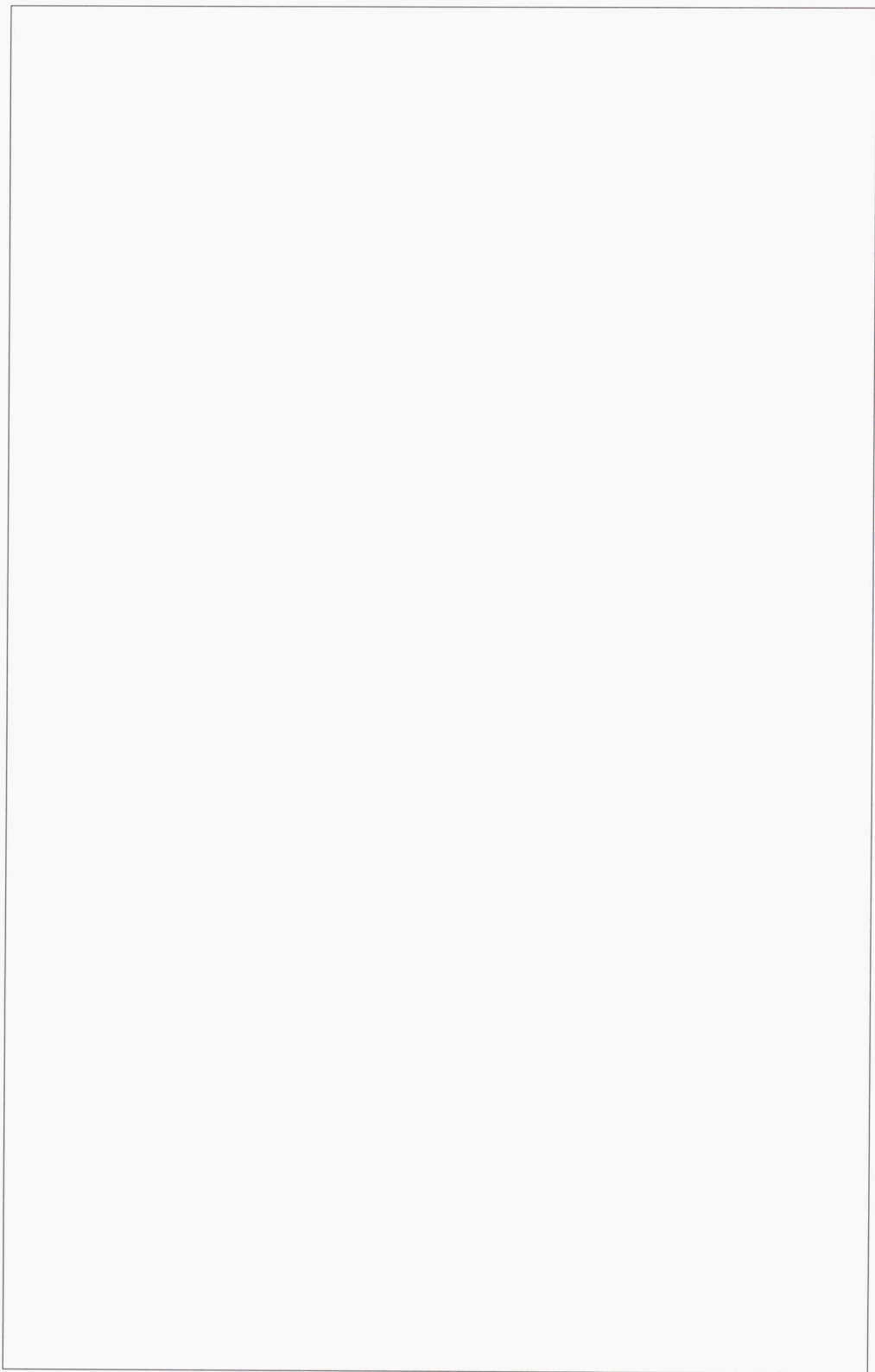
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FRONT COVER  
Acrylics & spackle on wood  
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Marion Llewellyn  
Photo: Owen Carey







# Ven Begamudré / THE LIGHTNESS WHICH IS OUR WORLD, SEEN FROM AFAR

## One

### 1: Ondu

She remembers how he railed  
as a householder. His obsession  
with rain, his need for it  
to purge their previous life, promise  
an end to rebirth. In the compound she stalks  
are ninety-nine images he crafted of summer:  
unglazed, even unfired,  
pieces of some greater whole that holds  
his longing for what summer could have been.  
She dreams he will return in her lifetime  
to finish them.

### 2: Eradu

There is a glimmer of dew; still every mouth is dry. He watches parakeets  
circling without rest. Hopes if he must be reborn, he will return as a partridge  
fed on moonbeams. Cobras stifle in the dust. If he had a child he would not want  
it to hear parakeets without songs.

### 3: Muru

Vultures alight on the banyans.  
They are heavy with flesh.

There is no rain  
in a land where crocodiles weep.

This is what she hates. So much thirst  
and how blue the sky.

### 4: Nalku

Even as a woman denying her loneliness  
thinks of summer as a season for desertion,  
thus couplets are composed of unlikely lines  
and so much sadness emerges: the princess  
hoping for a true prince who will not scorn her  
for her flaws or learning or wit. He is merely  
a dream, this long-lost mate, as if  
the thought We remember is all she needs  
to recapture their previous life. It is  
never enough. She knows this.

### 5: Aidu

Shadows lengthen by a stroke, his need not hers. He thinks of the Adivasi, those  
original tribes. How the girls sleep together, unripe yet welcoming nightly  
visits of boys. The boy pretending to abduct the girl. The dowry to appease her  
clan. How simple their desires: shamans interpreting intentions of everyday  
gods; no need for clothing, coyness, shame; bands of cloth barely meeting in the  
back. He sighs, holding himself tight, a lone cloud refusing to weep.

## 6: Aru

Pausing near an evergreen banyan,  
she eyes tourists at the temple  
well after nightfall performing pujas  
at the end of a picnic. All these prayers  
for the boredom to end. She likes  
to watch the Brahmins, their circling  
disk of flame, the neon lights.  
What she likes best is to hover  
when worshippers leave the sanctum  
for the muddle in the courtyard;  
how they reclaim sandals  
they know by feel, ayahs  
shepherding children, parents  
frowning at a hand-cranked carousel  
creaking through the night. She listens  
while novices close the inner gates  
to guard the sleeping god. Inside  
the Brahmins fatten on sugar and ghee,  
making the best of this age  
before the white horse comes,  
Kalki with his sword blazing  
like the comet of doom.

## 7: Elu

Hunger yet nothing will grow except doubt and envy. Where do all the songs go?  
What he craves is flight, an end to gravity, everyone becoming lighter. Hunger  
much as the Adivasi know scrabbling for roots while that other hunger wanes, the  
hunger for flesh. All their doubts like why? and how? In this case, the phrase  
much as easing his pangs. Hunger and doubt and envy, the day growing hot.



## 8: Entu

She is chanting the end of Ramayana,  
not the first end, not the one children  
are told: when Rama takes Sita back  
home, the long road north lit by lamps.  
It is the second end she likes: when Sita  
stands accused of seducing her abductor.

It is a tale for autumn nights  
told in the breeze: the endless  
quest for that perfect love.

How comforting it would be,  
she thinks, if there were only one end:  
no question of Rama's faith  
or questioning of Sita; no need for tears  
from listeners or lovers. Yet the version  
she prefers, her Ut-Ramayana,  
is so much more like life.

## 9: Ombaththu

He reaches out and touches scales. Each night the cobra seems more tame. He  
ponders the skin shrinking and splitting, shedding and drying with such ease.  
Beneath the slackened hood, an emerald. He will harvest it without killing his  
lone visitor, condemning himself to death from its mates. First the bites, then  
his fleeting breath. Their justice too swift, his execution slow. He could never  
do it, he thinks. He plucks a scale from the hood, sucks at the root where it is  
moist, the blood green, and savours it. Is this how she saw him, resenting her  
need? He urges the cobra towards him. He thinks: When it leaves to rejoin its  
kind, I will warn it of the sun.

## 10: Haththu

Her Ut-Ramayana is ambiguous.  
The first end led naturally to rain.  
Not the warm rains of winter here.  
A rain that plunges in relief  
on summer afternoons,  
a rain that leaves its mark.  
The second end, as perverse as life,  
leads instead to grief. She  
recites the paradox to herself,  
envying the poet his foresight:

The presence of doubt  
is the nature of love.

Often she wishes Rama failed in his rescue;  
let Sita save herself. Yet Ramaraj  
could not have begun, the perfect reign  
of an imperfect king, that once or ever.

## 11: Hannondu

Allow me to intrude. This is not some local diversion, didactic entertainment with an easy plot. We are what the Goddess dreams, able to direct her inventions as easily as we command the sun. Consider the footprints on a river bank after the Goddess crosses the river. We call it a sign but it is only she, walking in her sleep. Another way of being, which we envy. The question to be answered: Yet why are we here? The Goddess chuckling in her sleep when we seem so real.

## Two

### 12: Hanneradu

The beggars have discovered her home.  
A legless man propels himself at ease  
on a wheeled board followed by a woman  
cursing God for their lack of sons,  
though she has no tongue. A girl without ears  
dangles earrings on either side of her face;

swears she would never disfigure the child in her,  
not above the neck. Every well is dry.  
The icebox, as elsewhere, is locked.

Their hostess is in a dark room  
clutching a statue: a goddess of erotic love.  
She must emerge to greet the intruders  
and feed them but for once she is not angry  
with this image of summer, unfinished  
like so much he began. She tells herself  
he was not to blame and cups the breasts.  
They are glazed and firm.



### 13: Hadimuru

He lies with his face to the old moon and tunes his ears to their whispering, the hooded hiss of the guardians. He will creep with them to the edge of their realm. He prays the night will not be too dark. He prays the many portals will be lit by the brilliance hoarded within. Inside he will discard his loincloth, shed his fears. Squirm his way down through their halls: here, in the labyrinths they rule. And yet he will not touch the stones. He will keep only the thrill of resisting temptation, prizing this above the emeralds, rubies and diamonds of night.

### 14: Hadinalku

All of us hunger alone. Beggars  
wander, letting no one hold them back  
with promises. No water to be had,  
yet so much time for thirst.

The goddesses of dawn and dusk  
are sisters. She mouths this and reaches  
down in her shadows, aching to be full.  
She feels nothing at her fingertips  
but heat, resenting her need,  
his restlessness, while beggars cackle  
and a wheeled board creaks, the passing  
shapes a reminder of life beyond the shades.

### 15: Hadinaidu

Cobras in these thick summer months shrivel within their loosening skins.  
Shrivel and coil themselves on the hoard that galls them, drives them from cool  
halls into a sun blinding them to their duty. The cobras, the hooded ones.

### 16: Hadinaru

Dancing in her still dark room  
she welcomes a four-armed god:  
he so dazzling she closes her eyes  
to his touch; she so ready she mounts him

before he warns her of the outcome:  
ruining her for mere men.

### 17: Hadinelu

The man creeps again to their haunts. Trailing his loincloth, he enters to  
squeeze himself through mazes to this: a ransom left for his taking, light into  
light. He tells himself to relish his conquest. Soon. If there is any vestige  
approaching lust it is for these gems knotted in the cloth. He crawls back to  
the hut, his skin rasping through dust like scales.

## 18: Hadinentu

Her cries fade, ebbing like the light  
from her impossible lover's face.

If she lies perfectly still in his arms  
she can hear a keening while the hooded ones writhe.

## 19: Haththombaththu

Let us be frank: for the man to creep at night in search of wealth is just  
another error in judgement, as a lion makes who leaves cover to be  
confronted by  
his trackers. To surrender to the surprise of life: now this is stoicism, the  
kind we Hindus are thought to have perfected. Even you cannot hope to resist it.  
Satyagraha. Soul force. No surprise the Mahatma lives. No surprise you still  
mistake what he did for the passiveness of a sea on calm days while under the  
surface waters churn: the peace of doves the one thing a sea cannot attain, as  
dust cannot know it is even in the eyes of a lion a cause for tears.



## Three

### 20: Ippaththu

She lies with her god on a mat, starlight  
piercing the shutters to dapple his arms,  
two cradling her, two crossed upon his breast  
rising and falling with his breath. The god dreams  
creation, the cries of children in the sun,  
food their only thought. And shade.  
The image she tries to forget is of a man  
moulding a child out of clay.

The arms release her when she rises  
to open the shutters. She says, Love  
is for dreamers. This is what the god read  
in thoughts she could not speak:  
children in a monsoon playing with toys,  
the rain sweeping away the stars  
and the rootless seeds.

## 21: Ippathondu

What the god finds on earth is what Manu forgot in the flood: the tracks he left  
filling into themselves, generations to come chafing at rebirth. The full load,  
the seeds rooted once more, pujas that are prayers of Why? The god cares  
nothing  
for this. He has come down in lust and learned sorrow. He is finding the  
footprints on the river bank are not even his. How touching his surprise, his  
arms thrashing in the heat. It is a wonderful irony, his consort waiting and he  
knowing he has been found out. If he were a man he could say: She meant  
nothing  
to me.

## 22: Ippaththeradu

Then there is the man who does not want to die rich. When it finally rains he  
will leave with nothing more than the clothes on his pilgrim back. This is how  
he wants to be remembered. This is the tale they will tell when the sun no  
longer raves. He is planning to head farther south. He will leave only if  
everything else survives this drought in which even the young have no will.

## 23: Ippaththamuru

Clouds appear with a rising sun,  
lacy black in the dawn: the grieving clouds.

How many lives. How many ages.  
Vultures wake to circle the compound.

## 24: Ippaththanalku

There is little strength to breathe left in the elephant plodding through the mud. It is as grey as the rain. If you could read the embroidered script on its cap you might see, Come to the Circus, an invitation the man fears. The chance to laugh without guilt. He longs for it the way he longs for all those old verses by Tagore, rivers teeming with golden fish, prayers for the ease of innocent days.

## 25: Ippaththaidu

She sees the elephant looming through rain  
breaking figures in the compound. Lumbering  
from bench to kiln while pondering the number  
ninety-nine as though their maker must repent.  
This is wishful thinking: an animal  
hoping for completion with only memory  
to goad it. No wonder she pictures vultures  
rising from the banyans, laughing, expecting  
only fragments to greet their return.

## 26: Ippaththaru

Darkness surrounds him in his hut. He lies with his limbs exposed to the hooded ones. They take back the gems he holds, slithering across his thighs, hissing at each other, then at the lone visitor who glides away and coils into itself well beyond their reach. This is how Manu must have felt on the mountain, he thinks, water everywhere beneath his boat, the bitterness of triumph, clutching the many seeds he saved, returning them to soil and silt and stones. These last the preserve of the guardians.

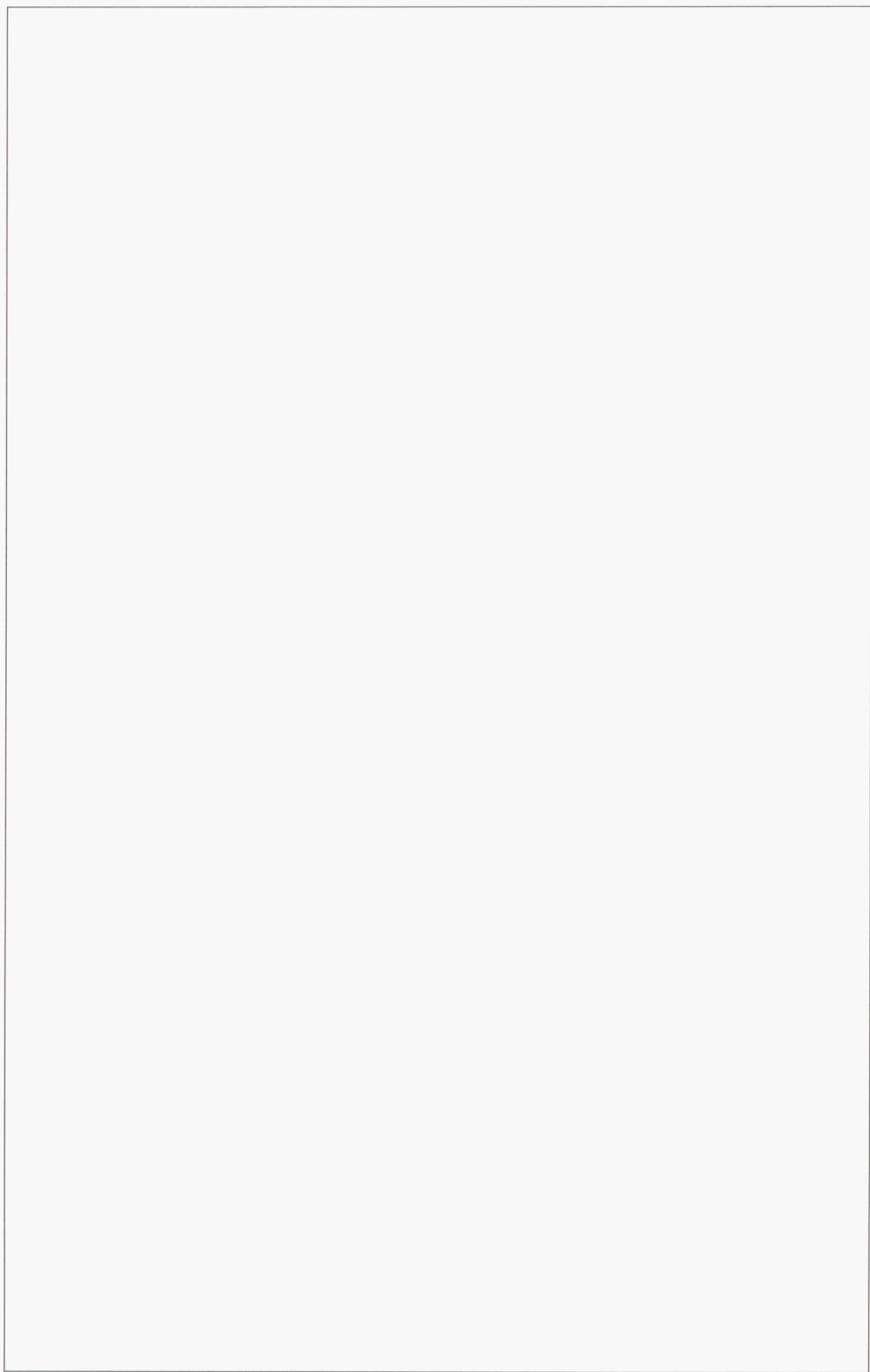


## 27: Ippaththelu

The flesh left on branches is a horror  
she ignores while she gathers the fragments  
and cradles them. Rain plucks the trees clean.  
How she yearns for night, the four-armed god  
returning with his emerald-coloured seed  
and still it sprouts and withers and dies.  
She is not ready, she thinks, to bear a child  
for a god, one so dazzling she cannot face him  
when he enters. Yet even riding him she thinks  
of a man with two hands moulding a child  
to which he gives his mouth, her eyes. This  
is what poisoned their love: thirst because someone  
has to light their pyre. Hunger because nothing will do  
except their own flesh and blood.

## 28: Ippaththentu

It is a vestige of the rains he absently moulds: wet clay malleable as an infant  
learning to sing. He could change it into anything he wants. He could even make  
a child in his own image, bring it to life with fire. He cradles the form in the  
sun on his hands, hardening while the moisture returns to the earth and air. He  
tells himself some things were never meant to be. Not in this life, perhaps not  
ever.



## Daphne Marlatt / QUESTIONS FOR NARRATIVE

narrative is something i've struggled with, & continue to struggle with, its usual definition: a story, a relating of an event or set of events — (how much has to happen to constitute an event?) — & that serial notion implied in the causative chain of plot, a movement as linear as the subject-action-object sentence in English. as a fiction reader, i resent the lure of suspense that pulls us through a series of time-bound events to continually find out what happens next. often it feels like coercion. there's so much else along the way i'd rather look at. (what's off the track, what gaps in the narrative road?). yet suspense is linked to the notion of continuity & without some thread of continuity we get lost. (well, lost — from what sense of direction? — could just as easily be found in another view.)

the so-called novel i'm writing (novel for want of a better term — it might be a long poem, it might be a sort of verbal/vocal score) occurs in a series of fragments. thought goes off in diverse directions, bouncing off word-associations, off personal & cultural memory-rhymes and tone-echoes, as it pursues (rationally or not) a set of connections. idea unravels, revels in branching pathways, resists staying on track, goes haring off after whatever attracts it on the periphery of attention (the shifting play of attraction as distinct from single-minded pursuit).

so, a distracted, a dis(at)tracted narrative perhaps, which doesn't arrive at a final ending.

yet continuity, and its obvious form, suspense, engages us, keeps us engaged right up to the very point of arrival at conflict-resolution. Rest in Peace, as the gravestones say. at which point continuity has ceased.

recently I had occasion to ponder fictional continuity and actual uncertainty juxtaposed. over Christmas my partner and i took our grand-daughters to their (& my) first pantomime, “Ali Baba & the Forty Thieves.” it was at the Metro, an old community theatre tucked away at the foot of the Arthur Laing bridge and almost dwarfed by that structure rising over the north arm of the Fraser River. now for those who don’t know about them, “pantos” are dramatic entertainments for a general audience, & there were certainly whole families present, from infants to elderly grandparents. pantos are loosely based on a fairy tale, but they’re a mongrel genre involving song & dance, old slapstick routines, romance painted with a very broad brush, social satire — contemporary political quips, for one. this panto included a fairy narrator who spoke in doggerel verse, the traditional cross-dressed “dame,” animal masquerade, lots of puns, & of course the old struggle that always grabs children, the struggle between good & evil, in this case between Wakey Fakir & Demon Distastely. its suspense was creaky & outrageously overt, but it kept the heterogeneity of the show moving forward & the audience engaged for 3 hours.

so, the question: if one does without suspense generated by plot, what other form of movement will keep readers engaged? how minimal can narrative get and still lead a reader on? (our very language for this suggests that narrative’s metaphor of linearity is itself misleading.)

but can we do without narrative? we use it regularly in daily conversation. there is something about its “leading” aspect that offers the pleasure of pursuit — “so then? and then?” tracing a movement from some point of origin to some point of impact. even if it’s impossible to see “the whole story,” following an arc, a storyline, gives us a sense of control over what we otherwise experience as random, scattered, or disconnected.

just as we came out of the Metro Theatre a fire-engine roared past us up the bridge ramp, followed soon after by an ambulance, both with emergency lights flashing. staring up in the dark, we could see an



endless line of stalled tail-lights. what had happened? from fantasy suspense to the cold douse of the real. if we had been heading that way it would have been a burning question in a far from metaphorical sense.

hung up. suspended. in uncertainty & doubt. the actual condition of our lives, with no fairy narrators to assure us that good will always triumph in the end. chance or hazard as names for this condition. chaos or the void as other names. any bridge can tell us our mortality looms as exit from the span of our lives suspended over this void of unknowing.

we drove home wondering who could have lost her life, or his, on that bridge? lost. it's a curious phrase, as if being alive were a possession we could carelessly mislay, leave behind by/in accident. (if we don't own our lives, then how do we shape them? how design where we think we're going?) in pantos there are designed incidents based on outrageous coincidence and nobody dies. the genre relies on the conventional happy ending, a "happy ever after" continuity of the same.

centuries ago, 500 B.C. to be more precise, Heraclitus pointed out that everything flows and changes — *panta rhei*. why you can't cross the same river twice because it's not the same & neither are you. meanwhile, we go on telling our lives as if they were solid and continuous arcs rising above that river of our unknowing.

narrate: hidden in its root, the ancient syllable *gna-*, know. how does narration know? & what does it have to do with unknowing?

in 1919 the American poet, H.D., musing on different states of consciousness, wrote: "each comfortable little home shelters a comfortable little soul — & a wall at the back shuts out completely any communication with the world beyond." that was before television broke a big hole in the wall, & long before the internet which now inundates our little rooms in massive waves of global information. rather than owning anything these days, it's easy to feel

occupied, preoccupied by disparate bits of collective life. to counter this, to make of these bits a telling of what we deeply know, a telling that also acknowledges the depth of what we don't know, becomes a strategy against the filling up of our days with haphazard data. the question: how narrate, how build a narrative arc that doesn't simply pave over the gaps?

In the opening essay of *Biting the Error*, Kathy Acker writes of the interstices between narrative events as “chaos or places where language cannot be, or death.” which doesn't simply mean without language we're dead, though we could be. the complex sets of phonemic difference that make up language fix the flow of chaos into recognizable points or markers. definition. so we know who & where we are & can communicate that to one another. but in the gaps between events, between bridge sections over the void shining beneath us, we dissolve, our story unravels. chaos exists not as a state way back then at the beginning of history/mythology, but with us now, the other side of everything that has form, including us. difficult to write (using words presupposes form, presupposes fixed points of meaning). but can i nudge my words a little closer to that edge? to the unfamiliar, the strangeness that comes between words, comes with attention to what rises into being & passes out through the very familiar we barely glance at — when we do more than glance. poems can do it. but narrative?

narrative depends on memory, on remembering events already told and building on them. not all events are large-scale. a single image can trigger a tremor in the psyche. at its most minimal, then, narrative can build through repetition of motif or sound, allusion, image-echo — small sections in the bridge of continuity we like to erect. sections that still leave open the gaps between them. but what about that sense the reader requires of a piece “going somewhere”? (going to the moon?) i'd like to delete “somewhere” in the same way that Hsueh-tou splinters the moon:

*Looking for the moon, it is here,  
In this wave, in the next.*

## Daphne Marlatt / OUT OF THE BLUE

“Good Luck Tea” from Harrogate. clay mug fashioned by West Coast hands. pinch of green leaves in a tea-darkened bamboo sieve, its broken handle propped by a spoon sinking under the hot pour of water. winds and bamboos. a rattanchair seat. gaps and continuity. watching it steep, i wonder will it help me pull all this together? “good luck!” (acidic tone — ah the 50s!)

home gaps, gapes, like the gape of her blouse our eyes avoided.  
going downhill.

i came home to her (body), their house, full of her taste. satin brocade cushions mushroom colour, plumped in place. we’d sat on them for years. lemon polish under-smell of the house. in the kitchen sink, yesterday’s rose-painted cup, familiar, its blur of crimson where her lips had sucked hot tea. English tea-towel limp and slightly grubby from use. in the bathroom, light-brown hair tangled in her brush and the sadness of old Chanel bottles, residue-caked and askew in a drawer splattered with face powder. sense of trespass staring at what had been part of her. these things that belonged in the house, that still felt as though they belonged to her.

*The entire material structure and substance of an organism, especially of a human being or an animal.*

first rent in the material solidity we live by.

and the closest Footprint: *Time and Distance* on the corner outside the once-synagogue later turned boys' club (a fire at night), then renovated into condos. in the dark its old dome, lit from below, floats at the end of our alley like some spaceship . . . *a woman kneels, waiting, with a child. A path behind her, leads away, over the horizon. Points on the curve, a piece of an arc, hide ghostly male figures. . . .* this is emigration history, not Jewish but Chinese. families broken by the head-tax. palimpsest of removals.

in the body of the mother-text

*Time and distance are how we measure separation.*

against that: *fee-bee, fee-bee* the birdbooks translate it. or an English friend, *yoo-hoo*. the vowels all wrong. *you here? ye who?* spring's piercing call to bliss. all *ye here . . .*  
here.

out of the blue it was.

that peculiar mid-morning hush of the suburbs, houses shut, people gone to their various destinations. let sleeping dogs lie, she warned us. the dogs themselves sun-drowsed, content. do dogs know blue?

the body incontrovertible. does not lie.

a thing. burned futon and sheet, dumped in the alley in front of our garbage cans. who dragged it for how long down the alley's gravel? and from where? green as in purloined hospital sheet? deliberately set on fire? or some boarding-house smoker's accident? to wince or not at the charred rim, the skin, of someone's passing through.

*I had been to big cities before, but I had never seen one with such a war zone.*

and roses, roses frosted onto birthday cakes, sparkling with fake dew diamonds on anniversary cards. organza petals nodding from a doll's hat. *Red Roses for a Blue Lady*.

what to do with the body?

*. . . the longing for some fairy godmother who will arrive at the reader's door and put her to sleep. When she awakens her bathroom will be full of exactly the right skin-care products. . . .*

despite the shed skins of condoms, limp underfoot, despite the worn pair of boots, one still standing askew, the other bereft on the schoolyard hill, morning rises fresh, scented with balsam from the poplars that line the fence. walking means greeting solitary others: the sweatsuit, sun-visored woman, professionally intent, whose face on her third? fourth? lap round the park illuminates with "hello." the woman who runs the corner grocery store, performs her morning chi gong next to its "OPEN/ Dairyland/ Your Fresh Ideas Dairy" sign. or the trim man who jogs in spats, face with the serene look of a Ming scholar floating above light fists.



*I am not your charwoman.*

summer's here, i say, and the bodies are on display again. the girls, the nubile self-conscious bodies of girls. we're driving The Drive's urban circus of stares, ruffled hips and bare midriffs, bodacious tank tops, lean spaghetti straps sipping cappucino or beer. yes, you add, the large ones and small ones, the good-looking ones and the not so good-looking ones. i glance at you but your mirrorized shades reveal nothing about the particular shade of your smile as we pass by.

gulls wheel and cry above the dumpsters, wheel and cry. swoop — that lunge of desire. where does a body begin and end?

*Leftover stale food that no one wants, waiting in the cold for an hour to eat, then waiting another half hour for preachers to tell us what sinners we are . . .*

stretched flat on a mossy roof, the black cat only lifts its head to Cantonese. the retired man pacing infinitely slow with Beau, decrepit bear of a Beauvoir who flops, refuses to get up. with infinite patience, one hand leashed, he shakes out a cigarette, waits, remarks on the weather, waits. crows cawing Crow in the horsechestnut trees.

the exit from her body years ago . . . connect. connect the dots.  
mother body demands the daughter remember.

like burglars whispering as she lay behind us under the blanket, curled into herself as if asleep. curled up and gone. Margo and i rummage through her drawers for something, some explanation beyond the empty bottle of sleeping pills. but how do we know how full it was? maybe she took one every night. it looks new. how can you tell? a note, something to tell us — something to make sense of the void.

city a memory-rim around that hole. allure of neon scrawl, capital marquee names, The Oyster Bar. mannequin window postures across the water, everything larger, cinematic. Foncie's Street Photos. city lights in a daughter's leaving eyes. The Lux. "Fire in the Hold" — gone cold. the contrary whirl of re-, re-, re- in rebel, re-moved.

*A number of persons, concepts or things, regarded collectively; . . . walked out in a body.*

she had no neighbourhood.

touching the tree, touching the fence. olly olly home free.

or moments like that warm expanse of shallow water coming in, sandflats' wide vista. ripple history in a name (Vancouver and Quadra) cool up to our knees and the dog cavorting free of heat stupour (*Sutil, Saturnina*). fur sprinkles glisten, late light's almost amber, *super-natural*, islands to the west mere silhouettes (Quadra, Valdez, Galiano) all that's left of the Spanish. just offshore two centuries ago. same gulls overhead? we cavort, wade, turn to go — and there, hallucinatory, banked in ahistorical distance, a vertical construct of glass and concrete lifts its windows' flash, its dazzle semaphore the "world-class city" Vancouver *did not know that there would one day be . . .*

body of water. named, erased, and named again.

for sale. Open House. cars coming and going. Sunday drives with the Classifieds. “horrid little kitchen.” “appalling colour scheme.” homing in on the ideal.

shall I make a cup of tea? he stands in the doorway, useless hands at his sides, unused to being the one to make it (long days ahead. . . .) in the sudden lapse when no one answers, Margo asks, shouldn’t we notify someone?

city of reconstruction. city of body shopping.

they did it in a day, he says. I get up this morning and look out the window and wow, there’s the American flag. it gave me a jolt I tell you. Stars and Stripes flying over Hastings Street.

presiding over an all-white *COUNTY COURTHOUSE*. moulded cornice, colonial shutters, porch with two white columns and classic pediment above the door. prefab, he says, they put it up in no time.

*‘Awfully well indeed,’ said Great-Aunt Topaz.*

“whose Footprint?” you ask, staring down at the mosaic circle inlaid on Gore, a splash of koi colour against the faded awnings of Chinatown.

it was the flick of the sprockets as the end flapped free. it was the smell of heated metal and overheated celluloid, his rare “damn it!” *daddy’s cine* burning up.

just the smell drove us wild. or those faces caught in a blitz of light, faces we recognized less and less, stuck forever in the mechanism of time. in the spin of rewind’s marionettes. a sudden whirr as the loose end flapped free, the dazzle of empty screen as he called for the lights. *what on earth is wrong with you three?*

otherwhere overexposed.

low spirits. No Spirits Here. *Ladies & Escorts*, ah, the blues. the dumps, the mopes, the megrims. (grim me’s). flattened to a word, walls collapsing with enough internal pressure to blow the roof sky high?

in through the flap (BANG) of the cat door (*you here? you here?*)  
howled question on four grey feet running upstairs. wanting a lap,  
wanting milk, wanting to nudge my hands off the keyboard & into  
fur. talk to him, you say. he wants to know you know he's here.

*To practice being home is to put home into action.*

and if it's not just practice? my tongue exploring that delicious area  
of your hairline where your thoughts emerge, soft earlobe wordless,  
silent history of breast. and down, down the sensitive midline of you,  
cloud-flesh of belly, non-blue heaven without a single thought (will a  
kiss do? to keep you here?), nothing in the balance. . . .

*a piece of matter*    (celestial body)

no one mentions the morgue (lugubrious word). no one calls a  
funeral parlour. no one knows which one to call. first we have to call  
her doctor, though it seems a little late for that, in fact it seems  
absurd. he has to sign the death certificate, Dad explains. his hair's a  
mess, he's been raking his hands through it, back and forth, back  
and forth. still standing in the door. no one sits in the . . . lounge.



mushroom, she insisted. sure of her colours. cushions. had they changed in the last fifteen, twenty years? dwindling visits from overseas friends, people with “plummy” accents who admired *the scenery* and smiled at our Canadian slang.

what lasted through the strain of time and distance? the broken arcs? they declared it was “just the same” as they sat reminiscing over drinks, the ladies with their knees together, feet tucked neatly below tweed skirts, the men with gallant manners.

how far the history that is home extends. in differing lengths.

on the radio now, the final bars of Chapman’s “Grouse Mountain Lullaby” — solemn, funereal. what ever happened to “that jolly chairlift”?

hours pass in the hush, waiting for her doctor to arrive. we’re perched on her bed as if she might wake up and ask for a book, her glasses. but she won’t. brown blotches have begun to appear on her skin. why? the unspoken question stuck to her blanket, her folded

counterpane, pasted all over her room. we sit in a hush as if one of us might hear the answer. what about her rings? no one moves.

Footprint 2: on the way to the Portuguese bakery we come across “Community in Bloom.” neighbourhood mandala imaged in bits of ceramic embedded in the sidewalk. the usual halo of black triangles on white (shades of a compass rose) around renovated rowhousing once inhabited by railroad crews, now brightly-painted townhouses replete with cherry blossom, (non-depicted gay gardeners), and west instead of actual north, snowpeaks sheltering peaked roofs. jagged lines and circles.

*on the homefront.*

## Shauna Singh Baldwin / THE VIEW FROM THE MOUNTAIN

I met Ted Grand soon after he came to Costa Rica and built the Buena Vista. He didn't know of me then, but I knew of him — every day of the construction of the hotel, I sat on my front veranda in the morning, nursed my first bottle of Imperial and narrowed my eyes to gauge his progress. The Buena Vista's walls capped a peak three miles away, at first grey, soon white. Trust a gringo, I thought, to buy that view, with all the lights of San José twinkling in the valley below. A man was beaten to death by the local bosses and found picked clean by crows — right where Ted Grand was building. Trust a gringo not to care that he was building on blood-soaked land: I wouldn't go see the hotel.

Ted wouldn't remember the day we met. I still do — my annual day of sadness. All my days were days of sadness, then, but that was the worst, the anniversary of the fire. I went through tequila, guao, Heineken, Pilsen, and whatever else was in my nightstand. But Madelina and Carmen were before me. My little Carmen, only six years old. Screaming, crying. A bout of dengue seemed to be upon me. I soaked a towel in ice water, went out to the veranda, sat down in my wicker chair and put the towel over my eyes.

I heard Jesús' Isuzu stop on the road below, but I didn't budge. He came in without knocking, the folds of his pelican neck wobbling, his shirt flapping about his paunch. He stuck his big nose into a cupboard in my kitchen, removed a steel basin, returned to the twin aluminium vats sitting in the flatbed of his truck and ladled out a little milk to last me a week. He talked all through, as he always did, and some words got through the buzzing and screaming in my head.

The gringo of Buena Vista, said Jesús Martínez, needed someone to look after his garden. Wanted someone who could care for ten coffee trees.

"Listen to me, señor Wilson Gonzales," he said, tipping his sombrero back, "the man who gets that job at the hotel can have all the coffee. Can you believe — he doesn't want it."

"What for are you telling me?" I mumbled. "I drink a lot of coffee, but I never took care of coffee trees."

"What for — ?" Jesús shook my shoulder. "If my son was old enough, I'd make him go talk to señor Grand, tell him he knows all about coffee. Tell him looking after coffee trees is what his father and grandfather knew in their cradles. But my son is too young. So I tell you, mi amigo."

I lifted a corner of my towel bandage and thanked Jesús for his tender concern and suggested he was wasting his time and gas.

"You're drinking more than milk — an educated man like you," Jesús, like my long-gone mother, would only be silent when he had finished saying what he planned to say. "And señor Grand might need a man who can cook, too. He should get a new wife. I hear his old one left him, the very day the hotel was completed. Went to Florida with the man who sold señor Grand the chandeliers."

"I always said I'd never go up that hill — a man was killed there." I said to Jesús.

"Yes, he was killed. And he died. A man died there and there and there," Jesús pointed at the hill, the valley and the road dotted with crosses in between. "Everywhere you look, a man has died. Men keep dying and what does it matter where they died or how? We all die." He spat in emphasis.

I groaned.

"Even I, Jesús, will someday die, and won't be back to save you if you don't save yourself right now."

Having delivered his analysis and prescription for immediate solution of my problems, Jesús pulled his sombrero forward again and crunched away to swing into his cab.

What did Jesús know? He was just one of my many creditors, that's why he wished me a long life and prosperity enough to pay his bills. And he didn't charge interest like the others. Eyes closed behind my wet bandage I made mental inventory of my creditors. All would agree with Jesús. That thought finally pushed me from my wicker chair so I could drag my alcohol-soaked body up the hill.

As I made my way into the hotel, I wanted to ignore what Jesús said. It should matter that someone dies a violent death, even a stranger. Death should matter, so Madelina and Carmen's would matter.

I can never tell an American's age, because so many tourists have had plastic surgery, even men. Ted's face seemed older than mine, his spine more erect, though his hair was sparse and turning grey. The new hotel was spacious and airy. A "bow-teak hotel" Ted called it as he showed me around. Each of its twenty rooms had a balcony with a view of the valley. Each would be uniquely decorated, each would have names like "The Bird Room . . . The Conquistador's Room . . . the Monsoon Suite."

Ted said Costa Rica attracted his investment with a large middle class, democracy, no military, no oligarchy. "I do not know what it is like to live in an oligarchy," I said, "but we now have a military. It lives in los Estados — the U.S.A. yes? — since we abolished our own. When the president of Nicaragua said he wanted to drop a bomb on our president, what did our president say? He picked up the phone and called Mr. Reagan. And Mr. Reagan sent troops to Nicaragua."

I was only joking, but Ted didn't laugh.

"Out of friendship, because we are just like los Estados," I added hastily. "A democracy."

"Don't count on that, Wilson," said Ted, wagging his finger. "It's all about interests. There's no friendship, only interests."

I thought of my friends, even Jesús. I could not have survived the last few years since the fire without them. They had no reason to help me. I said — not to Ted, because I didn't wish to offend him, but to myself — that I hoped I never thought like him.

Ted had built himself a white stucco villa beside the hotel. Modern, with a few Spanish arches and flourishes. I felt comfortable inside though it was sparsely furnished and not quite finished.

"I hired a Costa Rican architect," said Ted, when I mentioned it. I warmed to him immediately, because which gringo would hire a Costa Rican architect? We went out to look at the coffee trees and I assured him I would look after them. He said I could keep the coffee. I protested we would share it. We shook hands when I left.



“Wilson,” he said, as if quoting some great American poet, “I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship.”

Jesús was pleased that I’d followed his advice, but warned, “señor Grand is here for *la vida pura*, but give him a little more of the pure life and he’ll go home. He may sell the hotel as soon as it’s designed to his liking, you know.”

In the next few days, I showed Ted the SuperMaas so he could buy peanut butter; he didn’t blink at paying 1150 colons. He bought coffee for 2530, an avocado, an onion and a tomato for 1500. He didn’t ask how I could afford to eat. Perhaps he knew what we all knew: to buy anything at the SuperMaas, anything packaged, you must work for gringos or be in the tourist business.

Driving home, I translated a street sign for him “*Despacio* — eslowly,”

He corrected me “slowly.”

When we stopped, he bought a *USA Today* from an expat-run van service and from then on he read a few stories aloud to me every day. That’s how my English got better.

And for once Jesús’ fortunetelling was wrong: firstly, Ted didn’t sell the hotel. And secondly, we opened.

Ted put me in charge of the ground staff, then the inside staff. I hired willing women — not too pretty, but happy at heart — and put attractive, sensible Consuela in charge, though she was the youngest. I forgot all about the dead man, just like everyone else, being too busy even to take one drink or lie around like a sloth, anymore. I paid Jesús back, with a substantial tip for passing on information, and even more important, began paying my other creditors back as well.

In October I harvested the coffee cherries from the trees. I brought the sacks of cherries to my own veranda, and Jesús helped me pack them carefully into his Isuzu. I sent him to a factory in Heredia for the best wet processing and roasting. The coffee returned, now dressed in silver bags, each with a generously flourished “Arias” label — Oscar Arias Sánchez had just won the Nobel Peace Prize. Its aroma turned heads in the hotel. And in April, I hired younger men than Jesús, and supervised the planting of more trees down the side of Ted’s hill.



One day, just after I set up a huge satellite dish for his TV he said, “Wilson, let’s take a drive.” So I took him in his new SUV and we drove through the mountains. I pointed out teak, mahogany, Brazilian cherry, bocote, and purple heart where I could. At Río Tarcoles we stopped in the middle of the bridge to gaze at the crocodiles. Ted didn’t admire the scaly brown shapes nosing the shore — fifteen on one side of the bridge, ten on the other. He said they were animals that ate other animals.

“You like vegetarian animals only, my friend? Horses, cows?”

“Yeah, I was in the service. I had enough of killing,” he said.

Does killing or dying in war matter more or less than a death from accident? Again I was thinking of the fire. The fire killed, but I blamed myself. I should have come home earlier, should have had some sixth sense as a husband and a father. We strolled over to the other end of the bridge where palms rustled like a whisper of Madelina’s dress. I became tour guide as we entered a store, identifying packets of relLENOS, dried bananas, cashews, and coconut cookies for Ted. Behind pyramids of watermelons and mangoes, a little girl laughed — I heard my Carmen.

When you have lost the little girl you created with the only woman you have ever loved, when you have failed your family and disappointed yourself, it takes someone like Ted to make you believe it is possible to create again.

And create we did. A hotel with a bar, a restaurant, an organization. In 1993, we opened a tiny grocery store in the hotel and Ted taught me to stock Skippy low-fat peanut butter, Entenmann’s doughnuts, and SP-45 with aloe sunscreen. The Buena Vista offered internet service with a cup of Arias in 1996, before anyone else in Costa Rica had an internet café and Ted taught me to stock paintings by local artists beside the computer and call them “primitive art.”

He took a buying trip to Florida and returned with more chandeliers. While I stood on a stepladder, installing them in the lobby he handed up tools and the delicate globes, telling me how he met his ex-wife and forgave her — I went home and told Jesús the next day how much I admired that when I can’t even forgive myself.

Hurricane Mitch did a little damage in 1998, and I would have just renovated the hotel to look the way it used to, but Ted said destruction is an opportunity for change. He moved things around in the dining areas, redesigned the kitchen, redecorated the bar. Change, he said, sent a signal to customers that we were growing, not standing still.

“It tells people you’re with it.”

I wasn’t easy to convince as I saw no reason to tear out a perfectly good swimming pool to repave ours with blue floral ceramic tile. And most of our customers came once in their lives and then went elsewhere. But Ted said, “change is like music, felt but not seen.” And after days of hard work installing it, Consuela told me the bright tiles uplifted the whole garden.

Some changes I liked immediately, as when he decreed the Buena Vista would play no more Kenny G. That music had been playing in every bar, restaurant and hotel non-stop since 1993. He said people might like to listen to Costa Rican salsa and mambo, and I told him he was becoming one of us after all.

I didn’t tell Ted the salsa and mambo reminded me of Madelina — we used to dance. He had never asked me anything about my past or told me his. Whenever I asked, he said the past wasn’t important. Yet he called me brother.

“Individuality, that’s what we need, Wilson,” he said. “Distinction. We don’t want to be like the cookie-cutter resorts, bringing in hundreds of people on charters and storing them in high-rise hotels, turning them over like meat on a grill and sending them back tanned on both sides.” Individuality, I learned, was available to those who could afford it. I was shocked and apologetic each time Ted printed out a new season rate card. Ted had to spend a lot of time teaching me not to stutter over, “*only* \$175 per night, *only* 185 per night, *only* 200 per night.”

Every time something broke down, Ted asked, “Don’t you have anyone who can fix that?”

“Nobody,” I would say. “OK, maybe my cousin . . .” And I’d call. Soon I had every Gonzales working for Ted at Buena Vista. Slowly and “eslowly,” relatives I had pushed away in my grief came back into my life.

The clock over my stove moved forward, circled 360 degrees 365 times in a flash, then another and another. Ted and I moved in lockstep into the new century and I couldn't remember what 40 and 50 felt like. I only realized Ted was on the other side of 60 when he told me he needed a hearing aid.

I was in the gift shop helping a couple from New York make up their minds — modelling a sombrero one minute and spinning folk tales about hand-carved parrots the next. They had to catch a plane, so I had arranged for my cousin to take them to the airport.

But just as I was packaging the parrots, Ted came in and told us no planes would be flying to New York city that day. He said he just saw New York on CNN and . . . and . . . his face caved. Amazement hit me like a thump across my chest: Ted was holding in tears.

I juggled rooms and accommodated the New York couple and a number of others for extra nights, while we sorted out rumours from news. The TV, *The Tico Times*, *La Nación*, *Al Día*, *La República* and *USA Today* offered an intermingled dose of both. Bit by bit, we learned a crime had been committed in New York by nineteen men, and the death count was growing. The New York couple kept saying this was just like Pearl Harbor. I think they really believed some other country had attacked los Estados. The death count passed 1000, then 2000, then 3000 and then I watched their President Bush II say he was on a crusade, and he too thought the country was under attack.

Now I regretted installing the satellite dish because suddenly Ted was not with us at the Buena Vista anymore, except for collecting his money every evening. He bought a small TV and made me install it behind the reception desk so he could watch the sad and angry norteamericanos on CNN and FOX News all day long. If I was on duty there, I watched it too, and I felt the same sadness of the families. I too wanted all those deaths to matter. There were donations, there was talk of insurance — norteamericanos seemed much more valuable than my Madelina or Carmen ever were. I sat behind the desk watching so many wearing or waving only their own flag, though CNN said people of so many countries died in the towers.

One day, two days . . . it became five since Ted made a morning round with the housekeeping staff. Then I began doing it for him, so he would have time to cheer that man Bush. And he was still cheering a month later when that man Bush dropped bombs on poor people in Afghanistan. So Ted hadn't had enough of killing, after all.

Late one evening, I was watching a CNN special report on bioterrorism after an anthrax scare in Washington when I heard shouting and crying. I rushed around the reception desk into the hall to find Ted standing over a cowering maid as if he was going to rip her apart. No, not a maid — Consuela, my most efficient housekeeping supervisor, Consuela who had been with us since our grand opening. The heat of Ted's anger hit me though I was standing three feet away.

"Ted!"

He turned to me, and I saw the face of a man I did not know. "Wilson, don't you protect her. The clumsy bitch was about to break one of the globes on the chandelier."

Not a shard of glass on the floor; all the globes intact and in fixed orbit above.

"Which one has she broken?" I said reasonably, hoping to calm him.

Consuela's hands covered her face; she was weeping.

"None yet, but she was going to."

Dark tear-filled eyes met mine in mute appeal.

"Ted, Consuela has been dusting and cleaning this chandelier for years."

"You too, Wilson. You and your whole family . . . I know all of you . . . going to cheat me."

Insult churned in my belly. "Yes, you do know us, Ted." I knew I should be respectful to Ted, but my voice climbed away. I heard myself almost shout, "Why are you treating your friends as enemies?"

A gleam came to Ted's eye, a gleam I didn't like at all.

But he did turn away from Consuela.

He strode back to the reception desk, but instead of going behind it, stood arrested before the TV. Retired generals debated



preemptive strikes. "Motherfucking bastards." said Ted, sounding as if he was swearing at CNN. "Bastards! Nuke the lot. I'll sign up again. Do it myself."

His face, like a cold sun.

I came up behind him. "Do you remember the first time you saw the crocodiles?" I asked.

"What crocodiles?"

It was many years ago but if he chose not to remember the crocodiles, he would not remember what he had said. So what use was discussion? I went back to Consuela.

Her shoulders were fragile under my clasp. She looked up at me, confused. Teardrops on her lashes like dew on petals. I led her to the garden gazebo, and we sat bathed in the sweet scent of flame-vines. The view from the mountain calmed us both. I wiped her tears, and apologized for Ted.

Later when I was telling Jesús, I admitted I had wanted . . . yes, I wanted very much to kiss Consuela and make sure no one made her cry ever again.

The last guests left the bar, the night was cool and scented with jasmine. Normally, Ted would have invited me next door to his home for a night cap. He'd usually have a little Courvoisier in a snifter. I always had a Pepsi, because if I took anything stronger, I might keep drinking, and I knew it. But this night I would not yearn for what had flown. I walked home to my cabin in the valley alone.

Jesús reappeared the next morning. "Señor Wilson," he said, "I delivered the milk to Buena Vista and I tell you the gringo has gone mad. He says maybe I have poison in my milk. He said, 'Milk — *venenoso!*' I told him, 'The cow is tethered in my yard and I milk her morning and night. Where from would there be poison?'"

"He has anthrax on his mind," I said. "He's annoyed even with me. Things will calm down."

But they didn't. I was working with two labourers on the hillside below Ted's home, picking crimson coffee cherries when Ted swaggered over, and pointed at the burlap bags hanging at our waists. He told me to load them all onto his truck. Our agreement

was over by his whim, with no mention of payment to the labourers — or me. Embarrassed, I apologized on Ted's behalf and paid them myself. Maybe Ted's shares in some big American companies — Enron or Worldcom — had fallen. But then I saw on TV Ted's president had also decided he was not bound by previous agreements — larger ones, international ones. Ted was just following a bad example; he would return to normal when his president did.

Jesús said a good friend would leave Ted Grand alone, because that's what Ted wanted. "You yourself were like that, only a few years ago."

"You didn't leave me alone." I reminded him.

Ted's anger and suffering wouldn't leave me alone. I could not be his "brother" anymore. I hoped I was still his friend, but remembered him saying there are no friends, only interests. Did I have any right to call myself more than employee? Servant, perhaps? I sat on my veranda in the evening as the sun faded over the rainforest and the cicadas pulsed *sí, sí, sí* all around, and my blood pulsed "no, no, no." My Suzuki Samurai was all beaten up and rusting out, my cabin was just a shack, its only claim to beauty being a shrine I built to the Virgin from a half-circle of cement pipe. Actually it was a shrine to Madelina and Carmen. I talked to the Virgin now — I told her I had neglected my own life in favour of the gringo's. I made him my centre. The hotel was my life because it was important to him. But all Ted cared about now was cheering his country's troops through the "liberation" of Iraq. Fool, fool! What did I have for myself if he went away? I hadn't even saved very much.

On Holy Week everything was closed in Alajuela and no alcohol was being sold anywhere. I drove Ted to the coast, his air-conditioned van sealed against the humid warmth — and slower than usual, as everyone had the same idea. Coffee trees flowered in surrounding farms; I opened my window a crack to get a whiff of their fragrance. Woods of teak and mahogany flowed past.

Madelina and I used to take Carmen to the coast every Easter, and one time I drew two concentric circles in the sand. We each adopted a hermit crab, placed them at the centre and blew. Madelina's breath induced her crab to move first and farthest away



from the origin — and better still, out of its shell — I think she won. It didn't matter who won. Afterwards, we warned Carmen about the poisonous manzanillo trees by the beach, and she listened solemnly, then ran into the Pacific, shouting her glee.

This day, the drive did Ted some good — he closed his eyes most of the way. I wondered if running the hotel was becoming too much for him. I resolved to help him more.

Jesús brought his new monkey Luisa, and she swung from the rafters, her funny white face hanging below her long curly tail, as if righting our upside-down world. She reached for peanuts and I confided to her, though really to Jesús: "It's cancer. It's eating señor Grand from inside."

"In the brain?" said Jesús.

"No, in his spleen."

"If it was in his brain, we might explain his behaviour," said Jesús. "But the spleen — that excuses anger and pain, but not injustice."

"I went to see him in the hospital," I said. "He complains of unquenchable hunger and a terrible thirst. They have told him he can go home because they can do no more for him."

"So of course he called you to come bring him back to Buena Vista?"

I nodded. "Ted said he has been through difficult times before. And he has resources I never had."

"You're comparing your loss to his," said Jesús. "But each loss is itself. Right now, he's not here with us. In his head, he's in los Estados, in New York."

I had to agree. Ted was only following what had happened or was happening in Norte America, and he seemed to believe no people ever, anywhere at any time had such a tragedy but norteamericanos. Could I blame him? All he ever read was *USA Today*. And the many stories he read me to improve my English only featured norteamericanos. No norteamericano, no story. As if the rest of the world was inhabited by non-persons and monkeys. And he never heard my story or had any point of comparison because he never asked. I should have asked more questions, I should have tried to find that thing in his past that was eating him now.

“Is it good that his head is in the United States?” I wondered out loud.

Jesús nodded. “Sí, sí, it’s good, because if his body was also there, not only his mind, he’d have to pay a lot more for doctors.”

“He has additional expat coverage. Six months free hospital in the los Estados,” I said.

But Jesús’ compassion was at an all-time low. “Señor Grand has everything he needs,” he said. “He lives in fear and anger anyway. But, amigo, why are you looking so anxious?”

“Should I go with Ted to los Estados? I mean, when he goes for treatment?”

Jesús said, “Señor Wilson, I will say to you what I would say if you were my son: don’t go. Mr. Bush’s Injustice Department would stop you at the border. And now they take people who want to stay a long time in los Estados and put them in camps and prisons. We wouldn’t even know you were gone, we wouldn’t know how to find you.”

I thought about this. I thought about never seeing Consuela again. Then I thought about all the employees of the hotel — some of them my relatives — all who relied on me now. I thought about how many years I might have left and the things I still wanted to experience. I decided I did not wish to disappear.

But Ted once called me brother. What should a brother do?

Eventually, I didn’t go because Ted didn’t ask for my help. He believed he could do everything by himself: be angry alone, fight cancer alone. And he still needed a caretaker to run his hotel and send money to the hospital up north.

Ted left Costa Rica on a night the monsoon decided it must arrive. Torrents sounded on the roof and on the broad leaves of trees. Titi monkeys swung downhill before us as I drove his van down the valley to San José airport.

It wasn’t exactly goodbye, but I didn’t sleep much that night. A clay-coloured robin woke me with its drunken *dudududu*. After Jesús delivered my milk, I got in my Suzuki and drove to the coast. The rain lifted early in the morning, and I eventually noticed I was in Manuel Antonio. In the Parque Nacional, I sat facing the beach, my back to the smooth trunk of a Naked Indian tree that had sloughed off its bark.

On the path behind me, a park guide had set up her telescope on a tripod. Now she was chirping for a group of tourists, “some species have adapted so well they can’t survive any place else.” White-maned waves reared and tossed on the shore. Turquoise water, shady palms. In the distance a smooth hard island rose from the water, a lighthouse at its peak.

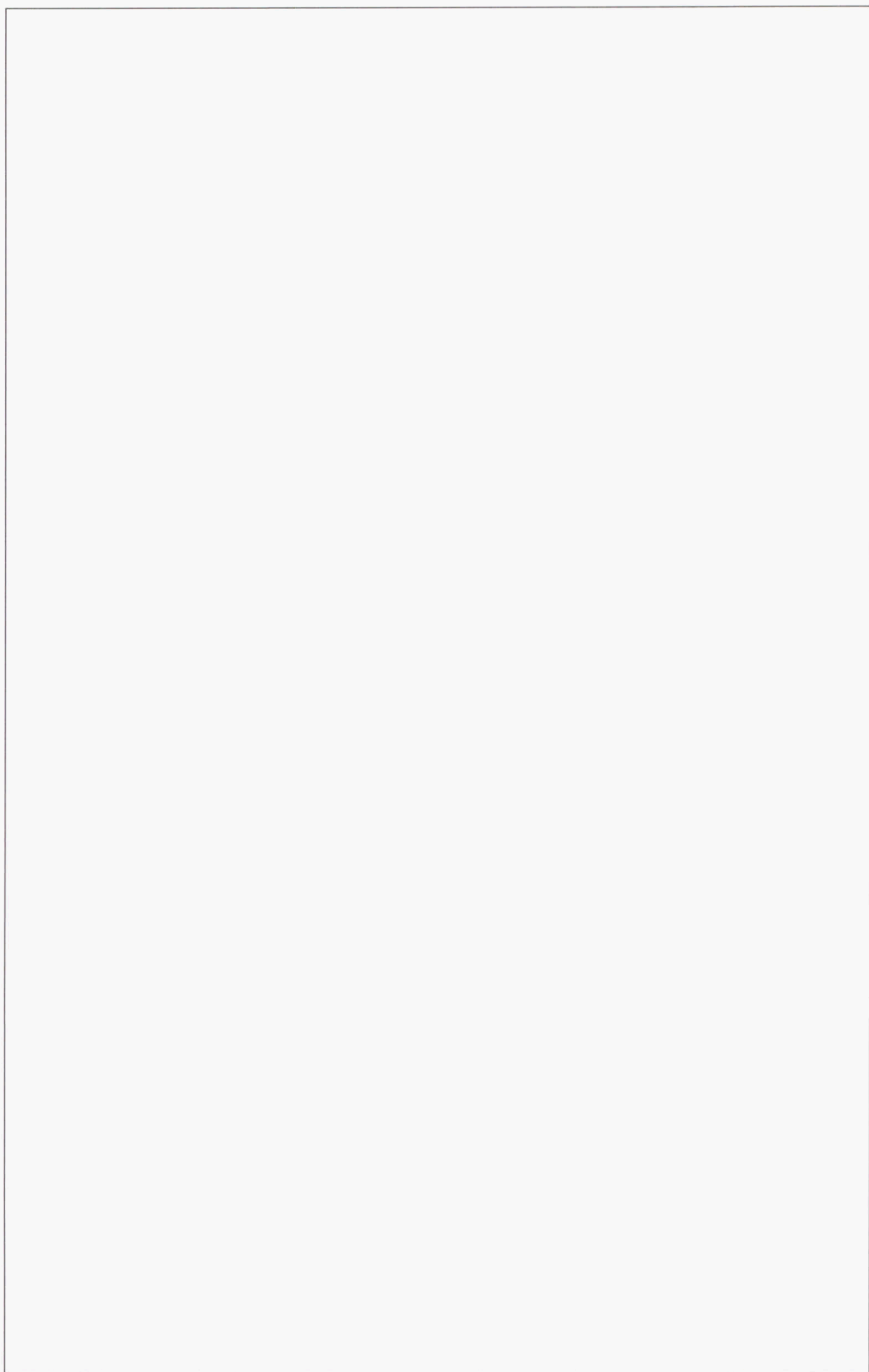
This was what Ted saw: the postcard he wanted to crawl into for a while. Maybe he could only be blown so far from his origin. Maybe he feared that if he crossed into the next concentric circle of the world, he would lose his American shell.

Maybe that fear was eating him from inside.

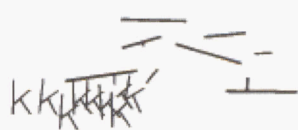
Ted went into remission a few times, but never completely recovered. His cancer claimed him fully one day in a hospice in los Estados. My sorrow at this death of a friend and brother shouldn’t have been so vague, like the obligatory sorrow I once felt for the man beaten to death at the top of the Buena Vista hill. His death should have mattered more than the death of a stranger. But one-way caring has become difficult for me.

The same year Ted died, Consuela and I agreed to care for each other. She did me the honour of marrying me. Jesús brought his only son to play the guitar and dance the salsa with us at our wedding. Soon after, Jesús moved closer to Irazú, the smouldering volcano — his relatives said he was needed there. More opportunity for his son, he said. He comes to see me when he needs a favour for someone — that’s as it should be.

Now Consuela and I operate the Buena Vista together, take salaries and send any profits to its new owner, Ted’s nephew in Portland, Oregon. The hotel gives travellers so much joy, it has made Ted’s life matter. And the view from the hill continues to bring joy to its guests — norteamericanos, and the rest of us.



derek beaulieu / FIVE CONCRETE POEMS

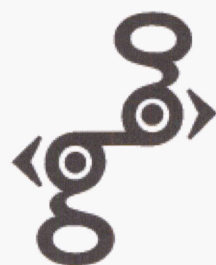


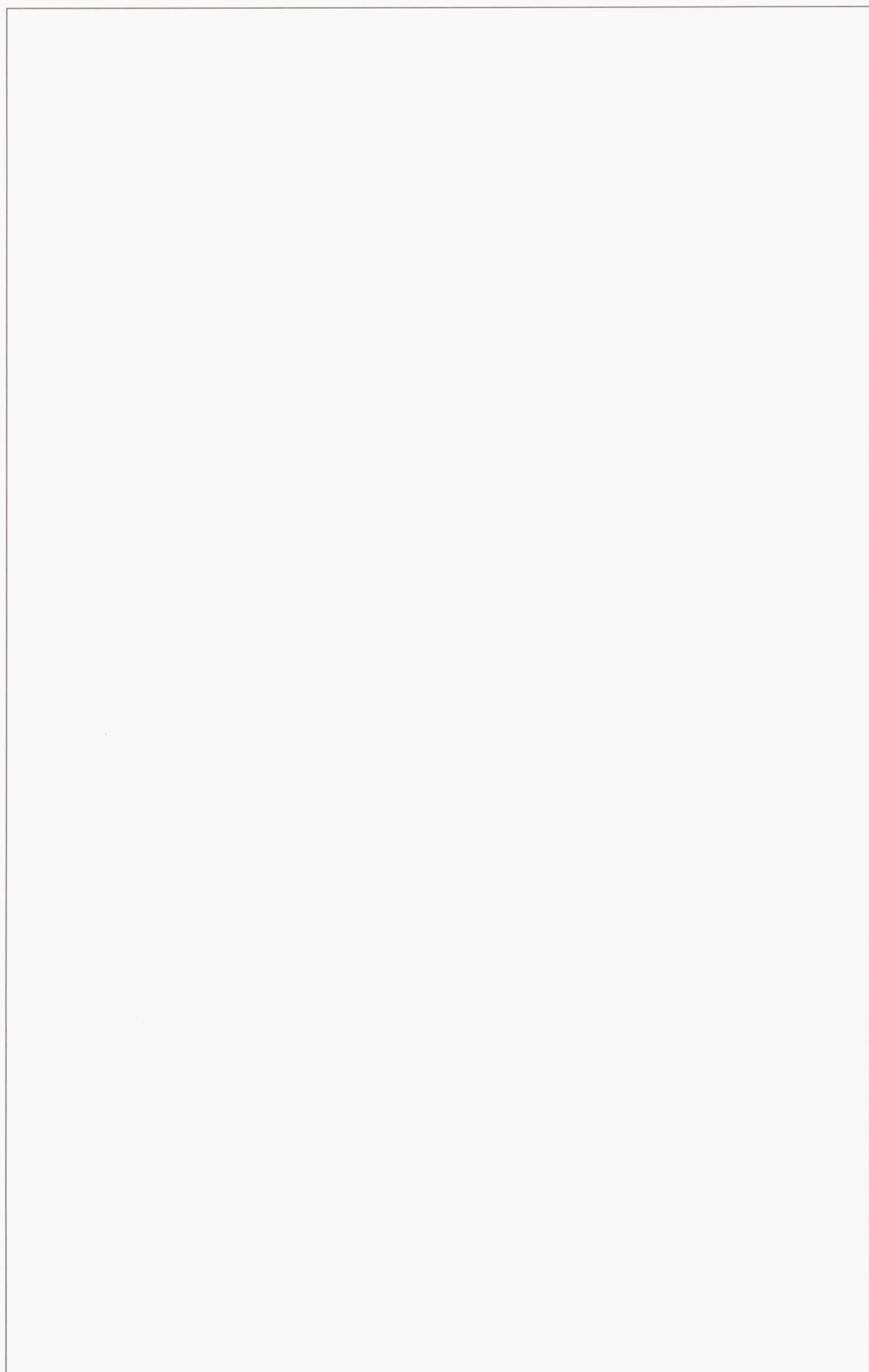












# Thea Bowering / HOW TO READ YOUR LOVER'S FAVOURITE RUSSIAN NOVEL

*What is so really almost painful to me is that I think that  
art ultimately should be laughter. That's the real pathway.*

— Robin Blaser, *Even on Sunday*

RULE #1: "Against the general rule: *never allow oneself to be deluded by the image of bliss*; agree to recognize bliss wherever a disturbance occurs in amatory adjustment."

Imagine, a young man at a party — a party that's like a movie full of great actors but, amazingly, still really bad — imagine as you go for your coat this young man cocks you a smile, passes you a bottle of European beer, and asks if you've ever read Bulgakov. This is what happened to me. And not so long ago either. Even worse, imagine he's a musician who's quickly pegged you as a student of literature. This is why Bulgakov is swiftly inserted into the conversation you find occurring while you lean, half in necessity, against the hideous rec-room bar in a city, you've come to realize, is nothing like Moscow. Or anywhere else in Europe for that matter. Bulgakov, the young man insists, is what distinguishes him from all the beer-bottle smashers there. Ha ha ha! you will laugh ruefully to yourself. But really, are you any better? You must admit, his introduction allows for a rare opportunity to reminisce aloud about your trip to Russia, three summers ago, before you moved to this god-forsaken dustbowl. You feel momentarily glamorous recounting the interior of the Kirov Ballet as you sweep your arm and quote a tourist brochure from memory: how, if you stood in front of every painting in the Hermitage for 30 seconds, it would take you 80 years to see everything. Or is it 80 seconds and 30 years? You can't remember.

At any rate, he is a guitar player who reads! So why not, what could be better: you are at school. School bores you. Besides, your

last boyfriend had not really read books, and only seemed like a character in a Russian novel. Three people, one was your mother, said he bore a striking resemblance to Raskolnikov — tall dark and gloomy, eyes flashing blue torment, a tattered overcoat. You'd hoped the likeness ended there but found out, soon enough, that this was not the case. He was a shit, just like Raskolnikov. Axed your heart right in two. To be fair, this was partly your own fault. You've always been attracted to men who look like they've just turned the corner from some famous 19th century novel. Who evoke the devastating, climactic scene from such a novel just by walking down the street. But at home: Raskolnikov who makes a great tiramisu; Raskolnikov who sorts the laundry while you sit down to write yet another English paper on Timothy Findley. If translated novels were allowed in English classes you might at least have been prepared: known how many crimes and punishments would be involved.

So relax, don't be so suspicious. Enjoy spending an evening with a guy who just likes to *read* a Russian novel from time to time, because he thinks they're hilarious. Russian novels are hilarious you find out in post-graduate life. You had no idea — too distracted at university reading *Pride and Prejudice* for the third or fourth time. However, when you do finally get to Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*, the opening is a revelation. Is there not a moment in every person's life where one's experience of a thing separates it completely from how one has been taught to think about it? This was such a time, and though you know Dostoevsky is a writer of sombre political and spiritual conviction, like they tell you, and though it's well known that he depicts bitter times for the individual at the mercy of the state, you cannot help but hear Woody Allen when the Underground Man says: "I am a sick man, . . . I am a spiteful man. I am a most unpleasant man. I think my liver is diseased. Then again, I don't know a thing about my illness. I'm not even sure what hurts." Another example: Geoffrey Chaucer. To your surprise you find there's nothing highbrow about Chaucer at all; it's all jokes about bums stuck in windows and your wife doing it with your neighbour or the baker. 15th century smut, pure and simple. It takes a lot more studying to find out gentlemen like Darcy don't really exist. If



university reading is supposed to prepare you for life, they should have a course called “The Best Loved Books of Boys to Avoid.” The top three on the syllabus would be ones by Georges Bataille, Charles Bukowski, and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

RULE #2: “The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas — for my body does not have the same ideas I do.”

By the end of a second party (where you and the Musician will have continued to allude to each other’s mysteries with shadowy lids and a tossing about of Russian titles) you will find yourself in this young novel-reading/ musician’s bed. And now you’ll have to admit, he may be onto something. His roommate/drummer doesn’t know how he does it; his roommate watches a lot of movies with car chases in them. But you know, like the women before you all knew, that the Musician’s discovered something his friends don’t have a clue about: that there’s a strong link between dropping the title of any 19th century European novel and a woman following you back to your bed — even if she’s not exactly believing a word you say, even if she doesn’t exactly remember the discussion including a talk of Goethe’s influence, or Kant’s distinction between Phenomenon and Noumenon, or the underlying message that the artist type is afforded a different moral code than ordinary mortals.

RULE #3: “The Pleasure of the text is not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. No need to throw out one’s chest. . . . [P]leasure can very well take the form of a drift.”

You could offer his video-renting friends a few pointers: gentlemen, you really only need to be familiar with one masterpiece. That said, you’ll want to avoid any machismo: consider Tolstoy’s popular *War and Peace*, too much war. Then again, you don’t want to come off as a dandy either: *Madame Bovary* will only have her referring to you as one of her “closest and dearest” friends. No gentlemen, here is the thing: the book you choose should feature a pale, emaciated (but handsomely angry) existential hero. People, whatever they say, love a

drifter. Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary* is a shoe in. Now then, throw in any short story that's of the same origin as your masterpiece to show you're well read in the area. In your case Gogol's "The Overcoat" will do. (Its depressing portrayal of domestic life will deter any question of settling down.) And now you're ready. The main thing is to make it obvious that you have a personal relationship with this book. You should be able to communicate, with a sideways glance, that reading it has thrilled you, that something in you also speaks of this thrill, and that you can pass it on to her in various ways that are not available through academia.

RULE #4: "In the text of pleasure, the opposing forces are no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic, everything is plural. I pass lightly through the reactionary darkness."

When you first open your eyes, you will look back and see that a bookshelf is functioning as the headboard of the Musician's bed. (The rather obvious eroticism-of-the-text will not escape you.) It will be loosely housing leaning and unrelated titles; you'll note that only two are Russian: a Chekov and a Turgenev. In the cruel and rather hung over light of morning you'll see there is also a copy of Anne Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*; some apparently eternal tomes of high school English: the *Never-Cry-Wolf-I-Heard-the-Owl-Call-my-Name* variety; and a Motley Crew autobiography which is both uncensored and uncut. You will applaud him for his eclectic and honest taste. However, the intoxicating allure of Russian masterpieces that brought you there the night before will have completely evaporated, and rushing to your mind will come a saying you think belonged to Dean Martin: if you can lie down on the floor without holding on, then you're not really drunk.

Well the same can be said of a futon. And though you are lying next to each other white-knuckled and barely alive, he will somehow conclude that now is a good time to bring up Emily Dickinson. Is this, you will wonder, a gallant effort to recover something of last night's "polite society"? Or does he want you to know that, despite the present depravity, he's still a man of some sensitivity the

“morning after.” Whichever it is, it’s a definite miss. You are nothing like what boys think girls who like Emily Dickinson are like. The “Collected Works of . . .” near your damp temple has the aura of an ex-girlfriend — lingering with the unfinished feel of a long dash. It dawns on you that perhaps the Farley Mowat book was not a high-school leftover, but passed on to him by his free-loving ex from Northern B.C. who tests bear turds for a living. You will begin to think that, perhaps, every book in the Musician’s headboard bookcase was a gift from a woman who has lain beneath it.

However, here is another thing: the bookshelves of men are often interesting for reasons besides the books in them. When you can finally pull yourself upright to retrieve your bra from the dead plant on the top shelf, you will catch a glimpse of a stray photograph: your new lover gazing into the eyes of a girl who looks a lot like Emily Dickinson. You will note, on subsequent visits to his bed, that although this picture sometimes changes position it is never put away. On the next shelf down are three books mysteriously tied together with pink ribbon — caught midway through some erotic Victorian-like exchange? Or perhaps with something of the frustrated Eugene Onegin and Tatyana passionately walking books back and forth between country houses . . . in the movie version anyway. And then there’s the occasional nameless phone number scratched on a matchbook, a balled-up, half-written verse about some girl with blue eyes, your eyes are green, who makes him twist in the prairie wind, etc. etc. . . . At night, amongst these things and the unassuming books, you will calmly find a place for your jewellery. After all, the whole point is to show you feel no antagonism, you can go with the flow, whatever. . . . And soon he will feel he can confide in you, and reveal his favourite Russian novel of all time.

RULE #5: “A text on pleasure cannot be anything but *short* (as we say: *is that all? It’s a bit short*).”

It is important to begin reading his favourite Russian novel early and make sure you read it quickly, because Russian novels are very long and most relationships with musicians are quite short. You don’t

want to be faced with the choice of whether or not to finish the book because you broke up on page 150, and there are 250 more pages yawning up ahead to torment you. It is probably a good book and you are enjoying yourself: *you don't want pleasure got from genuine and noble pursuits to be confused with a drawn-out pathetic revenge*. Case in point: a boy who spent six months practicing a Chopin Nocturne because you played it for him on the first date, but dumped him on the third. And he didn't even know how to play piano before he met you.

Or perhaps, better yet, re-read *Notes From Underground* as a cautionary tale. Skip to the section where the miserable narrator recounts his weeks spent scheming against an offending officer — who has, repeatedly, refused to step aside when passing the Underground Man on the street. Consider the tragic flaw of his brilliant revenge plan: scrounging together enough rubles for a beaver collar to replace the mangy raccoon one on his overcoat . . . so that he can look classy for a brief but orchestrated moment of collision with the officer. Write “undoing” in the margin. Follow the downfall with a highlighter: after many fevered nights, and a lot of last minute sidestepping, the Underground Man finally finds the courage to stay true to his course and clashes shoulders with the officer. The officer, however, who has not broken stride, does not appear to notice the new beaver collar . . . nor, in fact, the Underground Man himself, who now lays sprawling on the Nevsky Prospect. “At least,” the Underground Man tells us, “I have maintained my dignity.”

The point is, you want to avoid this kind of dignity. The first step: admit your pathos — that you have, in a move worthy of the Underground Man, spent a whole day combing Value Village for the perfect dress; bought it solely for the purpose of sashaying by your ex at a show so he can watch your ass with regret as you ignore him. But it's time to concede, ladies, that with musicians every love story is only an introduction to what will never be written. They can only repeat that beginning feeling over and over with someone new without ever introducing anything. So start looking in bookstores early, finish the novel quickly and put it away. Then, if things do end in a



sudden humiliating fashion, you can avoid an elaborate dual your ex won't even know he's engaged in, cut your losses, and move on.

RULE #6: "Bliss may come only with the absolutely new, for only the new disturbs (weakens) consciousness (easy? not at all: nine times out of ten, the new is only the stereotype of novelty)."

And so, awash in new love and the new possibilities of your lover's recommendation, you will go out in search of this magical book. You can't find a copy anywhere. One clerk will tell you that this title rarely comes in and when it does they can't keep it on the shelf. For a brief but terrible moment you will imagine the Musician's secret lovers, ex-girlfriends, and the ones he's prepping for the future, reading this book feverishly all across town. The likely truth is not much better: that his is the quintessential "It" book for this generation's hipsters. Just like a poster of Che Guevara is what all young men, fresh from their parents' houses, tack with attitude to their new bedroom walls. Just like Miles Davis's "Sketches from Spain" is the jazz album for every first-year college man trying to get laid via the old-school avant-garde. You were unprepared for this, thinking his love of this book, like his love for you, was singular, special, came from the private pleasure of reader-response. In fact, the book is probably only read now for the author's "punk-rock" status — as a man who was forbidden by his government to write. Try not to think about this and remind yourself that, nevertheless, the book is still worth reading, considered by everyone to be a classic.

RULE #7: "*Never apologize, never explain.*"

Of course, he does break up with you on page 150, and of course you do finish the book. All 400 torturous pages, in bed, eating Pringles off your stomach for brunch. You should have slammed it shut after the advice of the first chapter title: "Never Talk to Strangers" — not on Moscow park benches, nor at backyard Edmonton piss-ups. You never did get an explanation for why he left. But what of it; you should follow his example. That's what the pleasure of the text is all

about, says Roland Barthes: “Whoever speaks, by speaking denies bliss, or correlatively, whoever experiences bliss causes the letter — and all possible speech — to collapse.” Well yours certainly had. You were left paralyzed in bed for two days thinking your spleen had been poisoned by Pringles. “Ridiculous!” you say — when you can finally crawl back to your desk to finish your essay — “it was less than three months.” For most of your relationship you had attempted to fend off Bliss from your desk. In a wretched bathrobe, weeping over your laptop, you tried to articulate something for English 644 about the African Diaspora, which you know nothing about. Words like “identity” and “exile” swelled in your mouth until your inflated tongue floated you like a balloon against the ceiling, bobbing you along in perfect time to the exquisite twang of his pedal steel guitar, that you agreed he could set up in your livingroom. . . . All this because *Bliss is unspeakable*.

RULE #8: “No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion.”

Against the previously mentioned good advice about *not* taking justice into your own hands, you will go to the university library to find out everything the critics have said about his favourite Russian novel. In your head you will play out the moment when you “accidentally” run into the Musician at a party or show; how, when he asks if you ever finished reading the book, you will sum up its thesis in a few cool and brilliant sentences — like you’re reading him his rights. . . . You will take home three dark and joyless looking collections of essays. In them the critics prattle on, sorting through inconsistencies between fictional events and the life of the author, making educated guesses about religion and politics, breaking down the complicated structure of the novel. Nothing they say sounds sexy enough to fire out at an ex-lover between sips of beer.

You will realize that you are in need of some real advice. Though you never buy self-help books, you will go back to the library to find



Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*. Perhaps it holds the key to the enlightenment you saw on your ex-lover's face, when he was recommending his favourite novel to you. Maybe Barthes can teach you to be spontaneous and irresistibly charismatic — like the novel's unusually large talking cat: who strolls around like a person, in a bow tie, boards Moscow street cars with bravado, and has no qualms about sprawling confidently on a stranger's chaise-lounge with a glass of vodka in one paw while munching pickled mushrooms with the other. Maybe you will even learn how to build an exciting career, like this cat's: working as a magician's assistant, ripping the heads off audience members and screwing them back on, and playing chess with the devil. Now that's the life, you'll think.

As you tunnel through the library stacks you'll notice, pressed together like stiff British businessmen in the tube, *five* copies of E.M. Forster's tight-lipped guide to dissecting aspects of the novel. However, because your school's "world-class" library had its funding slashed in the 80s, there's only one copy of Barthes's guide to Bliss, and it has to be retrieved from the book depository. Or, perhaps no one reads *The Pleasure of the Text* in Edmonton. Or, maybe the idea of reading for pleasure is an outdated theory all together, an embarrassment to be locked away; those caught reading this book are made a mockery of and cast out of school.

RULE #9: "The pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense."

Once it's been long enough to begin congratulating yourself on how well you've handled things, and not worry about colliding with the Musician at every street corner, you will, of course, run smack into him at one of your favourite bars. The first thing he'll ask is if you ever managed to finish the book. Staring at him — grinning there in the dirty toque he never takes off, his shoes bound with electrician's tape, his only pair of pants — you'll remember why he's irresistible. It's the way with all trickster figures, you'll shrug, recalling your courses in Canadian Literature. Coyote, Raven, Guitar Players — shapeshifters who, no matter how elusive, always win back your

affection with their irrepressible trademarks. Case in point, the novel's cloven foot "visiting professor." Though no one is really sure who he is, he is, nevertheless, known to everyone: the Russian newspapers repeatedly mention a mysterious stranger in an obnoxious plaid jacket, who's first on the scene whenever a fire or flood, or some other hell breaks loose in Moscow. He has a fang that juts out whenever he smiles. He will charm you into doing ludicrous things with him (for the sake of freedom and the human spirit!) even though, more often than not, they result in disaster.

Dumbfounded, you will forget to outwit your ex with the perfect dress and a solid argument, and instead proceed to confess your ignorance of Russian history in the clichés of creative-writing workshops. You did not really understand his favourite Russian novel because, really, you don't know anything about the Russian people of that time, or any time for that matter, or anything about the politicians and artists that are supposedly being ridiculed by the famous Russian writer. As of yet, you have not had time to riddle them out, slowly *peel* back the layers, like an onion, as they say. He will interrupt. "But it's a love story!" He laughs. "Oh, no." You'll explain. "It's actually a thinly veiled allegory. There's Stalin, and some poet called Mayakovsky that Bulgakov despised, and the hero is definitely supposed to be the author because they *both* liked to wear skullcaps." You'll wink and tap your head. Silence. "But," he'll venture, arms akimbo, "the heroine's stark naked for half the book and no one even notices. It's insane!" He is beaming. You will be recalling the magazines in his dresser. The pages with black-haired women on them carefully dog-eared. . . . The novel's famous naked heroine also has long black hair, so does his ex-girlfriend — down and tied loosely off to the side; and then there's Emily Dickinson with her tidy dark bun. You will feel yourself shrinking in your vintage peacoat that once suggested soviet intrigue but now just seems bulky. Does this kind of obvious repetition lead to perversion or ecstasy? one might ask; but, when you search his grinning face you will find no signs of corruption, nor even a trace of guilt.

It will occur to you that, unlike the Musician, the critics have little to say about the sexy heroine (even though her name is half the

book's title), and even less about her naked witchy radiance, rubbed on by the devil's special ointment. In his guide, Barthes says that people in academia don't talk about pleasure. Instead they talk about desire, because desire has an epistemic dignity. Pleasure means you've *arrived* and are just happy to be there — of course professors and critics brush pleasure under the rug; it could put an end to the business of higher learning! Nevertheless, loathing your own insistence, you will feel compelled to push forth: "When the heroine leaves her husband for the artist," you will offer weakly, "it's supposed to be like the October Revolution." Your exegesis, however, gets lost in the alarming curves of the heroine's huge body that has suddenly appeared and is now bobbing naked and shining in the air between you, getting bigger and bigger, taking over the whole bar. People have started running and screaming, and the grinning Musician is pushed back into the crowd and disappears.

You determine that the only safe place in the bar, as usual, is the washroom. You turn on your heel to bolt, but in a moment of tentative camaraderie will yell over your shoulder that the book *had* left its mark on you. "Yes, yes . . . like the stain of red wine!" you hear him yell back. Even across the frenzied crowd this will sound like an overly dramatic metaphor. You'll expect he meant blood, like from his bleeding heart, and feel some satisfaction that, as you suspected, he knows nothing about Russian novels after all. A week later, however, while strolling happily-enough towards Sam Wok's for some noodles, you will stop cold — recalling chapter 30. The devil's emissary poisons the frustrated artist and his morose heroine with the devil's *moldy jug of wine* that turns everything the colour of *blood*. You were, needless to say, doubtful when the Musician said that the Devil, as it turns out, is a pretty good guy; but when you rush home to re-read the ending you'll see that, sure enough, the same wine that kills the lovers also revives them, rids them of the oppressive city and their miserable lives in it! Together they rise up on black horses and, kicking a dove and some linden branches out of the way, soar into a fantastic pleasure garden where nobody tells them how to read, how to write, or love. . . . You can't say for certain, now, just *what* the Musician knows. Which will leave you unsettled for the rest of . . . well for awhile.



RULE #10: “*Texts of pleasure*. Pleasure in pieces; language in pieces; culture in pieces. Such texts are perverse in that they are outside any imaginable finality.”

From this point on, whenever you encounter the Musician by chance his one-liners ring mysteriously of poetry — and, while poetry is a fine thing, it won’t help you with closure. So forget it. Keep in mind: like partially burned masterpieces, Sappho lines, or half-written song lyrics in a boyfriend’s notebook *these moments linger on because of the unknown story around them*. And so, when the Musician is suddenly coming towards you across the grimy Safeway parking lot, shifting his bags full of fresh Alaskan sea bass and prosciutto to wrap it in . . . and he begins to drawl on about the weather — how he chased an onion across the parking lot during last week’s freak dust-storm, now he knows what people felt like during the Depression — do not be surprised that (despite the unlikely allusion) he transforms before your eyes . . . is mounted against the prairie sky, a tragic folk hero from some forgotten Albertan Ballad! For a moment you will even be convinced that times are as tough for Edmonton musicians as they once were for Soviet writers. Are you hallucinating? Of course, but calm yourself, this is just what the poets call “the meeting of the visible and the invisible”; it will pass: he has appeared, unexpectedly . . . and so it follows you want to know who the god-damn bacon-wrapped fish is for, which is to say, piece together what’s continued on without you. Consider here the novel’s most important line: “Manuscripts don’t burn.” The Master’s book *does* burn, of course; nevertheless, the point is that the smouldering fragments carry with them a persistent (one could say perverse) conviction that whatever has been lost must re-surface, at some point, tattered but triumphant.

Therefore, wanting to know, you will “drop by” the Musician’s new house to return his Hank Williams box set. Unfortunately he is “just on his way out” to meet someone. Of course. You wonder who she is. He can provide only a dim epiphany, a few flashes from last night’s drunken black-out: . . . jumping a fence . . . kicking a ball. A child of nature! you’ll marvel; you can’t help yourself. He rubs his

face with his small hand, smiles, raises his eyebrows and sighs with satisfaction “I spend all my time in here.” Cross-legged at his kitchen table, he throws up his other small hand in mock defeat: “I don’t even know why we have the rest of the house.” Of course not, his charming yellow kitchen is the perfect *tableau vivant*; where else would anyone want to be?

But wait, ladies. Try to keep the whole story in mind. “The rest of the house” is, after all, *total squalor*. No different than his previous dump, that you just endured a dragged out winter in, that should have been condemned long ago: chunks of ceiling in the bathtub, no hot water, its liveliness spent. The gentlemen, wrapped in scarves, their breaths visible, played country music in the front room every night. Stand up bass, pedal steel, George Jones on a fraying rug. Reminiscent of an NFB documentary: a story about a struggling but spirited community on some Isle off Quebec. A charming image to put on a stamp, but you wouldn’t want to get stuck there, waiting for spring. Still, this must be what goes on all over the Great Canadian North . . . to fend off insanity, and with blurry eyes you reached for a washboard and awkwardly ran your fingers down it. But, well, this is it then. So what is Bliss? A few anecdotes to hold onto like fragile illuminated parchment. Nothing is to be recuperated. Him, cross-legged and grinning like a cat in the glow of his yellow kitchen, with perpetual winter around it.

RULE #11: “The Bliss of the text is not precarious, it is worse: *precocious*; it does not come in its own good time, it does not depend on any ripening. Everything is wrought to a transport at one and the same moment. . . . Everything comes about; indeed in every sense everything *comes* — at first glance.”

And so, to conclude, the moment the Musician casts you a sideways glance, and cocks a smile, you will accept everything — don’t kid yourself — the same way you jump when a well-known story takes an alarming turn. For instance: the heroine tearing off her clothes, jumping on a broom, and flying madly away from Moscow — Why not! — you say, your heart pounding. However, while you adamantly

support the revolution of Bliss, you cannot give up your years of critical reasoning . . . slowly coming to fruition as you pace the bar's washroom stall: if (a) the name of your ex-boyfriend's new girlfriend happens to be the same as that of the heroine's servant — who *rides a pig* into paradise — then (b) where does that put *him* in the analogy! . . . But really, you don't really think he's a pig. You're not feeling at all vengeful. In fact, you're fine! Besides, a student of literature needs her peace and quiet. A routine. It doesn't work taking Bliss to your parents' for dinner; you can't stay under the covers and watch a movie with Bliss. . . . But you can't "stay friends" with Bliss either. And so, you will exit the stall and walk home in the wet spring snow with a guitar pick in your pocket. For those who aren't quite ready to receive Bliss, Barthes has this mantra: "I write because I do not want the words I find." We might as well leave you here, then, with your aching heart, scribbling down your images of loss, while the Musician goes back to his small round table, to cock a smile at a girl, whose black hair is spiky and wild in the dark and whose eyes flash electrically with love.



## George Bowering / BELIEF

I believe he had seen us out of the window coming off to dine in the dinghy of a fourteen-ton yawl belonging to Marlow my host and skipper.

You probably don't know who or what I am referring to in my use of the pronoun "I," and I imagine that that will be true, also, regarding the times I use it in this sentence about that first one. Or should I say "I" imagine, but then would that not be "I" imagines? You see the sort of problem a person has in trying to tell a story or relate an anecdote or make a confession in the first person. Whose idea was it to call "I" the first person in the first place? Surely there are people whose mindset or religion, or just plain good manners, would see nothing untoward in calling you the first person, or him the first person.

It could be a matter of adapting to the situation. If I were to say, "I saw him smile as he received the award from the hands of the Governor General," you might say that I was being only sensible if I were to call the award winner the first person in this circumstance. Or, say, Marlow, when I saw his smile when he knew himself to be the first skipper under the harbour bridge at the end of the Celebes run.

In any case, we have to start somewhere, so we will have to come to an agreement here that this "I" is I, either this person sitting here typing these words, or the one we agree to listen to while he or she tell this tale of the odd young man whose name you have not yet heard.

It is all a matter of chance. That is why I may not have chosen the best possible verb when I chose "believe." I say this even though I know that the end of my story will come when Marlow uses the word. He will say "Hang it all, for all my belief in Chance I am not exactly a pagan. . . ." Ever since I heard him utter that sentence, if that is the whole of the sentence, I have wondered how ironic he was being. Of

course, when it comes to the interplay of belief and chance, how could one not be ironic? It is just, I think, a matter of degree.

"It is my belief," he once told me just after we had experienced a terrific storm off Malacca, "that we have no justification in holding to any belief system, as much as we might desire that it may work."

I told him that I had prayed while his ship lay nearly on its side atop a thirty-foot wave.

"Do you *believe*," he asked me, "that your prayer brought us through?" He looked a little like a Buddha in the evening light. "I was told not long ago a tale of four men set adrift in a lifeboat off the coast of Florida. When their boat ran in on the reef, it was battered to pieces, and three of the four castaways died. The best among them drowned, and a brute with murderous intent was left to live. I do not know how many of these four prayed during their ordeal, nor what they prayed for."

I think that I have heard a thousand stories from Marlow. And I am pretty sure that he could have strung this one out so that it lasted several hours, or, let us say, a hundred pages or more. I know that it is a cliché to have sea captains reciting tales, but there you are — I oftentimes think that Marlow was created for the job.

In any case, I am willing to replace the word "believe" with "think," though there are problems there, too. For example, are we really justified in calling what I was doing thought? Let's let it go, and say something about this "he," I believe — think — I saw. I don't know why I merely used the pronoun rather than the man's name, or why I did not begin by telling you something about him. He is, as you can easily infer from my sentence, going to be an important personage in my account, just as he or his pronoun seems to be the centre of the topic sentence you have been fortunate enough to see or hear.

I believe — think — that starting a story or even a novel in this fashion, a kind of *in media res*, is fairly common in recent literature. Certainly, around the time of the beginning of the First World War it would have been done by the fiction writers who situated themselves forward of the general popular writing. When you see or hear me utter the pronoun "he" you expect that to be narrowed down in due

time. I think, *think*, that there have been writers who fancy themselves as experimental, who give no more personal information than the pronoun all the way through the piece or book in question.

Does that sort of thing happen in real life, you ask. Certainly not. Not a chance. It is a sure sign of design, of purpose. Or maybe not: maybe the writer who refuses anything more than the gendered pronoun is trying to imitate what your senses do in any passage through a day. That is, you notice, by sight and sound, a person, even a person you know, but you do not consciously say his name, aloud or inwardly. You leave it at “he.”

Enough of that. I am not a literary theorist, you will be glad to learn, and we are not here for theory. We are here for clarity. That is why I am taking a little time to expound upon my topic sentence.

So we have an “I” and a “he.” That is not bad when it comes to populating a tale. And you already know that there is a third, my host and skipper. Chances are, you have run into him before, especially if you frequent waterfront towns such as this one.

I am sure that we do not have to long consider the word “had,” as it only serves to signify a tense, in this case the pluperfect. Doing that, it clarifies, or complicates, the time frame of the events to be reported. Well, some of that is inevitable. If I am going to recount these events in the normal past tense, I am going to have to use the pluperfect. If I were talking to you on the way to the ship, I might use the preterit, or possibly the imperfect. But starting with the pluperfect, I am preparing you for the phenomenon you will encounter within a few pages — quotation marks within quotation marks.

So: I “believe” he had seen us. That “us” joins the other pronouns we have been discussing, or which, actually, I have been writing and you have been reading. The difference here is that you will not yet know the number of people thus referred to, if you do not mind my hanging a proposition there. And why would you if you do not mind the ambiguities in my sentence that would suggest, among other things, eating in a dinghy.

In my next sentence, which we will not see for a while, you will learn that the “we” there employed will designate at least three

people, and in fact in what should have been a very short while, you will find that that will be the number. Three. The boy, Marlow, and I, or in the case of the first sentence, me.

I do not think that we have to contemplate or argue the single words that follow. I *think* that we can consider “out of the window” all at one time. Normally I would say “out the window,” but we have a distinctly British, if tropical, setting here, or instance, let us say. And I believe, or sense, that the Brits double up on (hee hee) their prepositions. So it is out of the window.

You will learn in time that the window in question is the window of a river-side inn, where Powell, for that will be discovered to be his name, was dining at a long table as white and inhospitable as a bank of snow. I think that was the simile that came immediately to my mind, at least.

But you see what engineering I am endeavouring to pull off here, as I lay about me with your perceptions, or the imaginary ones I hope to invoke. There is the question of the pluperfect, of course, but here you are behind some window where someone is catching sight of your narrator and his companion, all this a matter of belief. It is even more complicated than that, but you see what direction I am sending your observation in. The optic heart must venture, as someone more recently said.

I had reason sometime later, I thought, to wonder whether he had “chanced” to see us from his vantage point. Youth was my lot in those days, and my aim as well as my duty was to listen to these two old seamen tell their tales.

It is true that there was nothing unusual in his choice of dining rooms. The inn was the only place along the river in which one might get decent European fare unless one were to climb a distance that would be equal to a dozen blocks in a British or German city. And there was likely no contrivance in his choice of a seat facing the window and its view of the landing stage. I would not call it chance, but I would call it normal. And his being there just when we were on our way? It could have been chance.

Marlow was always going on about chance with a capital C. It was like the religion of no religion for him. More than once he would make pronouncements about it in my hearing.



“But from that same provision of understanding,” the atheist would say, “there springs in us compassion, charity, indignation, the sense of solidarity; and in minds of any largeness an inclination to that indulgence which is next door to affection.”

This was the way in which Marlow would construct a conversational sentence, so there should be no animus against mine. Once on a night-time pier I heard a dying man offer Marlow’s sentiment in more direct and far less encouraging language. “A man alone,” this unfortunate said, “hasn’t got a f—— chance.”

It has always struck me that this kind of usage of that final word is almost an opposite to the other.

In any case, this so-far unmet old seaman observed our coming off, and probably from that moment arranged things so that our meeting and spinning of yarns was anything but accidental. Certainly we had no idea that we were being watched, and no idea that we would spend that evening and many others with the watcher. He was a man who could not adjust to his retirement on shore, and who often looked for someone such as Marlow, whom he recognized if he did not know him.

He it was who once remarked that Nietzsche said that there are two kinds of people — those who want to know and those who want to believe. I reckon that people in the latter group are not much interested in anything I have to write.

But what will you know? Do you know more now than our watcher knows by this point in the story? Can a character know more than his watcher, or rather reader? Certainly he seems to, as for example, he likely knows his name and his version, anyway, of his life story, before you open the book. But can he be said to exist at all before you open and read?

That is not exactly the sort of situation that he and Marlow conversed about that evening and those to come, but there is a similarity in form, or let us say in structure. He was watching us, as you are watching him, and certainly Marlow has seen this sort of thing so often, he the beginner of long tales. Romance never knew a better partner.

But as I have said, we came off not to spin yarns but to dine. I honestly do not know whether Marlow the Buddha ever tasted any of

the food that passed between his lips. Observing him at the board, one might surmise that he was there for the carrying out of a secular ritual. He might sever a morsel from a chop while listening to an opinion offered by the man with the red-tinted face and cap of curly iron-grey hair. But then his utensils would be the shining ends for gestures he might make to indicate the breadth of the Indian Ocean or the lawlessness on some of its islands.

In other words, to dine, for Marlow, is to meet the necessity of the body's sustenance. Necessity, you will point out, is the opposite of chance. I might counter that the opposite of some instance of chance is another instance of chance. Let us say that for Marlow, the need to dine is the opportunity to dramatize folly and honour.

Then there is the storyteller's necessity. Since the dawn of writing, at least, the meal has been the setting for accounts sacred and profane, entertaining and philosophical. We know Socrates and Alcibiades by the reasoning and wit they exhibited during their symposium. We listened while Jesus foretold his story at the Last Supper. But we also know that we have told and heard wonderful baloney around a campfire, and fancy that right after fire was domesticated, hairy men stared into it and commenced lying to one another about their exploits with spears and such.

"Dine in the dinghy" is a misleading and quite comical phrase, and one that I might change if I could, but it is as if the sentence had been passed down to me in its present form and I incapable of changing a word. I may asseverate but never slice. I might wiggle some, but must remain within the tides.

As chance might have it, "dinghy" follows three words after "dine" on page 157 of Partridge, just as it does in my sentence. Does that not sound like design? Remember Marlow, who said, "I am not afraid of going to church with a friend." If Marlow found a watch on a supposedly deserted island, he would reason that a wayfarer had been there before him, not that a deity had dropped the timepiece to prove a point.

What does Partridge tell us of a dinghy, seeing that we are there anyway? "Bengalese *dingi*, dim of *dinga*, a boat; ? from Skt *dru*, wood (cf, the Gr *drus* s *dru*-, the oak)."



What an interesting page. Did you know that our word “dip” is related to the OS *dopian* (with a little circle over the “o”), to baptize. But there you go; the last thing we want to do here is to stray from the story. I mean, every page in Partridge is interesting. A fire engine coming out of its garage.

A diminutive boat coming out of its element onto shore at dinner time. Two of us stepped out. The lad would return for us when he received Marlow’s signal in the dark, and if precedent be a guide, the youth might be able to get some sleep before that event. He pushed off without our help, and we walked up to the boards that would lead to the restaurant. We arrived there just as the floating wood made it home to the fourteen-ton yawl.

Fourteen tons is a pretty fair weight for a yawl, most of the ones I have seen being perhaps three tons. Marlow never used the term — he always referred to her as a “dandy.” Marlow has been skipper of a lot of vessels in his day and ours. I believe or imagine, let us say, that he favoured a yawl because with its mizzen mast abaft the rudder, he could trim delicately. This would mean that he could keep a small crew. I have often seen one of the smaller yawls crewed by a single man. At the moment our crew numbered eight, largely because stevedores can be hard to find in the unofficial, let us say, harbours to which we pay visit.

One foggy day in 1905, two fourteen-ton yawls carrying nothing but ballast collided and sank off Donegal Town. This despite the advantages of the mizzens. One of them was named *Maid of Erin*. The other bore the interesting cognomen *Victory*. You could, as an American friend often tells me, look it up.

Chance threw them, Marlow told me one damp night, in one another’s way.

How long this particular yawl had belonged to Marlow, I never sought to learn from him. One got the impression that the craft had a past unknown to him, and an even stronger sense that he had been the owner or at least skipper of a long list of vessels of many sorts. I more than once heard that he had negotiated the Congo River at the helm of some sort of paddle-wheeler, and that there had at least on one occasion been only a shadow line between his occupation and

that of a brigand, this somewhere that British institutions had never rubbed smooth.

But in another sense it seemed as though the rig and its owner were almost indistinguishable. They were both weathered and brown and of an undeniable age. They both, one fancied, had unfinishable tales to tell. They both creaked when they moved.

I was then amazed and have since been astonished that Marlow is not the most famous man in the Empire. If all his stories have secure attachment to the real events of his watchful life, he is Homer for our time. And I have heard sufficient allusions to both his history and his historifying to believe (or assent) that the untapped narratives might be more resourceful than those I had (to return to the pluperfect) been vouchsafed.

Marlow was, in the rivermouths of the eastern hemisphere, ubiquitous — yet he was mysterious. I have heard people compare him with a god and an idol, with a statue of the Buddha and a wrinkled bird of the jungle canopy. I have pulled my watch from my vest and been astounded to see that four hours had slipped by while he smoked his pipe and told us about conflict in the heart of a man encountered belowdecks.

In his stories he was always marling such things.

I sometimes thought that Marlow had been invented by some overarching intelligence to frequent the waters of the colonized world and bring doubt into the minds of anyone, east or west, about the intentions of the European colonizers. All of Europe, he once told me, went into the making of a monster named Kurtz. In our nightly discussions with Mr Powell, this question always lay in the background: how was it that Powell had retired to a land so far from his bringing up, and how was it that Marlow, easily his equal in years, seemed bound for an eternity on the water?

Perhaps a coming together of two such differing fates was necessary to the story — for it was not long until we would discover that Marlow knew the young Powell, and understood a key factor in his life — that young Powell had by mere chance received his first posting as second-in-command, and that by that accident was the whole course of his life directed — his and those of numerous

others. Well, you will see. You will sit at Marlow's table or on his deck. You will decide whether we are dealing with design as introduced to us by the European Greeks, or chance, a word, Partridge reminds us, that like many others descends from the Skt *cad-*, to fall.

Not to jump, eh?

By "my host" I mean principally my host at the dinner to come, or as we will see it or now do see it, depending on whether we are inside or outside the narrative, the dinner that ensued. Well, enough of that mumble — you have by now seen my point regarding that. Marlow had noticed that I was careful with my ready money once ashore. He did not know my reason, and certainly there is no need for you to know it. Suffice it to say that any money I came upon was required in a coastal town on the other side of the sphere upon whose surface we sail.

Marlow sensed my situation, but was too much an officer of the old school to pry. He told me that in buying my supper he was ensuring himself an audience for his hoary narratives. Then he busied himself with his pipe. He was an actor with sufficient skill and experience to play himself. I directed mental plaudits his way and looked forward to filling my stomach more than usual.

As Marlow liked the term "dandy" in reference to his vessel, I like the term "skipper" in reference to its master. I know that he did. He was uneasy with the appellation "captain" because it has the word for head in it. Perhaps that displeased him because he was opposed to the hierarchy or governance proposed, seeing himself as he was in his youth, a soul setting to sea because the sea and its unknown resembles hope, resembles in its promise of chance a great possibility that no god or empire would extend to a fellow. Certainly a captain is *enmeshed*, both in his history and in rank.

Perhaps he did not like the word "head" because he had learned over a long career among dark trees and mirror-like water, that the head as the imperium of the living organism is a conceit that loses its usefulness upon the part of any journey that leaves Europe astern.

Besides, he did not want to dress up as a captain.

"Sir," I once gathered the nerve to say, "there is a recollection of last night's curry upon the back of your jacket sleeve."

“Where it will stay,” he replied, never taking his eye off the azimuth, “until I require sustenance enough to search it out.”

So “skipper,” a word that is simply connected to the word “ship.” Important here is my reference to him as *my* skipper. That is the relationship and debt that I want to keep visible when I get to my next sentence, for there it is that you will see us working together, not head and arms but arms bent to our mutual task.

Or if I abandon you to carry on the story by yourself, I hope that you do it with the “dignified loneliness” that I would have attributed to old Mr. Powell in that second sentence. It was going to be a long one, and the story too. I hope that you will include me among your listeners when you happen upon this.



# Marion Llewellyn / EVERYWHERE(?) IS MEMORY!

The current suite of work is directly informed by a braided memory of a childish question and a flight of fancy.

As a child I asked myself where Memory was contained. This became my primary question, one that addled the adults around me. How could they begin to supply a satisfactory answer when all these years later, scientists, despite their profound knowledge of the brain, still cannot pinpoint Memory's exact location?

I grew up deep in the English countryside. Along with my peers I was sent outside to "play" until the next meal time. To amuse ourselves we invariably ran across fields and hillocks and waded through streams and ran more — sometimes for miles. Occasionally, during intermittent rests, I lay on my stomach and scrutinized the wheat, a gnarled tree trunk, a dandelion — anything up close. Inevitably, the world appeared in sharp relief from the macro to micro form. A common activity was holding a leaf up to the light but one particular day I was staggered by its delicate meandering veins, the markings that seemed to signal a recording of an *event*. And each leaf had an original marking of an *event* or a series of *events*, a unique filigree, a divine pattern. At that point I thought, with mild grandiosity, I had the clue to where Memory was contained and preserved — in the veins of a leaf! My magnifier revealed each leaf from the same tree to differ subtly in color, form, line, and texture and consequently I was more or less persuaded.

The Buddhists have intimated that we'd all be better off without Memory. I have challenged this appealing notion believing Memory to be cellular and therefore ubiquitous without precluding autonomous ownership or acknowledgment. Obviously, as a child I didn't have the language to articulate this idea. It was fleeting. It refused to be lassoed and tethered into any child's form of coherence. The suite nevertheless attempts to manifest an

underlying coherence because as an adult I continue to believe Memory to be cellular and not stationed in a specific vicinity. This is a belief as opposed to a theory since I am not *au fait* with cutting edge scientific investigation. In fact, I have consciously avoided any such research — curious as I am. To deny myself this alluring research has been an act of will. In the future, research may precipitate a second suite, a third suite, like a long poem.

I have not made any distinctions between individual, collective, or genetic memory. This too could inform other works, not necessarily created in visual language alone. Rather, I have isolated and recorded a single potent, personal Memory. Hopefully, the viewer will concede a certain transposing or transfiguration and be stimulated to ask other questions. Where is Memory? Is it finite or does it cut across another dimension? Perhaps they will be challenged to come up with their own musings — scientific or otherwise.

Acrylics & spackle on wood

24 by 36 by 3 inches

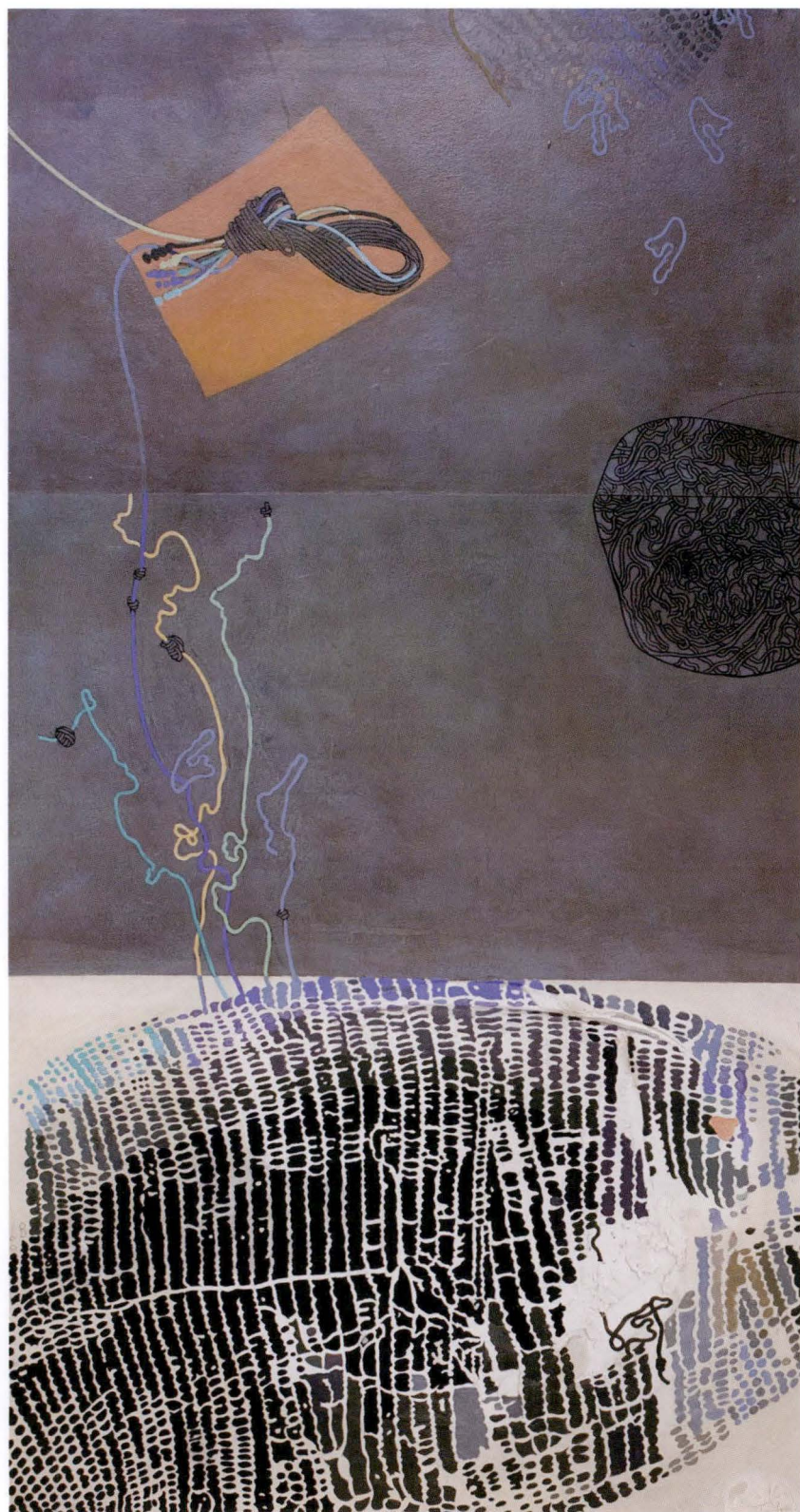
Photography by Owen Carey, Portland, OR

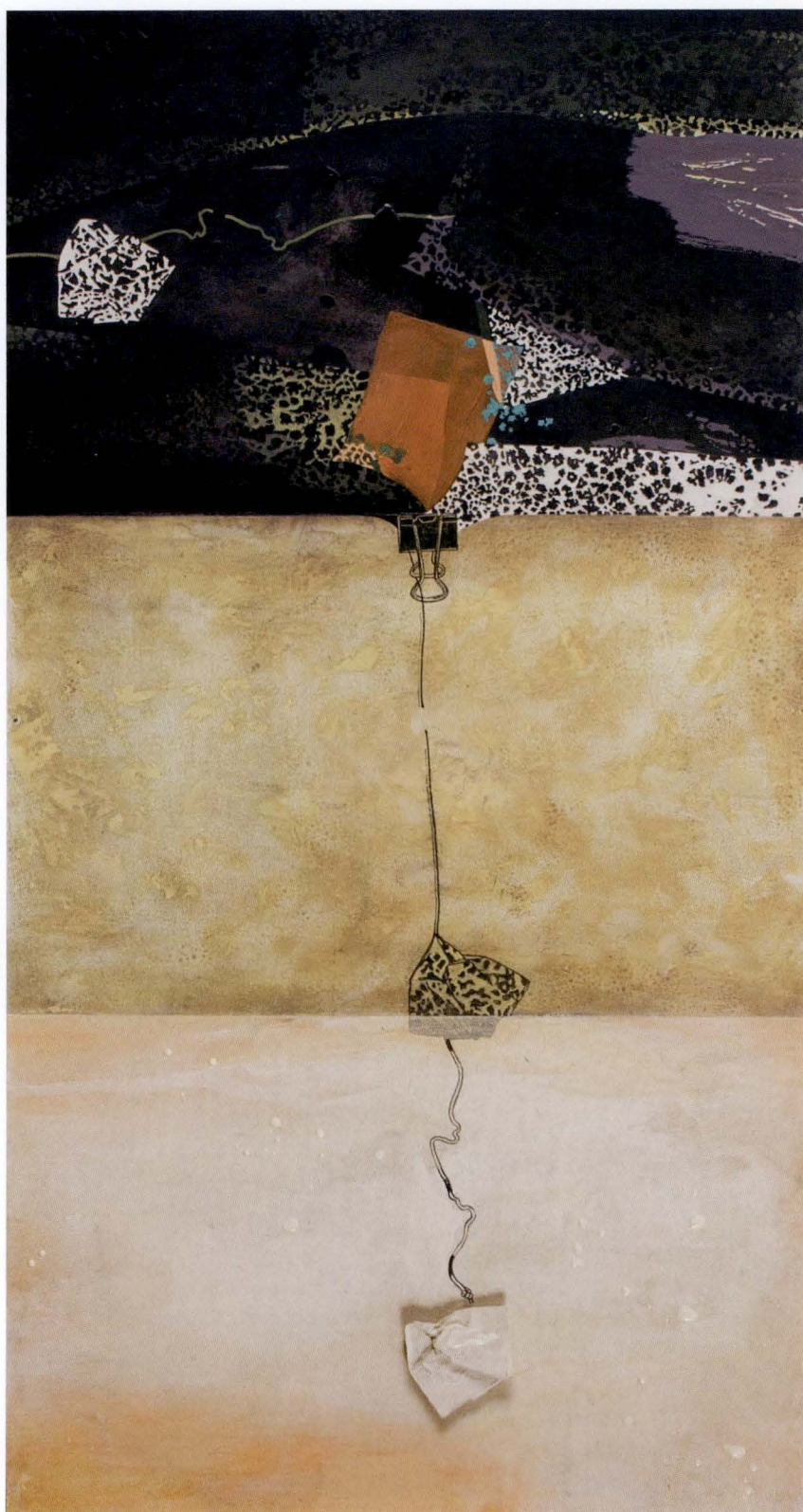




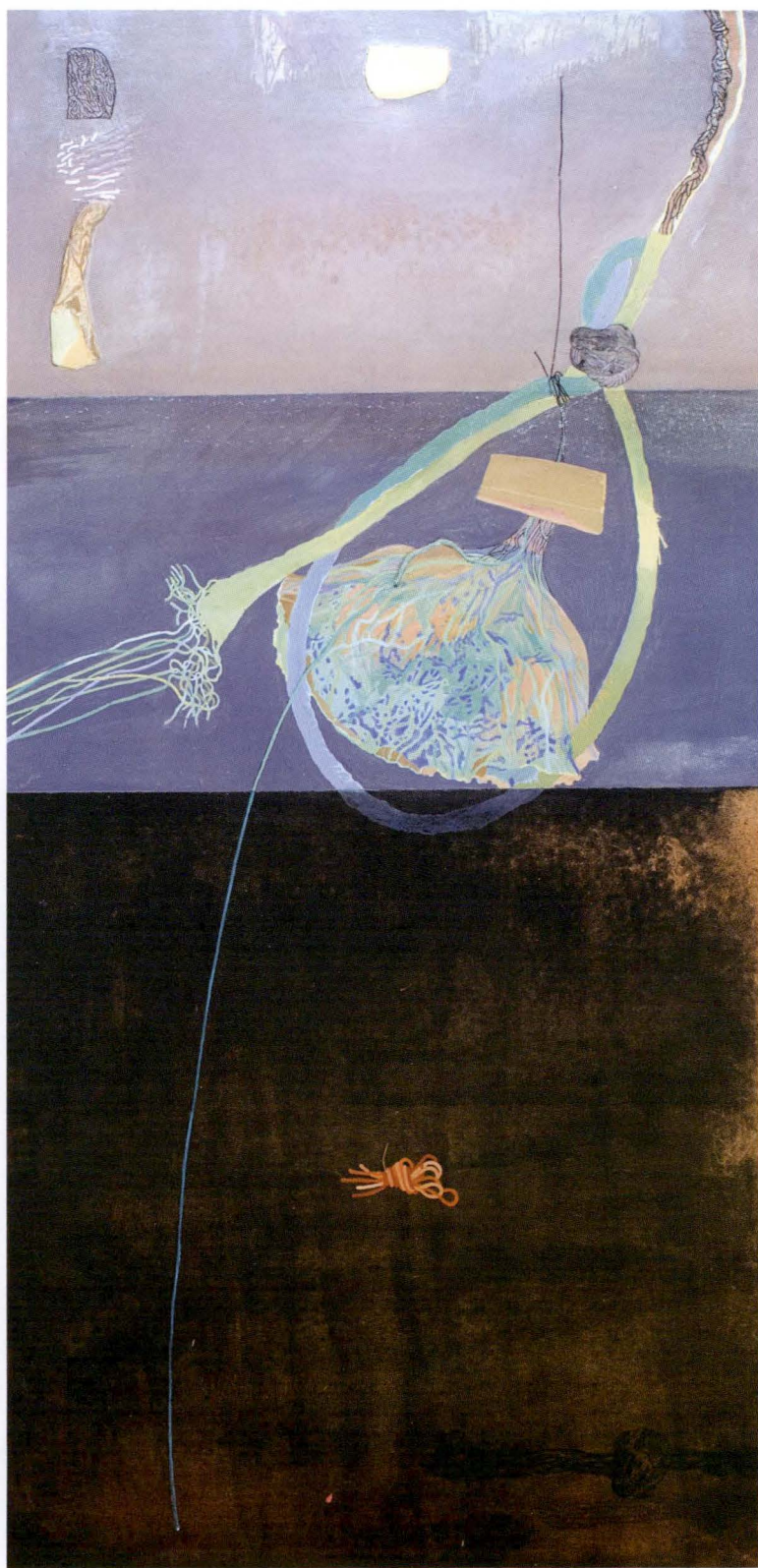




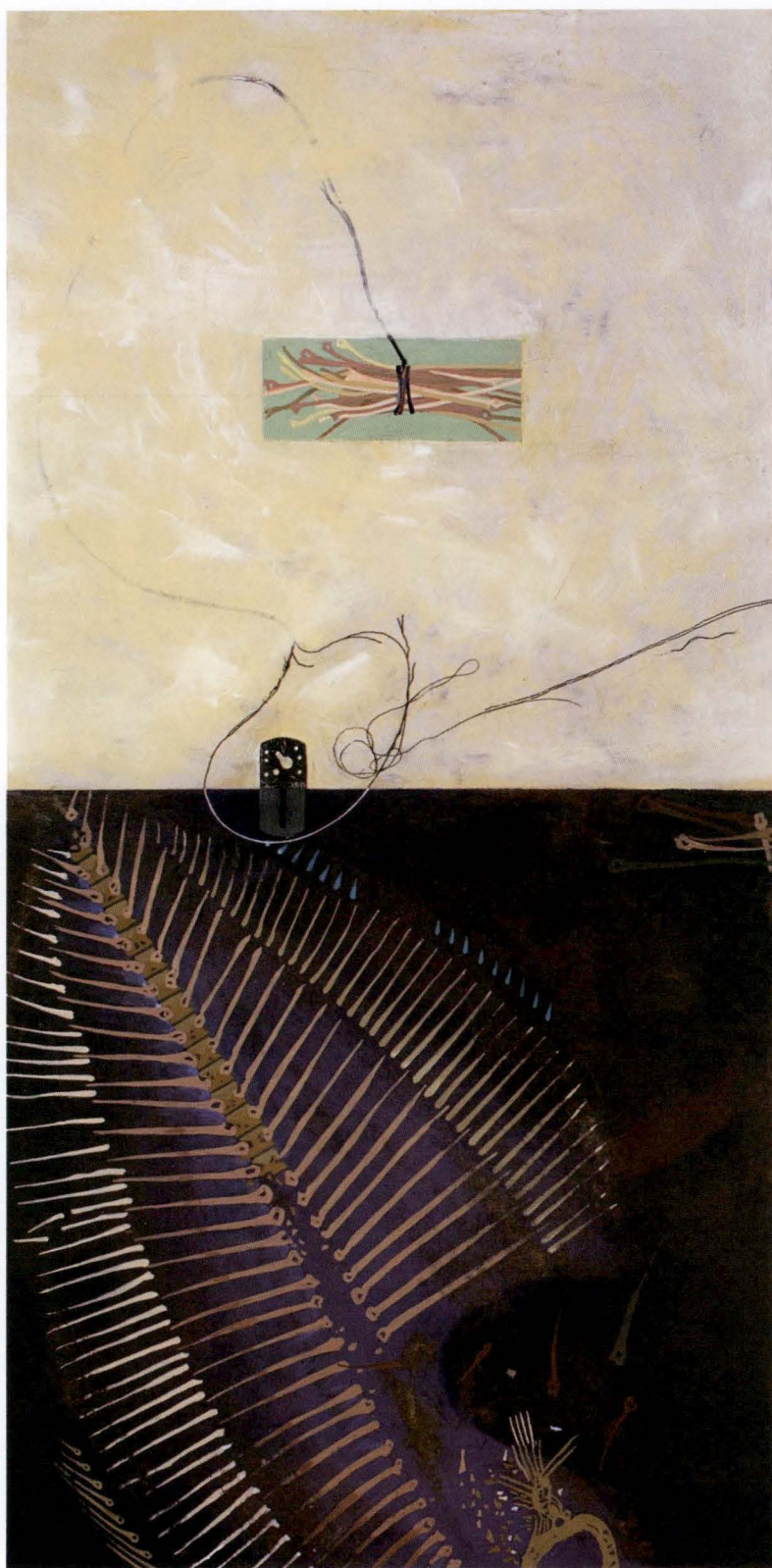


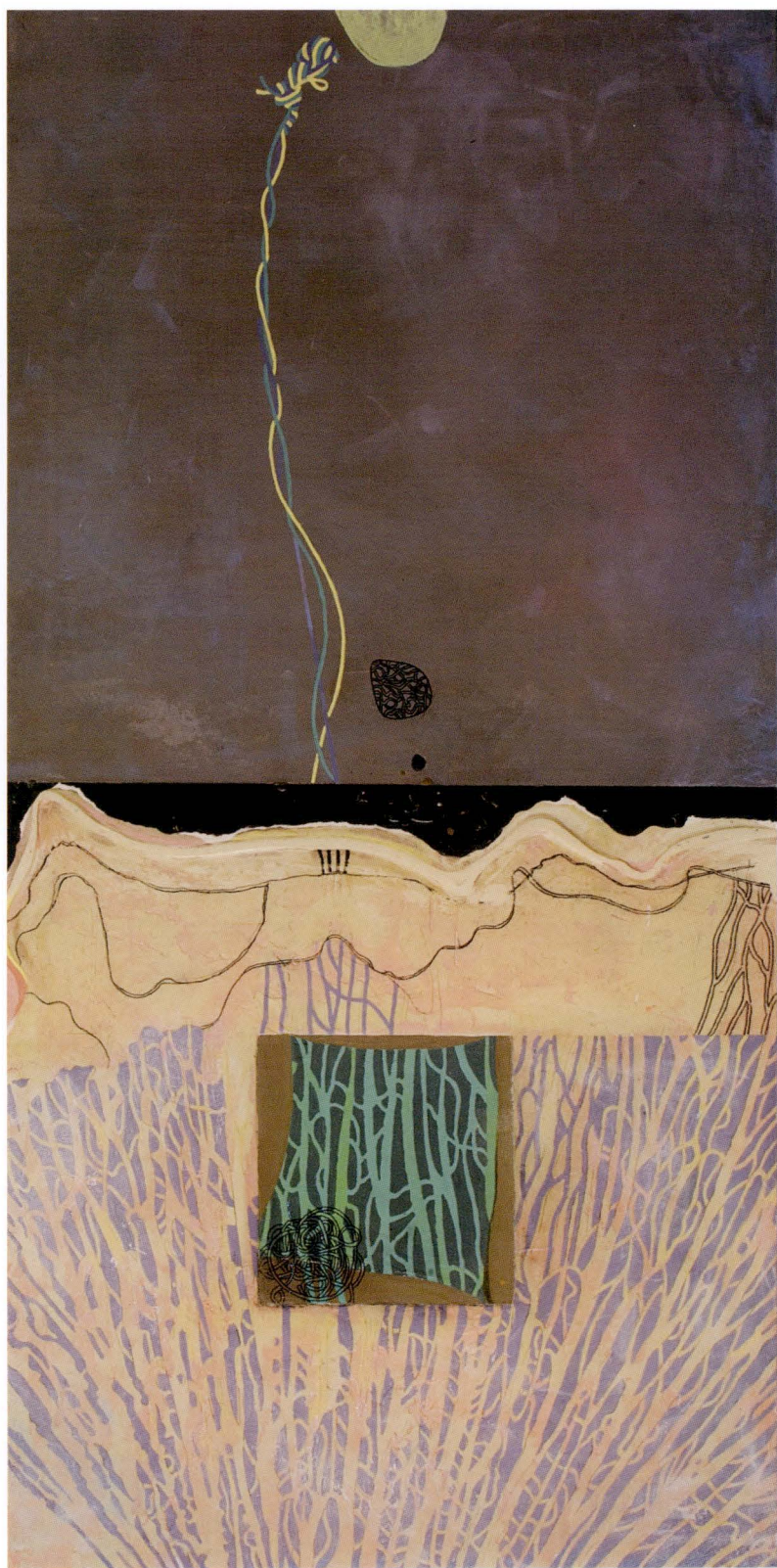
















## Joe Davies / AMONG OTHER THINGS, DESMOND RICE

I start here with my boy in the park intentionally banging his head on the edge of the sandbox, a habit he's developed: he leans forward, knocks his head several times before I can stop him; not hard, but hard enough to leave a mark and set him wailing. I've no idea why he does this or where the impulse comes from. (Has some fundamental comfort been denied him in his first fifteen months?) I've read this behaviour is not altogether uncommon and should pass shortly, still it's hard to watch. For now the best I can do is intervene physically, pick him up and try to soothe him. If I see him start and make the mistake of calling out: Don't! it only seems to intensify his desire to bang away. And yet sometimes I do wait; I imagine to see if his reckoning of pain has grown larger than his drive to behave this way. Someday I know he'll stop. Soon would be good.

At thirty-nine I am old. (Dull thing to say.) The wheels of fashion roll over and spit a version of my younger self into the street, and there he is, strutting past me, smug, confident, gliding unrestrained in tight plaid pants (29" waist), blissfully ignorant of the dust and mildew and flaking paint settling on junk accumulating in some future basement (my basement) begging to be sorted through and thrown out. Freshness walking past, mocking me.

Thirty-nine. Not old.

Just two days before my birthday I had a night to prowl. My wife had our children up to her folks for an overnight. I was at work until ten or eleven but after made it out to a bar and ran into a friend. It would have been fine to be on my own (I like to sit and drink and see what I can see) but this was good. I sometimes lose sense of scale on my own. The measure of another person, having to talk sense, this

helps, can stop me from tumbling into my own delusions or glancing at someone longer than I should.

I don't remember much of what we talked about, what we said. I expect we caught up. I forget. I am incapable of drinking like I used to. The big head arrives before I even leave the bar, a mere three drinks all I can do. On the sidewalk outside, cool fresh air and chalk drawings strung out along the pavement all down the street.

Several messages are waiting on the answering machine when I get home.

First the basement. I'll tell you about the basement because that's where I am now, surrounded, the walls and shelves, the floor, cluttered almost to the brink of suffocation. Dehumidifier banging away, obscured by a stack of boxes, most of them open and spilling over with old clothes, winter clothes, old toys, wrapping paper and god knows what. The crusty smell of basement prevails.

Our work table piled high with things that have come down here because there just isn't anywhere else to put them and for some reason they can't go straight into the garbage or elsewhere, not without some ritual questioning and classification of their value, useful, sentimental, otherwise. A task neither my wife nor I ever seem to get to, the mountain of junk threatening to collapse rendering the basement entirely unnavigable. An old magnifying glass, a half finished papier mâché fish, an old clementine box mostly empty except for the soldering set that won't fit on the shelf with the other tools and the paint and the paint thinner and used batteries that we know (for some reason) are not to be thrown out with the regular garbage and so we save them, there being some particular place to take them but we never do. One musty old box with all super-8 movies, family Christmases mostly, a few summer vacations, two or three drag races my father went to, almost all of it from before I was born so why I have them I don't know. And god, there is paper just everywhere down here. Books, vinyl records, old essays, stacks of them, computer texts and on and on. I haven't touched on half of it.



The phone messages.

When I got home, when I stepped in at two-thirty in the morning with my big head I busied myself, got my boots off, hung up my coat, brushed my teeth, all that, prepared myself to dive straight into bed and sleep undisturbed till early afternoon if I wanted (luscious), and it was then, just as I was guzzling down my second precautionary glass of water, it was then I noticed the flashing number on the answering machine. Seven messages it said. The first: the classic empty space of no message of any kind, faint white noise. Second: the library calling to say some books were in. The third: my wife and kids calling to say good night and all was well except for a tumble one of my sons had and now wore a scrape the length of his nose, apart from that hugs, kisses, sweet dreams and good night. Then the last four messages, all from the same person who never identified herself. (Approximated here almost solely for their entertainment value.)

Message #1: Uh, we're down here now, like you said. Unwin Ave., I'm looking right at the sign now and there's no one here. It's almost dark. Yeah, no one's here yet. Desmond's gone all the way to the end, down by that power plant place and we just don't see . . . I sure hope you weren't. . . . Anyway. Ring me on my cell when you get this. You have the number. Pretty desolate down here, man. Talk to you.

Message #2: Hi. It's me again. I'm wondering if you told us the wrong day, cause there isn't anybody here. It's completely dark now. Hope you're not pulling my leg, buddy. Hope you're not. Better be a reason for this. Bye.

Message #3: Do you have any fucken idea how hard it is to get out of this place? Desmond and me are . . . Tell him Desmond. Tell him what we are . . . (From the background, a man's voice shouts: "We're pissed.") That's right Donny, we're pissed and Desmond's bottle of Jaegermeister's almost empty. And when that's gone that's that. When that's gone . . . I don't know what. Fucken drag races. Good one Donny. Good one. If I find out . . . Hey! Desmond! Wait up! Not that

way, buddy! Stick to the road! Oh crap. Wait up. I've gotta find a bush, asshole. So yeah . . . Later, Donny. Better be good.

Message #4: Not only is this the last time I ever listen to you, it's the last time I ever talk to you. And you can find someone else to fool around with too if this your idea of a joke. If this is . . . . Aw, man. And I was gonna be so good. I was . . . I had this all worked out. I had a plan . . . I was gonna come here . . . Get some money together . . . Get my shit together. . . . And all this has nothing to do with nothing, so why am I fucken telling you . . . Oh my GOD! Desmond! DESMOND! Desmond's just disappeared. Oh, shit, buddy! Hang on! I'm right here! I'm right here! Look Desmond. Look! Here's the wall! Can you make it to the wall? I think . . . (End.)

\*

I haven't much to add here about these messages. Not the messages on their own. I'll tell you I listened to them a few times and it never became any clearer to me what happened exactly. I listened, then erased (a beautiful thing about phone messages, no tangible clutter). I didn't call anyone, though I might have or ought to have (my wife mentioned this). And then there was this: while describing these messages to my wife the next day I happened to conjure for myself an image of these two stumbling around in the dark, every bit as dense and aimless as I once was (my wife saying: ah yes, the sweet old you), and all summer long this image must have stuck with me; as sunny day replaced sunny day at the park, and rainy afternoons turned into shopping expeditions at the supermarket in the evening, and my daughter developed a penchant for throwing tantrums which we dearly hoped might subside as kindergarten loomed nearer, always, somewhere at the back, lurking behind all the other errata of daily life, this loose image of two untethered fools fumbling in the dark. (I mention here as well, in the event it isn't obvious, my name is not Donny.)

One of the dizzying aspects of parenthood, a form of exhaustion that sometimes approximates spells of senility (three children under the

age of five): I look in the mirror and see I need to shave and in a flash feel myself become angry as it seems I have just done this and now the whiskers are suddenly quite long once again and it doesn't feel as if several days have passed, and then, in the time it takes to toss a coin, I am instead caught up admiring the peppering of grey here and there, and not for the first time. All this accompanied by feelings of light-headedness, the screws coming loose.

And it happened as well that I found myself in the basement one morning having slept there without any real recollection of having gone down in the middle of the night as I must have. (An old green coat for a blanket, old pants rolled up for a pillow.) What happened to you? said my wife the next morning. I said I guessed I must have come down because it was cooler. This happened once. Another time I woke up thirsty in the middle of the night and wound up poking around in the basement still half-asleep. It was then I unearthed the box of old movies and without really thinking began to unreel one, looking at the frames against the naked bulb hung from the ceiling next to my head. Before I knew what I was doing I had nearly the whole reel uncoiled at my feet.

One of many things down here in the basement I forgot about: a pen and ink drawing of a French Cathedral that an old boyfriend of my sister's did. Long out of the picture this boyfriend, never met him. It's tacked up on the wall now and still I wonder how it is he came to send it to me.

So much stuff down here. (So much crap!) A broken clock, cold weather boots we never wear, the rear seat from our minivan. (I'm only making things worse poking around.) At my feet my dad's album of Sinatra movie hits (which I really do want to listen to sometime, if I ever get my turntable hooked up again; it's down here somewhere as well). In my hands my old pants. I'm looking for the place where the bum's sewn up, ripped them climbing over a fence on a hot summer night and got myself impaled (was stuck up there for a minute or so before falling off). Probably should have got stitches but never did. Things still don't feel right. If I really wanted I could throw them away, these pants. I probably should. I'm hoarding, hanging on, I know.

It has been hot even down here.

Hot enough as summers go. Hot enough certainly to make the basement an attractive place to sleep. Hot enough that the playground around the corner with the large planetree over the sandbox became a favourite place, the sand cool between our toes, my two sons', my daughter's, mine. Nice enough to be in the park that my daughter often refused to leave, sparking confrontation of one kind or another and once or twice had to be carried kicking and screaming over my shoulder. And with the ending of summer everyone is off once again; all go away but me. My children once more to their grandparents, my wife to a weekend retreat at a cottage with some high school friends, leaving me alone.

\*

I go for a drink after work.

I stand at the bar, squint my eyes, see the hazy figure of my younger self also out for the night. (And how I did this so many times. Blah, blah.) As I rest my chin on my hand and stare and order my second beer, sensations creep up on me, quaint old feelings, sensations I'd be happy enough to discard if they weren't still such a good fit now and then (compared to old pants): standing with my back to the wall, looking on, doing nothing while anticipation grows stale. Looking and waiting for I don't know what.

And someone drops a drink, glass shatters, spreads across the mottled floor. People pushing past. Side-stepping the mess, the place close and loud, the aroma rich with people and booze and the abandon of Saturday night all thrown in one. Someone I recognize slumps onto a stool nearby and doesn't see me, and I say nothing.

From two steps back I watch as I tumble down an old well, the splash at the bottom: ain't it too bad. Ain't it too bad how I never got up to much. (How I never did.) Stand around, something undone. Something I didn't do. (All so vague, I know.) And I stand like this, having a drink and I watch. How I want something to look at and want to be seen, and I keep to myself as always; and the beer tastes good, especially cold like this. Goes down fast.



The crowd moves around, so many brushes on a canvas.  
Someone laughs, two more nudge their way to the bar, leaning close,  
having to make an effort to hear each other above the din.

(Beautiful women, pretty boys, stay close and let me look.)

In the shadows, as I pull on my beer, tugging at my thoughts,  
sweet dreams for my children, wondering which ways they'll take  
after me, hoping they never find it in them to live so vicariously as  
this.

Across the bar a pair of eyes meet mine and I look away. None of  
that. One more drink I tell myself, one more and I'll go home.

One day early this last summer my daughter and I sat on our front  
porch and painted brown ceramic pots, the kind you put plants in. It  
was raining, thundering at times and we sat there quietly painting,  
the rain coming straight down not more than a couple of feet away.  
We were using water colours and the porous quality of the pots  
seemed to draw all the colour from what we did, leaving pale streaks  
no brighter than black board chalk.

These pots are down here in the basement now as well. Upstairs  
they'd only get broken. Nothing safe from the exploring hands of my  
boys.

The day we painted them my daughter asked: What will we put in  
them? I said I didn't know and why don't we wait until we think of  
something good (always waiting); in a huff my daughter suggests her  
brothers.

Later there is a fight over something or other (as happened so often  
this summer) and the TV, the giant pacifier of the house, goes on.

One more drink would have been plenty. There were perhaps two or  
three more I think, enough to flatten the muddle of my thoughts  
like a bug. Delusion crept in and all too soon I was king, bestowing  
knowing glances on one and all, churning a roomful of contestable  
impressions: a warm smile and missing teeth, white arms and pale  
blue tattoos (and eyes meeting mine) and five o'clock shadow and a  
pale princess of a girl with dark lined eyes looking over her shoulder  
at her beau and sticking her tongue out at him. A movie on the  
television above the bar, a younger Jimmy Stewart. Three young men



(boys really) scoping the place, looking for something or someone (or nothing at all), wandering back and forth, hair jelled into soft spikes, something sad and weary and void shifting about with them. Here and there thin strings of Christmas lights criss-crossing the walls and along the top a row of empty Jaegermeister bottles, and finally, somewhere in the middle of it all, finding the sense to let myself go and stepping outside, bumping into someone, physically bumping into them, surprised by this, by my sudden spatial stupidity, pretending I'm not.

It's raining outside, chalk drawings slowly washing across the sidewalk into the road, the colours blending, cars shushing past. Up ahead I see the lights of the all-nighter and figure I must be hungry and duck in, take a booth near the back, order a banquet burger, fries, gravy, and though I'm sure I don't need it, a coke. Halfway through a group of three takes the booth behind me.

(In the mail recently, a package from the east coast with my great-grandfather's medals from his years as a Free Mason. The dates on the medals: 1889, 1894, 1895, 1902. The dates stop here. Also down here in the basement, from the other side of the family: my grandfather's uniform from the first world war. Should be mothballs in with that. Not something I think of when I'm out, getting mothballs.)

The three men in the booth behind me are quick and funny. (Before I know what I am thinking I wish I was them). They're noisy and spend the time waiting for their food talking about how one of them is going to get something back to one of the others, joking and figuring out how and when they might cross paths again, and the something being something like a book or a CD or perhaps a movie script. (Yes, that was it.) And one of the three has a radio voice and a way of talking that draws you to listen even though he's only making fun of something he read somewhere in a magazine, something some politician said. "Original experience," he repeats more than once in his radio voice and the others laugh and eat their omelettes; and a little later, responding to the biblical proportion of something someone else has said, one of them quips "Beware false prophets" to

which one of the others adds “Ah, but most of all, beware the reporting of false profits” and they all laugh (and I want to be them; I want to be light; and why this is important, why any of this is important, I don’t know but it is).

And it happens that we all stand and move to the cash register at the same time and a few minutes later are out in the street, huddled under the same awning, hiding from the rain, waiting for the same streetcar, rows of polished shoes in the window behind us, waiting to be bought. More stuff. What else.

Trudging through the rain, splashing towards us, a couple of soldiers, their collars turned up around their ears, shoulders hunched, hands crammed in green pockets. They are just passing when someone behind me calls out “Desmond!” and one of the soldiers stops.

“Desmond Rice?” says the same voice behind me (one of the men from the restaurant).

“Yeah?”

“It’s Evan, from Coxwell.”

“Hey.”

“How’s it going?”

“Yeah. All right.”

“What’s this? New career?”

“Oh well, yeah. Yeah.”

“And this?” A hand reaches out and points to the side of Desmond’s face where a purple scar runs from top to bottom and out across one eye. And though it isn’t immediately obvious this Desmond is drunk as anything, says nothing.

“I was just thinking about you the other day.”

“Yeah?”

“Found this old program from school, from a play we did in grade four. There was your name . . . Desmond Rice . . . as the Cow. Whaddaya know. I’m sure no Jack ever sold so fine a cow for such a sorry handful of beans.”

“Handful of beans,” says Desmond, smiling.

“Still play ball?”

At this Desmond shrugs his shoulders, looks behind him to see that his companion, the other soldier, is still there. On Desmond's chest I can see the name 'Rice' stitched above his pocket.

"What'd you do? Here?" and a hand is pointing once again at the scar.

"We'd better get a move on, private" the other soldier says.

"Gotta go," says Desmond. "We're going overseas." And he tips his head as if overseas is a bar just up the street and around the corner.

"Okay. Bye then."

"Yeah, bye."

When they are out of earshot the man behind me speaks up. It's the man with the radio voice: "Used to play together all the time. Lived right across the street. He came camping with us once and had the good fortune to nearly break his arm falling out of a tree. Scared the shit out of my parents."

"Haven't seen him in a while?"

"No. Not in years. Used to run into him all the time. A while back. What a strange way to go."

"Not what you would have pictured?"

"Nope. Not at all."

By the time the streetcar shows, my feet are soaked. I slump onto one of those seats at the back and close my eyes and to my surprise everything starts to spin. I sit up and try to look through the steamed windows out into the night. Blocks of light shift past and my image from before, the one I concocted from the phone messages, this drops in my lap. Without realizing much what I am doing, I bring the two Desmonds together as one. (Takes me a while sometimes. My wife can tell you.) The whole ride home I chase my tail, I circle round and round trying to figure where it comes from: my romantic notion of blundering blind drunk through the dark. And tired old me, also replaying somewhere in the background, a deep smooth voice saying over and over: Original experience. As if somehow any of this ought to fit together. Oh Lord, spare me. More junk. Thin as air. Junk.

On the floor not far away, next to the wall (covered with flaking white paint), a blue balloon with an elastic attached at one end so you can punch it and it comes back at you so you can punch it again. Came in a loot bag from a birthday party my daughter went to a couple of weeks ago. The perfect loot for her, a tireless sparring partner. Like all sorts of things it's down here so her brothers won't get hold of it; unused and pretty much forgotten.

I'm thinking how I hate it down here just now. (And how this is not entirely true.) I'm thinking how I'm beyond tired. How things accumulate with little hope of my sorting them, tired of the way things pile up. And equally scared in a dull sort of way, wondering what happens if suddenly all was neat and tidy and ordered. What then?

Thirty nine. Not old.

Strangely for me this does not end here in the basement. Neither with the troubling realization that I have no difficulty imagining why my son bangs his head. I end with something else: the expression on my little girl's face as she loses her grip on a balloon, a different balloon, this one filled with helium, and startled, watching it at first, having just slipped through her fingers, watching it rise into to the sky with that brief and false hope that this can somehow be righted, only to be followed by the full and damning comprehension that what was precious is now gone, transient and gone; and her brave expression minutes later as life begins anew, this time with only the memory of a helium balloon.

## jeramy dodds / THREE POEMS

### Glenn Gould gasps on the Dictaphone

The music I wept to was dumbled down some  
'till it was music I crept to while mulling over  
swamp flats via the sticks, stumps, and gangplanks.  
I frogmarched from under a parasol pine,  
clouds did part and parts of the marsh  
were stunned by a raygun sun.  
The river's a sash, bashed-in  
by the alloy of starlight. Each leaf's  
fallen-angel-poise chalked by the cops.  
The lake's glass-machinery stepped up a notch.  
Rain like tape-hiss, lightning white as pineflesh.  
I can see the bass-lipped Maria Callas, she has lashed  
masts into a raft and is tossing up flares, strobing for me.  
O Death, you threw me the axe while I was  
looking at the sun and each key I've dropped  
was a finger clutching for the cliff top.



Credit theme from *The Rag Castle Hotel*

A theremin quartet, backed  
by ventilation shaft singers,  
music staged for the shadow theatre,  
piano bar piano music  
that reminds us the moon lip-synchs  
the sun. A brushed drum like 'help'  
snuffed in a rag-stuffed mouth  
the velvet pit of your mouth  
on my mouth last November  
pale and bedded on the tasseled  
rag duvet, we are cautious  
as though calling a stranger's  
dog. The painting overhead  
is of a hound hauling a gored goose  
like a rose through the reeds  
to his gunman. That same gunman  
in the room next to ours  
propped on two pillows, sucking  
a cigarette red, humming the chorus  
full-throttle, flat-out.

She's got a love like a matador

*If one looks down at the earth from the  
moon there is virtually no distance  
between the Louvre and the zoo.*

— Braco Dimitrijevic

At one point, while I'm deep in sleep  
she goes for water.

The lake is unpinned and sloshes in its bowl,  
what weather radio calls 'a front.'

I wake and, thinking she's gone for good

totter on the edge of the bed  
like a bull  
full of swords.

# John Lent / WILFRED WATSON AND THE SHIFT FROM MODERN TO POSTMODERN FORMS IN CANADIAN POETRY<sup>1</sup>

*For my sister, Susan*

1.

I begin with this poem by Wilfred Watson, written in 1966, and this diary entry by John Fowles, written in 1981, because there is a despair — in Watson's satire on the trendiness of art and the blindness of its contemporary audience, and in Fowles' attempts to hide the same sense of the futility of speaking out to a self-congratulatory, myopic liberal audience — that links the two writers precisely in that first artistic, organic wave of postmodernism that occurred in the decades during which Watson wrote most of his work, and which will help locate Wilfred Watson's voice in the aesthetic contexts of his own time.

What more did they want?

THEY MANAGED TO ENGAGE DANTE TO GIVE A VERSE READING AT  
THE YARDBIRD SUITE

What more did they want?

IT WASN'T AS IF HE HAD JUST CROSSED THE OCEAN IN AN OPEN  
ROWBOAT, SOMETHING WE DO ALL THE TIME

What more did they want?

IT WASN'T AS IF HE HAD JUST CLIMBED MT EVEREST OR  
ESTABLISHED

A BASE CAMP ON ANNA PURNA

What more did they want?

IT WASN'T AS IF HE HAD BEEN WORKING AS A SOCIAL SERVICE  
WORKER IN THE U.S. NORTH OR SOUTH OF THE U.S. NAVEL,  
AMONG THE BLACKS

What more did they want?

DID THEY EXPECT HIM TO LOOK LIKE LEONARD COHEN AND  
STAND BEFORE THEM NODDING A SILKEN UNICORN'S MANE? HE  
TOLD THEM HE HAD SPOKEN TO FRANCESCA

What more did they want?

HE TOLD THEM HE HAD SPOKEN TO THAT MAN BERTRAN DE  
BORN WHO CAME WALKING TOWARDS HIM CARRYING HIS HEAD

BY THE HAIR

What more did they want?

HE TOLD THEM HE HAD PUT HIS HAND IN THE MOUTH OF SATAN  
WHO AT THE CENTRE OF HELL WAS CHEWING BRUTUS AND  
CASSIUS

What more did they want?

DID THEY EXPECT HIM TO APPEAR BEFORE THEM WEARING THE  
MAGNIFICENT LION'S HEAD OF IRVING LAYTON? HE TOLD THEM  
HE HAD GAZED INTO THE EYES OF BEATRICE. HE DIDN'T SAY  
WHAT HE SAW

What more did they want?

DID THEY EXPECT HIM TO LOOK LIKE THE PORTRAIT OF YEATS BY  
AUGUSTUS JOHN? HE WAS PREMATURELY OLD

What more did they want?

HE TOLD THEM HE HAD CLIMBED DOWN LIKE A SPELUNKER INTO  
THE HOT BELLY OF HELL. DID THEY EXPECT HIM TO LOOK LIKE  
EDGAR ALLEN POE OR ROBERT CREELEY?

What more did they want?

I thought he looked like someone who had accomplished  
something.

There were those who thought he looked more like an ex-convict  
Than like a mystic.

WHAT MORE DID THEY WANT?

He had climbed up through purgatory. He had climbed up into the  
Highest heaven of paradise. Did they expect him to look like the  
Archbishop of Canterbury? He looked like a business man worn out  
With business

WHAT MORE DID THEY WANT?

He looked old and tired. He was not an unqualified success. Still  
Everyone agreed it was a good thing to have invited him to come  
To the Yardbird Suite

WHAT MORE DID THEY WANT?

— "lines 1966," Wilfred Watson

This is not a happy year. For weeks and weeks now I have woken up  
depressed, then gradually daytime 'normality' rescues me a little. . .  
it's more biological than political, a deep feeling that it is the  
selfishness of middle-class liberals that will finally end the human  
race. For years I have hidden my feelings here from my friends, half  
out of laziness, a quarter from never being able to argue on such  
matters face to face, a last quarter out of friendship — not being  
able to value truth above that. . . Most of them seem to me

biologically blind, there is no other word for it. Their lives, their views, their judgements, are all dictated by a deep longing to maintain the social and political status quo — that is, a world where ‘we’ and our friends still maintain our absurdly privileged status. Which is of course maintained and propagated ‘down’ from the elite, by all our media. All our ‘serious’ newspapers, the television channels, everything else (including the literary establishment) spread the same manure. . . or cultural hegemony.

—John Fowles

Wilfred Watson was a Canadian writer, a prairie writer, who could, as evidenced in the poem quoted above, seize a Swiftian sense of his times knowing full well that this particular kind of satire — broad and unrelenting in its attack and allusiveness — would go virtually unnoticed in Edmonton in 1966, written off in that decade as the eccentricities of a restless curmudgeon overpaid by the University of Alberta. The complexities of the literary forms he was engaging in then, in his poetry and his plays, really did hive him off as a presence in many ways even though it is difficult now, looking back, to find a Canadian writer whose aesthetics, and whose articulation of such aesthetics, was as advanced as Watson’s, particularly from the point of view of where Canadian poetics would *go* in the decades after his major work was completed. As Stephen Scobie wrote in 1981, “There is no other poet in Canada who writes like Wilfred Watson, and there are few who write as well” (283). Watson’s is a ‘lost’ voice, in the sense that, with a few exceptions like Scobie, it was never fully appreciated because it was never fully considered. It was, I suspect, too difficult and demanding a voice. Fowles’ reference to “hegemony” in the last line of his diary entry, moreover, links the two writers in another, significant way: Watson’s direct and full treatment of Gramsci aside, his poetry and drama push literary conventions against themselves, struggle consistently to break beyond that hegemony, especially in the way they take modern poetic forms and reach beyond them into postmodern forms. This is the precise territory I would like to examine in Wilfred Watson’s poetry. I hope to demonstrate this shift from modern to postmodern — more narrowly, the shift from temporal to spatial forms in his work — by



examining a few poems that indicate this shift: one from *Friday's Child*, several from *The Sorrowful Canadians* and several from *I begin with counting*. It is in this movement in form — from the temporal, linear formalism of the early work in *Friday's Child*, to the spatial, hybrid a-formalism of the later work in *I begin with counting* — that one can appreciate, in retrospect, how Watson was a model for younger writers who needed the confidence to reach for what he called “modular constructions” that suggest “multi-environments” and “multi-voices”: more contemporary notions of self and community.

## 2.

As the afternoon staggered on, the three groups became one as exhausted delegates slipped away to the Faculty Club to refuel for the conference's final event, the performance that evening of Wilfred Watson's play, *let's murder Clytemnestra according to the principles of Marshall McLuhan*. [Studio Theatre, 18 November 1969] The play space was the old Studio Theatre in Corbett Hall, the director was Bernard Engel, the set was flanked by two banks of television screens, and the actors were mostly students. I assumed at the time that the director's inspiration might have included “The Performance Group,” which had received international press the previous summer in New York doing “Dionysus in 69,” a play featuring nudity and interaction with the audience. . . [because Watson's play] tried as much partial nudity and interaction as was possible in what was still Bible Bill Aberhart's Alberta. A character called Samuela, for instance, was accurately described as “wearing very little make-up and very little of anything else.” As might be expected from a weary, but momentarily topped-up audience of critics and poets, the reactions were audible, rude, and frequently obscene. Near the play's climax, the actors worked up a hullabaloo of chanting and dancing and they obviously were under direction to mingle with and engage the audience. It was, for this particular evening, a mistake. I remember the near terror in Samuela's eyes as she struggled to remain in character and yet elude the questing hands of poets and critics alike.

— Morton L. Ross

Typically, Mort Ross is so damn funny here. He is recalling the infamous Canadian Literature conference held in Edmonton in

1969, "Poet and Critic '69 Poete et Critique." Convened to honour Dorothy Livesay's fortieth year as a poet, it included the writers D.G. Jones, Eli Mandel, Earle Birney, Bill Bissett, Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje, Barry McKinnon, Henry Kreisel, Stanley Cooperman, Ted Blodgett, J. Michael Yates, Rudy Weibe, Peter Stevens, Lionel Kearnes, Elizabeth Brewster, Stephen Scobie, Douglas Barbour and many others, including young and naïve graduate students like myself. It was a wild conference, full of feuds and bombast, even a counter-conference, but nothing about it was as outrageous as the flight of theatre-goers from Watson's play.

I still remember that exodus in detail because I could not understand why everyone was so upset. In his Modern Theatre class, Watson himself had introduced us to the work of Ionesco, Beckett, Sartre, Camus, McLuhan, Brecht, Durrenmatt, Frisch *et alia*. What he seemed to be trying to achieve in the play was admittedly absurd but definitely *in* the context of the parallel absurdities practiced by the writers mentioned above. I remember at the time thinking maybe the eighteen TV screens as vaginas was a bit over the top, but . . . the bottom line was the exodus itself, how deliberate it was, how mad everybody seemed to be. In retrospect, I think Ross provides the key: everyone was pretty loaded from the Faculty Club beforehand, and you don't want to witness the future in such a state. Visceral reaction had always followed Watson's work, so this exodus from his play would not have seemed unusual to him. Even his Governor General's Award-winning first volume of poetry, *Friday's Child*, selected by T.S. Eliot and published by Faber and Faber in 1955, had a blurb on the dust jacket that elicited a response from Northrop Frye. He noted that the blurb contained "the faintest trace of polite surprise that lyrical tones more highly organized than a buffalo's mating call should come from the windy plains of Alberta" (cited in Scobie). Isn't that great? Don't you love it? That's the way it *was* back then. That's what writers were up against in poetry, drama, even fiction.

Three years before I witnessed this generation of Canadian writers fleeing Wilfred's play, Watson had published a curious, hybrid piece on aesthetics in *Canadian Literature*, "The Preface: On Radical Absurdity," followed by his poem, "I Shot a Trumpet into My

Brain.” What fascinates me about his preface is the way in which, though Watson is focusing on the composition of his plays, he attempts to articulate this shift from the temporal to the spatial in narrative mentioned earlier, and, by extension, how this shift anticipates a move into what would later be identified as post-structural aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> He begins by arguing — out of his close association and collaboration with Marshall McLuhan — that artistic form is simply an “extension” of human consciousness, like a stick in a hand, a pair of stilts, a trumpet. He goes on to talk about what is radically different about twentieth century humankind — that is, the newly perceived complexity of all these extensions in consciousness itself. He refers to newly perceived “modes of consciousness” and calls these “a freedom not enjoyed by any previous civilization . . . so terrible a freedom that we don’t like looking at it . . . a freedom radically unlike any that mankind has yet known.” (“The Preface On Radical Absurdity” 36). He sees his own involvement in absurdist constructions as attempts to “celebrate” that freedom by building extensions of it that mirror its new complexities. Those constructions attempt to seize what Watson refers to here as “multi-environments” as opposed to the linear or temporal qualities of realist drama and poetry. He goes on to explain his method more precisely: these multiple environments are “collaged together.” He believed that constructions of this kind, built upon a recognition of the incredible play in modes and variables in human consciousness or subjectivity, and propelled by some notion of collage work (likely inspired by his and Sheila Watson’s fascination with the early work of Kurt Schwitters, 1887-1948), could create artistic forms, or extensions of consciousness, that would move the artist past what he saw as an impasse in modernist aesthetics:

I have perhaps given enough excerpts by way of example to suggest that the collaging together of two or more milieus makes possible a treatment of an absurdist theatre not altogether unlike but by no means identical with that modern theatre movement dominated by Camus’ sentiment of the absurd, where men and their questionings are answered by the blank meaningless world.  
— “The Preface on Radical Absurdity” 41

What I believe Watson is urging here is a more *direct* treatment of those “modes of consciousness” — the “wild body” of multi-consciousness — through the re-creation of the “multiple environments” of consciousness delivered by the juxtaposition inherent in collage, rather than the realist “sentiment” of those modes, only pointed at by “modern” constructions. In this shift towards a new kind of spatial composition, in his understanding of the principles of juxtaposition as the kinetics of narrative rather than the linear propulsion of conventional realism, Watson breaks into the notion of the spatial rather than temporal narrative, not unlike parallel breaks that would follow him a few years later: Margaret Laurence’s fierce struggle towards collage in *The Diviners*, Kroetsch’s wild and absurd canvas of juxtaposition in *The Studhorseman*, Ondaatje’s breakthrough use of it in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Listen to how prescient Watson is in this next paragraph about these issues of form; remember, too, he is writing this in 1966, long before the work of Barthes, Genette, Derrida, Foucault had been hauled into the discussion of these issues in North American art:

As I understand the new freedom, multi-media man has many worlds and many modes of awareness — as many in fact as he has media; and the significant thing is, these modes of consciousness are not unified by language, whether spoken, written or printed. This fact must, I believe, force upon us a new concept of the absurd. Formerly man could reason in a mode of awareness which was given him through language, but today man has many kinds of awareness, and to an increasing degree no two men are likely to have the same mix of the multi-consciousness available. Professor McLuhan has spoken of modern society as being without centres. Modern man has no centralized consciousness, he is off-centre, eccentric in a radical new way.

— “The Preface on Radical Absurdity” 41

Watson concludes by suggesting that this new field of multi-consciousness can be uniquely explored by “artists of great talent,” even claiming that “the social order of tomorrow will depend” upon them.



Looking back, I see that Watson captures in this short preface so much that would become the artistic battlefields of the decades of the '80s, '90s and this decade now, especially the key concept of the juxtaposition of panels of narrative as the central principle of composition in artistic attempts to represent or extend fields of consciousness, multi-consciousness, the infinite complexities of what Wyndham Lewis recognized as the "plastic" of subjectivity. Certainly, the progression of artistic forms in Watson's own work in the '60s and '70s, mirrors these concerns and methods directly.

3.

In 1980, Stephen Scobie wrote what still stands as the most illuminating gloss on the movement of forms in Wilfred Watson's poetry. "Love In The Burning City: The Poetry Of Wilfred Watson" was published in the Summer/Fall issue of *Essays On Canadian Writing*.<sup>3</sup> In his consideration of Watson, Scobie isolates the long shift from the mythopoeic, image-dominated poetry of *Friday's Child* to the surreal, multi-voiced, and generally experimental forms of the work in *I begin with counting*. Scobie is writing this essay at the end of the '70s, however, and does not have the benefit of the even further hindsight we have now. As a consequence, though he is so accurate in pin-pointing the shifts in question, he hesitates over where Watson is intending to go in his experiments, a hesitation we wouldn't have now. After examining carefully the "packed images" and mythopoeic, Frygian aspects of Watson's poems in *Friday's Child*, Scobie finds himself having to defend Watson's move into more open, experimental forms in the poetry that follows. He says, "In both Watson's subsequent books, however, the formal aspects are the first — and too often the last — things to catch the casual reader's attention . . . [they] run the risk of distracting attention from the poems themselves . . . they may seem like gimmicks, but in fact they're not . . ." (287). In order to draw his readers into an understanding of where Watson was attempting to go in these newer poems, Scobie raises three intriguing notions about composition: (1) he uses the word "modular," (2) he speculates that Watson writes "poems [that are] deployed spatially rather than temporally," and (3) he proposes that Watson develops "[poetic elements that]



interact as in a collage.” Each of these notions, as we can see from Watson’s “Preface,” is precisely correct, and we need not hesitate now in saying that Watson’s move towards spatial constructions in his poetry after *Friday’s Child* is simply his own artistic extension of the craft of poetry beyond the imagism and formal limitations of the modernist poem and into the multi-voiced, spatial constructions of postmodern poetry.

Let me begin by examining Watson’s poem, “Emily Carr,” from *Friday’s Child*. Note, as I’m reading it, its tight, incurled formality, its careful interweaving of Biblical and mythical allusion, its compressed, rhythmical phrasing, its boldness in attempting to complement the modernism of Carr’s vision. No wonder T.S. Eliot was drawn to these poems:

Emily Carr

Like Jonah in the green belly of the whale  
overwhelmed by Leviathan’s lights and liver  
imprisoned and appalled by the belly’s wall  
yet inscribing and scoring the uprush  
sink vault and arch of that monstrous cathedral,  
its living bone and its green pulsing flesh —  
old woman, of your three days anatomy  
Leviathan sickened and spewed you forth  
in a great vomit on coasts of eternity.  
Then, as for John of Patmos, the river of life  
burned for you an emerald and jasper smoke  
and down the valley you looked and saw  
all wilderness become transparent vapour,  
a ghostly underneath a fleshly stroke,  
and every bush an apocalypse of leaf

This is a strong, certain, closed set of images, delivered in an Eliot-like, Yeats-like, Dylan Thomas-like voice that moves towards that final, breath-taking but closed image. Its construction is tight, measured, sure; its voice absolutely certain of the cadence of its relentless direction — all journeyman-like aspects of British modernism in the lyrical poem. Now, watch these very features collapse and morph in “lines 1967,” the opening poem in *The Sorrowful Canadians*, written ten years later.<sup>4</sup>

lines 1967

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

There will be no more money for you

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dung

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

You will be one of the managers of automation

You will have no leisure at all

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

Scarlet ornaments for me to profane, her lips

But yet

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

You will sit at your desk trying to remain in

Charge

Est-ce tant que la mort?

But your function will be superfluous

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

There will be no more money for you

There won't be any credit cards, either

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

You will try to write scholarly articles in a

Popular style about the need to teach the

Dispossessed how to enjoy leisure

But

THERE WILL BE NO MORE MONEY FOR YOU

YOU WILL SIT AT YOUR DESK TRYING TO REMAIN IN

CHARGE

GAZING AT THE REPRODUCTION ON THE WALL OF

CHAGALL'S HORSE EATING A VIOLIN,

Tu ne mangeras plus.

The form and voice and vision have changed dramatically from the first poem. There is still a strong, rhythmic repetition or cadence in the voice, but otherwise, what we have here is almost hybrid. Aside from Watson's diabolical sense of humour, made relentless and obvious in the repetition itself, we have a poem that does not run on images, is not incurled, is not closed, but rather, has moved to a multi-levelled collage of situations and voices, of certainties and uncertainties, a crazy, almost surreal mix of the vernacular and the imperative — a poem as loose, as whimsical in some ways as Chagall's painting, a poem that is attempting to seize a vision that is more

complex, fragmented and/or eccentric than the vision the first poem moves towards. Here, moreover, the only logic that can be carried away from the poem is a logic driven by the gaps caused by the juxtapositions of voice and situations. The reader can't sit back and let the tight imagery wash over him or her as he or she might have in the first poem; here, the reader must engage in the juxtapositions and the field of logic those juxtapositions create. That is the true energy of this piece. Note the parallel effects in the title poem from this volume:

The sorrowful Canadians

The radiant grief of the owners of so much

Snow

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

Appals me

— THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

MAKES ME INTO A SORROWFUL  
CANADIAN

To have so much world in a world where men

Have so little

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

And to be grief's pig

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

And always blowing their noses

The sorrowful Canadians

With their bleeding fingers

North south east and west

In the bushes

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

Ou grouille une enfance bouffonne

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

Their flame

Gutted, gutting, leur chandelle triste

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

Lopsided, more tallow than wick or skin

THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS

What are they good for?

What have they done wrong?

Where did they get lost?

So much earth,  
Comme un excès de sang épanche tous les mois,  
THE SORROWFUL CANADIANS,  
What have they done to deserve this?

Here again, the juxtaposition of voice, tone, image, language, syntax and the strong rhythmic repetition of the title, present a multi-levelled, multi-voiced, multi-effects piece that is striving, again, for a satirical vision found only in the field of juxtaposition it has created. There is a sly informality in the voices, in the humour, that indicates a shift in Watson's poetry towards the vernacular, the informal, the playful, the eccentric: the postmodern.

This shift compounds itself in the poetry of *I begin with counting*. In this later volume, Watson breaks past the playfulness of *The Sorrowful Canadians* in two significant developments: first, he invents a way — beyond the graphic manipulation of fonts in *The Sorrowful Canadians* — to seize multiple voices by inventing what he calls “Number Grid Poetry,” and second, he moves farther and farther into the colloquial and intimate textures of everyday life by discovering a much more natural, ‘vernacular’ voice, reminiscent of the kind of voice that propels Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*, or the playful, laid-back voices that fuel some of the work of Dennis Cooley and bpNichol. These developments are startling if they are set against the form and voice that dominate *Friday's Child*.

Before examining several poems from *I begin with counting*, I need to draw attention to a typed key Wilfred Watson gave me and which he personally stuffed into as many copies of the NeWest Press edition of the book as he could get his hands on, worried as he was that readers would not be able to understand his number grids. Reading the key both illuminates the composition of these poems, but it also sheds light on their composition:

#### HOW TO WRITE NUMBER GRID POETRY

Traditional metrical verse counts syllables. Number grid verse counts words. The structural unit of traditional metrical verse is the “line.” The structural unit of number grid verse is the “number grid.” The number grid, like the line of traditional verse, can be varied endlessly.

I have developed a number grid using the numerals 1 to 9 with seventeen words according to the following rules:

*Rule One:* the numerals 1 to 9 are arranged to compose a grid like the ones in this book.

*Rule Two:* each numeral has two slots, except 9, which has one.

*Rule Three:* to compose verse, a word or compound word is placed in each of the numbered slots.

*Rule Four:* a poem can consist of one number grid or as many number grids as desired, the numerals 1 to 9 being repeated in each grid.

*Rule Five:* poems for two, three, four and sometimes five voices can be constructed by using double, triple, quadruple or quintuple grids.

## HOW TO READ NUMBER GRID POETRY

It's	1	very		
easy	2	to		
read	3	number		
		grid	4	poems
much	5	easier		
		than	6	learning
to	7	swim		
		or	8	to
9	ski			

Watson's new Number Grid constructions are astonishing in the play and flexibility they offer the writer, especially in three key ways: first, they allow the poet to whisper — (and here I have to say this is just me as another poet sounding out and reading Watson's voice . . . but it seems to me that the quiet, jocular whimsy of his voice has acquired the vernacular tone of softness, the way we'd talk to one another late at night over a beer . . . maybe it's the graphic presence of the numbers . . . maybe Watson simply grew his poetic voice past the theatrical voices in his plays . . . I don't know . . .) — second, they provide a spine of order and repetition that anchors the chaos of the material the poet is working, and finally, and most astonishing, they allow Watson to stack voices so that he can achieve what he must have thought of as the *impossible* previously: that is, juxtapositions



that occur *simultaneously* in the eye or ear — most successfully in the ear — of the reader/listener. This compression of the juxtapositions affects the spatial quality of these pieces directly in that it amplifies the *acoustics* of the poem so that the range of its multiplicity occurs unconsciously at first, rather than consciously in the mind of the reader/listener. This is, of course, difficult to explain. Let me try to demonstrate these effects.

In this first poem, “the theatre of the absurd of Adrienne Clarkson,” Watson meditates upon several issues and presents this meditation uni-vocally; there is no stacking of voices in this construction. But I hope you will hear both the urgent quiet quality in the voice itself, and register the acoustics of the elements that Watson has juxtaposed:

the theatre of the absurd of adrienne clarkson <sup>5</sup>									
	march	1	fifteen						
	1978	2	0607						
	hrs	3	wednesday						
				the	4	most			
	beautiful	5	water						
				is	6	often			
	only	7	a						
				stone	8	deep,			
9	or								
	calibrates	1	a						
	fractured	2	bed.						
	portrait	3	of						
				adrienne	4	clarkson,			
	the	5	noctambulist						
				beauty	6	of.			
	portrait	7	of						
				adrienne	8	clarkson			
9	as								
	a	1	one-armed						
	macbeth-lady	2	trying						
	to	3	rub						
				out	4	the			

spots	5	on			
			her	6	hand,
which	7	are			
			hers	8	and
9	ours [...]				

In the second poem, “peter kent smiles beautifully,” Watson has written the piece for three, stacked voices that present certain lines simultaneously according to their position on the grid. Of course, Watson is levelling his satirical eye on the misrepresentations and power of the television media, as he was as well in his portrait of Adrienne Clarkson as Lady MacBeth — that is the content of the poem — but here there is also a wonderful vertigo caused in the eye and ear of the reader/listener by the stacking and its simultaneity — the form of the piece. That vertigo, I suspect, is caused by an amplification of the acoustics of the poem intrinsic in the stacking:

peter kent smiles beautifully

		1	of			
		1				
the		1	snow			
		2	the			
death		2	smiling			
white		2	smile			
deadly		3	white			
		3				
of		3	peter			
				the	4	white
				death	4	smiling
				kent	4	
deadly	5		smile			
its	5		beautiful			
the	5		snow			
				of	6	peter
				bleached	6	bone
				white	6	teeth
kent	7		the			
white	7		grinning			
of	7		peter			
			beautiful		8	white

		peter	8	kent
		kent	8	smiling
9	teeth			
9	smile			
9	at			

Watson pursued his number grid poems in a wonderful and hilarious text, *Mass on Cowback*, published in a limited edition of 600 copies by Longspoon Press in 1982, and in the ‘riddles’ section of NeWest Press’ *Wilfred Watson: Poems Collected / Unpublished / New* (1986). As he pursued them, I believe he became more and more relaxed and confident in his methods.

#### 4.

Wilfred Watson played an enormous role in my own life as a young student, scholar, then writer. Through his classes, then his plays and poetry, Watson inspired us to be skeptical about the fixedness of received literary forms, and the dangers of falling victim to the then powerful imperialist influences of both British and American literatures. He had a much more European sense of aesthetics which was outrageous for the times we were living in because he himself was breaking new ground, not only in his plays and his poems — as obscure or demanding as they always were — but also in his collaborations with McLuhan, especially in their jointly written book, *From Cliché to Archetype*. I’m not sure that the ground he was breaking has ever been fully appreciated or recognized, and from that point of view I think of other Canadian prairie writers like Sinclair Ross and Howard O’Hagen who finally did receive the close scrutiny their work demands of us as a community. It is interesting lately to witness the rehabilitation of McLuhan in the light of post-structural theory. Maybe Watson will benefit from some of that interest. And other developments have been taking place that suggest interest in other quarters, too. In 1995, at the University of British Columbia, Stefan Haag completed a dissertation entitled “Allegories of the Postmodern: The Work of Wilfred Watson and R. Murray Schafer.”<sup>6</sup>

When I think of myself as this young, pathetically eager prairie student in the mid-sixties, Wilfred Watson was one of our most

exacting mentors in Edmonton, a person who *did* give us a confidence we might never have had without him, a confidence to venture into what we could call, only later, the ‘wild body’ of postmodernism. When I last visited Wilfred and Sheila Watson at their home in Nanaimo by the sea a year before both of them passed away, Wilfred took me on a tour of his patio where, everywhere it seemed, he’d hung these primitive masks that moved like soft chimes in the wind off the harbour. Right to the end, he was at play.

In closing, I would like to point out that NeWest Press in Edmonton produced two comprehensive anthologies of Wilfred Watson’s poetry, then plays: *Wilfred Watson: Poems Collected/Unpublished/New* (1986) and *Wilfred Watson: Plays at the Iron Bridge, The Autobiography of Tom Horror* (1989).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered at the University of Manitoba Conference, “The Prairies Lost and Found,” 23-25 September, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting, though, that the terms “postmodernism,” “structuralism,” and “post-structuralism” were not being used in the literary criticism of his time yet. He is writing this in 1966.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting, too, considering the people gathered together at this conference, twenty-four years later, that the other contributors and/or subjects of this issue of ECW included Dennis Cooley, Robert Enright, Peter Thomas, Robert Kroetsch, Peter Stevens, David Arnason, Eli Mandel, Patrick Lane, Andy Suknaski, E.F. Dyck, Alexandre Amprimoz, Daniel Lenoski, Patrick Friesen, Wayne Tefs, Douglas Barbour, Paul Denham, Lorna Crozier, Laurie Ricou, Don Kerr, Lyle Weis and others.

<sup>4</sup> I need to say that the text alternates in its fonts and the use of capital letters, and was hand-typed by Sheila Watson on an IBM Selectric, then published in the basement of the Watson’s house in Edmonton.

<sup>5</sup> For typescript information and emendations by the poet, see <http://bursar.sunsite.ualberta.ca:9030/cocoon201/archives/WWatsonb.series2>

<sup>6</sup> A dissertation on postmodernism, allegory and melancholy.

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## CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

DEREK BEAULIEU is former editor of *filling Station* and *dANdElion*, editor of special issues of *Whitewall of Sound* and *Open Letter*, and former editor/publisher of housepress (1997-2004). His books of poetry include *with wax* (Coach House, 2003), *Fragments from the Frag Pool* (Mercury, 2005), *fractal economies* (Talonbooks, 2006) and the co-edited *Shift & Switch: new Canadian poetry* with Jason Christie and angela rawlings (Mercury, 2005). He has performed his work and discussed poetics and community across Canada, the UK and the USA. He lives, with his young daughter, in Calgary where he is Administrative Director at The New Gallery, an artist-run centre.

SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN's first novel *What the Body Remembers*, the story of two women in a polygamous marriage in occupied India, received the Commonwealth Prize for Best Book (Canada-Caribbean). *English Lessons and Other Stories* received the Friends of American Writers prize. Her second novel, *The Tiger Claw* (Knopf Canada, 2004; Vintage Canada, 2005), inspired by the life of Noor Inayat Khan (codename: Madeleine), is the story of a Sufi Muslim secret agent who searches for her beloved through occupied France. It was a finalist for the Giller Prize. Other awards include the 1995 Writer's Union of Canada Award for short prose and the 1997 Canadian Literary Award. She is currently working on a second collection of short stories and a novel. More info can be found at [www.ShaunaSinghBaldwin.com](http://www.ShaunaSinghBaldwin.com).

VEN BEGAMUDRÉ writes fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry that can be realistic or speculative. "The Lightness Which Is Our World, Seen from Afar" is the title poem of his new book to be published by Frontenac House in the spring of 2006.

GEORGE BOWERING has published five collections of short stories, most recently *Standing on Richards*, published by Viking, 2004. In 2006, Talonbooks is publishing his baseball travel memoir, *Baseball Love*, and a collection of poems, *Vermeer's Light*. Bowering lives in Vancouver and is a former amateur softball player.

THEA BOWERING is a TA in Film Studies at the University of Alberta. She is working on a thesis focused on the female flaneur in contemporary Canadian and Danish fiction. Her prose has appeared in *The Capilano Review*, *Matrix*, *dANdelion* and *Latitude 53*.

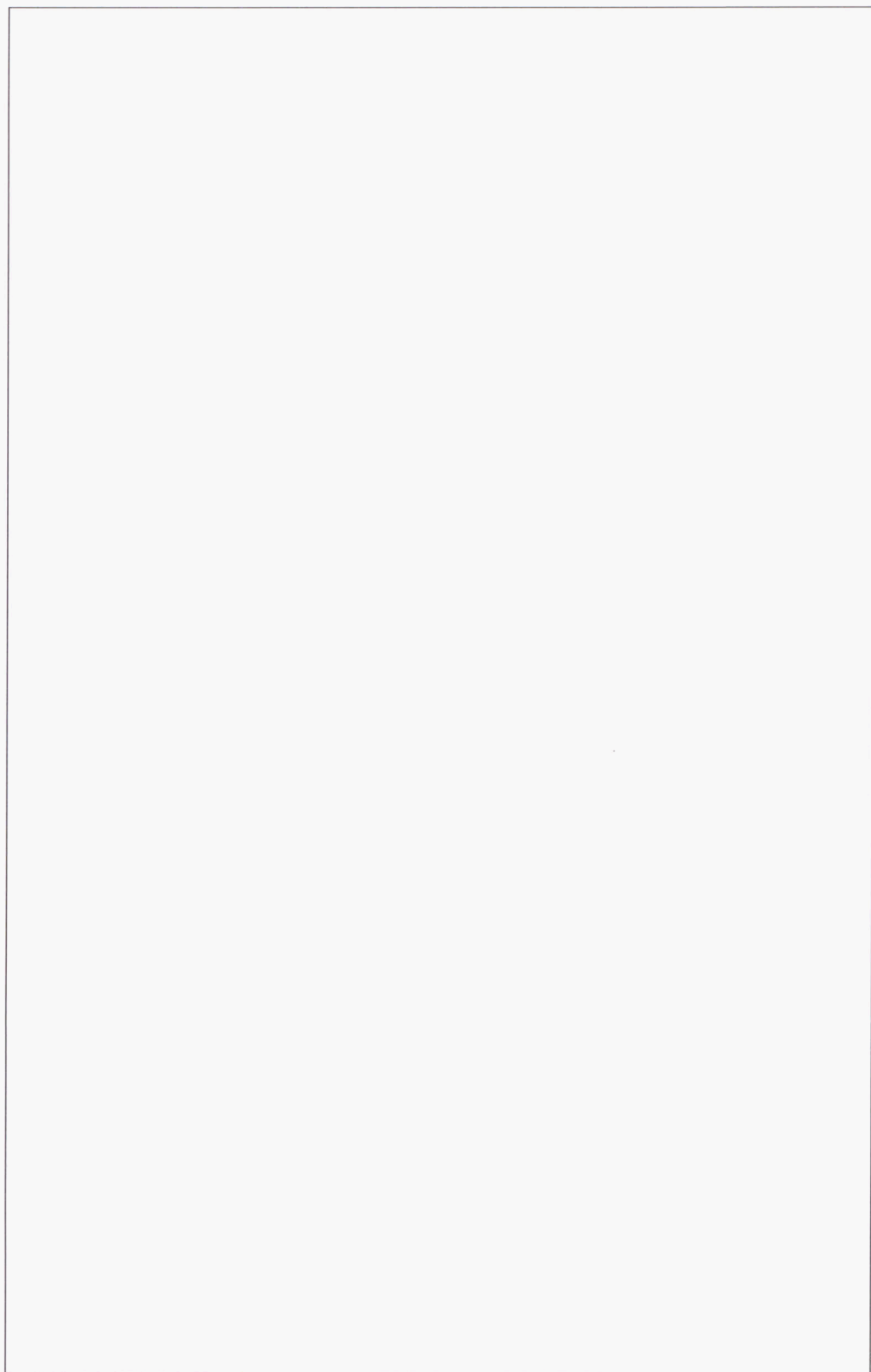
JOE DAVIES' short fiction is making its way into Canadian literary magazines including *The Antigoniish Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *Descant*, and *The New Quarterly*. Currently, he's working on a collection called *Something Like Life in Southern Ontario*. He lives in Peterborough, ON with his wife and three children.

JERAMY DODDS lives in Havelock, Ontario. His poems have appeared in a variety of international and Canadian journals.

JOHN LENT has taught Creative Writing and Literature at Okanagan College for the past twenty-five years. His seventh book, *So It Won't Go Away*, is a novel published by Thistledown Press in 2005. Other titles include *Monet's Garden* (1996) and *Wood Lake Music* (1982). Lent has written articles about Malcolm Lowry, Mavis Gallant, Kristjana Gunnars and Thomas De Quincey. He lives in Vernon, BC, with his wife, the painter Jude Clarke.

MARION LLEWELLYN was born in the U.K. and received a B.A. Honours from Manchester College of Art and Design. She has been a practicing artist and designer ever since. Her work has been shown in San Francisco, Portland, Montreal, and Vancouver.

Vancouver writer, DAPHNE MARLATT, is currently working on a third bio/novel, this one adding /poem to its genre slide. "out of the blue" in this issue is an excerpt from it, as was her Nomados chapbook, *Seven Glass Bowls*. she has recently begun a series of hybrid intertextual stories and is also collaborating with Robert Minden and Carla Hallett on a song for Tom Cone's Song Room series. her Canadian Noh play, *The Gull*, produced by Pangaea Arts with a cast drawn from both Canada and Japan, will be performed May 11-14 in Richmond. Daphne Marlatt was awarded The Order of Canada in February 2006.

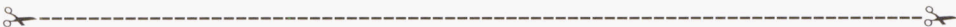


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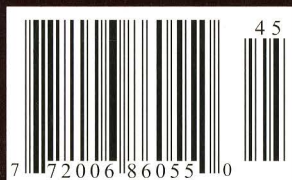
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