

THE
CAPILANO
REVIEW



TCR Series 2:8 ERRATUM Page 23

The last line of Bill Schermbrucker's story "Motor Therapy" should read as follows:

"no more than the bright surface of the pond and reflections of bare trees."

— Our apologies to the author

Teasing the exploded seed,
Which will never now know its own careful flowering

— R.W. Stedinger

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CONTENTS

<i>David</i>	5	Elizabeth Hay
<i>Motor Therapy</i>	14	Bill Schermbrucker
<i>Love Suite</i>	24	Robert Hilles
Five Poems	31	R.W. Stedinh
Three Poems	36	Evelyn Lau
Three Poems	42	David Michael Gillis
<i>Putti I - VIII</i>	47	Andrew Podnieks
<i>For the Six O'Clock News</i>	57	Carol Ashton
<i>Like Mother, Like Son</i>	66	William Goede

An Interview with Eugène Ionesco	79	
Preface	81	Dan Radu Munteanu
Interview	85	Eugène Ionesco Gabriel Liiceanu
Open Letter to Eugène Ionesco	103	Andrei Plesu
	109	Contributors
Detail from <i>Putti VIII</i>		Front Cover Andrew Podnieks
Detail from <i>Putti V</i>		Back Cover Andrew Podnieks

Elizabeth Hay/DAVID

The mail arrives with a letter from David. A barely readable envelope, and inside, a card with nothing on it, a handful of stamps, a smaller envelope with my daughter's name written on it and Brooklin, misspelled, and New York — petering out.

A photograph he took hangs above my desk. One of a series shot in Yellowknife of weeds in water, weeds in snow. This one is weeds in snow. The stems stick up like fine, precise calligraphy: stick legs, his legs, now.

Last spring he was very thin. He still limped but no longer needed a cane. The leg infection that “went crazy.”

“Why?” I asked.

A pause. And then, “I might as well tell you.”

Our conversation was on the phone. I saw him the next day, toyed with the idea of leaving my daughter behind, but it would have hurt him so much. And how could she have come to any harm?

“The hardest thing,” he said, “is to have so little energy.”

In the kitchen he washed his hands carefully. “They say that’s important. Not to let any dirt get under your nails.”

He called at 1:55 a.m. Alec answered. When he crawled back into bed I asked him what David had said.

“It’s all roses and hospitals here, so tell Lizzie to send me a rose. A rose is a rose is a rose. Send it to the children’s hospital, yeah, the children’s hospital. Or send it to a hospital there and I’ll get it quicker.”

“What else did he say?”

“He said he was walking with a cane and a rich couple in fur passed him, and he thought of you. I asked him how his mother was and he said, Fine — worried about me, I’m worried about me, I’m worried about my friends. They all think I’m dead. But I’m not dead. Then he switched to French. He said, I’m here in Toronto. No. I’m in Mexico. No, I’m in France. In Toronto. No. Mexico. I’m in Mexico. I bought a ticket. I’m going at Easter.”

"He was so brilliant," his mother said when we went to visit, and she burst into tears. "That's what's so hard. To see him now."

She hurried away so that he wouldn't see her crying.

Her insomnia keeps step with his. When he can't sleep he wanders around and changes everything in the house, writes on things, paints on them, cuts them up and pastes them to other things. And so she stays awake too. A month without sleep. Bringing us tea.

David said, "When I start to quarrel with my mother the answer is to go from one room into another."

In his bedroom pictures of us were on the wall: bathing our feet in the stream at Palenque, buying tortillas, climbing a ruin. Next to the pictures were several Mexican masks, a photograph of our hotel in San Cristobal, a Mennonite quilt, a child's drawing of a bone.

David sat down in a rocking chair and reached for a book about the artist, Joseph Beuys. He showed us two photographs of Beuys with a cane. "And my brother just happened to give me this the other day." A hat, almost exactly like Beuys's fedora. David put it on.

"It's almost too much," he said.

Then he put buttons, embroidery thread, pieces of scrap Christmas paper in a box already full of things he had saved for us. He threw in a handful of change. "Do something with them," he said.

We were leaving — David was lying down upstairs, we had said goodbye and were already in the driveway — when his mother hurried out and from the porch said to us in a low voice, "The painting. You should take it back."

One of my mother's paintings. David had asked to have it — a portrait of a bandaged torso. "I think it would heal me."

Now his mother was anxiously bringing it back out. "I'm afraid he'll draw all over it," she said.

I smelled Mexico so clearly a little while ago. Cuernavaca. The smell of the street where I first stayed. A dream from last night?

When David came to see us we took him to Chiapas. In the square in San Cristobal a woman sat on a bench with a wide bucket of meringue at her feet. Soft, white, shiny, sweet. In the morning David's breath was visible in the air when he leaned out the window.

David and I walked to Zinacantan. Coming down the hillside he

picked a pink thread off a bush and put it into his notebook. I noticed him noticing, which was how I noticed for a long time. We walked into the full colour of the village: the lipstick pink of tunics and shawls, the lighter pink of peach blossoms. Threads and petals were underfoot.

Pink knocked on pink: two girls at a door.

Pink stretched out on the grass: two men.

Pink stretched out on the floor: Maria's weaving. Was she working on it when we knocked?

We asked if she could make us something to eat, there was no restaurant in the village. Only tortillas and salt, she answered. Eggs? Yes, she could make eggs. She sent her younger brother off to buy them while we waited inside the little house.

Her eyes were bad, she told us. She was 18.

"Would glasses help?"

"We don't wear glasses."

"Why?"

"We don't."

"Custom?"

"Yes," she said.

Later she showed us wedding pictures of her older sister, and her brother. He wore glasses.

We sat on the only two chairs, David and I, with a low narrow table between us. Maria brought sweet coffee, and questions. Is it colder in Canada than here? How do they make houses? What do they eat? Can you live on wheat? Here, she said, people are strong eating corn, and they say in Europe and North America people grow fat on bread.

"Are you married?" she asked. We smiled, no.

And then, "How old are you?"

"Guess David's age," I said.

"Fifty," she said.

I laughed but David was shocked. At the time I thought it was vanity, and it surprised me.

David was reading a book set in Mexico in 1932. An Indian died and his family put tortillas in his coffin. They wet his lips several times for the long journey.

Outside Chamula we walked through the cemetery on the hill. I

jotted down all the different spellings for died: fallecio, fallesio, fahecio, failecio, facio. Small crosses were painted black, or white and blue, the lettering was crude.

For over a year David had already had deep and vicious boils that wouldn't go away. The leg infections that eventually "went crazy."

One afternoon while he slept outside in a hammock, Alec and I made love in the tent and conceived our daughter. I've always thought of David as her guardian angel. Death? As a guardian angel?

• • • •

A valentine from David. I open the envelope and hearts fall out, keep falling out. Ten of them cut from fluorescent orange and pink paper, from regular red and white paper, and from a snapshot. Cut rather crudely. They make my eyes swim.

In fact, only nine. The tenth is the torn corner of the red envelope.

Also a poem.

MY HEART BROKEN

BY MY CANE

LET'S YOU AND I TALK ABOUT MATISSE.

We were driving through snow listening to jazz. In a warm car, warmed by jazz, listening to snow. And now I'm in a hot bath and Coleman Hawkins continues in the other room. Thirty-two hours of him on the radio.

Eskimos listened to jazz in the twenties. Rasmussen came upon an igloo where they were starving, and fed them. Then he watched as they produced a gramophone and told him "in sober earnest" that jazz was as soothing to a full stomach as it was comforting to an empty one.

Hot music in a snow house.

Matisse — in my house. Cards from his series called "Jazz" decorate the walls; the full colours of hunger satisfied. I send one to David.

In the months when David suspected he had AIDS but before he knew for sure, he made a series of drawings using black ivory pigment made from burned bones. He set up a tent in his studio, laid pieces of

paper inside, used a bellows to blow in the pigment, and allowed it to settle on the paper. He drew on the dust with his fingers. He said he wanted the drawings to resemble the marks left in snow on a tranquil day.

A few years ago we walked over to Broadview and Gerrard and went into three Chinese groceries. We looked at bowls and talked about ways of containing loneliness. David said it would be a struggle not to become isolated, I would have to fight. He advised me to fill my days as full as possible by having friends over and by going to visit.

He reached for a can of lichees. "You've eaten them?"

"No."

"Well," he said, "we'll have to eat them in these green bowls," reaching for two, "because the colour of the lichees against this green is beautiful."

We made our purchases and walked to his apartment where he opened the can of lichees, washed the two bowls, spooned in the fruit. The lichees were white against the green. I told him why Keith and I had separated. He was surprised, and not surprised.

His apartment was orderly in a sensual way. In the kitchen a wooden shelf ran along the counter just above the sink. On the shelf sat other Chinese bowls, and above them — a photograph of clay pots arranged against a wall in Pompeii; the bowls echoed the pots in the photograph.

In the hallway I looked at his photograph of an old house in Quebec. He pointed out the precise use of white: the lacy woodwork on the double screen doors was white, but the doors had been left a weathered gray; the posts at the side of the steps were white, but the steps and the verandah were gray. The effect was considered, restful.

Luxurious, like cream. David said he needed cream for the sauce he planned to make. We walked to a store, and he asked me to get the cream while he ordered the meat at the counter. I was slow, comparing prices. When I reached for the 18 percent David was already beside me taking the 35 percent. He smiled, "Why not?" So we had the richest of sauces.

As we ate I looked at the reflections in the window beside us: the lamp hanging low over the middle of the table, the bottle of wine, our profiles. The wind blew and the branch of a scotch pine brushed

against the window. We were four floors up. David had chosen the three most beautiful discarded Christmas trees on his block, carried them home, wrapped a rope around the trunks, and hoisted each one up to his apartment balcony. He built three bases for them, and set them upright alongside his window.

Some time after my marriage with Keith ended, David said to me, "I've been thinking a lot about colour. It's so intimate. Like you and the *rubrum lilies*."

"You mean the wedding bouquet?"

"Yes. We cut them and arranged them and handled them. It's very intimate."

We had done this the night before the wedding. I had cut the flowers in the garden and taken them over to David's apartment where he made them into a bouquet.

"The colour," he said, "with your dress. I remember your dress being mostly gray and the colour of the lilies set it off."

We cut the stems and held the flowers this way and that, our hands touching, till we settled on the final arrangement.

David continued to talk about flowers — he had brought five sprigs of freesia and we smelled them over dinner — and that was intimate too. Next to each other, conversing, next to the flowers.

"He's not here," his mother says when I call. "He's in Toronto and he's in a lot of trouble. Last night he demolished Stephen's apartment, and tonight he's supposed to stay with Eric — I don't know whether you know him — and he hasn't got any money because he lost his wallet."

"What do you mean demolished?"

"Well, he demolished a lot of things around here too. He paints on everything, spills paint everywhere — because," she says, "he just wants to paint."

Stephen said months ago that he couldn't deal with David anymore. He said that one night David had talked nonstop without taking a breath for seven hours. All of it nonsense. Brain damage. Memory loss. Unable to tell the time. Unable to count. Therefore unable to take his own medicine.

He would get up in the middle of the night and frantically write notes to himself, none of them legible. Demand to be waited on hand and foot. Insist — for four hours — that the colour television was no good and they had to buy another.

One night Stephen called friends over to help because he couldn't "settle him down," and "as soon as they stepped in the door he was as good as gold." The minute they left, "He was pounding on my door again and I knew I'd be up with him till four in the morning."

Stephen put David on a bus to Owen Sound. He called David's parents to tell them he was coming, and they pleaded with him to wait a day until they could come and get him. Stephen put him on the bus anyway. David — not knowing where he was — got back off, wandered around, soiled himself, finally got hold of a friend by phone who came and picked him up.

After David "demolished" his apartment — upsetting drawers in his desk, pulling books off shelves — Stephen had the lock to the apartment changed. This was the apartment he and David had shared for seven years.

David can still write postcards and short letters, though after writing one his hands are very tired.

"What do they feel like?"

"A thousand pins and needles."

He says he can't move "except with a cane and a wall." Sleep is very difficult because his legs go into painful spasms — they're always jumping — and that wakes him up.

Stephen is bedridden, he tells me. And his mouth and throat are so full of thrush that he can't talk. "Or so his mother says."

"You don't believe her?"

"I don't know. She's cut him off from everybody."

"You think she's trying to keep you from talking to him?"

"Or maybe it's just Stephen. He's cut himself off. He'd be one to do that. And you know, I love him, but I'm ready to move on. And you know what I'm ready to move on to?"

"What?"

"A relationship with a lady. I already have someone in mind — but she's not available."

I go through the box of things David saved for us: a picture of a hummingbird torn from a magazine, buttons, a small tourist pamphlet of a church in Alsace, clump after clump of embroidery thread, a scrap of tie-dyed material, fuchsia and white, two knitting needles, a piece of lace, a package of hooks and eyes, a notebook written in backwards and upside down. The only words I can make out are To Stephen, and Nose Knows. Colour samples for paint: tangerine, vienna blue, peacock green. A postcard addressed to Sochi Elizabeth Jean Hay. More lace, two whistles, a pink balloon, shoelaces, a stamp from Cuba, one from Vietnam, one from Laos.

He calls to tell me that Stephen has died. "Me next," he says.

"What did David say?" Alec asks.

"Just that Stephen died yesterday, and me next."

The distance on the telephone — 700 miles — and the distance of my reaction, I know. David's quiet voice.

"He isn't able to go upstairs anymore," I say. "He's confined to the first floor now. His feet won't move."

More samples: van gogh yellow, garnet red, pink casino, billiard green, firmament.

A crochet needle.

"Make use of them," David kept saying. "Do something with them."

I write to Stephen's mother. In addressing the envelope I put down, unthinkingly, Stephen — then white it out.

When David was small he took the dry turds out of his diaper and lined them up in a perfect row on the windowsill. As a young man he made a series of drawings by puncturing large sheets of paper with a sewing machine. In other drawings he scored lines with the blade of a meat cleaver. In some there were barnacle-like holes.

"Bullets," he said.

At the Scarborough shooting range he pinned sheets of paper on the wall and two policemen shot holes in them. They used 33 calibre rifles in order to make pencil-sized holes.

"Were they interested?" I asked. "Curious?"

"No, the only thing one of them said was, 'Let's try a shotgun'."

The drawings were so peaceful and intimate. How can this be? I wondered.

Down the street in a friend's studio three photographs hang on the wall. They show a dead dog lying in a woods, the fur dusted with snow, then covered lightly as though with wax, then covered completely. A burned down candle — soft, splayed out — a puddle with just a bit of height. Softly burning snow, snow softly burning in a dead dog candle.

The dog must have been hit by a car, and dragged itself into the woods to die.

I reread a letter from David.

"Dearest Liz,

The garden out the window is exquisite, we've been getting rain. Early morning light makes it so beautiful. The cat is lying on the deck washing himself.

The AIDS disease now has me crippled up to my waist plus my hands are partially useless. Still try and draw a little but it's next to impossible. Cat fell asleep. Sunshine.

Raspberries have been abundantly ripe in my sister's garden. (He draws a raspberry and shades it red.)

The hibiscus on my desk is in bloom. Exquisite colour — coral."

Bill Schermbrucker / MOTOR THERAPY

I met Maxwell Eastman in 1972, in the library of Tonawanda Community College, Lockport, N.Y. I remember this big guy in a denim shirt getting up to shake my hand, and holding it as he looked into my face with soft, marbled blue eyes. His teeth showed beneath his smile, his face a bit fat, mustache curling below his lips. His suede jacket seemed to smell faintly of marijuana. Within the first sentence or two, he laughed.

My wife and I had driven across the continent from Vancouver B.C., for a year's teaching exchange. I was 34, with long hair and a black beret; Christina was 19, in faded jeans, yellow gorilla stompers and a skimpy halter top that drew men's eyes. We'd been warned there were no apartments in Lockport, but we hadn't believed it. So we were stuck in the Crittenden Motel on Route 93, until Max offered us a room in his apartment, and we became friends.

Ask in Lockport today, and they will tell you we developed a special friendship, not entirely understood. Attraction of opposites? Not that simple. I think of my hat: Before we left Lockport to come home, the four of us went for a walk one day, and Christina suddenly reached up and took my old Kenya Regiment hat off my head and put it on Max's.

"What? Is this for me?" he said.

"Yes," said Christina.

"Really?"

"Of course!" I said, as though we had prearranged it. Actually, that hat was the one Kenyan thing I'd held onto, and Christina's giving it away on impulse shocked me. It took a while, but now I'm glad she did. Other events have superseded the giving of the hat, and anyway it suited him. Three years ago, when Max lay in delirium on his sickbed in Buffalo, I got the message to phone him. His daughter answered guardedly, "May I ask who's calling?" I said my name and she cried, "Oh thank God!" with a burst of emotion that quite astonished me.

That afternoon in 1972, Christina and I moved in to Max Eastman's two-bedroom apartment on the upper floor of a house in a gas station. We lugged our stuff up, and I said, "Max, what are all these dead flies doing in the stairwell?"

"Aren't they something?" He laughed his deep, prolonged chortle, and that's when I knew we would be friends.

Max cooked, and I drove out and bought some good wine. When dinner was ready, Max lit candles and put on the record player. "You know Tom Rush?" he asked, and we shook our heads. "Listen to this."

We paid attention to the words of "No Regrets." Outside, traffic was an occasional swish of air. Inside, the candle flames glowed ruby in our wineglasses. As the song ended, I saw that Max was crying.

"What's the matter, Max?" Christina asked.

"Gaad!" He sniffed deeply. "I'm sorry."

We talked about relationships gone wrong: his divorce, his three children living in Buffalo with their mother; my divorce, my three children. "Just about everybody I know's divorced," Max said.

"Not I!" said Christina.

"Yeah," said Max. "Here's to love!" He clinked his wineglass with ours, and Tom Rush began singing Joni Mitchell's "The Circle Game." We talked till we were all exhausted. A channel of intimacy opened that night, and never closed.

We stayed a month with Max, then moved to a house in Millersport. Sunday mornings, Max and his girlfriend Valerie would come for cream scones and strawberry jam. We went to restaurants in Buffalo, art galleries, concerts, movies. The next May, our house owners returned from Florida, and by then Max had moved into half of an old brick farmhouse on Albion Road, and he invited us to spend the last month there. Sometimes the four of us would walk out back around the woodlot and pond, throwing sticks into the grass for the dog. Sometimes, Max and I would go and help John Yeoman, the farmer, with barn chores. The old man was not keen to have us around his cows, but one day he let me carry a bucket of milk across the slippery floor to the churn, and Max congratulated me with a wink. We invited Max and Valerie to visit us in Vancouver, the following summer. In the CN station, suddenly, there was my Kenya Regiment hat coming down the platform. We rented a cabin up at

Lac Lejeune and went fishing. At a gas station I picked up a red plastic gallon can, and exclaimed at the price. Max took the can out of my hand and paid for it. When they went home, I was surprised at my feelings. We had been in agreement on all the issues, from Watergate and the bombing of Cambodia to Trudeau's Just Society. But on the little stuff we fought. Should we take the short cut or the scenic route to Lac Lejeune? Go out to eat or stay home? Which movie? More than once I said privately to Christina, "Christ I'll be relieved when Max goes home!" But at the airport, watching his big, broad shoulders move away, still smelling his hug, I felt a pang.

Some letters passed between us. Little things would remind me of him. Once, Tom Rush came to town on my birthday, and Christina took me to hear him. "Play 'No Regrets'!" I called several times from our table in the dinner-theatre, and Tom Rush scowled at me, but at the end he announced, "This is for a friend," and plucked his guitar, and sang in his deep voice:

I know your leaving's too long overdue

For far too long I've had nothing new to show to you...

Afterwards, I found a phone booth. It was midnight here, three in the morning in Lockport, and I could hear thunder raging.

"You always seem to call when there's a storm," Max said.

"Did I wake you up? I should have waited till morning."

"Do what's in your heart!" he said. "I'm truly glad you called."

He did not tell me then that he had broken up with Valerie. I didn't tell him that Christina and I were having difficulties. Once, I went to Toronto for a conference, and took an extra day and visited Max in Lockport. We ate a meal, and filled one another in on the latest news. A year later Max phoned, and said he wanted to come out again to Vancouver, with Sonia, Valerie's best friend, who worked in the library with him. Oh brave new Me Generation, what a carousel!

We caught the ferry to Victoria, and the Butchart Gardens. We took my boat up Indian Arm. We dived into the clear water, and I remember his great shout of protest at the cold when we broke surface. Back in the house, we lived, as always, in the kitchen, drinking wine and telling stories. Then they were gone.

Year after year, why did we make those long hauls across the

continent, to plonk ourselves down across the table, only to start bitching? Could one not talk into the night and take day trips with somebody who lived closer? Oh Maxwell, you and your stubborn refusal to overlook any unresolved emotional issue! All your touchy-feely crap, right down to those haiku you went and wrote to reconcile yourself to dying:

A pear, mostly green
Sitting in the winter sun.
Through a door, the snow.

The flute speaks no words
But says that happy and sad
Are close together.

All due respect, my friend, but horseshit! How about some "rage against the dying of the light"? There is no opposing presence here to say my thoughts are wrong.

When Max and Sonia got married, they took sailing lessons, and used her parents' cash gift to buy a 25' sailboat they called "The Runcible Spoon." When I visited, we drove up to Lake Ontario to see it. Max seemed confident about sailing. "Sh!" he'd say, turning up the car radio. "Let's get the weather. Maybe we can sail up to Toronto."

Propped up on land for winter storage, "The Runcible Spoon" seemed a pretty substantial vessel, but I was glad when Sonia wrote later to say they'd sold it and bought a grand piano. I arrived one day on a surprise visit, hitch-hiked out to Yeomans' and was walking up the driveway, when I heard piano notes coming from the house. It was early spring, and the stench of manure in the cold air cut my nostrils, taking me back to childhood on African farms.

I opened the rickety side door, without knocking.

The Bach minuet abruptly stopped, and Max called out, "Who's this?"

"Hi Max."

He entered the kitchen, and stood for several seconds with his eyes widening and closing. He looked pale.

"What's going on?" I asked, at the kitchen table, but he resisted an answer. Then, he latched onto a thread and began telling me,

frowning, how he had gone to start his car, and it wouldn't turn over. He called the Head Librarian and said, "Maureen, my car's dead, I'm not sure when I'll be in." A few minutes later Maureen called back to say she'd spoken to the Dean, and Max was to take sick leave and get some help.

"So.... How long does this disability leave last? Have you gotten help?"

"Gaad, Alistair, I've been sitting here for four days, helping John with the chores, practicing piano and guitar."

"Let's go to New Hampshire," I said. "See Jed."

"I would *love* to see Jedediah," Max said. "But the College?"

"Not to worry," I said. "I'll call Nathan and tell him I'm taking care of it. He can tell the Dean."

I phoned my old ally in the English Department at TCC. I called Vancouver, and arranged for a colleague to cover my classes. We left a note for Sonia saying when we'd be back. As we climbed into his Saab, Max asked, "What did you tell Nathan?"

"I told him the doctor has prescribed motor therapy for you, and I am giving you a hand."

For the first time that day, Max laughed.

"How about the old road to Utica?" I said. "Then up through the Adirondacks."

"That'll take forever," he said.

"It's got to be the going, not the getting there, that's good."

"Harry Chapin," Max said, and laughed again. "Motor therapy! 'The doctor has prescribed motor therapy!'"

"Hey! My PhD. finally pays off!"

At first we spoke little. The sun was bright, the car ran well, and I felt the excitement of skipping out. But soon we were locked in argument. He told me that since his marriage to Sonia, his daughters wouldn't visit him. His son, yes, but not his daughters. He took them out for hamburgers.

"That's weird," I said. "Is it a Catholic thing?"

"What do you mean 'weird'? Why do you say 'Catholic'? Gaad, Alistair, you're one abrasive son of a bitch!"

"Look," I said, "children have their own lives. They notice what their parents *do* for them. They're not interested in reasons."

"What are you saying?"

I felt good because he was fighting. Earlier, in his kitchen, his face had opened and closed helplessly. Now, his grip on the wheel was firm, twisting back and forth. What is our life anyway but a continuous conversation, sometimes easy and sometimes not? We were arguing whether or not to go via the Ticonderoga ferry, when he suddenly cried "Shit!" whether at something in the road, or a missed appointment, or a spasm in his back muscles, I don't know. But I felt his energy then.

At Jed's house in Concord, we drank wine and talked late. Emily, Jed's wife, excused herself and went to bed. I asked Jed about his arrangements to have his daughter by his first wife come from England for a visit. Jed was evasive.

"Your daughter's *got* to know your feelings about this, Jed," I said. "No point pussyfooting around it: the mother thinks the ex-husband is nothing but an asshole, and so will the child. You've got to act to counter that impression."

Jed frowned.

"Alistair you're a fascist!" Max cried. "Jed's gotta do this, I gotta do that, my daughters have gotta come to my house."

"What's this?" Jed asked, and Max explained.

"*I* can understand that!" Jed said, his deep moral voice, sounding incongruously like Richard Nixon. "*I* can understand that Max's daughters might feel protective of their mother and not wish to come to the house of his new wife."

"What if they say no," Max asked. "Do I kidnap them?"

"People don't live forever," I said. "How long can you afford to postpone these relationships? Your eldest girl is what, sixteen?"

"*Sixteen!*" cried Jed. Clearly he had been thinking she was six or eight.

A look of disappointment came over Max's face. His unexpected ally had deserted. "Let's talk about something else," he said.

"Wait!" Jed insisted. "Let's see what the expert says."

I thought he was going to wake Emily, but he came back holding a letter. It was from me. He read out a paragraph in which I told Jed how one day my eldest son had preferred to work with his stepfather rather than come camping with me, and I had stood with my son on

the lawn and said, "Do whatever you decide to do, without apology to anyone."

I took the letter from Jed to read.

"Now Al-istairr," Jed said, imitating the Old Man we taught under in Africa, "Al-istairr, I want you to apologise to Max. Tell him his children can do whatever they want. Without apologizing to anyone. Including you!"

"Son of a bitch!" I said.

Around 3 a.m., when I lay down to sleep on the foamy under Jed's chipped grand piano in the study, I looked across, and saw Max Eastman lying totally relaxed on his back, with the Kenya Regiment hat on his head.

When Max next arrived in Vancouver, alone, my son Colin and I got into a shouting match at supper. Max scraped back his chair: "I wanna know just *where in the hell you think you get off*, telling me how to deal with my children, when you yell at your own son like that!"

"Colin can keep his end up," I said.

"That doesn't make it any less sick!"

After Max went home, my son told me that as they walked to the store together for ice-cream, Max said to him:

"Listen, Callin, here's my number in New York, and if you ever need to call, call collect."

Another year, driving from Boston to Toronto, I called Sonia at TCC from the Thruway. I knew they had split up. She told me how to get to the property Max had bought in Millersport. "Good for you, Max!" I cried, as I entered the greenhouse he was renovating to live in.

He took me out back to walk through several acres, wooded and leafy, with a pond. It was alive with birds and small animals. Then he put me to work stapling pink insulation to the walls.

"What made you suddenly decide to buy a piece of property?" I asked.

Max sat down and sighed. His big face started going through a succession of frowns and relaxations, and I thought I was going to get some Buddhist stuff. Instead he said:

"Nodal lymphoma."

"Cancer?"

"Yes."

"Well.... Are you going to let it kill you?"

He laughed. "No," he said. "I'm not thinking about dying."

After supper, and my latest stories from Vancouver, Max said, "You remember when you came, and I was depressed, and we visited Jed?"

"Motor therapy?"

"Yeah. You remember how I sometimes put on events in the library? Well, I put on this show of paintings by a local artist. We hung it, there was an opening, lunch-hour talk, visits from classes, so on. Afterwards, I realized *nobody* said *anything* to me about that show, good or bad. It was as though it never happened. Apparently, it made not a jot of difference to anybody's life. Not one single person. That was a very strange feeling."

"That's when —"

"Next day, the car wouldn't start."

In the summer of 1986, Max came to Vancouver for Expo. He stayed in our rec room, and spent time in meditation. He reestablished his bond with my son Colin, whose new name, Chuck, he accepted without a qualm. I was preoccupied, writing a book. By the time I took him to the airport, several visits had blurred into one, and I thought of him as a fixture.

Two years later, my new wife Laura and I rented a cottage on Skaha Lake, for a water-skiing holiday. On impulse, I called Max in Millersport, and invited him to join us.

"Water-ski? Gaad, Alistair, there's nothing I'd like better. Maybe I can come."

"Come!"

"Well. I might not be able to."

"What's the matter?"

"Well, shit, the thing has come back."

"*Drive* it away, Max. Water-skiing is so beautiful. Think about ballet man, just gliding over the water."

"I'll let you know," he said.

Jed called me a few days later to say Max was sick. Then Max called and said he definitely could not come water-skiing.

"Look," I said, "you told me once that you were not going to let this thing kill you. So just come!"

I handed the phone to Laura, and heard her say, "It doesn't help when people are denying."

When she hung up, she said, "Nobody's denying it around there. His daughter has quit her job to be with him. The whole family's there. He's at his first wife's place."

"Therese's?"

"Yes."

"Where's Sonia?"

"She's there all the time."

I tried to absorb this information while I slept.

In the morning, I said: "Max Eastman is such a one for feelings, you know, theatre of the self. He'll spend a year at this, people round his bedside, Anthea quitting her job, dramatic phone calls."

"Call and tell him!"

"No. If he decides to live, he'll fly out here."

Next night, when I got home, Laura said Jed had called, and would call again at 9. I ate supper and waited. Jed sounded shook-up. He was on the road home from visiting Max in Lockport, and finding it difficult to drive.

I said sternly, "You've done what you can. Life's for the living, man. Concentrate on getting home. Tomorrow you can write your feelings down."

Early next morning, Max Eastman died. At the end of the week, Sonia phoned us, and later sent a copy of the memorial service, including Max's four haiku. Jed wrote his letter. He thought it was too raw, but after a month he sent it. He described Max lying in an overheated room, naked on a sheepskin, recognizing people who leaned in to tell the dying man they loved him. He cried for music, and they put on Vivaldi. "No," he demanded, "rock and roll!" so they put on a Dylan record. But it had barely begun, when he shouted "Stop it! Take it off!" Although he was terminally weak, he was anxious to hear what people had to say to him. He listened attentively to their voices in the room, and on the phone.

"The pavement seemed straighter, flatter, blacker on the drive home," Jed wrote. "All the dimensions of life seemed to withdraw from their loveliness. Hot sun, black pavement, people running around...all seemed remotely bizarre; the cars, the people, the traffic lights, the

bricks and mortar and tin and sticks that people have erected.... All terribly silly, vain, and of no real importance."

Early next spring, I made it to Lockport once again. Sonia put on her camel-hair coat and took me out to Max's former property in Millersport. As she drove, she confessed, "You know, Alistair, when we had the boat, and Maxwell would be listening to the weather to see if we could go out across the lake, I always prayed it would be stormy!" She laughed, and sniffed back a tear. I took her hand and held it for a moment, and then we drove on.

At Millersport, we asked permission of the young man who lives there now to walk in back to the pond. There was a derelict wooden straight chair in the snow, overgrown with grass, facing the water. We stood beside it in silence.

"This is where we scattered his ashes," Sonia said. "Oh look!" she touched my arm. "They are still there."

I saw. Lying under water on decaying leaves, there was a little, irregular deposit of bone pellets. I took a picture. But the print shows no more than the bright surface of the pond and reflections of bare

Robert Hilles / LOVE SUITE (for Rebecca)

1

I borrowed your eyes
last night and
I walked through the
house wearing them
fresh air entered
my lungs and my hands began
to open to learn tenderness.
Colours were strange
not at all what I was prepared for.

You rose from the couch.
I saw my eyes looking back at me
cold and unsure.

We climbed the stairs together
and went to bed separately.
In the morning, it was
my own eyes I looked out
from and was afraid.
I saw that the colours and sights
that I had once loved
belonged only to my eyes.
I stared out a window and knew
close as we are,
only with our own eyes
can we see our deaths
waiting
small landmarks on the horizon.

2

I take care to linger
on the places you
have told me to.
You close your eyes
and I like that.
I know your face and yet
I do not know it each time
it is completely new to me

You watch me undress
say nothing listen perhaps
for a wind outside.
I stand naked.
You smile and take my hand
I smile too my fingers
already finding power.

Everything surprises me.
The way you use your mouth,
the way moonlight finds our bodies
no matter where we lie on the bed,
the way the trees outside
seem to watch us,
our eyes following
the other's even when
they are closed,
the way your fingers

seem to be where I want
them, the children
do not call out until our love making
is finished and we lie together
thinking of them each alone in
their small rooms,
the way you get out of bed
and stand above me as if
you wanted to see how
I looked when alone.

3

I enter the kitchen
you have placed a rose
in a cup near the sink.
It doesn't surprise me that
its scent fills everything
I touch for the rest of the day.

When I think of you I
do not think of flowers,
the smell of morning
after a night of light rain,
nor a sweet cloud of perfume
that passes my office,

or the full blue dress
that hangs on the door for
the morning, the warm body
I hug when I wake in the middle
of the night or the bath water
that holds you softly as I
would like to, nor the pronounced
form of your crotch in blue jeans
although all those things
remind me of you.

I think you are
unlike the person I think
of, you take my hand
when I am tired and can no
longer think straight,
you move your hair from your face
and stand there important
as anyone can be.

4

Sometimes after making love I look
at the moon how small
we are beneath its scrutiny.
For you I try to be the horizon
or the sound the world makes in spring.

In the mirror I see you
change the baby while he
holds two fists in the air.
I take him from you and kiss
him and you smile as if you
have found the perfect place to
stand. I kiss you full
on the mouth until
the baby's weight pulls
me away. Later at the sink
I listen to you play with him
know my happiness
can not be described.

6

Sometimes I like to wake you
in the middle of the night
and surprise you with my passion.
Our love making is different then
no longer protected by light.
I soothe you awake slowly
my fingers finding you soft and open.
You move your thighs
in a fluid sway as you continue
to sleep. I wash you with my tongue

until you move your hands over me
to tell me you are awake.

When I wake
you are a field of blossoms beside
me I take your hand
let it shape my words for me
your tongue pushing back
the darkness in my mouth.
I hum softly to you you smile
and I know how I must open to you
not be that other man
who sings to himself
while the children cry downstairs,
who finds his pleasure first
while looking into your eyes,
who has not learned yet
his pleasure is formed by yours
his smile an echo of yours his words
planted in his mouth by your kiss.

R.W. Stedinger / FIVE POEMS

COHO SALMON

I

Always it seems, Love, even in sleep,
Your silver hips wave, flash and flutter
Like leafage in the wind
As you browse the river mouth for squid,
Tail sweeping back and forth
Against the darkness, against the light,
Swimming deeper and deeper
Upstream into less and less
The higher you go into the unseen mountains.

II

Yet while all is done between us you continue,
Love, the journey:
Beached on a rounded stone, you flap
Against earth like a new moon and fall
Till gills flared, your eyes before my eyes
Clouding, as your lips open and close
Trying to say something entering death,
Amazed to see me standing here
And breathing air.

EASTER LILY
for Anne

You are the spring day
In which all are resurrected,
The shy night in which bedded lovers

Emboldened like acrobats,
Bring off their feats giving mutual smile;
You are the dew of my days,

Where the child in you leaps out of a winter grave.
But mark you the vaguely heart-shaped
Patterns of this wild lily's leaves:

May we out of such cloudy jade
Distill clear emerald,
Shape with closed eyes a seeing touch,

A hard, determined green
Of many facets, but of one light invincible
Through all the dark perduring

As music and song like this,
Which bodied forth in the country of your love
Is yours.

CHERRY TREE

A soft memory of snow
Rising in your budding limbs
Flowers in the mirror of morning twilight.

You say nothing, flushed refusing,
As you root yourself deeper
In the bluegrass blanket.

My pierced light dawning quickens in your cold,
And the womb of your branches throbs:

Hereafter, feelings, shall we speak volumes in eyes,
In silence, our common tongue.

ROCK DOVE

Shy as you are, and non-committal,
You do not see this woman's open hand
But the empty palm,
And in challenged doubt, a weapon,
And you peck it. A fist too
Is worthless though blunt to you
Till it opens proffering popcorn:
Then you are all courage
By hunger blinded, by her indolence
Controlled. Teasing the exploded seed,
Which will never now know its own careful flowering,
You dance in nervous circles weaving near and far
Shredding the white heart on the pavement
Till a delighted child chases you away.

SALMONBERRY

Reaching through thorns,
I pinch your pink nipples firm
between stung fingers
And the whole of you quakes.
I take you into my mouth
Till my tongue bleeds
Or you bleed. The taste is
The same: sweet with an edge.

Evelyn Lau / THREE POEMS

SAFE TRIPS

Not me, he says in the hallway, I'm not leaving you I promise.
you turn in the bathroom doorway a moth of feeling struggling in
your chest. your heart beats like you're high on some kind of
hope that jumps rope while your feet get tangled in the green
contour mat and he stands there with his hand in the air, Scouts
honour.

in bed your thighs ache your toenails are ten cinnamon hearts
burning the brass bars as your hands explore the terrain
of his face. his body is a group of hills you gather around
your own small body, his hands puppets performing magic.
with your arms you shape the wings of angels on his back,
encourage the leaky lift between his legs, the bite and
drawing suck of his teeth on your nipple drawing your breast
up in a surprised triangle. then he's inside you like a
branch with an eye at its tip testing roving a long bright
stare and then a wink a coy brush of lashes a withdrawn
look. when you open your eyes he flinches, he must adjust
slowly to you as if to a hundred watt bulb, all your silenced
thoughts concentrated in a collection of wishes in your
eyes.

you know when to leave but you can't help yourself, in the
hallway you babble Sex was good or well it wasn't bad I
sort of liked it I don't normally I...and he steps
behind you lifts your jacket you slip one arm and then the

other into blackness and tenderly he lifts your hair from
the base of your neck he lets it fall over the leather collar
and down your back he puts his hands on your shoulder pads
he says tenderly Shut up.

CITY OF MEN

coming around the corner past the sexshop with its anemic mannequin in the window, you are more naked walking down this street in daylight than you ever were stripping in the middle of a dance floor in seattle or pretending to masturbate in a stranger's living room or giving nude backrubs in a massage parlor on skid row. no one would think of calling you gorgeous the way they do at night, yelling it out of car windows past the hotels where you stand, blue light hovering around you like angels, your bare white back dipping to your waist in someone's rearview mirror.

sometimes they catch you coming out of the doctor's office, a valium prescription like a passport to a foreign country in your purse. it's too small a city to be surprised when men call the name that isn't your name and squeeze your elbow in the middle of the intersection as if you might float away if they didn't keep you anchored down. it is then you know that if you broke away and ran, you would be followed until you fell.

though you buy plane tickets to famous cities, though sometimes you are seen with girlfriends at movies or walking on the trails of a park on weekends, you always return to this city of men. you say you're going to leave for good one day, with the same look in your eyes you had five years ago when you first said those words. that

shiny look, your eyes turned slightly off-centre like
you're looking at another world just a little to the side
of this one. someday it'll appear, sharp as the picture
on a new television. you'll be standing on this street
corner when that happens, waiting for it to head straight
towards you like a john who knows what he wants and has
the money to make it real.

IT'S BOXING DAY

and cab drivers complain about a 43% drop in income over the past three years while we ride the glitter of city bridges, trees blazing triangles of electric light from the tops of buildings and cranes crooking over empty construction sites. something's different about your kiss tonight, about the angle of your body when the door opens inwards and we are narrow in a narrow space. when I try to give you my coat I see you have handcuffed yourself and the key surrendered to my palm is delicate as a clitoris. under the duvet the knots are already tied the cuffs like claws waiting to close on wrists and ankles.

that afternoon we sat in a restaurant eyeing the blank stare of the royal bank across the street the blink of lights at a wendy's drive-in the curve of the bridge like the curve of the moon. everyone watched each other cautiously the men in neto jackets the women with holiday-slim legs. the law says it's okay as long as you have the intent to eat as long as you have the intent, the waitress winked, and it was time for another round. spitting strawberry daiquiri seeds at you from across the table while gold christmas tinsel shimmered and shattered over the bar.

you take the chain for the nipple clamps between your teeth, silver runs waterfalls down either side of your mouth. this perfect balance between pleasure and pain the scale refusing to tip yet in one direction or the other. meanwhile

candles flame on the table, a stockingful of caramels
spills to the floor. a bruise the size of a gold-wrapped
chocolate coin melts under your hipbone. "D was at the
christmas party we danced all night we drank all night we
came back here and kissedandnecked but we didn't do anything
else. Why my friend asked expecting some noble reply but
in reality I didn't know how to explain the bruises the
scars I mean that was Saturday imagine how bad it was THEN?"
I listen crunching candy canes their red and green veins
slit and swirling through the hard white sugar, watching
your face confessional with pain. soon it's late the taxi
drivers again complaining about their shifts the economy
"anyone who says the recession's over should drive cab
they're not sitting in this seat twelve hours a day I got
a wife two kids" and downtown the hands of the
birks clock meet each other at midnight and part again.

david michael gillis / THREE POEMS

OH LITTLE TOWN OF DRAINAGEBROOK

Ignore this suicidal homosexual
passing through your night on a Grey Hound
past your doublewides and satellite dishes
on land tilled first
by nineteenth century women and men
whose collective mind
languished in the eighteenth century,
Old Countries,
different coloured soil
& spiralangular weather systems off other oceans
of different wind.

This is it.
You love it as those who came before you did.
All that remains is a left at Parksville
and straight on to Tofino: land's end.
Japanese garbage.
The bodies
of WWII airmen in rubber rafts caught
in open ocean currents for fifty years.
Released slowly
one at a time.
There are millions of them to be washed up on those shores.
Their children
dead
or otherwise statistics.
Paunchy,
middle aged,

fatherless &
circumstantially arrogant.
They have buzzed me with their motorhomes
as I've hitch-hiked this island highway.
I've met them in truckstops and in provincial campgrounds.
They give me beer and advice.
Husbands cruise me as hungrily as the neglected wives.
What is so appealing about a man with nowhere to go?
There's this couple I meet up island during the off season.
They're from Flagstaff, Az.
He's out to fish.
She's "...just taggin' along."
Like the time in '58 when they got married.

We're waiting for a road crew to finish blasting.
Everyone has left their vehicles
and are talking, arms folded, heads nodding,
on the gravel shoulder.
I'm hitching to Port Hardy for no good reason.
It is January, but the sun is shining.
Up the road warning whistles sound.
Explosions occur.
Flagstaff Man asks if I want a ride. Asks
if I'd like to suck his cock —
"...for spendin' cash."

His wife is unaffected by this.

I'm looking for the local beat cop
a drugstore clerk or postman:
someone to phone my mother
and take me home.

BOYS' TOWN

Every boy in this town's got messy hair
because the wind blows all the time.
Wind chimes going mad.
Birthing sound.
The mount,
 the nod,
 the exclamation.

Reluctantly
we are out the french doors.
Sheers flapping
wild on the brick patio.

Tonight
the view.
Lights
dark patches of ocean.
Civil systems.
Bus routes. Cops on Harleys.
Prohibition & celebration.
Immigrants still waltzing in the sewers.
Accustomed to steerage
if this city sinks
they know their doom.
We know tonight is the last of its kind.
Sucking up the dregs
 of the Santa Annas California spares us,
night things will go mad.

I will drive my Cadillac headlights off
down alleys
over garbage cans
past back doors where boys meet.
I'll park
choose a door
and stroll in with the manhole steam
following me
like Chinese New Year.

Welcome to Boys Town.
Welcome to Hallelujah.

Tonight
what rifts?
What words will be ode
to the next man I grab
and steal to the floor
to this last night
we experience in such light?
We could love, but better
will I know a name?

In this dark
who could linger on any threshold?
A passage
standing
handed
on to another.
With all we know
we are still sacrificial
and prone to surrender.

DEAD

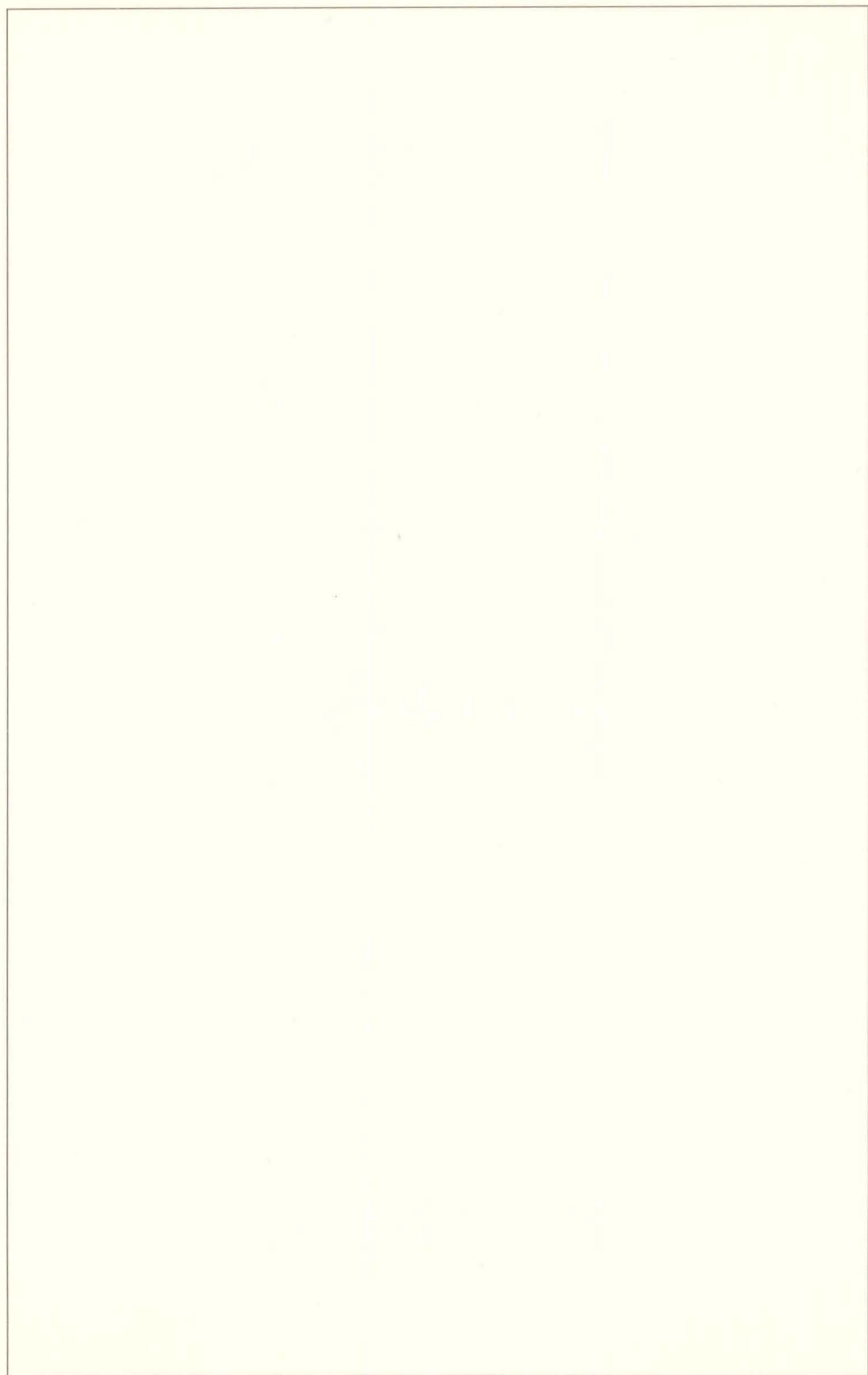
dead come
dot matrix across grey morning vision
forming words from snowy light
dancing their hands dryly
as weed bodies at ballet
& slip back through drafts
where boundaries separate us

dead are not angels
dead are dead
it is a gender
we cannot know
dead mock angels as god's inorganic frivolous invention

dead visit their caskets crypts cremation urns
& the bellies of their destroyers
nostalgically view their remains
reflect upon their state of decay
enthralled by beauty & logic

dead are giants seen from earth marching
upon the horizon of the moon during an eclipse
& the third unseen
partner in procreation

Andrew Podnieks / PUTTI I - VIII







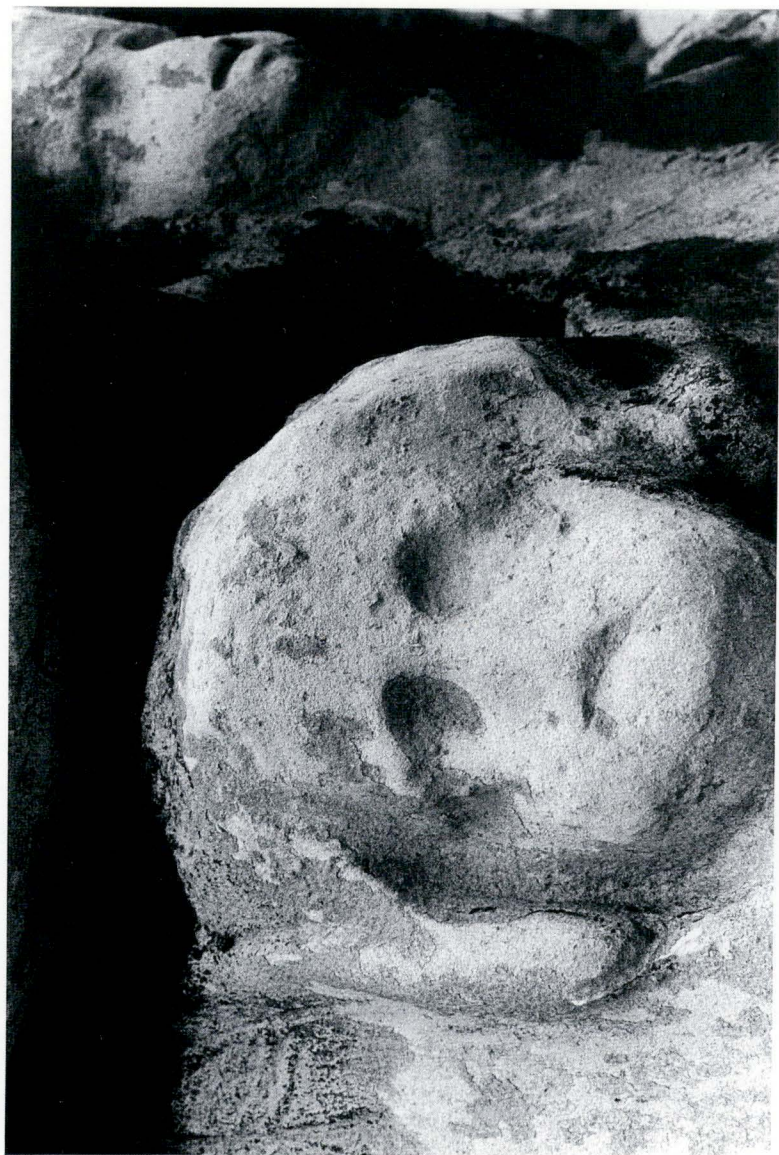












Carol Ashton / FOR THE SIX O'CLOCK NEWS

Latham Frye is an inconsequential man from an inconsequential family that thought otherwise.

"There's certain people you don't associate with," his father had warned behind the business section of the *Telegram*.

The old man had checked his meager stock holdings with a grimness that defined their economic marginality. Money was a thing for which one struggled; before which pleasures were aborted; beneath which ideals and ideas were buried. Latham, sitting at his sums, had wondered how many nickels, dimes and quarters it took to fill a life.

He swears at the ticket on his car. It has been over forty years since his father made little towers of nickels in the darkened kitchen. Light was costly, even then, you see. Latham puts the ticket in his pocket and slides behind the wheel of his corroded Ford. There are salt stains on his shoes and pant cuffs. He is sure the bastards in the Roads Department are secret agents for the auto and clothing industries. For a moment he sits staring at his reflection in the rear view mirror. Yes, it's there, that dusty and defeated look, partner to middle-aged disappointment. Not like young Barnes or that smooth-ass Winsku, coveting his job. He could almost smile at the thought of a mind so pedestrian as to covet such a worthless thing. Latham feels too old, too tired to compete. Advertising is a job for fair-faced liars. He tries to start the car which wheezes and subsides into its chronic disorder. The doctor has told him not to become over-stressed. Silly fart. How do you work in the world and not become over-stressed? He tries again, this time with a success that allows him to grind into an aggressive flow of traffic between apartments with anonymous glass faces, past the homeless with their plastic bags, the street punks in little huddles, the teenage prostitute sitting on a mailbox. Child models are big in advertising now. Painted little mouths and bare shoulders.

His windshield is fogged because the defrost system is broken, and he can't afford to fix it. Paying alimony to two wives has left him near

to bankruptcy, but, he recognizes, that is due to his own stupidity. Lise had been bedding Steven, his best friend. Like a gentleman he should have walked out, not fucked Steven's wife whom he detested. Miriam had been another matter. All she wanted was to escape the city, the bills, the secretarial job typing pink slips for Eaton's, the ever-speeding time. At forty-eight he had been afraid; where would he find a job in the country? When he was eighteen he wanted to be a farmer. His father had called him an idiot and sent him to university where he obtained a B.Comm. and the fruition of an imagination that wove day-dreams.

At a stop light he rubs the steam away and rolls down the window. "Lookin' for some place?"

The face of the young mailbox prostitute is in his car. Not sixteen, not on your life. She has large metal rings on every finger and her eyelids are coloured a peculiar red, like the nipples on the small round breasts pointing beneath her flimsy blouse. How good would she be? But the traffic is moving; someone is leaning with asperity against his horn, and Latham shakes his head. Christ, why don't they get them off the street, all these punks and drunks and bag ladies and crack pushers. He takes a deep breath and tries to concentrate. It's not them. It's those bastards on the thirty-second floor. They say packaging is everything. Well screw them all! He puts his foot on the accelerator and hogs the road so the bully with the horn and the red Firebird can't pass.

At the next intersection they're breaking concrete with pneumatic drills. Barnes works with his Walkman bleeding out Paula Abdul. He has never seen Barnes without a penumbra of obliterating noise. What is it that needs to be extinguished so completely?

Latham lives in a small one-storey reno sandwiched between two Victorian matrons with stained glass in the bathrooms. The agent had been embarrassed, the smell of mildew, of beer and urine and hamburg thick on the wallpaper. Not big selling points. Now it bears the pleasant aroma of new wood, of sweet linen — after three years of hard work. No, not work. That's what he does at McCullough and Weir. The restoration had been something else. If not a farmer, then a carpenter. He thinks about chucking it all, about telling McCullough Sr. and Weir Jr. to stick it up their backsides sideways. A piece of

property on a backroad. Custom carpentry, like Jesus Christ. He smiles somewhat bitterly to himself as he locks the car doors. You always lock your door, the housing development, those people his father had warned him of, not three blocks away. He hates the sense of threat. Phillip Paxton and wife Sheila, his next door neighbours, have two guns in the house.

"I'll blow their balls off," Phillip told him one day with a certain amount of anticipation. Phillip likes to kill things, deer, and field mice in peanut butter traps.

Inside Latham's house is the scent of warm air and this morning's coffee. The house is plain but cozy. Even the word is delightful to him — *cozy*. He turns on the light. A philodendron is on the floor, dirt all over. How can that be? He takes off his coat, puts his briefcase on the hall stand, his gloves and keys. He picks up the plant. Bloody great trucks shaking everything to ruin. He feels the need for a drink. In the library (which had been a second bedroom for four) there are books, their pages torn out, scattered. Papers everywhere and the glass from architectural engravings shattered in a pool of ink across the desk.

"Christ!" is all he can think to say.

His books are second hand, but they are his, the words and the old bindings. Inscriptions like "To Irene with love on her Birthday, Richard, 1926," are his too. He looks about the room. There is nothing missing, but everything is destroyed.

"Christ!" he says again when he sees the huge slash in his favourite chair, an Eastlake that no one at Frank's Furnishings recognized.

It is a stupid thing to do, but Latham, like all of us, does insane things when he ceases to think. He should stay where he is when he hears the scuffling in the hall, but he is too angry. He is angry at Barnes and Winsku, at McCullough Sr. and Weir Jr., at the child prostitute taking him for a dirty old man.

When he steps into the hall he puts himself between them and the door. Untenable position. He has never struck anyone in his life. He is not like Phillip. There are four of them. Street punks. Three boys and a girl, all in the obligatory black. Are they in mourning? VCR, CD, TV — why is everything diminished to initials he wonders, thinking, but not of the right thing. The girl has his portable radio and stares at him with defiant eyes drawn in black.

"Outa the fuckin' way old man!" one of them screams from a beautiful mouth.

Latham once dreamt he was in a tunnel, a cave, and there was a room in the middle of the cave, between *a there* which was dark and *a there* which was light. The room shimmered in a fiery glow. Inside it he could not make progress, just lift his feet and put them down in futile slow motion. He never left the room. The hallway is like that. He can't move into the library and let them pass even when he sees the boy (?) man (?) put the TV on the floor and come towards him. Latham is not small but this boy/man is larger. There are cat hairs on the black teeshirt and he wears a crucifix painted red.

"Outta my way! You deaf?"

He seizes Latham, slams him against the wall, roughs him into the living room. There is litter everywhere. One of them has peed on the carpet, and the girl has written dirty words in red lipstick on the pale walls. There is a small jade collection, something left from Miriam's time, a "wish stick" given him on his forty-third birthday by a daughter he's not seen or heard from in ten years. Where is she? Several snuff bottles, a Buddha of the Western Paradise, a carp with traces of amber skin, other things, all smashed on the floor. Didn't they know? No sense of value, no sense of the lovely.

"Wallet! Give over the fuckin' wallet!"

He gives it over, but all he can see are the pieces on the floor. The boy/man pushes him.

"What else? Come on! Fuckin' old bugger!"

His hands are on Latham pulling away the pocket watch and chain, the tie pin. There is a gold ring on his finger from Miriam. He can't stand this dirty boy, yes boy, touching him, putting a shoulder into his chest and pressing him into the wall. It's like being a thing inside the essentials of clothing. He strikes the pretty face and strikes it again so there is blood on the young cannibal lips. There is shouting and movement. Surprised, maybe amused, the girl watches, tenderly cradling the radio.

"Shit! He's fuckin' broke my fuckin' nose. Shit!"

It never enters Latham's mind about weapons. Of course they have weapons. Phillip told him that. He can't say what it is, a knife, an ice pick, possibly a screwdriver, but it goes in with apparent ease. There

isn't any pain, not until he falls, on the broken jade and the stuffing from the sofa. They take his ring and run. He tries to rise, but can only kneel, like an acolyte without a Jesus. The girl lingers, curious, in the doorway. Someone has taken the radio and is screaming at her to move. Why are they so hysterical? Why is everyone so hysterical?

Latham is unaware anyone could bleed so much. It is on his hands and is turning his waistcoat red. It has soaked the wads of fibre on the floor. And then there is the pain. He has never suffered physical pain before, not like this. He collapses on his side. The doorway is empty, and he can hear them running. Won't people see them with all those things? People don't see anything, he realizes. He can feel the blood moving over his fingers. He rolls on his back with the insane idea that maybe it will stay inside. There is a crack in the ceiling. Phillip had said it was too thin, an air of triumph about his stupid, insipid face. Latham always thought of them as Ken and Barbie — with guns, his blue, hers pink. He is trying to remember where he'd put the phone.

There is a jade boy on a jade ox which he holds in his hand. The boy is brown and the ox green, a masterly piece of carving. Not two inches long, it is too small to have broken. What's it like to be a boy in a rice field on an ox? Quiet, he thinks.

There is blood seeping from his mouth, and he breathes only with labour. 911 and the address. He can't remember the address. Why is that?

"Shouldn't lie on yer back."

The girl is looking at him from somewhere far above. She has a thin-soled pair of black shoes white with salt. Her legs are thin too, covered with black leotards. She isn't wearing socks. He can't see her above the waist. He can't see the crack anymore.

"You wanna sit up. You got blood comin' outta yer mouth ya know."

She's kneeling down. Her hair is stringy-blond. She's a wraith with a greasy pallor, street ugly like those nervous, sullen apparitions he's seen in malls. There is movement behind the dazed eyes, speculation as if he were lying on the beach and she were calculating how much sand would bury him.

The boy on the ox is moving through the rice paddies. There are hills and little shacks. A wooden walkway runs above the fields to the

shadow houses.

The girl, chewing gum that stinks of pink sweetness, is unbuttoning his waistcoat, removing his tie, opening his shirt. She keeps tossing her head to get the hair out of her face.

"Yer dead mister. Got any smokes?" She goes through his pockets and is disappointed.

"911," he says.

"You just got in the way mister. We're all in somebody's way. It's nobody's fault." She shrugs her boney shoulders. "You could've been his trick. He likes the business guys. They give him jewelry."

Latham closes his eyes and when he opens them she is gone. Winsku said something about greasy hair. "They wash in the subway cans." He always says cans. Why does Winsku want to be tough? The stories by the coffee machine are lies. No one could screw that many women. It's not necessary. What is necessary? The girl is putting a towel against the wound, and he almost passes out. She is wiping his face with the dishcloth.

"Better sit up," and grabs him under the arms, props him against the fireplace. She begins to go about the room touching everything that's not broken or torn.

"I liked the green things. They were O.K. The guys don't know about that. I saw a painting once in a gallery. It was O.K. too. We're goin' to McDonald's tonight. There's this guy sells crack outside. Right in the doorway with the cops cruisin' by every five minutes."

He has a silver St. Christopher medal about his neck. He doesn't believe St. Christopher isn't a saint anymore. It doesn't matter what old men in red hats (or is it pale bureaucrats) say. He hates aeroplanes. Stupid, but anything to stop the fear. Phillip and Sheila always fly. They never walk anywhere, not even to Becker's around the corner. They'd shrivel and die without that car. There's a pink carseat in the back for little Barbie who smells of vaseline and talc. The girl is removing the medal, her hair about his face. They say these people have lice. Why is he worrying about lice?

"Drink?"

She's looking at the medal. St. Christopher twirling about — saint, not a saint. He manages a nod. The towel is red now and he can taste the blood in his mouth again.

"What do you want?" he whispers reaching for understanding. Somehow if he knew, everything would make sense.

His voice fades. They like his presentations at McCullough and Weir. "You sound good Latham. Could charm the ass off a virgin," Winsku again. Crude as always and aggressive. That's what everyone wants. "You always look good Latham. Nice conservative reassurance. The glasses are good." Winsku's total adjectival output consists of nice and good. They think Winsku's limited vocabulary synonymous with sincerity. Variety always frightens people who want things geometrically precise.

She puts the medal around her neck.

"They pulled the phone outta the wall mister. It's better at home anyways. You don't want no hospital. Meat, that's all ya are there. I got beat up, raped once. They said I got what I deserved. Real bedside manner, eh?"

She is sitting beside him, has put his head against her shoulder, and now presses a glass, cool, against his mouth. The taste is of blood and wine.

"Whadya want to hit him for? Couldn't ya see he's crazy man?" She begins stroking his hair. "No, guess not. Hower you suppose ta know? You think he's a kid. Street kids they call us like we're like you, just a little screwed up. We're crazies. You don't know anything about it. I'll bet you never fucked your daughter." There had been a picture of her in a silver frame. Now it is gone. What would they do with the picture? "I'll bet you sent her ta university, all that stuff. I could've done that if I'd wanted. I could've been a hairdresser. Didn't wanna. They can't tell me nothin' there."

She speaks as if she were discussing a subway route. It is a reassuring sound Latham thinks. Is that the sound when there's no apprehension and the stress index is non-existent or is she dead? He has to draw up his leg to stop the pain. She puts her hand on top of his, on top of the wound which is saturating the towel.

"You ain't married are ya? No lady here. Girl friend?"

"No."

He wonders why he answered. It is the sound of her voice. There is on any given day no other voice in this house but his own and those of the CD, VCR, TV. But they are now gone, and she, with her desecrated

English, is all there is. She lifts his head again and lets him drink, then she kisses him thoroughly, clinically. There is blood on her mouth when she draws away. She touches it with her fingers and for a moment he thinks he sees fear.

"I never kissed someone that's ready to check out. Sorry."

He is saddened at her sorrow. At least she still wonders what something would be like. It doesn't matter what. She thinks about the unknown, and there is an innocence, he fancies, in her spontaneity which eases his pain. The boy and the ox are standing in the middle of the field. It's early in the morning and the sun is opalescent behind the mist. The stillness is profound. Latham doubts as she plays with the shiny little medal. Maybe it's merely sick sex — or nothing, like looking in this window instead of that? He analyses why he's not afraid. Perhaps it's the knowledge that there is absolutely nothing to be done. It is very peaceful.

They sit there a while longer. The sun strikes a prism hanging in the window. Rainbows float along the walls, across his face. She smiles, pleased with the colours. If only she'd wash her hair. Men don't like dirty hair he wants to tell her.

"You like beautiful things?" he hears his voice say.

She nods, claps the prism in her hands, spins it so the room flies in tiny coloured clouds.

"An so da you, eh? You shouldn'ta got angry. They were only things."

"The books...you broke these...." A dizziness embraces him and he flies with the rainbows. His hand opens that he might show her the boy on the ox. "Take it."

She is baffled, but obeys, rolling the piece in her palm.

"Smooth," she delights. "I ain't selling this. Thanks."

She puts out her hand to take the prism.

"No."

Winsku would never believe such things could happen. He couldn't use them in an ad, and Barnes would be horrified that death could come so grotesquely to one so similar, if far removed, from himself. Would Winsku, over coffee and a muffin, ruminate on a sordid sexual encounter leading to a sordid death as he contemplated the vacant desk and increased salary?

"Why?" she asks.

He can no longer speak and knows he will never understand anything. She leaves the prism slowly swaying; goes through his clothes once more. In his waistcoat pocket she finds a loonie and in his jacket a dignified black fountain pen. Leaving, she stops in the doorway, holds up the boy on the ox and lets the rainbows play upon its face. A shudder of agony passes through him clamping shut then opening his eyes.

She and the boy are gone. The house is silent and the rainbows slide.

William Goede / LIKE MOTHER, LIKE SON

1

Yang Li told me the elevator in her new apartment highrise always breaks down the moment you take it into your head to use it, between six and eight in the morning of course when you go to work and five and seven at night when you come home again. And when it's up and running in the middle of the day, they usually shut it down again to save electricity, so the grandmas and grandpas, left at home, have to coolie everything some thirteen, fourteen, fifteen floors straight up — groceries, live chickens, fuel, the wash, not to mention their great big fat grandbabies — all the way up the cold, dark stairs on their backs.

So I was surprised when the old gateman told me to take the elevator. I said I'd walk up, but he insisted I take the elevator. The only explanation I could come up with was he wanted to make sure I went where I said I was going. Like Gollum, he followed me all the way in from the front gate of the complex and inside the apartment building to the elevator, where a small, gaunt woman sat hunched so far over swirling hands and something long and purple I figured she was knitting it with her nose.

"The foreigner wants to visit Yang Li," he said. "It's all right, take him up."

"Okay! Okay!" she said, dropping the knitting to the floor. She wasn't supposed to go *up* this time of day. This time of day you were supposed to come *down*. She stared at the old gateman and waited for him to leave and then said, "You can go back now and fill out your report."

"Careful, you fool!" said the old man, casting a quick, shocked look at me. "This one speaks Chinese."

I said, "Not at all, not at all! You honour a mere child!"

He flapped his cheeks for a moment and limped away, the woman spun the crank and, as we squirmed our way to the top of the chute, continued her obsessive knitting.

The elevator wasn't working at all back in the spring of 1985. The complex of tall concrete apartment buildings had only just been erected for the families of the officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and, since Yang Li's husband was a high cadre, he was invited to come and pick out an apartment. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to do it because he had been posted to Hong Kong, so Yang asked me to climb the fourteen floors with her to have a look at the apartment and to advise her whether to take it or keep their old rotting house deep in the ancient *hutongs* of the old city. I had once boasted to having built my own house, and so I guess she considered me an expert. I tried to decline the invitation. I had been in the country for three years — long enough not simply to accept things as they appeared to be but not long enough to figure out what they really were.

She insisted, and my other Chinese colleagues urged me to do so. They thought I knew everything simply because I was a Canadian.

It's all Dr. Norman Bethune's fault, of course. For some reason the Chinese think we're all somehow related to the man who invented M.A.S.H. somewhere in the mountains of Hebei and then died of septicemia contracted when he cut his finger operating on a Chinese soldier. It's so disheartening, this sense of exemplary and artful improvisation and integrity that Canadians symbolize to the Chinese. They like to confide in us and ask us to solve their problems as if we reminded them of The Good Old Days of Yanan and the Second United Front and the Eighth Route Army and Dr. Bethune's hospital on horseback.

But me, I was only a 'foreign expert' who taught the English language. I never quite figured out how I got to be an 'expert' just because I spoke my own language. It surely was something like being an expert at sitting because you can sit. I lived among a couple of hundred other foreigners expert at speaking their own languages in a huge complex called the Friendship Hotel, just two blocks down the street from the apartment complex Yang Li was now planning to show me. Yang and I were colleagues in the First Department at *Renmin Daxue*, the People's University. "I learn from you," she was accustomed to saying, and I always responded with, "And I learn from you." In point of fact, since she had already spent two years in Toronto studying linguistics, I'm afraid she learned very little from me and I

learned far more from her than I could ever use.

"The workmen say the apartment needs another coat of paint," she said, trying to keep the fanfare of enthusiasm out of her voice.

"Yes," I said, trying to keep the dampness out of mine.

We walked around the cold, hollow flat inhaling wet concrete. Yang was small, but she had a large, active voice that sounded the depths of the grey cave. "They must put doors up there, you see?" She pointed at a hole the size of a dragon's jaw above the door of the bedroom. "This is storage place."

Yang had earlier described the apartment as a spacious modern flat. She said it was considered a luxury townhouse because it had balconies from which you could see clear across Beijing to the magic yellow roofs of the Forbidden City and beyond them even to the Temple of Heaven, and because the apartment featured running water and a shower and just about anything you could imagine. Moreover, it was a mere walk across the road to her classrooms. But all I could see now was a crude concrete hole with knobby and uneven concrete floors infilled with unconscionably poor carpentry and impromptu plumbing. It looked more like something hammered together by a pack of boy scouts for their summer project. I couldn't imagine anyone actually ever living there.

I said, "Storage, eh?"

"Anyway, I don't need storage. I have nothing I must store."

We inspected the entire flat. Nothing matched, no. It needed more than just another coat of paint. Metal windows were sprung and leaked air, a ganglia of wiring dribbled out here and there with crude electrical outlets stapled to the wall at eye level, the doors were already warped and badly hung, ready to fall off when used more than once.

But I could tell by the look on her face she wasn't really interested in trivialities. She had brought me here to tell her she ought to take it.

"You ought to take it," I said.

"I will have my own kitchen now and must not share it with my neighbours!"

"And Xiao Ling his own room."

"Yes, I will not have to wait until he is in bed and then undress in the dark."

"And your own toilet."

"Yes, my own toilet."

"You ought to take it."

She smiled at me, and it was a smile that broke up my cynicism.

"You think so?"

"Oh, yes!"

She laughed: "I know it is not so good, I have lived in Toronto."

"Take it. This isn't Toronto."

"Moving here will be good for Xiao Ling. The best Middle School in Beijing is right across the street." She treasured her son as a special person, treated him as an heir apparent, often addressed him as an equal, and the boy responded to such treatment with bright smiles and intelligent observations about the world of science and technology. "I've already spoken to the teachers, and they are very excited if he comes to them." She walked to the windows and began to laugh out loud. "But, Hagstrom, the best part is yet to come. Look, the view!" She threw open the door, and we walked out onto the balcony. It shook, and I half expected it to fall off. Not Yang Li. She leaned way over the edge as if preparing to springboard up and away and then fly around the building a few times to show me how wonderful it all was. "The view, there it is, see how wonderful!"

"Be careful!" I said, reaching for her. "Didn't anyone ever tell you how gravity works?"

We stood watching the molten blue flow of bicycles below the trees.

"You know this road?" she asked. "It's *Bai shi qiao lu*. Very famous road in China history. Very bloody road. This road starts high in the mountains in Mongolia...nobody knows where. You call it a 'brook', don't you? Mongolian soldiers came down this road for many centuries to invade us and so we must block it off with the Great Wall. Still, we must fight many battles along it. Then, in 1860, armies from Germany and Britain and the U.S. came up from Tianjin and burned the city and then went right past here to the *Yuanmingyuan* and burned it to the ground...and in 1945 Chairman Mao came down from Yanan and marched along this very road to liberate Beijing from the Guomindang. There were so many dead people in the ditches they just piled them up and burned them right where they lay." I thought I saw something unpleasant come to her as she leaned again over the

railing to contemplate the long hard road stretching back and forth for four thousand years. "But that's all behind us now." She laughed suddenly and pointed to the Friendship Hotel just south of the intersection. "You know, the very best part is...you will be my new neighbour, Hagstrom. I can keep an eye on you from here!"

"I'll have to draw my curtains," I said and went back inside.

2

The woman with the purple knitting had trouble prying open the elevator door. She got a knee and an elbow into the opening and with the other hand, levered it open, and, released, I walked quickly away. The hallway was dark, deathlike. It still smelled of cold and wet. A concrete tomb. Maybe the building had never cured. I stood for a moment and listened. Hollow. The dull thud of the elevator doors opening and closing, opening and closing, finally slamming shut, the electric hum of the car going down...and then silence. I passed several dark doorways before I saw the small card.

YANG LI, it announced in bold Chinese characters, and beneath the characters, the Pinyin and English. *Yingyu Laoshi*. Teacher of English. *Renmin Daxue*. People's University.

Teacher of English. *Yingyu Laoshi*. Yes, she represented, I thought, the best of both worlds and I remembered how she used to come to school wearing a yellow University of Toronto sweatshirt under her blue Mao jacket. Unlike her colleagues, she talked loudly and joked around with her students and then even invited them up to her new flat for a party and likely took them out onto her balcony and leaned way out over the railing to show them the wonders of their own world. The summer she moved into the flat, she boarded a shy young exchange student from Winnipeg at a time when it just wasn't done anywhere in the country.

She got away with that, too.

But while she was her own person, she structured her political views 'correctly'. She was both 'Red' and 'Expert'. Her leaders trusted

her. More than once, she had to lecture me on decorum and often gave me the 'correct' interpretation of political events. Lao Yang was a survivor. She had great instincts. She had survived the Japanese War, the civil war with the Guomindang, the Five Year Plan, the Hundred Flowers Movement, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the crackdown on mourning the death of Zhou Enlai, The Democracy Wall, the Gang of Four, and the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. When we were alone, she was open and candid about herself. She told me she believed in China and loved 'the motherland', but she was often troubled by the cruelty Chinese people perpetrated upon each other as easily as doing the morning dishes. "It's all because of the Cultural Revolution," she'd explain. "Our manners fell apart, we never recovered. It was like we learned something about ourselves and we can never forgive ourselves."

3

I knocked at Yang Li's door .

Silence.

Knocked again.

My heart bumped up against a hard bone in my chest. I waited and knocked a third time. An inner door rasped across concrete. It whispered, I wish you'd leave us alone, we have done nothing wrong. Footsteps, and then a key worked, the door cracked, and the boy stood there.

"Hello, Xiao Ling," I said in Chinese. "May I come in?" One hand to his chin as if holding a mask to his face. "I want to speak to your mother. Is she home?"

He stared at me and said nothing. A door opened somewhere behind him and Yang Li sprang forward. "Marvin Hagstrom!" she cried, rushing out of the dark. "What are you doing here, Marvin? No one should be out in the streets now." Eyes dark saucers of fear, they searched the dark behind me. "Are you alone?"

"Except for the old gatekeeper, the elevator lady, and probably every member of your neighborhood committee!"

She laughed in the old way. "Oh, Marvin!" she said, reaching around her son and, with the old strong claw, dragged me into the room while the door was sealed behind me. "What are we going to do with you...always telling jokes."

"No, I...really, I..."

We walked into the living room. She had tried to make living quarters out of a cold hard box. Pictures of Toronto and the CN Tower and the Grand Canyon and the Great Wall were tacked to the walls, and on the floor a small green Beijing wool carpet, the furniture, plain and functional, as if stored there, lime green curtains, a lamp or two with shades of red fussy, flounced fringes, and a bookshelf with real books. Faulkner and Mao rubbing shoulders. And in the corner, under a doily, a large SONY television set and a video player her husband had brought home from Hong Kong on one of his visits.

Xiao Ling slipped back into his room, and Yang Li told me to sit down. "You shouldn't be out, we haven't been out for three days." Her voice sounded hard and unpracticed. It lacked its usual resonance and roundness. "It isn't safe to go out. We won't even go out to the balcony. What is it like? Did you see anybody in the road?"

"Soldiers. There's still that tank down there at the *Sanhuan* crossroads."

"Yes, yes," she said, perched tentatively across from me, studying the carpet. "We saw it come...early Sunday morning." She trembled a little and glanced nervously out the window, listening. "All night Saturday...we saw the smoke...lots of smoke to the west there, all along Chang'an. We heard shooting too and around midnight lots of trucks went south...very fast. We couldn't sleep. Xiao Ling and I went down to the road like everyone else. Rumours started flying. The police came and said, Go back home. Then some people came up from the south on bicycles and told us the army had killed many people at Muxidi. We refused to believe them. We said to ourselves, They are just troublemakers, this could not happen. But then others came too and said the army had gone to Tian'anmen and was shooting all the students. Some people got crazy and ran down the road saying they

were going to fight the army.” The sunlight fell across Yang’s face and accentuated dark lines I had never seen before. I had always thought of her as pretty, in spite of her stout, Red Army build. But now she looked as if someone had reached down inside her and pulled out one or two supporting bones. “Then, around six that morning, when it was light, we saw the first students...in trucks and buses, and some on foot, barely able to walk. Bleeding, crying...some still singing away. Many of them had to be carried, you know, and you could see the pedicabs, lots of them, like they had come from the butcher market. We stood and watched, stunned, crying, we could not believe our eyes. There were many, many people in the street, but no shouting now. No ‘Down with Li Peng! Down with Deng Xiaoping!’ No slogans. No banners. It was like a funeral. Then some students came running up to us and said, Go back inside, the army is coming! I knew one of them and tried to talk to him, but he was so scared he wouldn’t talk to me. A girl said the army had come into the square with tanks and lined up on one end and then run over all the tents. We couldn’t believe it! She said two hundred students from Tianjin were still inside the tents when the tanks ran over them. Arms and heads came squirting out everywhere, she said, and, oh how we cried! This is not *our* country you’re talking about, we said. This is not *our* army. *Our* army said it would not kill *our* people! Then someone said army trucks were coming up *Bai shi qiao lu*, and we heard shooting and everyone screamed and ran away. I hid for a while in bushes and watched. The trucks came up the hill and soldiers jumped out and took over the intersection, and then they ran around shooting everybody! That was when the tank came and pointed its gun right at the gate of the university.”

I tried to lighten her thoughts. I said, “Speaking of Xiao Ling, will he go back to school now?”

She stared at me, and I could see the first sign of blood in her face. “He is fifteen, you know,” she said. “Often he followed my students when they marched down to the square. He was there two days before the army came. Thursday, it was. Children’s Day. He said the students all sat around the Goddess of Democracy and a professor from Bei Da talked about poetry and freedom.”

"So what's going to happen?"

She thought for a moment and, instead of responding, got to her feet and walked to the kitchen and put the kettle on the stove. "I wonder why you came, Marvin," she said. "I'm sure you were told you should not leave the Friendship Hotel...not to go near your Chinese friends."

"I was worried about you."

She walked back into the room and settled across from me, tentatively, with her eyes fixed on me. "You are very foolish to come! They will ask questions and I will have to answer them."

"I have been here before and nobody has asked questions."

"That was then. This is now."

At that moment Xiao Ling emerged from his room as if he had thought of something to say, but he stood with his back to the wall and silently studied the floor. He had preserved the round, healthy Han visage of his mother, but something new was growing up inside him and lurked in the eyes waiting to be born. They were heavily lidded, deep, the forehead sloping, profound, Mongolian. Why hadn't I noticed this before? Yang once told me the boy's father was from Ulaanbaatar. That would explain it. I knew from my few visits that Xiao Ling was a bright young man, a computer whiz in a world without computers, a thinker in a world without thought. He seemed charmed by Western ways, and his mother had promised him that one day like her he would study at the University of Toronto.

At last he spoke to his mother, ignoring my presence. "There is still nothing at all on the radio...just lies." He walked into the kitchen and returned with a teapot, and then cups and a tray of crackers, which he set out dutifully. He then strolled to the window and said, "There will be trouble now with him here."

Yang spoke quickly: "Xiao Ling, respect our guest!"

"They will want to know."

"We'll talk about it later."

"There is no 'later' any more. You will have to explain everything."

He looked at me as if he blamed me for the blood in the streets, and then walked out of the room.

"Forgive him, he is very disturbed by all this," she said. "I don't know what to say to him, how to explain..."

"What will happen to him when he goes back to school?"

"Nobody knows."

"And you? What will happen to you?"

She hesitated, her eyes fixed at a spot just below my chin, and, when she spoke, it seemed she was reading a speech she had been preparing for just such an occasion. "They have already started," she said, quietly, "the younger teachers. They started the day after you and all the other foreign teachers were directed to go back to the hotel and stay there. Once you were all gone, the young teachers got up at the meeting and said they wanted to do something. But they were...foolish. Nothing can be done. Not now. The older ones, people my age, they got up and said they wanted to start struggle sessions because of the marches. They have already forgotten what happened in the Cultural Revolution. It was like someone erased their minds. We don't understand ourselves, Marvin. Who was it said... 'Those who do not know history are cursed to repeat it.' Something like that."

"What is expected of you now, Lao Yang?"

She began to laugh nervously and to sip her tea while she thought about her words. "Nothing," she said, without conviction. "Nothing at all." She seemed to be talking herself. "They asked me and I said I knew nothing."

I knew what she was saying, but I continued to push her: "And so they told you that if you didn't know anything, then you were just as guilty as the young teachers."

She fired her words with accuracy. "Oh, you expect too much, Marvin," she said. "You think we are like you. You have read too many books. Books that tell too many lies about China. Pearl Buck, Han Suyin, people like that." I let her subside, and she went looking for words that would lead her back to the subject. "No, no, don't worry about me." I drank some tea and snapped a cracker, waiting. I knew she wanted to tell me something more. All I had to do was wait, and so I waited, and she finally said, "Anyway, you know Liu? Liu Jiangfu? The tall man with the scar on his cheek here —"

"Isn't he some kind of director?"

"This Liu came to me one day and he asked me who marched in the square. I told him I did not march in the square and I did not

know anyone who had marched in the square. He asked me again. I knew what he wanted me to say." It was coming out now. She spoke, but this time the words were driving her. "They always look for me. Every time they look for me. It's Lao Yang's job, they say. Go ask Lao Yang. Lao Yang must know." Her words turned sour. "But this time I refused. I did it before, but this time I refused."

I waited a while, looking for something to say. "Well, you feel better about it anyway."

"But don't you see? They know!"

"Know what?"

"Xiao Ling and I..."

She seemed unable to finish, and so I said, "They know Xiao Ling and you were —!"

"Yes!" she said, sank back and the tears began to roll down her face. "Yes, we marched with them. The two of us, we marched...with all the young teachers."

"So...what will happen, what will they do?"

She shook her head and dried her tears with her arm. "Nothing will happen. Nothing ever happens to informers."

"Informers?"

"I must think about Xiao Ling now." I thought she was going to lecture me on decorum again, as she leaned forward suddenly and laid one of her hands on my arm. "Marvin, we must get him out of here! We must find a way to get him out." I could hear her breathing now, her fingers dug into my arm, she snared me with her brown eyes. "I will send him down to his father in Hong Kong. I can do that. He is allowed one visit a year. I will send him...well, very soon. And you must leave soon, perhaps even tomorrow. All of our foreign friends must leave the country now. There will be more trouble. All foreigners must leave. You must go to Hong Kong, Marvin. I will tell you where to meet my husband."

"You mean you would send Xiao Ling away?"

"I *must* do it!" she said, too loud. "There is nothing more I can do now —"

A sudden knock at the door. Short and hard and final.

She stared at me and laid a finger to her lips. Another knock. She rose slowly, forgetting me, and walked to the door, smoothing her

skirt as if she expected a lover. Yang opened the door and then backed away from it. Four men stood in the dark hallway. Four true blue ones. One was the old gatekeeper. They braced themselves and peered past into the room as if they expected an explosion. I knew Mandarin, of course, but their words sputtered fast and broke apart in their teeth. Something about The Foreigner, Who is he? What is he doing here? You know the rules! Sharp, angled words, fired pointblank. And I heard Yang's voice, too. It jellied when she tried to speak about a Loyal Foreign Friend, a Colleague from My University...

One hard official voice asserted itself over the rest, created the form, filled in the blanks and signed and sealed the summons.

It was silent for a moment.

Then the door closed and Yang crept back into the room and leaned back against the wall, clutching her stomach. I jumped to my feet and went to her. "You were right," I said, "I shouldn't have tried to come, I will leave at once."

"Marvin!" she whispered. "Remember what I said. I will send a note to you as soon as I can about where to meet my husband." I looked into pale eyes that were not looking at me now but at something beyond me, way out there past the balcony and the Road of the White Stone Bridge, past the *Yuanmingyuan* and even past the Great Wall and Outer Mongolia, to a place perhaps only she could see. "Then you must take him with you to Canada —"

"I am not going anywhere!"

It was Xiao Ling. He had come out of his room and stood staring at us, a parent who had stumbled upon his two misbehaving children, his eyes small and fixed and hard.

"Shhh!"

"I will *not* leave!" he said loudly and then looked at me. "I will *not* go anywhere!"

Yang went to her son and talked quietly for some time.

When she returned, I said, "Like Mother, Like Son."

She placed her hands on my arm. "Xiao Ling is your son now...take good care of him." I stood speechless. "Now go, my friend," she said. "Go...go!" She walked to the door and opened it. The light struck the four men in the face, and they flinched.

"Goodbye, Lao Yang," I said and turned toward Xiao Ling. He

lifted his eyes to me for a brief moment. I'm not sure what we saw in each other. "Goodbye, Xiao Ling." I looked again at Yang Li, but she was looking at the men in the doorway. "Thank you very much for the tea."

"Go," she said. "Go now."

They escorted me down the corridor like a prisoner. Fear, a human gas, bled from beneath the doorways. Fear, and curdled fat. Cold tea. Lost hopes. The elevator stood waiting for us. The doors were open. They had to be wrestled shut again. The contraption scraped its way to the ground. The Neighborhood Committee stared at the walls. The woman knitted silently. She seemed relieved to be going down.

AN INTERVIEW WITH
EUGÈNE IONESCO

The following section of this issue
is dedicated to the memory of
Victor and Clava Munteanu.

Dan Radu Munteanu /PRIESTS — THE MOUNTAINS HIGH

It is impossible to discuss Romanian spirituality, without paying a pious respect to the tutelary entity that has made it possible — Romanian folklore. One of the richest in Europe, it is the decanted expression of an attitude towards life, as is any folklore in the world. As such, it is both universally true and unique. Its uniqueness might be described as a form of constructive pessimism that helps man overcome the numberless obstacles of phenomenal existence, to eventually achieve a mild transcendence, which in the Romanian vision is inextricably related to nature. In spite of the often chaotic and painful forms that existence may take, in spite of the innumerable sufferings that one may be subjected to, the lesson of Romanian tradition is balance. The only effort worth making, regardless of circumstances, is the effort towards equilibrium — an equilibrium that is more profound than the classical Roman concept of virtue, since it derives its strength not from an austere mental concept, but from nature itself. Tragic conscience is not characteristic of the Romanian vision. Romanian history is replete with tragedy and probably that is why, in order to prevail, one has to aim higher and seek support from an order beyond contradiction.

The highest artistic expression of this vision is the ballad *Miorita* (the Ewe-lamb). A strange poem, it tells the story of a shepherd in mortal danger. His two mates, out of envy and greed, plan to kill him at sunset and appropriate his flocks. He is warned about their plan by one of his ewe-lambs which, having magically acquired human speech, relates to him the conversation of the other two shepherds. At this point, the logical cause-effect order is broken. The hero of the ballad ignores the warning. Even more, he takes it as an accomplished fact. He does not act, nor does he comment. He merely asks the ewe-lamb to tell the shepherds that his wish is to be buried close to his sheepfold and to have three small pipes laid beside him: one of beech, one of

bone, and one of elder so that the blowing wind will play on them and the sheep will hear and weep. But the sheep must not be told of his death. Instead, the ewe-lamb must tell them that the shepherd has gone to marry. Following is a cosmic allegory of death as a wedding: "At my wedding, tell/How a bright star fell./ Sun and moon came down/ To hold my bridal crown,/ Firs and maple trees/ Were my guests; my priests/ Were the mountains high;/ Fiddlers birds that fly,/ All birds of the sky;/ Torchlights, stars on high."¹

What seems a curious inability to respond appropriately to a deadly challenge is, in fact, a leap into transcendence which re-establishes the balance, not by means of catharsis as a result of tragic confrontation, but by direct identification with the universal order. Dialectics governs the two murderous shepherds, not the hero of the ballad.

In the Romanian folklore conception, the human condition is flawed because of its alienation from nature. Hence a return to the order of nature is the path to salvation. One could say that a defining trace of Romanian folklore is a sense of the lost paradise. One of its most frequently recurring motifs is that of *dor*. The word is hard to translate owing to its complex connotations. It means "yearning," "longing," "nostalgia," but also "heart's desire," "torment of love," "woe." It expresses an aspiration towards an equilibrium that humanity has lost and has been deeply missing ever since. However, it should be noted that the "dor" motif is not mystical, but philosophical. The mystical state strives to achieve ecstasy, which is intense tension culminating in the explosion of contradiction. The "dor" concept aims at the same thing, yet it does not explode the contradiction but, rather, nullifies it. The Romanian peasant has a structural aversion for violence. He is tolerant and he believes in harmony.

This conception of existence has profoundly influenced Romanian

1. *Romanian Popular Ballads*, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1980, pp. 375-377.

culture. Consequently, the extraordinary changes occurring in Romania today must be looked at in order to be understood, bearing in mind the lesson folklore has to teach. Like anywhere in Eastern Europe, Romanian intellectuals are engaged in an effort to rethink the relationship between man and the fundamental entities: society, history, God. The fifth decade of this century brought about in Eastern Europe what the Romanian writer N. Steinhardt called "tremendum": a social experiment that started in Russia in 1917 and spilt over its borders into the neighbouring countries claiming to liberate man from injustice and return his long lost dignity. But the new system did exactly the opposite. It came into being and lasted for so long because it capitalized on the dark side of human nature. It offered a subtle and terribly tempting deal: it claimed one's freedom in exchange for one's absolution from responsibility. And so, it came to pass that institutions lost their meaning and were turned into a mockery. Generations were born and people began to learn that, as Milan Kundera put it, life is elsewhere. But they had to cope with the new realities. And they did. Some succumbed and accepted the absolution from responsibility with relish. Thus, a new class was created and it infested the whole social structure. However, the majority did not sign the pact. Instead, they developed an elaborate system of subterfuge and role playing designed to give to Caesar what was Caesar's and to God what was God's. But that was not an easy exercise and it generated an ever growing pressure of alienation, of existing on two levels. Nowhere in Eastern Europe was this pressure so hard to bear as in Romania, in the '80s.

This tension may be a partial explanation for the violent events of December 1989. What can be stated with certainty is that period marked the beginning of labours that are far from over. Romania is in a process of redefining itself. The institutions of the state have to be rebuilt, a process that requires serious meditation. A new constitution is subject to public debate. Consequently, the meaning and role of the three powers in a state — the legislative, executive, and judiciary — have become a matter of general concern. Economic collapse has generated an acute sense of fear, insecurity, and confusion. The unsolved problem of the Hungarian minority is used by some to justify

an emerging nationalistic trend, quite disturbing since it is so alien to the Romanian spirit of tolerance.

Given these complex realities, as well as the Romanian traditional predisposition to dream the transcendence, the relationship between man and the sacred is one of utmost importance. The following two texts reflect it. It should be noted, however, that the religious debate going on at present in Romania is not so much concerned with matters of dogma, but rather with the broader question of faith. Quite often, this is translated into Christian Orthodox terms, as Mr. Plesu does in his response to Mr. Liiceanu's interview with Eugène Ionesco. The reason is that, on the one hand, for centuries, the Romanian people have been predominantly Christian Orthodox and, on the other, that one needs a specialized terminology when discussing matters of faith. The Christian Orthodox vocabulary is just as good as any. What is, in fact, under scrutiny in the following two texts, is the existence of evil in the world, the miracle of love, the mystery of death, and the presence or absence of God. These fundamental great questions gain their full relevance if one remembers that the anonymous author of the ballad *Miorita* situates his cosmic drama "Near a low foothill/ At Heaven's doorsill."

Dan Radu Munteanu
Vancouver, B.C.
31 March 1992

EUGÈNE IONESCO
IN CONVERSATION WITH
GABRIEL LIICEANU

— Translated by Dan Radu Munteanu

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The following interview between Eugène Ionesco and Gabriel Liiceanu was originally broadcast by the Romanian national television network in August 1991. The text of the interview, revised by Gabriel Liiceanu, was published by the Group for Social Dialogue in the weekly 22 in September 1991. The response, in the form of an open letter by Andrei Plesu, appeared in a subsequent issue of 22.

The Capilano Review offers its sincere thanks to 22 for permission to publish translations of that interview and the response to it. We also extend our thanks to Nicolae Manolescu, Romania's leading literary critic, for his generosity in supporting us in publishing the following texts.

Următorul interviu dintre Eugen Ionescu și Gabriel Liiceanu a fost inițial difuzat de Televiziunea Română, în august 1991. Textul interviului, revizuit de Gabriel Liiceanu, a fost publicat de Grupul pentru Dialog Social în săptămânalul 22, în septembrie 1991. Răspunsul, sub forma unei scrisori deschise, semnat de Andrei Pleșu, a apărut în numărul următor al revistei 22.

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NOTHING MUST BE HIDDEN

Gabriel Liiceanu: One thing that is characteristic of your entire work, which became manifest as early as that famous *NO*, and which is the starting point of any discussion with you, is rebellion, rebellion as a fundamental component of *NO*. And, in an interview that you gave to Mrs. Monica Lovinescu in 1986, you said, referring to *NO*: "I was a hooligan." And now my question is, how has this initial *hooliganism* been transfigured in your later work? Or in your life since then? Therefore, has your superior civic standing, your civic splendour, that urged you to defend all lost causes, any connection with this initial hooliganism? From the famous inter-war generation, you are the one whose civic component of writing is the most distinct. Unlike Cioran or Eliade, you took sides in the press, you defended, as I said, all lost causes. You spoke with a total lack of reverence, without fear of consequences, against all the gulags of the world, you spoke both against fascism and against communism. Is there a trace here of the "hooliganism" you were talking about initially, when you said "I was a hooligan?" Or did your initial "hooliganism" foreshadow these subsequent attitudes?

Eugène Ionesco: Maybe. Maybe. I tried, indeed, to continue writing in total sincerity, in the sense of Baudelaire's "mon cœur mis à nu." Nothing must be hidden as to the truth and out of respect for the truth. If one can hide something out of respect for people, this respect for people is lack of respect for the truth.

G.L.: Yes, but this respect for the truth quite often forces the writer to leave his work room and to state his position with regard to the immediate problems of society. To enter a political space. How does

the writer's dialogue with God agree, in his work, with his dialogue with a profane, public, social entity, with a political entity? How do you accept in the name of truth, this interference by a political entity? Must it exist?

E.I.: It must exist. From time to time the writer must leave home, and these are the intermittences I am speaking about in "La quête...." He must get into contact with the world, he must be in touch with the people in the street who are his fellow men.

G.L.: In France, when, amongst the intellectuals, leftism was in fashion, you gave proof of the superior civic standing that I mentioned before and called things by their proper names, showing what terrible excesses were hiding behind that glorification of the left.

E.I.: I did it out of a sense of decency for the truth. Truth must be respected, while those putting their heads in the sand had to be exposed. Or those who did not want to face the truth. In France, for instance, people were toying with the left; the literary salons of the 16th district were full of leftists who refused to see things clearly and then the truth had to be told unsparingly and at any risk.

G.L.: What was the risk for you?

E.I.: The risk was that I was pointed at, it was their contempt for someone who saw the horror which they did not want to see and name.

G.L.: What made them not see? Why did they not want to see the horror?

E.I.: They did not want to see it out of timidity, out of ideological timidity. I believe that's how the French are. The Western world is like that, too. They think that the ideological truth is more true than the truth pure and simple. What is good for ideology must be also good for reality. Out of respect for ideology, they had no respect for reality. As it is well known.

G.L.: And why did you have a privileged position compared to them? Why were you closer to the truth that is deeper than the ideological truth?

E.I.: I don't know. I think that, maybe, because I am Romanian. I think that because I was informed, I think that because I am not afraid to speak frankly.

G.L.: But what is the connection with the fact that you had a past Romanian experience? Because you had the experience of the right but not of the left.

E.I.: It is true. I had the experience of an *extrême droite*. And of a second hand left, which had been radical socialist. I went once to a meeting of the left with Mircea Grigorescu and Horia Roman and we were attacked on the street and bullied. But this did not offer me the experience of the left; I haven't been really poor either. Maybe I should have belonged to the left for a while, maybe I should have been of the left before being — not of the right — of the non-left, an enemy of the left. But at a certain moment, the left was no longer left, at a certain moment the left became a right of the horror, a right of the terror and that's what I was denouncing — the terror.

I WAS SENSITIVE TO HORROR

G.L.: And why didn't the others see the same thing? Because the gulag had become public. One had already learned about it. Why, in spite of what Solzhenitsyn had revealed, didn't the others want to see? How do you explain that? For us, who went through the concentration experience, this thing seems inexplicable. This desire to keep the veil over the eyes...why?

E.I.: Out of respect for ideology. Out of respect for comfort.

G.L.: ...for one's own, initial option. Right?

E.I.: Yes.

G.L.: Because, you see, this has been a constant question in my mind. Why were you, who did not have a direct knowledge of horror, such as Solzhenitsyn or the dissidents of the east, sensitive to it and could denounce it, like one who had known it?

E.I.: Yes, it is true, I have been sensitive to horror and I learned about it from the people who were coming from Romania, whom I believed, and I also lacked the indifference that all the people had as to what was going on in the world.

G.L.: I was asking you about the rebellion that marked the start of your work. But this rebellion, born out of a direct social dissatisfaction — for instance, in *NO* you are irritated by petty politics, a certain mediocrity that characterized our inter-war society — this rebellion acquired, later on, another dimension in your theater, when it became the rebellion against the finite human condition, when it became the rebellion against death. Well, how was it possible that such a wonderful encounter with the divine emerged out of this rebellion, as the one in your latest book, *La quête intermittente*? How did you meet God at the limit of your rebellion?

E.I.: I don't know if I met him. Even now, I don't know if I met him. I am permanently seeking him.

G.L.: That's what I meant. In fact, the great theme, as I see it, of your theater and of your theoretical writings, and, anyway, of your latest book, is precisely the theme of waiting, the theme of hope, of quest and of doubt. What if nobody comes? What if nobody is waiting for us? Isn't that the question tormenting you?

E.I.: It is the question tormenting me and my great fear.

G.L.: And then, isn't your work a dialogue with a great absence?

E.I.: Yes. That's what I fear. Yes. For a quarter, for a tenth of time, I *believe* — for the rest of time I am agnostic. In this moment I do not know if I believe or not. My desire is to believe, I want to believe, I am like that friend of mine, a priest, who prayed every morning “*mon Dieu, faites que je crois en Vous.*” That's how I am. This is my permanent attitude and, sometimes, I rebel against what seems to me to be badly done. As in one of my stories, I want another universe. I want to return into the world. I love the being, but I'd like another. I'd like God to reshuffle it. And I am waiting for another nativity and I hope for another world — I hope without hope. We are born to grow up, to be merry, beautiful, and we all die little by little, we become lame, ugly, precarious; how is it possible, how is it permitted and why? I have asked all the priests that I know — also the Pope in writing — why is that? And everybody answers this is a mystery. We cannot answer. *Le Pape ne peut pas répondre à cette question.* And this seems to me a divine cruelty, which humanely I cannot accept. There is a French writer, Armand Salacrou, who restored the order of the world as he and as the people would like it to be: people are old when they are born, they get younger as they approach death, and they die babies after they have gone through youth and adulthood. An old lady, who was born dying who little by little recovered, the cancer was resorbed and then she reached maturity — that's how I wish the world were.

G.L.: That's how you would like it.

E.I.: That's how I would like it.

JESUS CHRIST IS MY BROTHER AND HE IS CLOSER

G.L.: And, then, isn't this the supreme form of your rebellion? The rebellion against a cruel condition: why, actually, do we have to die?

E.I.: I think so. Why do we have to die, why do we have to grow old, why do we have to suffer, why do we have to wait, why do we have to put up with injustice, why must there be injustice in the world? For thousands and thousands of years, there has been war. You see a beautiful blue sea and you think that two meters underneath there is war and that beings are crosscutting each other. I cannot understand why the universe is like that, why this world has been made. And this is my question: is there God? Or isn't there? And if there isn't, there must be somebody who made this world. And sometimes I am tempted to believe that it was made by evil angels, the ones that the bogomils¹ and the cathars² speak about and...

G.L.: ...your friend Cioran.

E.I.: And my friend Cioran. In "*Le mauvais D miurge*". But Cioran is lucky because he has something that soothes him, that appeases him — this beautiful style. I don't have a beautiful style and style is of no help to me. I think with horror that I will die. I think with a tremendous fear that my daughter will die, that my wife will die and that there is no forgiveness. And then I think not of God, but of Jesus Christ, who is my brother and who is closer. Him I invoke, him I ask, but he too does not give me an answer, except that he too suffered and waited. If he waited, that's the beginning of an answer.

G.L.: Why do you think that Cioran can be more serene and reconciled before death, he who had the same obsession with death as you, at exactly the same age as you?

1. Bogomils: Eastern Orthodox sect.

2. Cathars: Southern French sectarian movement.

E.I.: I must say that he read more than I.

G.L.: And did that help him? Does reading help when it comes to death?

E.I.: Yes. It helps to make literature. All his books are written as if inspired by the books of the 3rd century before Christ, by the books of the gnostics. I do not believe in Cioran's absolute sincerity. He is my friend, we speak, but I do not believe in his absolute sincerity.

G.L.: Absolute sincerity in what way? Related to what? To his anxiety?

E.I.: To his anxiety.

G.L.: Therefore it is an anxiety that's a bit feigned, a little less genuine.

E.I.: Yes. Because it's got style.

G.L.: Consequently, genuine anxiety does not go hand in hand with style.

E.I.: It doesn't.

G.L.: And how do you explain the fact that the people who believe in God do not ask exactly the same questions as you do and do not get into the same deadlock as you?

E.I.: I don't know. And yet — as Cioran used to say — it is beyond doubt that the experience of Saint John of the Cross and of Saint Teresa of Avilla is true. How the two agree — my mind cannot comprehend. I try from morning till night and from night till morning, in my sleepless nights, to conceive *l'inconcevable*. To conceive the unconceivable.

G.L.: Doesn't the experience of the saints help you? Therefore, can't we live by commission in relation with them? Since they went one step

ahead of us, wouldn't that be a way to retrieve our hopes?

E.I.: Yes, of course. But I am impatient, my impatience is enormous. And I am impatient minute by minute, day by day.

RHINOCEROSES, RHINOCERITIS, AND RHINOCERATION

G.L.: Forgive me for entirely changing the level of our discussion and going back to the space of our common life, starting from the great theme of *The Rhinoceroses*. And what I am going to ask you now is something that I have recently felt with regard to what I have experienced in the past months in Romania. The rhinoceroses, rhinoceritis and rhinoceration are current matters and you singled out a disease of the spirit that was born in this century. Humanity is besieged by certain diseases, physiologically and organically, but the *spirit* too is periodically besieged by certain diseases. You discovered a disease of the 20th century, which could be called, after your famous play, rhinoceritis. For a while, one can say that a man is rhinocerised by stupidity or baseness. But there are people — honest and intelligent — who in their turn may suffer the unexpected onset of this disease; even the dear and close ones may suffer such a...

E.I.: It happened to my friends. It is impossible to explain. Yet another mystery. That's why I left Romania, I didn't want to stay there and I came to France where I found a group, Gabriel Marcel, Pierre Emannuel, Denis de Rougemont — I no longer believed that I alone could be right against all people, I was saying to myself that it would be impossible — and I met several people who had the courage to be isolated from evil and not to believe in evil.

G.L.: Have you ever asked yourself why evil, being so vigorous while good is so frail — good, said Kierkegaard, belongs to eternity, and that's why it is so frail — why evil does not get irrevocably established

in the world? Why doesn't rhinoceration affect everyone?

E.I.: It is inexplicable, but it is also my hope.

G.L.: Why is it that the world remains in equilibrium?

E.I.: Who knows... How can one know? Then you are bound to believe in Jesus Christ and in religion and in all religions that, all, have the feeling and sense of good. Might be, might be... This conversation gives me hope; yet why does the great evil exist, why do we get old, why do we get ugly, why can't we believe any more — as it happens, why? Evil is so huge compared to good. Why has God given Satan so much power? It is a mystery, my daughter will answer, but I'd like to have the key to the mystery — I cannot live without the key to this mystery, although I will never have it.

G.L.: Yes, but still, the world does not become an empire of evil. There is always this struggle. And even Béranger, who is left alone, makes us understand that, out of his solitude, a community of good will be reborn. How does that come to pass? Therefore, there is no absolute forestalling of the world... The world cannot be satanized to the end. You know, this is one thing I cannot understand as I see how massive is the force of evil.

E.I.: To what extent, preponderant evil does not exist... I say to myself that, if God allows that we kill each other, if he allows humans to kill animals, if you have to kill in order not to be killed, then I believe that the preponderance of evil is not total, but it is immense, immense.

G.L.: Is it possible for something to start in purity and end up miserably?

E.I.: Certainly. Everything ends up miserably. Communism claims that it brought justice. And it brought only privileges and injustice. Churchill waged the war to maintain the integrity of the British empire. And he destroyed it. Hitler wanted to make a splendid Germany. And he destroyed it. I have the impression that the devil turns

all our wishes upside down. Regardless of whether they are favourable or they are unfavourable. There is this anecdote: at the last sitting of the Reichstag, a man shows up, who pulls off his little moustache, takes off his lock of hair and says: it's over, no more playing. The truth is that my name is John Smith, that I am English and an agent of Scotland Yard.

THE HURT PRIDE OF THE ONE BORN INTO A LITTLE CULTURE

G.L.: Again I am asking you an entirely different thing. Since we mentioned Cioran: he says, in a book written before the war, that "the pride of a man born into a little culture is always hurt." Have you felt that, as one born into a small culture?

E.I.: Yes.

G.L.: How was your pride hurt? Did you feel the urge for new vistas? For a world-wide fame?

E.I.: At that time I wanted to be famous, I don't want it anymore. Maybe because I am.

G.L.: Do you sort of feel the flimsiness of fame? Its unsubstantiality?

E.I.: I feel it deeply. I was preparing for something else. I wanted to be a monk in a monastery. And to pray to God only. But I fell. As I said in one of my plays, I fell. But I've still had this huge compensation: my daughter and my wife.

G.L.: This hurt pride of yours, when you left the country. Have you found another stage, better, here? After all, wasn't Romania, at that time, a stage of concentrated values? Compared to France, did the difference seem to you so great?

E.I.: Yes. The difference seemed great because Romania was not taken into consideration, because one didn't know where Sophia was, where Bucharest was; now Romania is known, the Romanian writers are known. So what? Now, after I have wished if for so long, in spite of all the evil that came to pass, that Romania were known, now I realize that it means nothing and that we should have continued to live outside history.

G.L.: But you haven't lived outside history.

E.I.: I have not lived outside history. I have lived with history. I've felt sorry for the wrongs of history.

G.L.: And then why do you say it's better to live outside history?

E.I.: It would be good to live outside history and pray... The only act that seems possible to me for the benefit of humanity is prayer. Then — pray. You live outside history, but pray to God.

G.L.: What does prayer solve?

E.I.: God knows if God solves it.

G.L.: Do you believe in the power of prayer.

E.I.: I would like to.

G.L.: Do you pray?

E.I.: Sometimes.

G.L.: By the way of prayer. You knew Mircea Vulcanescu³ very well. You know that, when Cioran — Cioran himself tells this story in a letter to one of Vulcanescu's daughters — Cioran, who had gone so far as to

3. Romanian government minister jailed by the communists in the 1950s who died while helping other prisoners to survive.

speaking ill of the Romanian people out of too much love...

E.I.: My impression is that Cioran spoke ill of Romania not out of great love, but out of a great personal pride. My impression is he hated the fact that he was Cioran and not Pascal.

G.L.: But he became Pascal. Eventually he became Pascal. So, Cioran said to Vulcanescu: "What kind of people is this, that hasn't produced any saints?" And Vulcanescu answered: "Had you only seen, as I did, the mark left by the knees of an old woman who prayed every day." Have you met Vulcanescu? His holiness or his faith, has it influenced you in any way?

E.I.: I wish he had influenced me more. If I had been close to him for longer, he would have influenced me more.

G.L.: Did you have a feeling of loneliness when you crossed over from the Balkan world to the Western world?

E.I.: No.

G.L.: Did you feel more lonely?

E.I.: No. There was a time, at first, when I felt much better, because I had spent my childhood in France. And for me, childhood and the country that at first was mine, were something wonderful, something very rich. And later on the French became a sort of Romanians.

G.L.: Do you enjoy meeting people?

E.I.: Yes, it's a great pleasure. I feel a great pleasure to meet Romanians, because I have been, deeply inside, for such a long time, Romanian. And I have "unloved" Romania for such a long time, but now I feel I am again their brother.

G.L.: Has this happened since you realized the tragedy that a whole people has been through?

E.I.: Yes.

G.L.: When did that happen?

E.I.: Twenty-five years ago, when I started to hate France and the West because they refused to understand.

Marie-France Ionesco: Sorry, father, but it was much earlier than twenty-five years ago, it was forty years ago.

E.I.: Forty, yes...

G.L.: What happened then?

M.F.: A conference, wonderful people, and suddenly, Father found himself alone, once again, because everybody there told him, "N'exagérez pas..." Somebody even used an amazing argument: "Vous ne savez pas parce que vous venez de là-bas."

E.I.: "Vous n'avez pas le droit parce que vous venez de là-bas."

G.L.: Exactly the other way round.

E.I.: If I come from there and I speak ill of the people there, it means that...

M.F.: They did the same with Kravtchenko, they called him a traitor.

E.I.: And they called Sartre — a noble spirit, when, in fact, he was... the biggest fool.

G.L.: Have you ever met him?

E.I.: I haven't had the honour; actually, I didn't want to.

G.L.: Has he irritated you from the first moment?

E.I.: From the first moment.

G.L.: Yes, but the absurdity of his position started to become apparent only in the sixties. Especially.

E.I.: I had a dream about Sartre, after his death... It happened in a place that was like a sort of theatre, and I was saying to Sartre, who was next to me, "Il n'y a personne dans ce théâtre." There's nobody. And he said, "Look up there, in the dress circle..." — "Monsieur Sartre," I said. "I regret not to have met you."

REGRETS AND REMORSE

G.L.: You make, in *Journal en miettes*, a distinction, which I liked immensely, between regret and remorse. You said there that remorse is the regret which is reflected upon the others, which finds the others. Remorse is the way of going beyond one's subjectivity, it is the sorrowful and guilty encounter with the other. When a man regrets, he remains within the boundaries of his ego. What are your regrets and remorse?

E.I.: The regret that I did not become a monk; compensated by the existence of two beings: my daughter and my wife. The remorse that I have done so much harm to the world and to the people whom I love; and I am sorry and I beg forgiveness from Him who must be. I live in a constant remorse and fear of death.

G.L.: I was thinking: In *La quête intermittente* you always come back, and also now, in our discussion, to two beings: to your wife and to your daughter, Marie-France. However, all you have done, goes beyond the intimate circle of those beings closest to you. The feeling is that you are always in touch with a vaster humanity. Don't you happen to appropriate to your emotion a circle that is much vaster, to appropriate all of humanity? Doesn't kindness mean the identification

with the other beyond a natural relationship?

E.I.: Kindness... My fear is too great to allow for such a feeling. From time to time I am good. I am good in a paradoxical manner, when I am sorry that I was bad.

G.L.: But what harm have you done?

E.I.: ...

G.L.: That is, biographically, I don't remember an explicit wrong. There are authors whose lives are stained by a regrettable wrong. There are thinkers who function badly during some period or other in their lives, who are guilty for the ideas that they produced at a certain moment. But your work or your life cannot be associated with evil.

E.I.: Who knows... I think it can. And this is my secret.

G.L.: You were bad only when you wrote *NO*, which was a programmed wickedness.

E.I.: Yes. But I was a man who was not good. But we shall know everything, as the priest says. I shall be told everything (everything shall be explained to me) — and I can hardly wait until that moment. But I know that in order to reach that moment, we must pass through death.

G.L.: I thank you and forgive me for tiring you so much.

E.I.: You must forgive me, I am eighty years old.

G.L.: Do you have the obsession of your eighty years?

E.I.: Just as I had the obsession of my seventy-nine years...

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Andrei Plesu / OPEN LETTER TO EUGÈNE IONESCO

“...pratiquement, il est, certes, plus naturel de chercher une issue, même en espérant un miracle, que de ne pas bouger en désespérant.”

P. Florensky, *La colonne et le fondement de la vérité*.

I have recently had the pleasure, Mr. Ionesco, to watch the interview that you gave to Gabriel Liiceanu last year. I didn't know that it had been scheduled, so the fact that I watched it seems a little miracle to me. I roused with a start from a heavy afternoon nap and, in a quasi-somnambulistic state, I happened to switch on the TV set. The interview had just started and I watched in an atemporal state of mind, perplexed to witness a real drama, in a moment when I was suffocated by a wreckless extravagance of conjectural drama. From “death to the intellectuals” to “death to the president,” almost everything one can imagine was shouted in Romania. But about *death*, about death pure and simple, no one's had time to think of any more. Just the same, the church ritual has become with us an overabundant presence, but this has not yet determined a real revival of faith. And you spoke about death, about faith. The effect — as far as I am concerned — has been terrible and it has translated into the need to write to you and thank you; for an hour you pulled me away from the penumbra of the administration and of immediate history in order to awaken in me the sleeping reflex of what I had been before circumstances plunged me into the government merry-go-round...

But you did more than that: you challenged my inner wish *to participate*, to enter into conversation, to rethink a problem which, intermittently, maybe capriciously, had, however, been the central problem of my life until the other day. More precisely, it is the effort to find, in the relentless fluency of the intellect, the fissure, the discontinuity, the void that may allow one to catch a glimpse of God's

unintelligible gesture. Of course, I do not have solutions and I am not so foolish as to imagine that I can tell you something definitive, or at least enlightening, at such a subtle level as this. But I feel, even from my beginner's level, an active involvement with your questions, and I feel urged to expand them, to add to them my own *confession*. In the matter of faith (because it is about the matter of faith that we must speak, and not, vaguely, about its "spirit") the confession of each and everyone may have an unforeseeable impact on the destiny of all those engaged on the same course.

Your central theme is the classical theme of all apostasies: how to reconcile the existence of God (in particular the faith in Him) with the existence of evil in the world (in particular with suffering, aging, and death). Naturally, it seems unacceptable to you that, in a world governed by the spirit of good, there should be room for so much moral and physical decrepitude; your own death, the death of those close to you, the general precariousness of a world, where, after all, nothing *exists* in a full sense. Compared to this "order" of the good Lord, Armand Salacrou's "order" seems more just to you: to be born old, dying, eaten by cancer, and then to live *à rebours*, to gradually regain your maturity and to end up in a quasi unconscious way, as a suckling on the brink of a uterine reabsorption. You must admit that this "project" of Salacrou's is not lacking in a certain monstrosity. By a very strange twist of criteria, it appears easier to accept, sentimentally and metaphysically, the death of an innocent child rather than that of a decrepit old man. All this would only make sense in a symbolic variant. But this is recommended in the very text of the *Gospels*: aren't we actually recommended to be "like babes"? To save ourselves by a means that, at first glance, seems an involution? The drama of death would be suspended if we were to appear before it with the innocence of childhood and with its belief in angels, dragons, and fairies. Not the direction of our life is wrong, but rather the fact that the biological direction that we are following is not doubled by an opposite, balanced direction of the inner evolution.

As far as the *scandal of the existence of evil* is concerned, who will contest it? Only that this is half of the world's scandal. The other half

is the scandal of good. Gabriel, at a certain point, suggested that in one of his questions. He said something like: if the world is so gloomy, if creation actually belongs to a *mauvais démiurge*, why are there still on this earth impersonations of good? I emphasize: we do not have a plausible explanation for evil (with the exception of that concerning the problem of freedom and original sin). But do we have a plausible explanation of good? Why is it that we can feel joy, purity, hope? Why is it that we can be creators? What about beauty, generosity, sacrifice? How could humanity be, so many times, so noble? Therefore, the problem is not only how the existence of God can be reconciled with the existence of evil, but also how can the splendour of the world be reconciled with the absence of God? And allow me a rather brutal *racourci*: how can one believe in the kindness and mission of one's wife and daughter, in the good fortune to have them around and not believe in God's kindness and mission? And then, if there are so many things that sadden us, because of their degradation, because of their lapse into evil, how shall we interpret these great shifts to good, repentance, the conversions?

It is clear that we are not faced with *evidence*, but with *choice*: we must choose between deploring the world's evil and crediting its good. And this choice cannot be an act of *discernment*, but one of faith. Faith as a credit granted to the good existing in the created world — here is a possible start.

But do we really want *to believe*? Don't we actually want *to know*, pure and simple, that is, to be in the possession of a *certainty*? So it seems, as long as we wish to solve our frustrations by asking *questions*, therefore expecting (from our intellect, from the intellect of the parish priest or of the Pope) illuminating *answers*. Yet faith does not comply with "question-answer mechanics" — such as positive knowledge — it is the solution of a quest. The difference is that the question puts the one asking in the position of the one waiting. It is the current way to miss faith. The quest, on the contrary, is an offensive act, a way of *undertaking* something. I have always been deeply disturbed by my, as well as other people's, inertia when it comes to the problem of faith; it is the inertia of those who say they

want to believe, but they *cannot*. Usually we stop here: *we want* to believe; we do not try to experiment with *anything* pertaining to the presuppositions of faith: we do not read the sacred texts, we do not read the texts of the patristic tradition, we do not pray, we do not go to church. We only *want* to believe. Because, if we do not believe, how can we do things that, for us, have no meaning? It is yet another proof that, in fact, we want *to know*. We conceptualize religious life as the putting into practice of a certainty when, actually, it is only a *canonized quest*. Quest, not possession. There is an instance when Florensky mentions a passage in Psalm XXXIII: "...they that seek the Lord (*inquirentes Dominum*) shall not want any good thing." Therefore, those that seek Him. Therefore no promise made to those who have found Him. Consequently, the reward is not meant for the answer that obstructs, but for the *approach* that hopes, that leaves the sky open. I was speaking about doing something in order to achieve faith. Something of a radical order, such as monachism (which you yourself mentioned as a missed chance) or of a more modest order, such as preparing the ground. But we want to be *straight away* Francis of Assisi or Seraphim of Sarov, without doing anything they had done before they were *smitten* with grace! We are waiting to be smitten and as this doesn't come to pass, we busy ourselves with laying the blame on God or with nursing our own private fears. At best we ask the "competent authorities": the priest, the Pope. And they, of course, answer disappointingly with that ready-made, "it's a mystery," beyond which the only thing left is resignation. Even the famous Zosima, in *The Karamazovs*, indulges, if you remember, in such silent truths. To a desperate woman, who had lost her three year old child while her husband Nikitiushka got addicted to drinking, the only thing he can say is that her child is sitting among angels at the foot of God's throne: so there is no reason for sorrow. And the woman answers with bitter humour, "That's just how Nikitiushka tried to comfort me, as though the two of you had agreed beforehand." At the answer level, even the great confessions unfortunately remain quite often at Nikitiushka's level. That's why you must not ask them to answer you, but only to accompany you in your quest.

I do not wish now to approach the problem of the *meaning* of suffering. As one raised and educated under the influence of a few great jailbirds (some of them well-known to you), I could see that almost all of them ended up by assimilating their terrible trauma as one full of meaning and that, consequently, we can invoke the meaning's lack of immediacy, its late, too laborious, too dearly paid emergence, but not its absence. In Islam "the angel" is nothing else but the meaning of a given reality. In this case, everything is full of angels; unfortunately, they are covered by eyes that can see, and not we...

But let us assume that what you wish with such moving intensity might happen: let us assume that you *have found* faith! After all, you have found so many things in your life. And generally you have been disappointed by all the things you have found: fame, the France of great values (Sartre — "the biggest fool". Right!) etcetera. Wouldn't there have been a risk for the *found* faith to be yet another disappointment, the last and heaviest? Not found, sought after, always perceived as vanishing — this is the image of true faith and its prestige. This image you have already touched, like Job, at the end of his wrestling. It seems that God justifies our stupefactions rather than our sufferings. The pride of the unenlightened Job is rewarded as the reasonableness (full of answers) of the theologians is not. That is why I look at you with envy and love, as you are one of the few great men of our century who do not know, cannot and do not want to find their peace.

I thank you once again and I apologize for the possible presumption of my theological remarks. They are, now, my only possible way of being close to you.

Yours,
Andrei Plesu

EUGÈNE IONESCO is one of this century's major playwrights. He was born in Romania in 1912 and was raised in France until the age of thirteen when his family returned to Bucharest. There, he continued his education and began publishing his first essays and poetry. He taught for one year (1937) at the Lycée in Bucharest but returned to France in 1938 and has since become a French citizen. *No*, his first major publication, is a form of meditation which focuses on the absurdity of modern existence and the pointlessness of language as a form of communication. Among his best known plays are *The Bald Soprano* (1949), *The Lesson* (1950), *The Chairs* (1951), and *Rhinoceros* (1958). In addition to his plays, Ionesco is known for the short story collection *The Colonel's Photo* and for the publication of his journals.

GABRIEL LIICEANU was born in 1942 and holds degrees in philosophy and classical languages from the University of Bucharest. His work focuses on problems related to the philosophy of culture and the history of philosophy. He has contributed to the publishing of Plato's complete works through extensive translations into Romanian, as well as through his commentaries and critical texts. His own books include *The Tragic: a Phenomenology of Limit and Surpassing* (1975), *The Paltinis Diary* (1981), and *Studies of Polytrophy of Culture* (1985). He is Editor-in-Chief of the Humanitas Publishing House and a member of the "Group for Social Dialogue."

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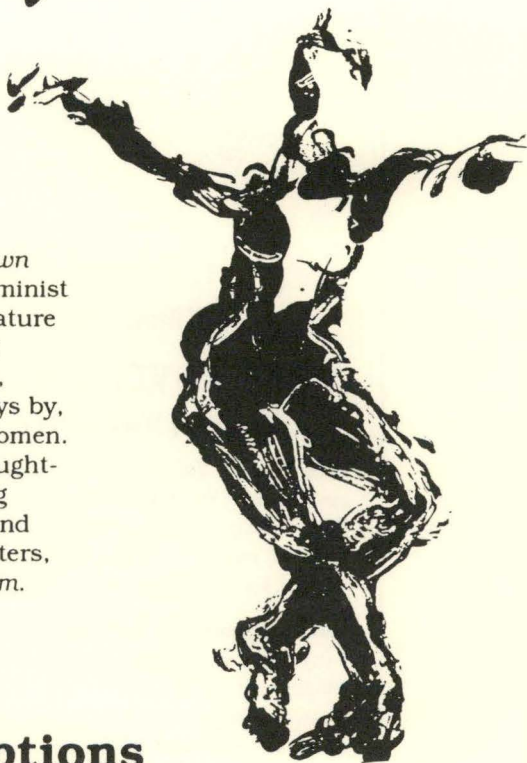
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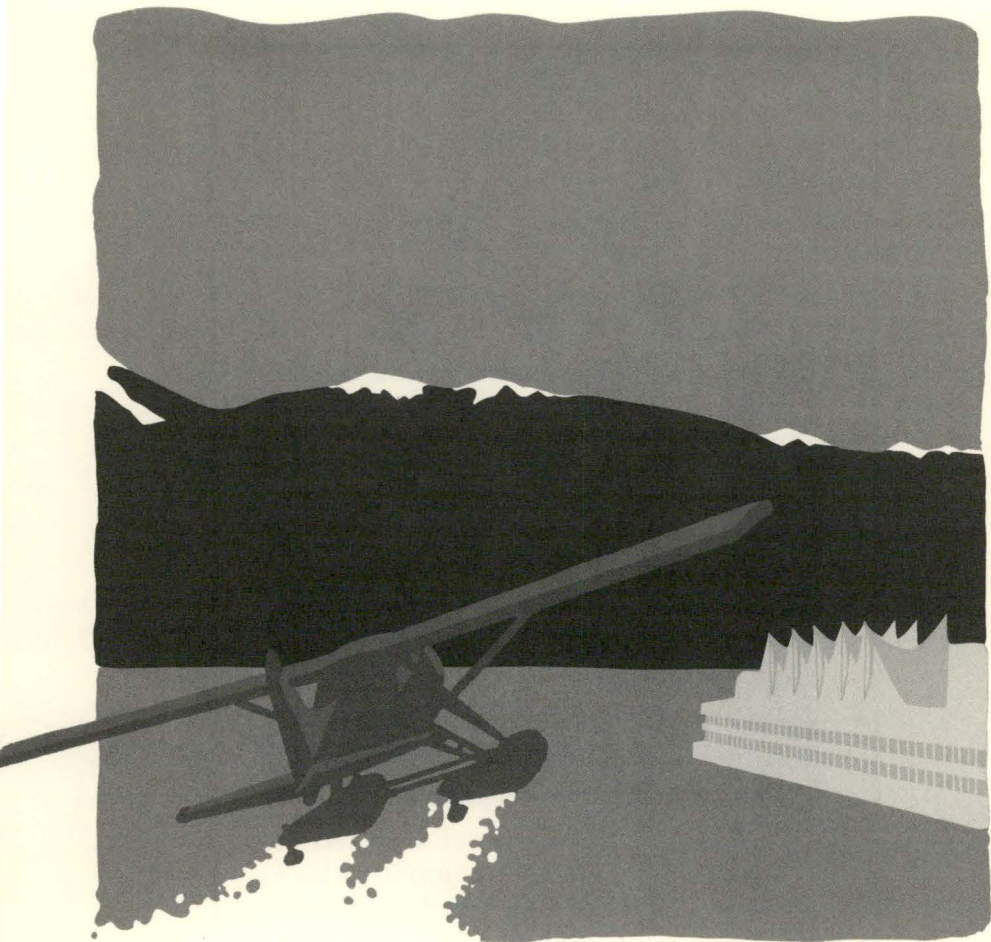
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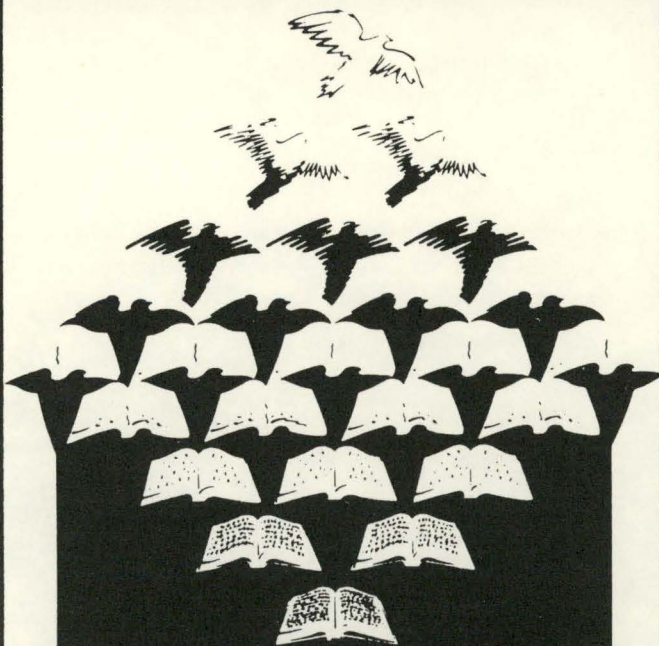


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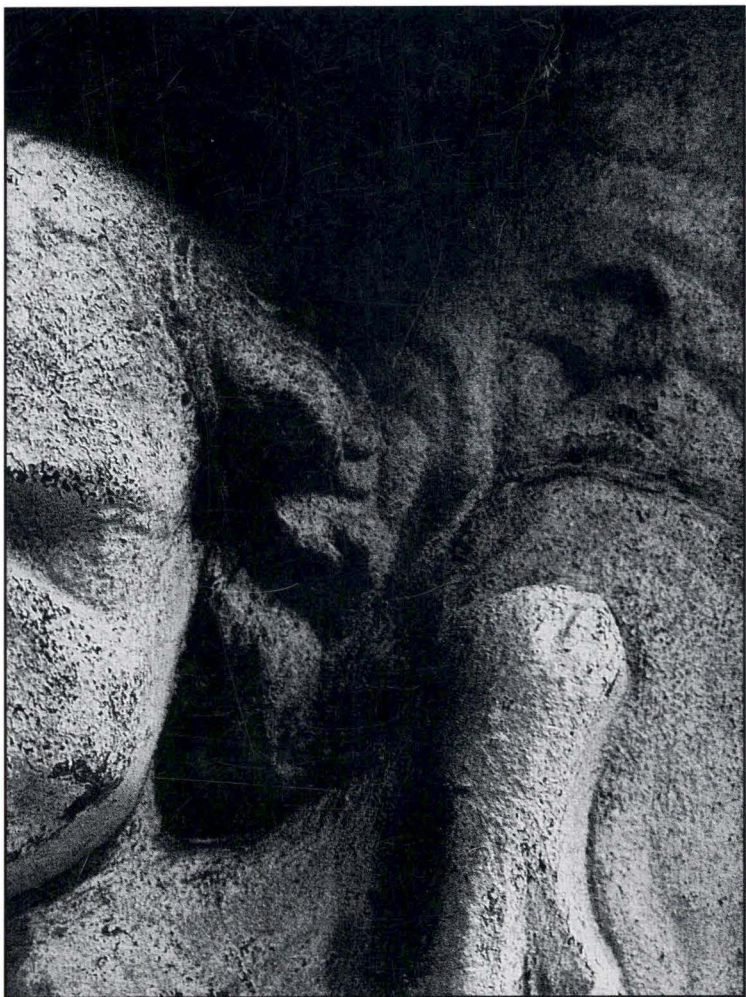
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