



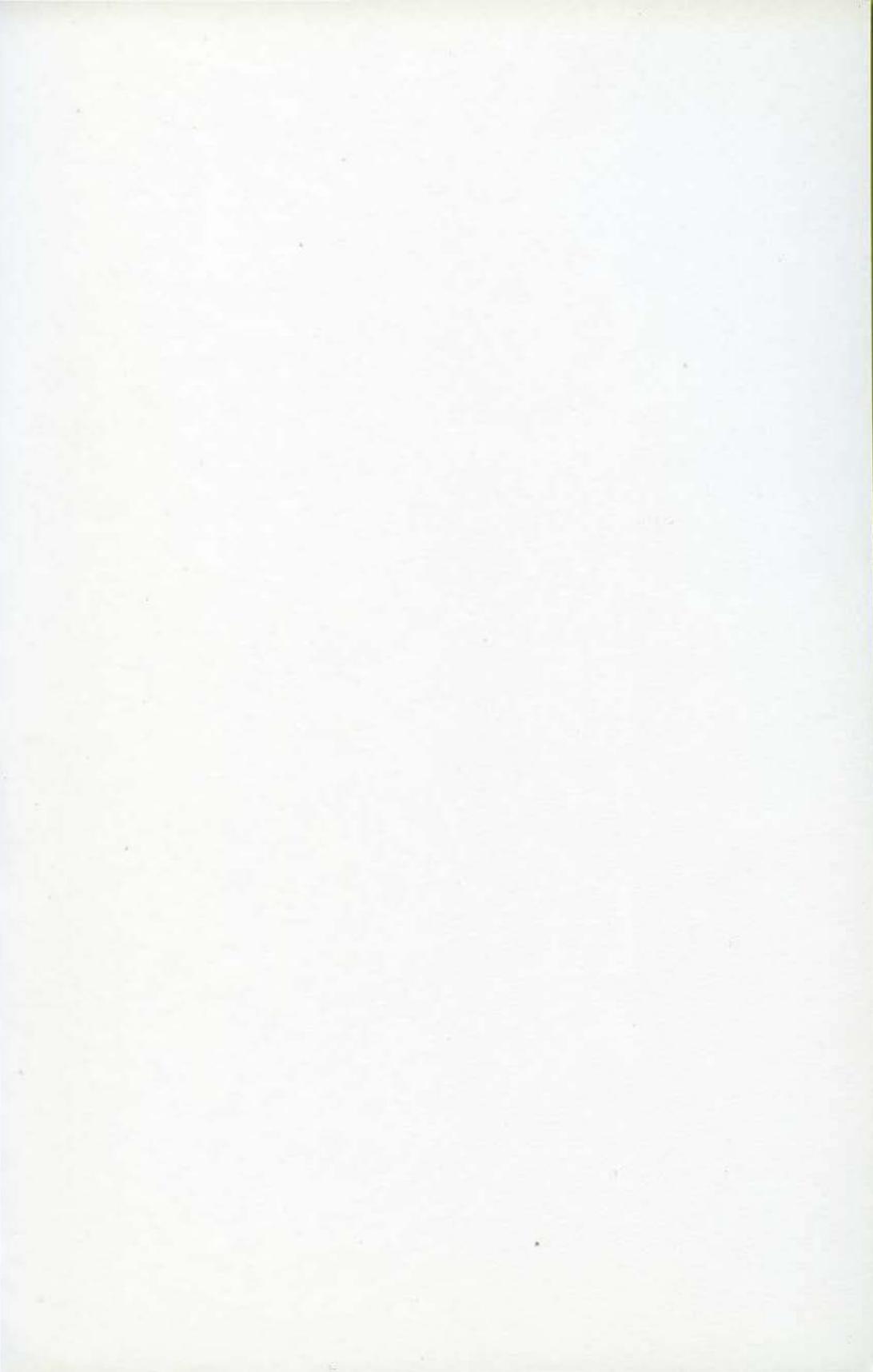
TCR

The Capilano Review

Norm Sibum/
poetry

Søren Gauger/
fiction

Wendy Lu/
digital art



To learn from an old master might be better —
but there's only the brimming grass,
the young river.

— Roo Borson

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Roo Borson / AUTUMN RECORD

Yoshino
cherries:
autumn
in the underworld.

It was March, the beginning of autumn in the southern hemisphere, and we had just seen Yoshino cherries — the famous trees, that is — for the first time. Except this wasn't Yoshino, and they weren't blossoming. Instead the leaves were a dry late-summer green, even after the drizzle that had come and gone, alternating with fog, all day. Walking high up along the path that threads one side of the ravine, black dripping foliage below, dry sky above, there was a clear sense of being in two places at once: two continents, two ideas, each a museum and a wilderness. Yoshino and Mt Lofty. Later that night, under the reading lamp, for a moment my eyes close: light of another day, crickets singing in the long daylight grass.

Often now by the river there are fragments of dead things, sometimes no more than a couple of shining fish scales, or a tail unattached to anything. This week so far I've seen a whole duck carcass that had been mauled and started to blacken, and something else: the picked-clean skeleton of a tiny nestling — though when I crouched down beside it, it seemed to be made of fish bones. My eyes, even my teeth, are not what they used to be — so whatever I say now I have to say with a lisp.

All night possums on the roof
play leaping sliding games —
and now the rain.

I try to think of what it must be like — to have a mating season, like the brush-tailed possums. We're watching television with the lights out when the thunder begins on the roof: galloping, followed by a drawn-out rhythmic wheezing, wild and strange. Then they leap into the trees and are gone. All day long the persistent sense of descending damp concrete stairs; leaf tips, rooftops, can be all alright with afternoon sun, yet we're in an underworld. Rooms at night so completely dark there is neither right nor left, no past or future. Lifting back the curtain, there might be a dot of light — but this too, whatever is visible, is just another temperature of the one monotonous dimension, which is darkness.

A forensic gloom of hairs, leaves, pollen, petals, fur, burrs, seeds, segments of casuarina, the dusky red threads of the bottlebrush. Every day the carpets accumulate new decorations, beside which the shoes take on a festive air, having fetched them in. Certain plants are only now coming into flower: new candles on the sawtooth banksias, bursts of red and yellow in the eucalyptus. Yesterday an elderly man on the bus had a minute green flower caught in his hair. It must have fallen from a tree as he passed under it.

To learn from an old master might be better —
but there's only the brimming grass,
the young river.

How easily last year's growth, some of it over twelve feet high, simply slumps toward the ground and is gone. And now the new unruly grass, a brilliant green along the banks. I found a baby bird, all skin and skeleton, no feathers as yet, gawky as a young turkey but no more than three inches long, shivering at the edge of the path. It couldn't walk, would tip over if it tried, its beak heavier than its legs. All the adult birds were off on the river, paying no attention. Coots and swans, pelicans, navy-chested swamp-hens. I scooped up the orphan with a magazine and carried it to the zoo nearby, where a keeper was called. Instantly she took it into her hands, crooning over it, then just as quickly scolded me, saying I'd have to take it back to the spot where I'd found it, that all I could do now was to leave it by the river again with its human scent.

Saturdays are market days. Beautiful white cheeses in wheels and semi-circles. Chunks of the pumpkin they call "blue" because of its softly glossy bluish skin, a complexion roughened by buff-colored seams and patches. Garlic chives, and varieties of green and purple water-plants that take their bitterness from the mineralized water in which they anchor themselves and grow. The high roof of the block-long market building protects everything under it: sheepskins, boots, cans of coconut milk and jars of mayonnaise, breads baked in the shapes of loaves and turtles, used television sets that may or may not work when you plug them in, huge proteas, lavishly silvered with furry edging, standing in plastic buckets. Above the best of the apple stands (Fuji and still-green Golden Delicious from the cooler hills outside the city), a Boobook owl has taken shelter on one of the thick cross-beams. It sleeps, eyes shut, its flat clock-face utterly calm amidst the hubbub of the market (though one imagines the quiet of nighttime when the gates will be locked, and mice dare to crisscross the expanse for bits of fallen food), the bigger vegetable stalls with their callers, each one louder and auctioning off the remainders at lower prices than the next, "Everything fifty cents but me!" and offering slices of overripe melon or bruised peach.

There are days when everything seems to be in parables. Reflections draped along the river, a young tree (I don't know what kind) half in autumn, half in spring — pink-veined blossoms on the one side, dried burgundy leaves on the other, shaking in the wind. It seems the seasons here confuse all but the native species, this tree joining the jacarandas, which have flowered for the third time in a single year. I can find no evidence of grafting on the young trunk, no scar. The fleshy blossoms on the half-tree's naked boughs are reminiscent of spring, but only as an emblem is reminiscent, or a keepsake by which one is still implicated in the events of one's past. Certainly nothing like the rafts of cherry and plum which, filling the eyes in springtime, can temporarily blind us.

Instead a faint thrill, that old feeling of dread over the simplest things.

Finally the rain comes, strumming the roof.
Two or three letters in the letterbox.

The new calendar? Same pictures as last year.

You can always tell the first real rain of autumn. Even if it's only the first few drops, they announce themselves by resonating a little more hollowly, and that much more resolutely, demonstrating that summer has indeed been broken and will not be returning. As the dark falls earlier and earlier, whatever had been shrugged off among the summer drinks and gaiety as if it were some ghost of private idealism, not only outmoded but useless, comes back now with renewed longing. Home, security, permanence. A society structured on kindness. Friendship undisfigured by envy.

Eighth anniversary of my mother's death.
I warm myself
in her red mittens.

Today I waited out a rainstorm under an umbrella at an outdoor cafe. The place was deserted except for several crows — fanning and folding their wings, and in that way too staying dry in the rain.

Lately I've come across a curious sort of litter, scattered widely and evenly beneath a certain stand of pines. Not just needles, though there are dry needles underneath, but bits and pieces of shredded cone. And now I see that overhead, cockatoos, each balancing on one foot among the boughs, grasping a chewed-off cone in the other, are eating ripe pine seeds, shredding the tough cones with their tough-as-nails bills, and in the process littering the path below. Farther along a car has been pushed halfway into the river. It must have taken at least two people to accomplish this: the reeds all around it are flattened. A policeman and police dog emerge from the riverbank where they've been searching, and head off into the flowering wasteground along the old rail line, bottles and cans aglint beneath the net of purple morning glories.

Policeman and police dog, on duty:
neither returns my smile.

Once, early in the morning, I happened upon a few drops of still-wet blood. This was on the university grounds, and I could see a broken ground-floor window in a nearby building. I followed the trail, the drops getting smaller and further apart as I went, all the way to the State Library, where they simply stopped. Things like this happen in broad daylight, when help is nowhere near. Another time, not far from here, I came upon someone crouched in the shadows beneath the overpass. He stood up with his pants down, not even bothering to wipe himself, and looked straight into my face.

Going through clothes that haven't been touched
since the final weeks of early spring,

I find wads of tissue,
tickets to performances I'd forgotten we attended.

Rain, then a dust storm (those of us unlucky enough to be waiting for the bus shield our eyes by leaning into the back of the person ahead of us in line) — followed by innumerable minute white flies which must have hatched all at once or else been carried by the wind in the wake of the cyclone which, the late afternoon news tells us, has destroyed two towns in the far northwest. They settle in the backyard pomegranate tree, and rise and shift and settle again as the gusts wane. The cats, usually so disdainful of surprises, explore with barely trembling steps their changed circumstances.

The leaves of the ornamental plums and apricots, the plane trees, the various deciduous imports and fruit trees, are finally down. The city looks newly swept. No one about (it's Sunday), but an empty phone-box outside the Mobil station keeps ringing and ringing.

Today I enter a room in which all the people I've known who are dead now are lined up as figurines on a mantelpiece facing the wall, no more than a foot high, made of some hard substance, wood or pottery, each with an arm bent upward at the elbow, fingers raised in some symbolic configuration, whose meaning, it is clear, is inaccessible to me.

On waking, though, what seems most strange is that there was no fire in the hearth.

I had never expected poetry to provide for anything beyond itself, but now I feel unhappy with poetry — or with myself — for not exceeding those expectations. The feeling is the feeling of reaching the end of Montale's poems to his dead wife just as it's becoming too dark to read, the lights coming on in the city below just as the stars too are coming out, as you wait for someone you love and depend on to be finished with some chore and come back with the car. The grasses are tasseled with seed, the crickets beginning, in stops and starts, suggestive trills. All of this happens in memory of course, recalled under the lamp's warmth as you lie in bed with your eyes closed, too tired to read. Later they'll sound more insistent: exploratory, expository, epistolary, before becoming exhausted.

"After prose has said all it can, or at least all that it is decent for it to attempt, poems rise to have their say." (Earl Miner, translator and commentator.) The Japanese, still writing in classical Chinese while adapting literature to their own purposes, were the first to compose poetic diaries. But there's only so much that even poetry can attempt. As the weeks go on, the crickets begin singing in the daytime too, as though wearying, or muddled, looking straight into daytime's true face as though it were darkness.

And where, in all of this, is autumn?

"Does it reside in the ink? But the ink is used up." (Chu Lu, painter.)

"All dark lines, and subordinate subjects of regret." (From another dream.)

The poems rise up (now, as then), but the feeling isn't in poetry.

When no one is present,
but it appears that someone is present,
autumn is here.

Søren Alberto Gauger / THE UNUSUAL NARRATIVE OF THE ODESSA CONFERENCE

Dawnoż to było, gdy stalem pomiędzy nicością a krzyżem
— Aleksander Wat

It is five years ago now that my university, the University of Central Canada, which enjoys the status of centrality neither in the literal nor the figurative sense, sent me at their own considerable expense to the 31st annual conference for the Promotion of Educated Discourse in faraway Odessa. I confess with a modicum of shame that I needed to consult my atlas with my wife . . . and that we started looking for Odessa in the wrong hemisphere. I found, to my considerable consternation, that not only was it a place that I had never heard of, but it was deep in the middle of a vast area about which I was equally ignorant. Somehow, the total absence of a friendly Halifax, Zurich, or even Calcutta amidst the dense clusters of Dnipopetrovs'ks, Tighinas, Arcyzes, and Mohyliv-Podil'kyjs gave me a profounder feeling of unrest than I had theretofore experienced prior to a journey, as though wandering alone into a thick, black forest with only a flickering candle of orientation in my pocket. My wife, Gloria, said that I was being silly. "Even in Odessa," she cooed, smoothing back my hair, "they will find you a flashlight."

That night as I awoke squinting in the glare from a streetlamp beaming through the overhastily-drawn curtains I began to trace my fingers down the uneven spine of my slumbering wife, and I thought clearly that mine were Canadian hands, and that the soft blue light whispering into the bedroom was a glow from a Canadian street and I memorized these things for recollection when I would be I didn't know where.

Leaving for the airport, my wife dressed me in my overcoat and hat. I seemed to have forgotten how to go about it with my own two hands. We drove the entire distance in a strange mute confusion and stopping only for the traffic signals. When I hugged my wife goodbye

I began sobbing softly. "Oh, now," she said curiously, "there have been other departures."

Between that and the boarding, in that strange inter-continental corridor I smoked cigarettes savagely, one after another, a single refrain from some elusive book of poetry swimming in my head, "And that my ego, bound by no outward force . . . Should now seem strange to me, like a strange dog."

I was assigned to row thirty-four. Under my arm was a complimentary newspaper that I couldn't recall having taken. My seat was by the window, and to get to it meant the off-putting task of wedging myself past my neighbour-to-be's enormous, spread thighs. A minute later we had gruntingly negotiated our separate terrains, a process that had left him flushed and lightly dappled with sweat.

"I fear I'm a size or two overgrown for these seats!" he jested in a rough British accent, at which I offered a weak smile and chuckled. "Usher's the name," he said, drawing a dog-eared business card from his breast pocket and slapping it down fondly onto my little plastic tray. I forcibly re-oriented myself out of my old frame of mind and into this new social predicament, and my eyes succeeded in focusing on the little card: "Clark Usher — General Sales Division, Ektop Ltd." "Ektop?" I mumbled, more to myself than to him, and then immediately wished I hadn't, as he saw this as an opening to illuminate the milliards of drab and inconsequential details which, when clotted together like a child building a mud pie, had ossified into the indiscriminate unity of a life. Mr. Usher wore green suspenders and a necktie that was probably once capable of circumnavigating the great orb of his girth, but no more. He wore his sleeves rolled up and when he smiled — which was frequently — he exposed an uncommonly generous quantity of upper gums.

But happily, Mr. Usher was an alcoholic. I gave him my little cocktails to help him along, and after only two hours of unbroken autobiography he had fallen asleep in the upright position. It had by then gotten dark both inside and outside the fuselage, and the only sounds were the gentle, fluttery moans of passengers settling into an unfamiliar and murky species of sleep. I pressed a button on my armrest and was bathed in an island of strong light, one of an only four-strong archipelago on board the plane. I softly unfolded the

newspaper and with weary eyes skimmed for the gists of various international dramas. My gaze fixed on a bizarre item on page five.

"Tourists to Rats," read the headline. And below: "After the disappearance of seven more international tourists from Volgograd, positively identified as two Swedes, an American, and four Germans, an extraordinary letter appeared on our copy editor's desk. It stated that the travellers had been seized and held by force, drugged, and then turned, one by one, into rats. The author of the letter offered as proof an accompanying photograph of seven grey rats, most probably of the *glaucus mus genus*. Police are still pondering whether or not to take the letter seriously..."

"Oh, they'll have to take it seriously," wheezed Clark Usher, giving me a terrible jolt with his sudden, boozy presence, his two huge scarlet eyes glowing from outside the island of light. "I've seen this before... but it's always treated half in jest." His voice had developed an unsettling huskiness, and his face possessed a chiaroscuro macabre. "But mark my words... Eventually, when the number of wayward tourists climbs above fifty... and it surely will... then you'll see the bobbies poking around in the Volgograd gutters, trying to sift the real vermin from the travellers." He burst into a steady, prolonged laughter, like air escaping from a pinched balloon. When he ran out he coughed and spluttered for a moment and then lit a cigarette, winking and offering me one. I gratefully accepted, and as I lit it my eyes fell upon the photograph of the rats, which stared towards the camera with wild and pleading expressions. Looking at their eyes I almost started to believe that they were German eyes, staring out from the middle-point of some unimaginable chaos, but then I righted my train of thought with a long suck at my cigarette. A low rumbling sound made me glance at Usher, who had fallen asleep with his lit cigarette dangling from his puffy lips. Flakes of ash fell like autumn leaves onto the downy meadow of his expansive belly. I gently removed the glowing remainder from his mouth, stubbed it out, and switched off the light overhead.

I was carrying something terribly heavy, something which dug into my shoulder blades, and suddenly I was aware that I was falling onto my knees except that there was nothing solid for my knees to fall onto and then I woke up to find the plane descending and Clark,

his mouth full of croissant and scrambled egg, shaking me to secure myself for the imminent landing. Out the window the sun was scaling a powdery violet sky, and the perambulations of the morning traffic were just becoming visible. Clark Usher's face had undergone a remarkable transformation, had shed all of its night-time monstrosity and regained its friendly though pallid composition. Stewardesses; runway; disembarking.

I remember neither my farewell to Clark nor the passport check area. My next memory is a surging mass of expectant families and friends. My eyes scanned the crowd for any academic-looking personae and rested on a young, dark-haired woman with square-rimmed glasses, holding aloft a sign with the crest of the International Society for the Promotion of Educated Discourse: two humanoid lions wrestling with each other, one's teeth locked in the other's shoulder, with a stylised globe hovering between them. She picked me out at once (perhaps because of my elevated forehead) and moved to assist me with my suitcases. Her name was Tatiana, and with her was a Norwegian professor of mystic philosophy who went by the name of Olaf. Olaf was obviously suffering from his flight, but he was not at all wanting in Scandinavian affability.

All of Odessa smelt of salt. The day was bright. "Odessa is a city conceived for dusk . . ." said Tatiana chimerically, but the oddest thing was that I intuited her meaning. The sunlight washed uneasily across the stone facades of buildings that twisted chaotically, like tangled roots bursting out of the uneven streets that led us downhill to the historic centre of town.

Entering the fortified centre necessitated going through an arch, carved onto which were the remnants of an inscription. Our guide translated as follows: "Odessa is the sound of the Gothic strings retuning." "You see . . ." explained Tatiana as Olaf dug flecks of dust from his left retina, "there was a belief that as Odessa was being built, the Gothic style had reached its pinnacle of expression. A palpable feeling hung in the air that the style had been exhausted, in literature, music, architecture . . ." We passed a fountain carved in the shape of a man posed in classic Grecian mid-sway, who held his own severed head under his arm. The open, grimacing mouth of the head vomited water into a basin below. Children kicked a ball

around it. ". . . That anything that could come next would either need to be a sheer break from the Gothic, or else suffer the fate of being a meaningless repetition. History has generally been more kind. Some scholars describe our city as the last great flowering of the late Gothic period. Others, less charitably, as the Gothic style's last shrivelled stump."

We wandered through a fresh fish market thick with crimson, long-bodied, winged insects, which seemed to flit about unnoticed by the shoppers and fish mongers alike. The latter all had over-abundances of metal teeth, which made awful glares in the blanched sunlight. Dogs played with fish heads in the gutter. For a short time the all-pervading salt smell surrendered to that of mouldering fish. Olaf and Tatiana maintained their brisk pace, but I lagged behind for the closer inspection of a gaping and slightly puckering carp maw. I approached it and watched my index finger slowly inch forwards and stick itself between the carp's undulating lips. The fish clamped down on it with surprising strength. Only then did I notice a fishmonger with a bloody smock and extensive dental reconstruction looming over me. I tried to look as dignified as possible with my finger inside the fish. "America?" said the man, leering crookedly. "As a matter of fact, no, I'm . . . no, Canada. CaNAda," I rattled, stifling the urge to tell him about the streetlamps and how with hands like these I ought to have been sent to piano lessons. "Canada. Ha ha ha ha," he chuckled monotonously, and then, his features having clouded somewhat, "Hey . . . you want buy . . . krysa? No . . . shchoor?" Then three things happened at exactly the same instant. A carpet of black clouds swept across the sky and tore open with rain. The fishmonger pounded the tail of the carp with his fist causing the mouth to snap open and my finger to be released. And Tatiana grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me away.

The Hotel Turichistesky was only one hundred metres away, but upon reaching that uniquely drab lobby, decorated exclusively in clashing shades of brown, the deeply rooted reek of old tobacco stains universal, a few shiftless characters slumped suspiciously in the only upholstered chairs, I was woefully drenched and shivering. Olaf had already checked in and was unruffled by the lobby, inquisitively scrutinizing an embroidered picture of galloping horses in a broken

frame. I stood idly by, picking at the chipped varnish of the service desk as Tatiana and the hotel owner exchanged whirlpools of Slavic syllables.

Olaf and I were to share a room. Two beds separated by a plain wooden table on which sat a lamp that didn't work, a plywood wardrobe with one door halfway pulled off its hinges and three wire coat hangers that were fastened to the rack to deter would-be thieves, and, when the curtains were parted to yield a view of what might have been a grain elevator, they also revealed a massive radio that took up the entirety of the windowsill and had six more dials than I recalled a radio needing. Olaf flung himself down on the bed and gave out a cry of pain and surprise. Something metal had jabbed into his lower back.

The torrential rain refused to abate, so we were condemned to remain in our room. I tried in vain to concentrate on a book of applied narratology, Olaf made staticky sounds with the radio. Olaf smoked a cigarette ruminatively, I stared gloomily out the window. I tried out the radio, Olaf spread out and folded his collection of decorative socks. I hit upon some frequency which, from behind the warbling tenor of a Russian opera, one could just make out the pale traces of a news report in French.

“Comme j’ai déjà dit . . . le monde, était le monde, après tout . . . au même temps, à la Russe . . . il y a trente-et-un personne qui sont . . . avec une photo des rats . . . jamais . . .” I turned to Olaf for some reaction, but he was blithely folding socks on his knee and whistling along to the Shostakovich in the foreground. “What is your specialty in mystic philosophy” I asked. “I am a Plotinian,” he said cheerily, and then, with a note of regret, “There are not many of us left.”

At nine o’clock the rain had somewhat let up and our hunger had suddenly and decisively overcome us. The hotel restaurant was filled with guttersnipes and drunks, so we headed out into the drizzly night on our own.

The challenge proved to be in finding a place that was in fact a restaurant in the familiar sense of the word. We would bound over great, oily puddles, nearly topple down crumbling steps, and throw open some heavy medieval door only to be confronted with the same four or five sullen, badly-shaven thugs murkily drinking pint-glasses of

thick, transparent vodka. The moment that Olaf would stroll in from the icy rain with his short sightseer's pants, long crimson legs and little tufts of creamy blonde hair at his kneecaps, the game was up.

Tatiana was correct. In the slippery lamplight Odessa's architectural peculiarities came to life. Its gargoyles squirmed fiendishly. The buildings seemed fluid and were always shifting about on you when they occupied the periphery of your vision. A file of orthodox Jews swept by muttering almost inaudibly, like a murder of crows. Or were they only the shadows of lampposts?

We swiftly lost our way, and then we were damp, morose, and totally uncommunicative in any language spoken for a thousand miles. But we finally happened upon a restaurant. The light came from a giant hearth in which cooked the half-carved shape of a reddish-bronze roasted animal. An inordinate number of policemen sat around the wobbly timber tables, many of whom chuckled under their breaths and nudged each other meaningfully when we sat ourselves down. Smoke hung thickly.

Olaf and I ordered some mid-priced entrees of entirely mysterious character and settled down at a corner table. At the far end of the restaurant I saw curtains which seemed to hint at a small stage. "Oho," I said to Olaf, "I think we're in for a performance."

No sooner had these words fluttered out of my lips like dusty moths than the curtains drew apart and the sound of dueling accordions filled the restaurant. On stage appeared a gentleman in tattered top hat and tails with a ghoulish smile painted bright red onto his cheeks. He introduced a series of attractions. First there was a contortionist with closely-cropped black hair and nervously flickering eyes, who was capable of twisting his legs into such revolting postures that I was compelled to avert my eyes. Next up was an old bearded gentleman who made doleful noises by bowing and wiggling an iron saw. Olaf and I gave him our polite attention, but my mind had started free associating, from the saw to my trembling knees in the dream on the aeroplane, to Clark Usher, to kissing my wife goodbye, to Gloria's baffled smile, to a night I had spent with her drinking red wine and laughing and crying, to the very large portion of hot oily tripes that the waitress was setting before me. I had ordered it through cruel happenstance. The very smell was

enough to make my sensitive throat go into convulsions. Olaf shifted a bit down the table with his roast pork to get away from the smell of my dish. At this point the music changed in texture and the lighting as well seemed to change. The tuxedoed man again appeared stage centre and displayed that disagreeable grin of his. He went into a long comic speech that was well appreciated by the crowd, but was entirely lost on me. Olaf laughed mildly from time to time so as not to appear too ungrateful an audience, indulging his Scandinavian sense of propriety. He looked absurd, larding the general merriment with his polite mirth. Most unsettling, though, was the fact that it seemed as though the comedian would incite the crowd to laugh ominously while gesturing towards Olaf and myself. My senses may have been confused. I had choked back the last of my food, and a dull, warm, stupid feeling was spreading through my body, a torporous undertow brought on by the filling, hot, tripe. A volunteer was being invited up to the stage, a young, dark waiter with blotchy skin. The presenter elicited a few more chuckles from the audience while the waiter agitatedly shifted from foot to foot, and then he drew out a long blade and lopped the boy's head from its shoulders. I squinted my throbbing eyes to see through the smoky haze. The youth had tucked his still-blinking head under one arm and was feeling his way offstage with the other amidst some stormy applause. "Olaf . . ." I heard my voice peep as the entertainer wheeled onstage a silver cage containing seven familiar-looking rats on top of a cart. And thereafter was heard the rhythmic pounding of more applause.

I jerked awake and found the plane descending and old Clark, his mouth brimming with croissant and scrambled egg, shaking me to secure myself for the imminent landing. I lunged at him and seized him by the stiffened collar, causing his coffee to slosh treacherously to and fro on his dining tray. "Tell me what you know about the rats!" I murderously growled, causing other passengers to look in our direction. Mr. Usher just stared at me, unpeeling my fingers from his collar and suggesting that perhaps the ardour of travelling had put me off-colour. The night's sleep had left him more British.

We disembarked separately without so much as a polite word of farewell. My stomach felt as though it were trying to digest a live

animal. The customs officer had difficulty matching my badly-shaven and nausea-distorted face with the serene and smiling one in the passport. My suitcases were slashed open with a practiced swipe of a razorblade, sorted through, and then resealed with electrical tape.

A raven-haired woman named Tatiana was waiting for me in the arrival hall, holding up a sign emblazoned with the crest of the International Society for the Promotion of Educated Discourse: two humanoid lions devouring each other's tails, with a stylised globe hanging between them. With her was a professor of applied metaphysics from the Central University of Norway, who affably introduced himself as Olaf.

Everywhere you walked in Odessa you stepped in mud up to your ankles. Thus, a revolting squelching noise was ubiquitous. My trolley-suitcase on wheels, purchased at great cost, sank so deeply at one point that I was forced to abandon it. The buildings, some of which were built in the shape of great, yawning gargoyle heads, leaned disarmingly this way or that, and things like potted plants or children's toys were forever sliding off of balconies and onto the streets below, gravely injuring passersby.

"Tatiana . . ." I began, but then stopped myself, hearing my thin voice echo like a rubber ball through alleyways, over rooftops, into the courtyards and sewers. We arrived at a great hexagonal piazza surrounded by structures that seemed too old to be standing. The wind couriered a creaking sound. Over the piazza were laid wooden planks, stretching from one end to the other. The mud here had reached such depths that it could not be safely trod upon.

The planks teetered unsteadily under our cautious footsteps. Olaf chuckled good-naturedly to dispel the general gloom. We had to interrupt our progress from time to time as people crossed planks laid crosswise to ours, grave and vampiric shadows of people often dressed in cloaks. At one such intersection we passed a group of filth-covered farmers, their arms filled with squealing and clawing livestock. As they passed us, a corpulent piglet kicked its way free and leapt onto our plank, causing it to shake terribly and setting us all off balance. At just that precarious moment an undernourished hen seized the opportunity to wrench itself from its owner's arms, flapping squarely into my aghast face. It was in this way that I fell into

the waiting mud with a brief wail that got stuck in my throat. Up to my chest and slowly sinking in the historic centre of Odessa, I wiped the grime from my eyes and saw Olaf's long and veiny Scandinavian arm stretched out towards me for help, only inches too short. The hen had fallen head-first into the mud and, to judge by the motionlessness of her legs, had already suffocated. Tatianna searched in vain for a stick, and as I felt the mud resolutely ooze up over my shoulders I thought to myself that this, too, must have a bottom.

I came to with a thunderous pulse raging in the brain-pan and a soft blue light coming in through the window, and for a fleeting moment I thought: Oh, thank God, I'm in Canada. But then I saw Olaf's sturdy frame slumped in the corner opposite, little rivulets of blood at his temples and felt the ground shuddering beneath me and I pieced together that I was in the back of a transport vehicle being taken somewhere. I had the sickly aftertaste of tripes at the back of my throat and my clothing was encrusted in dried mud, all of it. I peered out the bar-covered window and there was the heavy form of the moon, the source of the watery-blue light I had mistaken for Canada. Olaf was dreaming badly, and his periodic whimpers sent chills of recognition down my spine. "Olaf . . ." I stage-whispered, ". . . Olaf, what's happened to us . . . there was a mud pit . . . and a restaurant . . ."

"Oh, God, the restaurant!" he wailed, his eyelids fluttering in a state of collision or confrontation between dream and waking, unable to select which was the more perfidious. "The man with one glass eye is lifting the shroud from the box . . . he intends to commit unclean acts . . . the man with one glass eye has tricked God into paralysis . . . he is clothed like a lion . . . when he smiles there is malice . . . Oh! Vermin! . . ." Here the truck hit a bump and Olaf's fragile condition was irrevocably disrupted.

Inside of five minutes I had oriented Olaf to the situation at hand and his stare had lost most of its glassy despondency. We had very little difficulty in untying each other (Olaf had trained seven years with the Norwegian boy scouts), and this small victory put us in fine spirits. Olaf found a little flask of powerful liquor in his shirt pocket and we gulped it back like giddy adolescents. Whereupon Olaf lifted up one of his giant, steel-toe booted legs and vigorously kicked open the back doors.

It was like the curtains opening to show the fantastical set of a play! Snow shimmered all about, painted in blues by the moonlight, geese flew overhead, the road slid from under the truck at an electric speed. The landscape was so austere, I swear I was more afraid of finding myself in the heart of it than I was of being in that really rather cozy truck . . . But as it turned out, the choice was not mine to make. In a moment Olaf had seized me bodily and thrown me headlong into a snowdrift.Flushed with excitement, I picked myself up from the ground and turned back to see a struggling Olaf being dragged back into the truck, still speeding away, and the back doors slamming shut. My exhilarated grin faded into the icy fields of my new reality.

I struck out into the motionless landscape, feeling the vague and pulsating warmth of Olaf's alcohol in my veins, watching my long pianist's fingers turn blue from the cold. Every direction was equally desolate. I would take a dozen steps one way, be overcome by hopelessness, start out on another tack, the same thing . . . As I stumbled forth I drew a line map of my progress in my head, sketching out the trail by which I'd come in dark charcoal across the blank canvas of my thoughts, all the way from the truck to some future point which I marked with an optimistic "X" . . . and little by little, with my nose numbing to a tender rose and the wind muttering obscenities in my ears, little by little I began re-orienting my focus of attention away from the robotic plod of my fur-lined boots through the snow and the moon satelliting through the firmament far above, away from these things and deeper inward, into the very trails of the map I was drawing, a map which was becoming three-dimensional . . . The charcoal blackness, upon drawing closer to it, dissolved into filigrees which obscured camps of huddled people, bundled in wools and sitting by dark orange gas lamps, holding each other by the hand and kissing each other on the forehead.

I wake up amongst some trash cans in an alley that reeks of old booze and filth. Alternatively, the smell may be coming from me. I remember very little, but I have the absolute certainty that I am in Volgograd. I am in Volgograd and the rat people will be trying to find me.

My pants are torn and my collar is weirdly askew. The more I tug at it, the more I disfigure it. I scuttle crustaceously along unfamiliar streets pulling at the stubble on my face. A man gives me a cigarette, which I smoke energetically. I reel off the street and into a coffee-house teeming with suspect clientele. From the menu bordered with turn-of-the-century lilies, I locate coffee, which is bitter and arrives in a glass with no handle and a thick layer of grounds clogging up the top. I pull my battered edition of *Applied Narratology* out of my pocket, thinking that I might try to anchor myself in something direct and rational, that I might read something that would make sense of my disarray. "Focalization," I read, "is the relationship between the 'vision', the agent that sees (the focalizor), and that which is seen." I skim on past the bits on analepsis and prolepsis, and read the following, "If the retroversion occurs within the time span of the primary fabula, then we refer to an internal analepsis . . . If the retroversion begins outside the primary time span and ends within it, we refer to a mixed retroversion." I hear a rustling noise and look up to see a man sitting across from me. He is dressed in a tan winter coat with an extravagant fur collar. There is a fedora on his head and a pair of costly sunglasses on his face. He is agitatedly chewing on a lump of sugar. "You are in unspeakable danger here," he hisses from between clenched teeth, and it makes me jump in my seat to hear the English language being spoken. "The problem sticks in the fact," he says leaning forward, beckoning me closer, his voice a conspiratorial whisper, "that you are incapable of dreaming the Crimea. But I will help you to get a foothold. Don't drink that coffee, it will only make things worse . . ."

The stranger leads me along boulevards filled with rumbling motor cars and trains, outside of the city centre and into the lobby of a post-secession tenement building. We go upstairs without a word exchanged between us, and at the very top there is his apartment. I scarcely register the squalid poverty of the decor, the broken furniture and the smell of rot. The stranger shows me to a low, concave bed and I immediately black out from sheer exhaustion.

"Ektop?" I hear myself saying, and that one word, like a refrain from a melody one has known since childhood, tells me everything I will find around me when I lift my weary head. "Ektop isn't just

another business," recited Usher, his brow furrowing earnestly, "It's a philosophy."

Clark snored a basso continuoso to my left as I pushed a button on my armrest, thereby illuminating my seating area. I could scarcely believe that I was back on that infamous airplane, opening up the very same newspaper, hurtling towards the next, consecutive Odessa. I flipped past the now-familiar "Tourists to Rats" piece, and my gaze rested on a small item near the back. It was the 100th anniversary of the death of Poland's national poet. He had lived through a turbulent era and was responsible for the idea that every nation, every generation, and beyond that, every single individual walks his or her own stations of the cross. I stopped reading as this idea rippled and resonated in my mind. I was normally suspicious of poetry, but somehow, on that night . . . I closed the newspaper softly, so as not to rouse the dreaming Mr. Usher, and clicked off the overhead light. The stars were all where they ought to have been, and the aeroplane engine hummed a lullaby.

My first thought was: I am falling once more. And then there was Clark, with his half-chewed eggs and croissant. And the descent.

Tatiana was there waiting for me in the arrivals lounge, albeit oddly Olafless, and holding aloft the crest of the International Society for the Promotion of Educated Discourse: a humanoid lion greedily devouring its own tail. As we made our way through the airport, my absurd little suitcase rolling in our wake, I slowly came to recognize that everyone about us was wearing plastic masks, moulded to take on human features. I mentioned this observation to Tatiana, to which she replied, "Yes . . . they are all giant rats." She contributed nothing more on the subject, and I feared it was too culturally sensitive to delve further.

It was the same thing in the streets, everyone bent-backed and wearing grinning plastic masks and long, yellow overcoats. I tried to catch sight of a tail dragging behind one of them to back up Tatiana's peculiar claim, but this ended up in vain. Perhaps they wind them up inside their coats, I resolved. We passed through a great stone archway that led us to the historic town centre, an archway inscribed with a motto that Tatiana translated as signifying "Odessa is the sound of the Gothic wires snapping." "You'll have

plenty of opportunities to see that arch again," said my guide with a chimeric grin. Soon I understood her immaculately. We went through that archway three, four, six times, always from the same side, and then I lost count of how many passes we had made.

"Tatiana . . ." I croaked, keeping my voice low so as not to tip off the rats, who would surely take me for an American, ". . . we are moving in circles." The sound of my own voice seemed strange to me.

Tatiana giggled. "Foreigners always think that at first. Pay more attention."

Absolutely right, I thought to myself, keen attention to detail is what this situation requires. During our next pass I noted that just beyond the archway was a boy selling newspapers, a small pile of kopeks in front of him on a small dish. His knee-length pants were torn horribly and he had very large ears and a mustard-yellow cap. I committed these things to memory. Now we'll see if there is one archway or many, I vowed, wondering what Heraclitus or Nietzsche would make of my empirical philosophising. When we passed the gate once more I eagerly looked for my newsboy. He was right where we had left him, but . . . his cap was pumpkin-orange. I tried to recall what Berkeley had said, that colours, as secondary substances, existed only in the mind . . . but the significance of the cap's transformation . . . what it meant for the archway, for Odessa, and ultimately, myself even . . . seemed entirely beyond reckoning.

But then suddenly we were at the hotel "Tourist," and I was swept by a wave of morbid anxiety at the thought of being left alone, of the prospect of falling asleep and waking up in God knows which Odessa, totally alone and stranded with my electrical tape repaired and fishy-smelling suitcase-on-wheels and my hands that were so disfigured that I wished I was wearing gloves. Tatiana laughed with a kindly lilt, straightened out my collar, and gave me a little flashlight (embossed with the lion insignia) to give me courage throughout the night, which, she added unnecessarily, was to be the longest of the year.

I lay feverishly, incurably awake until three o'clock a.m., in dread expectancy of forthcoming Odessas, not entirely able to decide if I was trapped in not being able to leave Odessa, or rather that the trap was my inability to definitively arrive, calling up fragments of literature like holy spirits to soothe me and stave off the shadows:

"One is a superfluous mist, a little puff of breath exhaled, which God no longer bothers about"; "This continuous whittling away of his personality seemed linked to a vague presage of the rebuilding elsewhere of a personality"; "I could write a treatise/ on the sudden change/ of life to archaeology"; "Do thyself no harm! For we are all here!" And then it was three o'clock.

I woke up amongst snowdrifts. The numbness of my extremities indicated that I had been unconscious for some time. Every bone yearned to escape the cold, and I reflected that I might have spent the previous night in the hotel "Tourist" a good bit more merrily had I known what the bitter sequel would bring.

The sound of a motor was just audible in the distance. There might be somebody who would drive me to a warm place, I thought. Yet I was entirely consumed in blackness. I found myself quickly recalling everything: Olaf in the truck, falling out, losing Olaf, trudging hopelessly from nowhere to nowhere. I shouted at the vehicle as much as my throat would allow, but my voice was carried away by the wind. My left hand half-somnambulently reached into a pocket and fished out Tatiana's flashlight. It seemed to me that there might be a dubious narrative congruity to the flashlight being in my pocket at that moment . . . but then I was delirious from the cold and the disorientation . . . in any case, I raised the thing above me like the torch of liberty and waved it about energetically. I heard the screech of brakes as the car pulled to a halt. The strength in my limbs, attenuated to a virtual abyss by the cold, rallied for a sprightly hobble to the road.

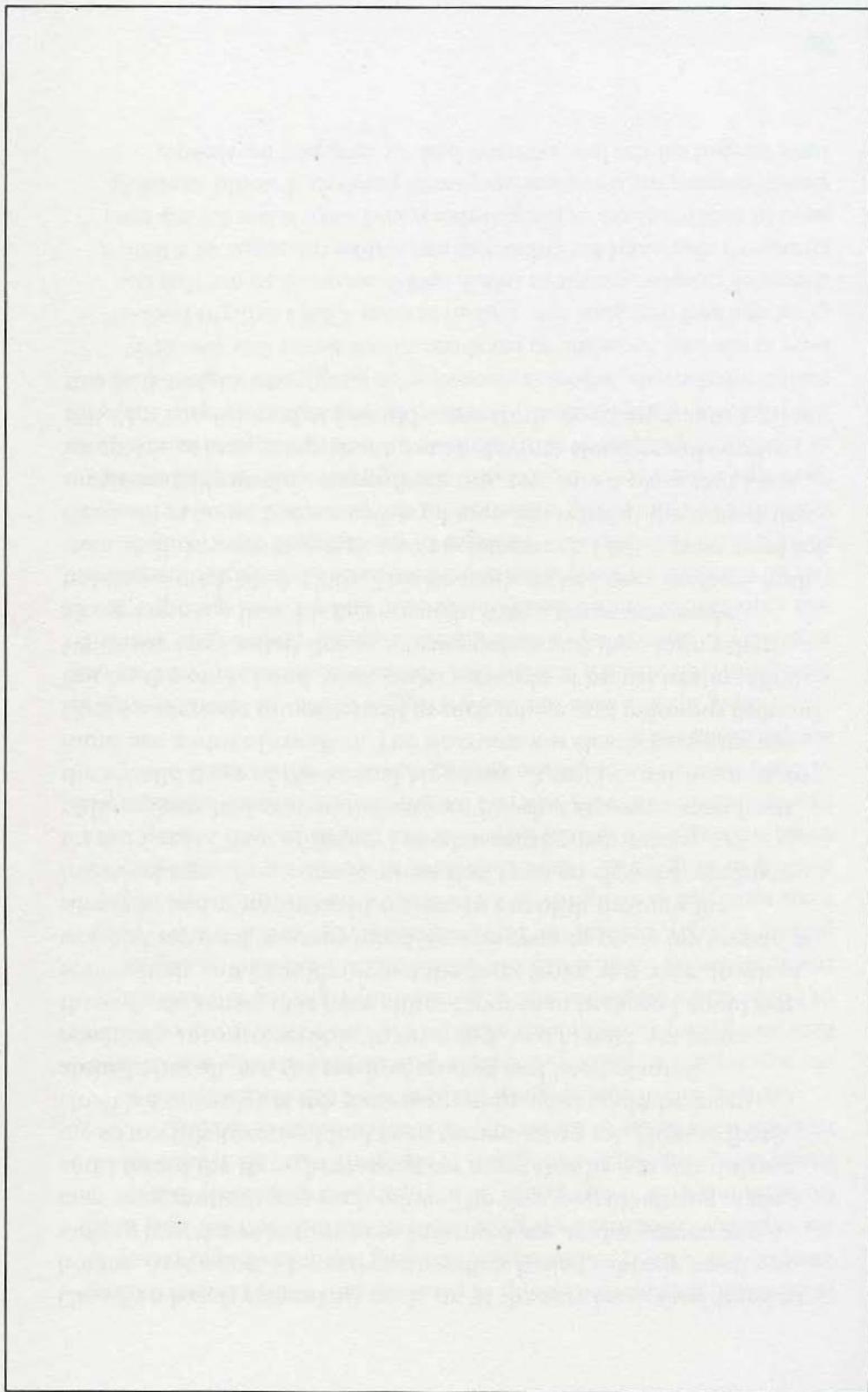
The motorist was a gentleman of Scythian profile and manner. His automobile, mercifully, was equipped with a small vent that coughed up petroleum-smelling hot air, and I placed my hands greedily over this as I hopped into the car. As soon as I shut the door, we were off. It occurred to me that I remembered from somewhere the Russian word for "where." Pointing through the windshield and into the swirling murk and haze so as to indicate our destination, I slurred "Giddy-eh?" through my frozen lips. There was an unnaturally protracted pause, during which time I expectantly studied the driver's features, his sad and drooping eyebrows, the gradual and chiseled ascension of his forehead, the lumpy contours

of his skull, the skyward swoop of his nose, and without determining what on earth for, I found myself bringing my index finger closer to his expansive mouth, to wedge it between his full Slavonic lips, until he burst out with "Volgograd!" so abruptly and ghoulishly that it made me spring back, and again, "Volgograd!" and then neither of us knew what to say or do for the next three hours of driving.

Getting out of that singular automobile I felt distinctly like a strange replica or parody of myself. The stubble on one side of my face had grown more quickly than on the other side, my breath stank of booze and exhaustion and I favoured my right leg as I walked, a result of having fallen badly out of the truck. I avoided staring at people directly, though the few denizens awake at that bitterly early hour were just as unsightly as I. For half an hour I limped through the city of Volgograd, where the leaves of trees were painted grey to avoid striking a discordant note with the buildings, and at long last I found a solitary alleyway where I happily nestled myself betwixt a pair of trash cans, in amongst the cloying odour of refuse, for a tempestuous sleep.

Waking up this time felt like a struggle of will, an unwieldy tug, as though there existed a muscle that was used to dormancy but yet was necessary to launch my consciousness from the thick bog in which it was embedded. When I finally succeeded and my eyes sprung open I felt all through my body a narcotic heaviness. I recognised the room to be the one to which the stranger in the cafe had led me, and I was reassured in connecting a memory to the present. I heard deliberate footsteps enter the room, drawers sliding open and shut, all outside of my frozen periphery. A breakdown of focalization, I mused, due to the paralysis of the focalizor. But then he was right on top of me, the man from the cafe, who was removing his sunglasses to get a closer look at me and revealing to my dumbstruck terror one perfectly good eye and one glass eye, and all at once Olaf's twilight back-of-the-truck prophecy leapt to mind, and it occurred to me that the stranger's abundant fur collar was not unlike the mane of a lion, a second confirmation of the prophecy, and were it not for my total powerlessness, my complete corporeal paralysis, I would certainly have lunged off the low, concave bed, or wrapped my slender

Canadian hands around his neck, or, at the very least, shuddered in horror. As it stood, I lay extremely still. A boiled cabbage smell was wafting into the room, my nose informed me, and a woman and a man were muttering to each other. The lion was still staring at me, and I found the thought crossing my mind that he was scrutinizing me so intently because I had been turned into a rat. Now, at first I chuckled (silently) at this auto-suggestion, what could be more absurd after all, but the seeds of anxiety had been planted, resolutely, incontrovertibly, in my mind, and I could not prove through my senses that I was either rat or man because I could not see my body and I could not feel the parts from, as it were, inside. I wracked my tired, swampy mind for some way to prove my humanity simply by use of my unaided reason, to establish through the interworkings of my consciousness that I was an elevated specimen on the Great Chain of Being; I tried to recall what various philosophers had said on the subject, on what separates man from the squalid dross of the animal kingdom . . . but I could summon to mind not a whit of comfort. The situation was clearly preposterous. Could a mere rat unnerve itself in such a base and infamous fashion? But on the other hand, what better example of bestial irrationality?! While my wits jostled thusly, scoring points and then losing them, along came the lion, his face wrought with a decorative smile, holding a thick black cloth. This he tenderly laid over my face. And then, as if through suggestion or enchantment, I felt a great need for sleep, all at once, and somewhere I even felt relief at the notion that my personality would emerge from this, too, into a place that I was incapable of imagining, that I would ebb into slumber only under this firm condition, that I would come forth, re-emerge, into a place that had certainties.



Norm Sibum / DINNER HOUR

— for R.M.

1

III

Maybe it was this gentleman who had
pulled America off the teats
Of a feral she-nurse, done it with no memory of
Romulus and Remus, done it with his flustered,
tiny fingers,
With no image in his mind of a shelf of Roman portrait busts
ID'd like corpses in a morgue

III

Or maybe, the *X*, white with ragged edges,
Was the differential in a numbers game — maybe this was it.
That where, for the First Cause, *Y* once stood,
Now *X* stands, is value
For the lesser effects of love
As when a dreamer dreams and pie-in-the-sky attracts
The grosser appetites, as when the dreamer is not Villon
But that the dream-set might be set
 in Queens or Bangkok.

IV

His right hand muzzled a glass of wine —
That zealous right hand of the old buzzard,
His left arm glued to the table, an administrator to time.
And his voice was nasal and his jokes were trite
And so, this much had yet to change
 with a *bon vivant*.
Petulah at the counter, beginning to founder
 from her cargo of hilarity,
Once a party girl, getting to be a bitter jade,
Grabbed at her Medusa-like curls, some adagio in her fine mind
 run amok.

v

It's to say no one had, no, not Petulah, not Harringstone the Brit,
Not Iris the volatile ballet instructor
 who doubled as a waitress —
No one had the faintest notion
Of who or what God might be.
Did He bomb civilians?
Did He play *Jeopardy*?

VI

Allen the ferret-eyed hotel clerk, Rupert the big-bellied cabbie,
and Dick
Who spent his sumptuous wages
On assignations in cheap motels — not he
Or any of the others could tell you
Of what mental fabric God was.

VII

So that, maybe, the old duffer in his cap
such as Bolsheviks used to wear
May as well have aped the deity
And a drunk, too, and a lawyer retired from the fray,
and a veteran of a coronary.

VIII

So maybe, the sirens of emergency response were it,
Maybe, the radio with songs and skits
Designed to keep the cash-flow flowing
And encourage a responsible pursuit of sin
And a rational appropriation of joy
and less ambitious delights —
God a burned-out shell of a gentleman loner,
His eyes as unblinking as a reptile's, taking in a vast sweep of terrain
And the Ministry of Health's
relentless propaganda.

IX

Then again, maybe the umbrella in the street,
Kicked around somewhat, was it,
A malignant flower, a fallen star,
A discarded article bespeaking feminine grace
from the sunny state of Georgia.

X

Yes, whatever *it was*, maybe, it was due
to a woman, after all, Petulah there
Too weary for love, too tired to resist
The advances of a railroad worker, but that she, even so, was
some kind of keeper of a faith.

XI

Or maybe Lennie, our unofficial rabbi, would
connect us to God,

But Lennie was sweating in the heat
On account of his fears and corpulence,
The humid air a shroud.

Maybe it was all this that brought
The beginning to us: Stalinist bravura, pious love feast,
light's pulverizing hammer.

XII

Even so, Nick the cook, unabashed Greek, he swore in his mother's tongue
In a thought-impoverished moment
That, nonetheless, outpaced the intellect
As he surveyed the bitches and the whoresons
that were his means to making a living.

XIII

Then pig-tailed Jimmy, a trucker once,
Made light of anxiety, hunger, and the scene.
Eggs benedict was what he'd eat,
That is, if he were as rich as Croesus.

Hey, that's it, eggs benedict. Waitress, take my order.

XIV

And the blondes in blush-pink sandals spoke
Of redemption, slid into the subject easily
As though all their lives they had debated
clerics and mullahs and bailiffs,

XV

Those babes for whom a god of old
Made the world in under a week,
For whom TV guarantees much, *and self-esteem*,
And redemption was, well, it amounted to
paths of least resistance, and

XVI

The blondes in blush-pink sandals could,
While wriggling toes, bide their time
Until the boyfriends were let loose from jail.
Lennie rocked in his chair, incredulous,
Wishing, maybe, to add to his little band of true believers.

XVII

Marilou and Agatha wore
Enormous earrings — this equipage
Lent them a Rembrandtian air.
They had kindly smiles — Marilou and Agatha, and they were bohemian
even if Marilou was a realtor.
They dined often with Lenny,
And they looked after him, tightening his suspenders
and helping him with his buttons . . .

XVIII

Oh, they might have broken into psalm right then and there
for the beginning that was to come,
But that they were spinsters and oversexed
And they were hard up and celibate
And they were swell sports and vicious losers,
as intense as squirrels,

XIX

And they were intimidated and lost
To imaginings such as loneliness breeds:
That the streak in Marilou's spiffy, new hairstyle
 was gold and it was obscene.
So that maybe, in another life, she used to officiate
 at subterranean rites
Performed against the backdrop
Of architectural fantasies, *Lennie their baby, their orphan, their link*
 with time out of mind.

XX

Maybe the chairs freshly cushioned, painted black,
Maybe the new paint job on the walls
That took longer to complete than had been advertised . . .
Maybe, this was it, a way of going forward
 one futility at a time.

XXI

Mrs D, a lover in her own eyes
 if in no one else's, squirmed in her running togs
As she sat with her coffee and cigarette. Maybe, knock wood, she'd
 find a man,
One who'd be fun when fun was needed
And all boot when a *boot* was required
To attend to matters of state and business.
She looked for a man for her boudoir,
But men are the occasion of so much mess
And this was to her dismay
 and discomfort.

XXII

Nickles, a lover in his own eyes
 if in no one else's,
Idolater of the Enlightenment even now, ran everything
 to ground and spat
On personal virtue, mind, and art, on all who passed themselves off
As being in possession of the articles above —
 egregious frauds —
As he passed by in his usual funk
And slagged a modernist in the window,

XXIII

And Lalah, the relief cook, swore
In his mother's tongue, and it was as though
The café, a seesaw, teetered — in its search for balance —
On the sharpest peak of the Hindu Kush.

XXIV

It was as though the world would attack the world
And time, diverted from itself, would flow back
to itself.

XXV

Maybe, the cars splashing through the rain
Were the thing, that, and the thunder and the fact
life is a constellate arrangement.

XXVI

So that maybe, it was the faces you see in dreams,
That float up at you in dreams, and you the dreamer say,
“I told you they’d behave like that
And even I didn’t believe it.”
Diners twirled spaghetti.

XXVII

And it was the opinion of a connoisseur,
Of a greasy-haired, amateur theologian named Roger,
That Tammy the Devastater was gifted
With the best legs he'd ever seen,
But that the rest of her
Was gloss and commentary.

XXVIII

"What?" I said. "Her eyes," I said, "the set of her jaw . . .
She could make love all day and still run a marathon.
She could manage a business with complete attention and tender care,
And then lay off staff a day before Christmas,"
Her eyes the color of fool's gold, flowers peppering the wide,
wide boulevards of time . . .

*On that day, it was only the heat
That was making us crazy.*

XXIX

And maybe the rooms were it, the rooms in which you and I reside,
Rooms being the structures that contain
The skeptics within the spiritual
In sight of the valley of the cradle
And the precipice of the grave.
Even so, rooms bring to the door
busybodies, thieves, zealots.

XXX

Maybe it was the rain that fell.
A house of cards was a citadel.
Nick the cook squeezed Mrs D,
That is, he massaged her shoulder, and she
Very nearly sobbed from the gravity
Of the occasion, and she had a dog to walk,
an adolescent to castigate.

XXXI

Maybe it was the lovebirds who, day after day,
Courted one another in the café, how their lips met and parted
In a prelude to calamity, he a purveyor of illegal potions and she his reason
for gratitude.
And their eyes grew wise, taking stock.

XXXII

Maybe it was the twilight, the ricochetting rain, the flowers fleetingly
beautiful
On the wide, wide boulevards of time. Maybe it was that
but maybe it was not.

XXXIII

And the wide boulevards of time were flower-strewn,
Yet, it was just the same, old street outside.
Trucks bounced along. Lennie rocked in his chair.
Salt was sprinkled. Beer was thin.

XXXIV

And Tammy the Devastater in shorts stood up
And men winced to see her limbs,
And she grinned, her mood better now,
And life got rich for a few mechanics,
And God drummed his fingers
on an arborite surface.

XXXV

So maybe, here it was, possible perfections for a brief portion of time:
A perfect morsel of smoked meat, a perfectly executed quip,
An old man doggedly carrying on
Even if he might die, just sitting there,
reading a book,

XXXVI

Tammy so fetching, that evening, irrespective of character
and the travails of her soul.

But it was as though nothing had come before

To tell us what to take or leave

By way of the evils and the felicities.

It's always like this

And now it's September

And we are at sea.

Brian Buckbee / DUBIALITY

The earth is apparently made up of plates that, from time to time, shift. What happens next is buildings, roads, and people — yes people — fall into the chasm of the earth. But, before that, for a moment, they are suspended in mid-air.

I came awake this morning surrounded by the debris of a bed that is too large for me, and the memory of a woman floating on an inflatable red raft in the hippopotamus pool at the zoo. Which zoo? I cannot be sure. The woman was glistening with oil and the hippos glided through the clear water beneath her like birds.

The coffee maker had been destroyed, so I did the next sensible thing: I walked up the road to a coffee shop. It is an odd thing, to float on a raft in a hippo pool. The pool, as I recall, was indoors, so I cannot account for the suntan oil. She wore a white bikini, and was oblivious to the onlooking zoo patrons, who seemed more interested in the hippopotami. I can't remember why the woman was in the pool. Was she a zoo employee? Had she won a contest? It seems unsafe to dally with the mighty hippo. But I remember how peaceful she was, and the memory of my dream made me want to cry.

The coffee shop was closed. A stack of Sunday papers sat outside the door. A sign on the door explained the hours of the coffee shop. It seemed as if the hours of operation on their list intersected with, or overlapped, the point on my watch. My watch has hands, but, as I have learned, those cannot be trusted. The street was deserted and, though the sky was blue, the moon was still out. It was fading, perhaps even trying to disguise itself as a precisely exact semicircular cloud. I said hello to the moon. The sun I could not see. Perhaps it was behind some buildings. The sun and the moon at the same time. Who can make sense out of all this? It was early, of course. I went and looked at the clock on the bank. It was 14 degrees Celsius.

Now that I am alone, I have decided to seek shelter in the routine of toast. There is the twisting of the twisty tie, the spinning of the bag, the scanning for mold. There is the somehow noble upright stance of the bread before it drops down, down, down. I am so nearly overcome by emotion that I am unable to push the lever that lowers the bread. I find the courage, however, and am ready to break out in subdued celebration when I notice that the floppiness of a slice has kept it from sinking all the way into the depths of the toaster. The bread slice's lower half is being burned alive. God help us all!

Things are beginning to make less sense to me. I am noticing what a precarious thread the world hangs by. I don't have any clue how the toaster works, and if I stop believing in it, I am afraid it will cease to work at all. The world would be an especially lonely place without toast. At what point, I wonder, does the bread cease to be bread, and become something else altogether? When is that moment that the definitions of things change? Right now, I could pre-empt the toaster's full cycle, and pull out the white squares and run up the street shouting, "This is toast!" and no one would believe me. On my toaster's chart, between white and a series of increasingly threatening browns, is a gray color, like putty. I've never been able to match any kind of bread, at any degree of toasting, to anything near that color. Why doesn't the toaster ever just go up in flames? That's what I'd like to see. I simply cannot be satisfied any longer by toast. I unplug the machine and carry its warm body upstairs to the bathroom. I step into the tub and hurl the toaster through the hole where the window once was. It lands two floors below, right next to the coffee maker. Unlike the coffee maker and the food processor, the toaster looks intact. I could probably go down and get it, bring it back up, plug it in, and it would keep cooking my toast as if nothing had happened. Who needs an object such as this, one that does not even have the decency to be fragile? I can live without toast, can make it in the world without all things. A cup of coffee, however, would be good.

There was a time when the world was not so strange. It was enough just to see somebody else's total confidence in the toaster, or in the incollapsible handle on the gallon milk jug. I could even stand under the hot water while my wife's hand turned the knob to even

hotter, without any fear of getting burned at all. The important things made sense, so the little things didn't matter much. Like how telephone poles don't just fall over at random. And how you can buy apple after apple without finding a worm. I have a pear tree in my backyard, and all the pears have gaping holes. Some of them, I think, are lived in by birds.

* * *

Unless the knocking at the door is Juan Valdez, it looks like I won't be getting coffee today. I open the door, and it's not a Colombian standing there, but a policeman, and, curiously, he's holding a cup of steaming coffee. How did he know? This, here, standing before me, is the brotherhood of man embodied! But it turns out the coffee is not for me at all. He takes a sip from what was, for the briefest of moments, my coffee, and says,

"Good morning." His mustache is dripping coffee and I ask him just what the hell I can do for *him*.

"Wanted to catch you before work," he says. He is all dressed up in his cop suit and his cruiser is in the driveway. To me, and I'm no cop, the evidence suggests he is already working. He continues:

"Some neighbors complained about the junk in the front yard." He points his mug toward the pile of domesticity beneath the bathroom window.

"Really," I say. I have not seen a neighbor in quite some time.

"You know," he says, giving me a once-over, "this is a nice neighborhood and all."

"Well, *sure*," I say, taking a look around. I see exactly what he means.

"Now, if this were *my* neighborhood..." he says, and trails off, implying that there are many homes in his neighborhood that have such piles out front. "You know, cars on blocks, old refrigerators."

"Yes, I see," I say. And now he's got me thinking. "I've always wondered what makes the refrigerator work."

He sniffs authoritatively. He has mighty nostrils. I have upset him.

"They don't work at all," he says. "That's why they're in the front yards."

"*That I understand*," I say. I look up at my bathroom window and have a brief, intense fantasy.

My policeman friend is rather chatty. "It seems like I spend half my time driving around, ripping the doors off abandoned refrigerators," he says.

"And why do you do that?" I ask.

"To keep kids from suffocating."

"It's tragic," I say.

"Yes it is," he says, nodding his head sadly.

What I said next I should not have said out loud. "Poor, poor refrigerators."

My new officer friend left in a hurry. I need to clean this shit up, is what he said. I suppose that is how people talk in his neighborhood.

I always thought that surgeons operate on a person's heart through their ribs. That explained to me why so many doctors were small, because they needed little, nimble fingers. Then I learned they split the whole rib cage open, like a peeled orange. What I don't understand is why everything inside just doesn't spill out. Why don't they ever do an autopsy and say, "It was the heart. We found it in the stomach." It turns out the heart is an ugly thing. It is topped with greasy fat much the way Liza Minelli's head is topped with hair. People can now live with monkey hearts instead of their own. I believe I have seen that somewhere recently. Maybe it was a monkey living with a man's heart. (Poor, poor monkey.) They put all sorts of things in the heart these days. Pieces of metal, balloons and pig parts. Do we even need a body any more? Or can we just be heads that immigrant servants mix in the preferred company of our choice? Or has that been done, too? What I do know is that there's an island somewhere where a man's worth is judged by the number of monkeys he has working for him. Monkey, drive my car!

I have the perpetual headache of one who is oversleeping. That is not to say that I am waking up past an appointed time, though that is exactly what *oversleeping* seems to mean. Rather, I am sleeping too much, similar in many ways as someone who eats too much *overeats*. Oddly, it seems as if those who are *oversexed* don't have sex at all. They just think about it a lot. Even words are failing me now.

When I'm not sleeping, which usually isn't the case, I think about sleep. If not for the headaches, I'd never get up at all. There are people greeting me in my dreams who I have not thought about for years. Beautiful people who I have been intimate with in the past, and in my dreams want to give, give, give. Bless their fatty hearts! The strange rooms of my dreams suddenly now all have beds in them. And as I sleep in my own bed, I dream of myself in those dream-beds, and of girls as far back as my grade school girlfriend, who asked me to go steady with her while we hung upside down from the jungle gym. It is the headaches that prevent me from lingering in bed. But when a headache ceases, I start looking for a place to lie down.

I have slept under a bridge and on a bridge and on the floor of a clothing store beneath some long, hanging garments. A woman who maybe worked there, maybe did not (who can tell these days), asked me what I was doing. "I'm resting," I said. She said she was calling security, and that was the end of my sleep. I am not afraid of security, never have been, but I felt a headache coming on, and there was a pin sticking out of my leg.

* * *

I am dragging the love seat up the stairs when there is yet another knock at the door. If this is the mustached policeman, I will have a hard time explaining what a couch is doing in the stairwell. Is this what it was like for my wife while I was working, what with the doorbell constantly ringing and strange men standing on the threshold? No wonder she left.

There is a man on my porch wearing skin-tight black shorts and a tank top. How can one prepare for such unexpected visitors? Next time it will be ten monkeys formed into a pyramid. "Yes?" I say.

He hands me a cheaply made brochure and explains to me that he is a fitness instructor looking for clients. I inspect his brochure and ask, "Is this crayon?"

"Yes," he says proudly.

He is a professional, so I choose to be blunt. "Do I look fat?" I ask.

"Nope," he says. "But there's a woman two doors down, she's huge."

"Mrs. Jenkins."

He is intent on reiterating her fatness. This time with a visual. He blows out his cheeks and makes a circle with his arms.

"She's pregnant," I say. (She's not.)

"Oh," he says. He is mortified, genuinely mortified. He cleverly falls back on his pitch, expounding on the tortuous devices he would set me to. He promises to make me "buff."

"I'm not interested in 'buff,'" I tell him. "But if you want a used microwave," I say, pointing to the pile with my out-of-shape chin, "help yourself." My attempt to close the door is then thwarted by a well-trained waffle shoe.

"Wait," he says.

"What is it?" I ask impatiently. I am now anxious to get back to shoving the love seat out the window.

"I can also help you get your heart fit."

I am an old-looking thirty-four. But to him, I may as well have been born in the back of a mule-driven wagon while the folks headed west to pick apple trees. The look on his face makes me think that he thinks I am considering his offer. What I am actually considering is what it would be like to crash the living room ceiling fan over his head. He then makes an egregious error, a genuinely egregious error. He says, "Maybe I could help your wife."

I have just struck the fitness instructor. I got him right on the nose. I can see him out the peephole. He is flat on his back. Yep, I got him good. He is stretched out like a buff corpse. I think this means that it is too late to ask him to help me lug the sofa upstairs. He eventually gets to his feet, and then bounds off. He is remarkably fast.

It is a hard thing to be up and left so quickly. Someone packs a few bags, gets in the car and drives away. Maybe it isn't hard at all. Out the driveway, down two small roads. A lane here, an avenue there, and just like that you're on the highway. They go so fast, all those cars. It's a miracle they aren't constantly knocking one another off the road. People, in those cars, talk to each other on telephones. They may be zooming toward each other, yakking away at a hundred miles an hour. What happens at the exact moment they pass, at that instant when they spot each other talking to each other, lips moving

to the words they're hearing. Probably nothing happens. Maybe somebody blows a tire. Perhaps a chunk of metal has been run over. But the tire patches itself, and inflates itself, *while the car is still moving*. That seems ridiculous to me, and very unfair. Couples, these days, stand so little a chance.

It would take the hands of a skilled surgeon to reduce my headache to a more tolerable level, meaning one I could sleep with. Coffee helps, but that would mean I'd have to walk back up the road. I have a terrible taste in my mouth. Yesterday, I threw the toothpaste out the window because it came out of the tube in three such precise colors. It has come to this: toothpaste baffles me. The mouthwash has been taken, a phenomena which I am also at a loss to explain. A shower seems like a good idea, though my naked body does not look good to me any more, not one bit. Since I knocked out the window with the fondue pot, I now can stand in the tub and look straight down at the accumulating pile of domestic items. If I slipped on a bar of soap, I could fall right out the window myself. Things have come to pass, however, so the only soap in the bathroom comes in a bottle, and is meant to be applied with a scrunchy loofah, a surprisingly slippery blossom of blue and white, which also has recently been deposited to the ground below.

There is, however, an unopened bar of soap under the kitchen sink. I am under the sink because I am looking for blenders and mixers and juicers and the like. I leave them all for later and take the soap up to the shower. The water is quite cold since I disconnected the water heater and threw it on the pile. While it is true the neighbors can see me through the hole where the window was, I also get to look out at the expanse of suburbia. There is not much to see at this hour: manicured hedges, a robin bobbing for worms, and a cop car cruising up my driveway. Someone is in the backseat and the cop — my cop — gets out and walks toward the front porch. When he sees me, he yells, "Hey!"

That's my cue to get out of the shower and put some clothes on. I grab the nearest thing handy, a woman's robe, my wife's robe, and make my way past the love seat, down the stairs, and answer the door. Apparently the officer has someone in the back of his car who is claiming that I punched him. I have a feeling I know who that

someone is. Normally, an affluent resident would have the edge over a tight-pantsed solicitor in such a dispute. My pile of junk, however, combined with my earlier behavior, has tipped the scales of justice in favor of my opponent.

"I can explain," I say. But I am not thinking of explanations, but for ways to fit the names of famous mustached men into the conversation in order to sway the law in my favor. All I can come up with under pressure, though, is Rollie Fingers, a handlebarred Oakland Athletics pitcher from the 1970's, and Dennis Weaver, the guy who played McCloud. Before I can present a defense, the cop says, "What the hell?!"

I follow his gaze over my shoulder. There are red footprints on the living room carpet. They walk right up to where I'm standing. "Huh," I say.

"You're bleeding," the cop says.

He's right, I am bleeding! "There must have been glass in the tub."

"You need a doctor," the cop says.

He's right, of course. My fat, ugly heart is pumping blood right out of me and onto the tiled floor. It has pumped blood onto the white living room carpet, the white stairway carpet, and, I'd imagine, the white hallway carpet. Small-fingered medical professionals wait for me in giant smokestacked facilities of anatomical repair. "I'm a doctor," I suddenly find myself saying. "I'll take care of this."

He fingers his mustache skeptically. "Are you sure?" He looks concerned, but what I'm wondering about is what happened to my cup of coffee. My becoming a doctor was unforecasted, but it has a profound effect on the policeman. The balance, I can tell, has shifted away from the aerobics instructor and now we are at a stalemate, dead even, at a point in the middle of it all.

"Look," I plead, "the guy insulted me..." But no sign from the man that things have changed.

...insulted my wife." Still even.

I add the following absurdity: "I'm a respectable member of this community."

It feels, to me, like things are about to tilt in my favor.

"Where's your wife?" he asks.

"She left," I say.

He looks like he's been punched in his big gut. A brother among men! He nods in the direction of the car and says, "I'll talk to him."

Few things are clear to me, but I understand his predicament right away. He's going to want to drive me to the hospital. But the man I just beat up is in the back of his car, which means he'd either have to drop the instructor off on my curb, or one of us would have to ride up front with him. By the looks of him, he's had enough of me. It is also safe to assume the fitness instructor has worn out his welcome with such a portly fellow. "I better get myself over to the clinic," I say. I begin to ease the door shut, expecting a shoe to get in the way, but the cop turns and walks away. He's had enough.

I am woozy, but I make it over to the couch. I rip the armrest covers, wrap them around my feet and think of smelling salts. I once blacked out for a number of hours. At that time, I functioned with no recollection of what I did. I drank a lot, and I think someone may have slipped me something extra. I only have one memory that escaped the blackout, in which I was kneeling down in an intensely bright room, kissing a girl's toes. Those toes would some day become my wife's toes. She was clothed in a sheet, and there were several other people watching. That's all I remember. It seems to me conceivable that I could have killed somebody that night. In that state, did my decision-making abilities break down? That I kissed strange toes makes me think I might have been capable of anything. I am dreaming about toes, giant toes, when I am awakened by the distinct sound of somebody rooting through my trash. I hobble to the door and find a small child near my pile.

"What is all this?" she asks.

"It's a pile of junk," I answer.

She steps onto the mound, which is now big enough that she reaches a considerable height. She has brown hair streaked blonde and is wearing overalls.

"It's not safe," I say, and she asks for a jelly sandwich.

It is a good thing I haven't thrown the refrigerator out the window, because it turns out we have all sorts of jelly. Here is something else I did not know. And that I did not know it, and that we have all this jelly, makes me hurt. I have trouble with the screw top and have to turn my back on the girl so she will not see me

crying while I make her sandwich. Thankfully, she doesn't ask me to toast the bread. If she did, I would be forced to drive the butter knife right through my ribs.

This girl has brought me such undeserved happiness and such choking pain that I can't look at her. All she wants is a jelly sandwich and a friend and maybe to toss an appliance or two on a pile of junk. She eats her sandwich and I send her upstairs to play. It is true, I love her.

I hear her upstairs in the bathroom. Good, she has found an object suitable for heaving out the window. My satisfaction is interrupted when I notice her little sandals by the door and remember the glass in the tub. "No!" I shout and sprint up the stairs, past the love seat, and into the bathroom. "No!" I yell, and stop her before she can step into the tub. Then, softer, gentler, I say, "Wait."

I return a moment later with a dustpan and broom. I sweep the glass into a pile and step into the tub. I squat down and brush the pieces of glass into the dustpan. She waits patiently by the side of the tub with a mixing bowl in her arms.

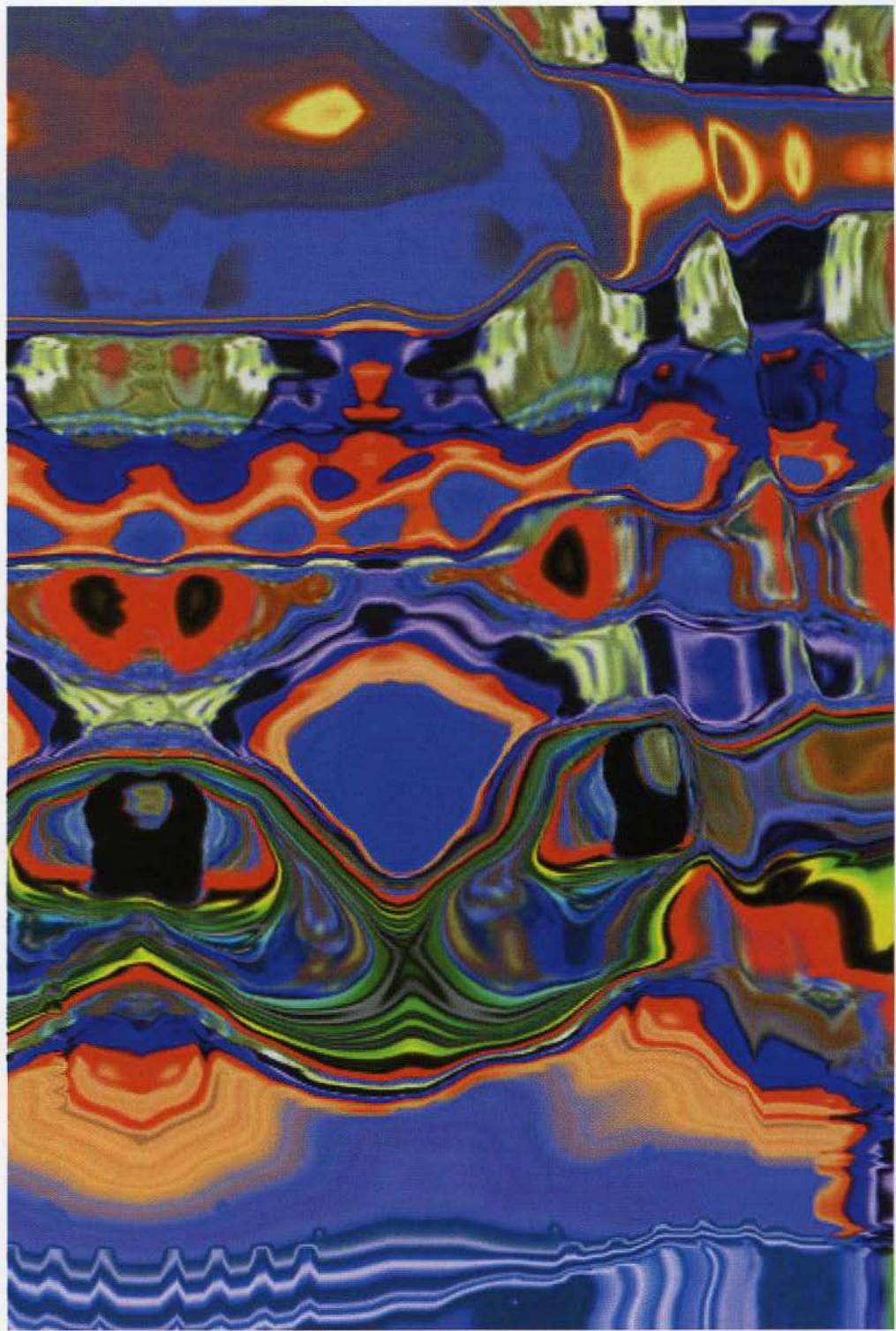
What I've come to realize is this: that's me walking up the road, breaking up the dinette, stepping into the tub. I am alone now, and I have been left with all the time in the world to *think* about all the things in the world. I shudder at the science that went into making the dustpan and broom. I look at the girl, then the size of the window, and I am afraid for her. "Wait," I say, and hurl the tools out the window. I press my hands on the tub's porcelain bottom, trapping the slivers of glass in my palms.

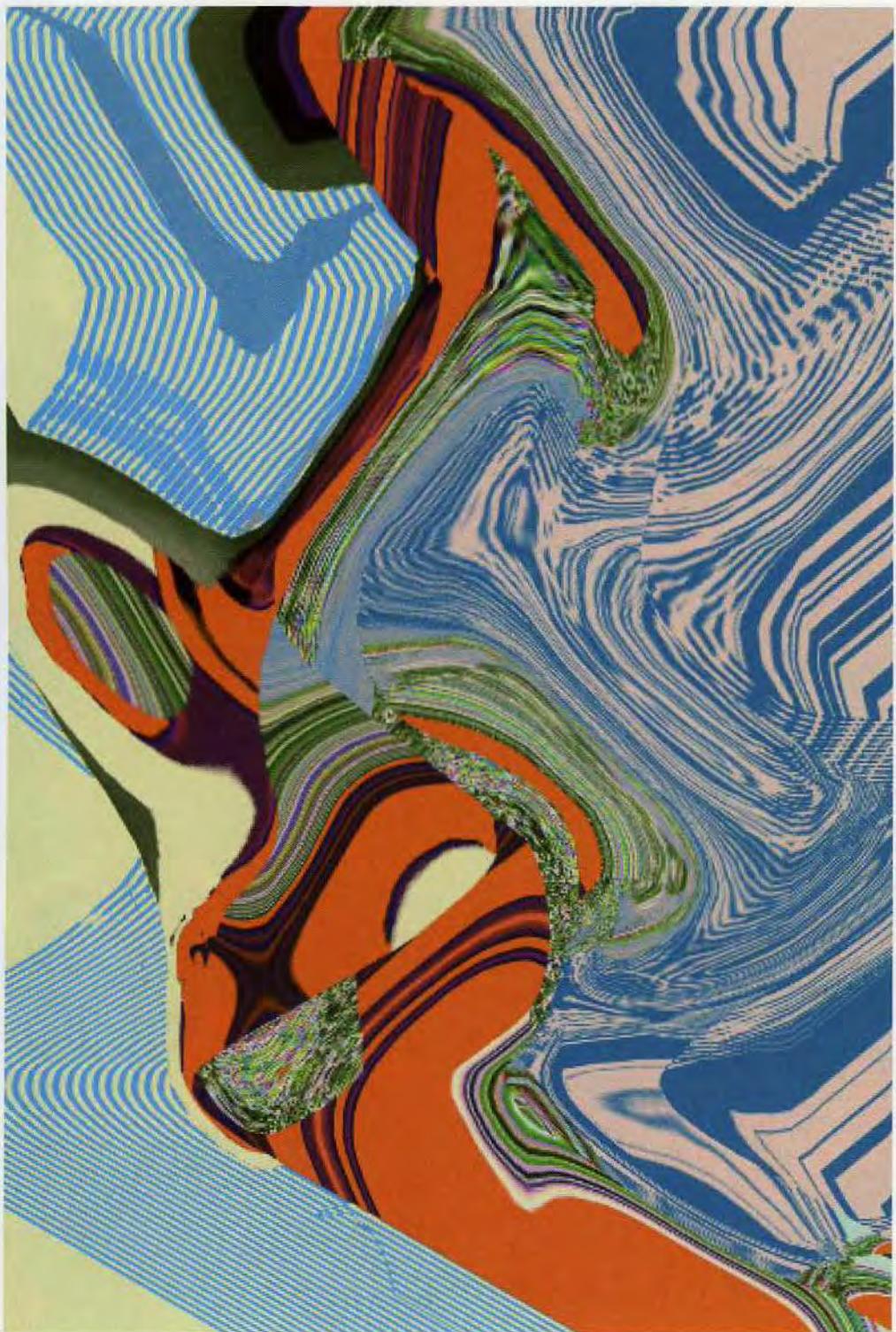
I'm squatting like that, in the tub, bleeding, when I hear somebody shout "Hey!" out front. I recognize that mustached voice, and I know what he wants this time. But I won't give her up. I won't let them have her.

Wendy Lu / EIGHT VISUALS

ARTIST STATEMENT

To me, any journey through the technological medium of cyberspace conveys a universal message of freedom, hope and peace in a constant state of flux as circumstances change through time. In my digitally produced images called "A Voyage to the New World: Envisioning the Future," I attempt to capture the vital energies of all living things, which explore different relationships between the process of technological transformation, the identification of life existence and the manifestation of cosmic power in a complex way. There is a profound connection between the sublime parts of nature, the value of environmental quality and the spontaneous expression of life in my work. I believe that the transformation of the natural world is a represented and presented space, a real place and its simulacrum as well as both a package and the commodity inside the package.

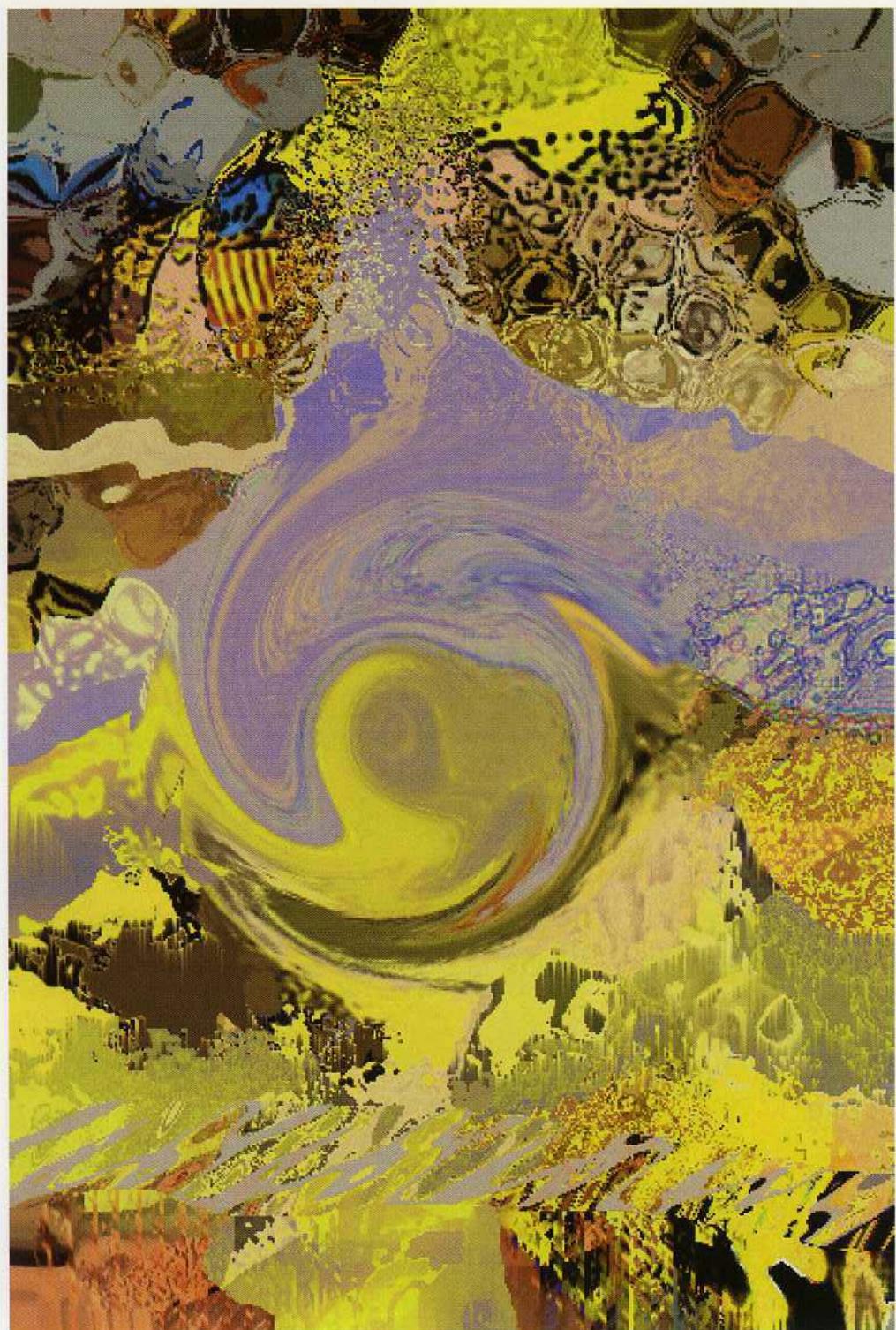




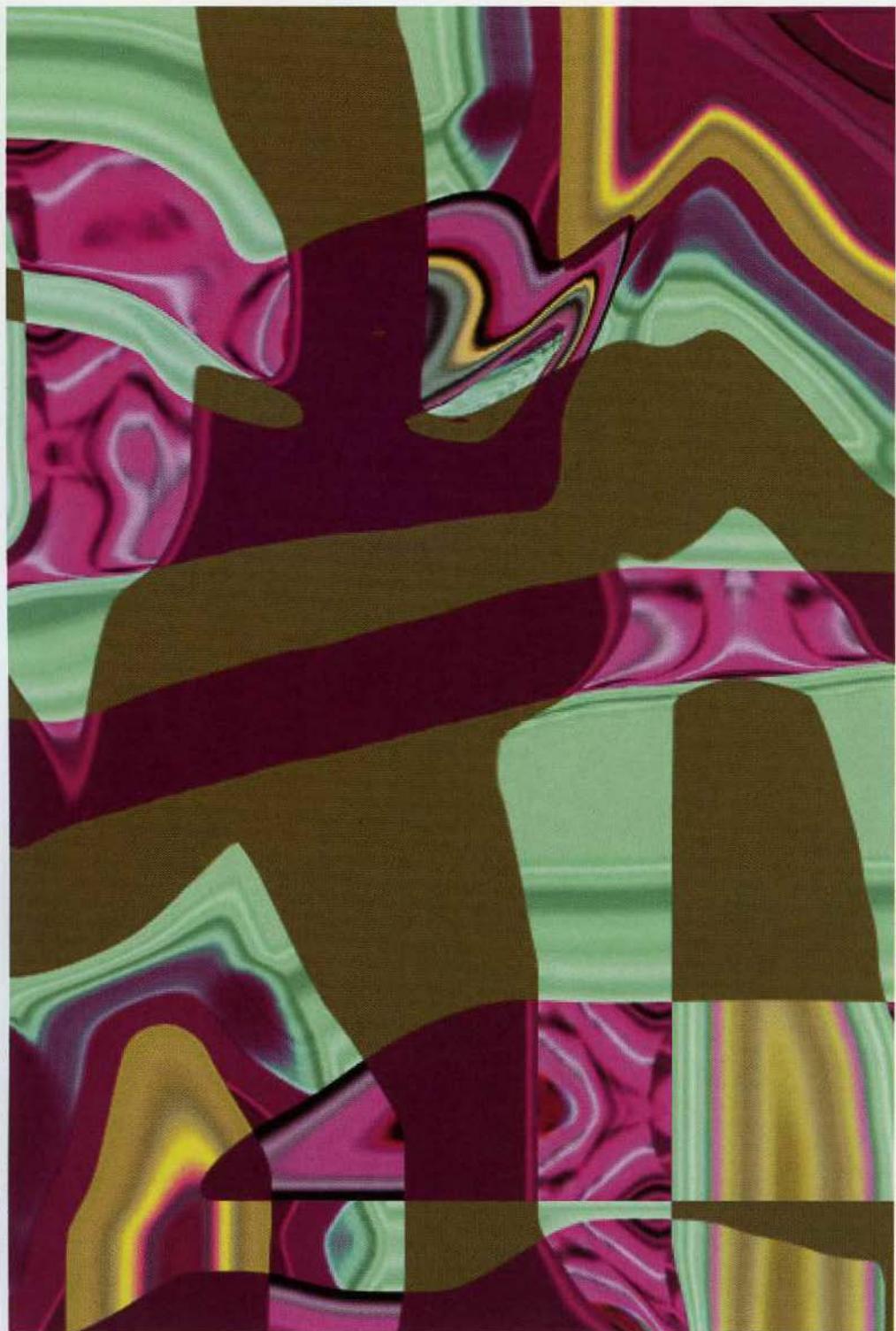






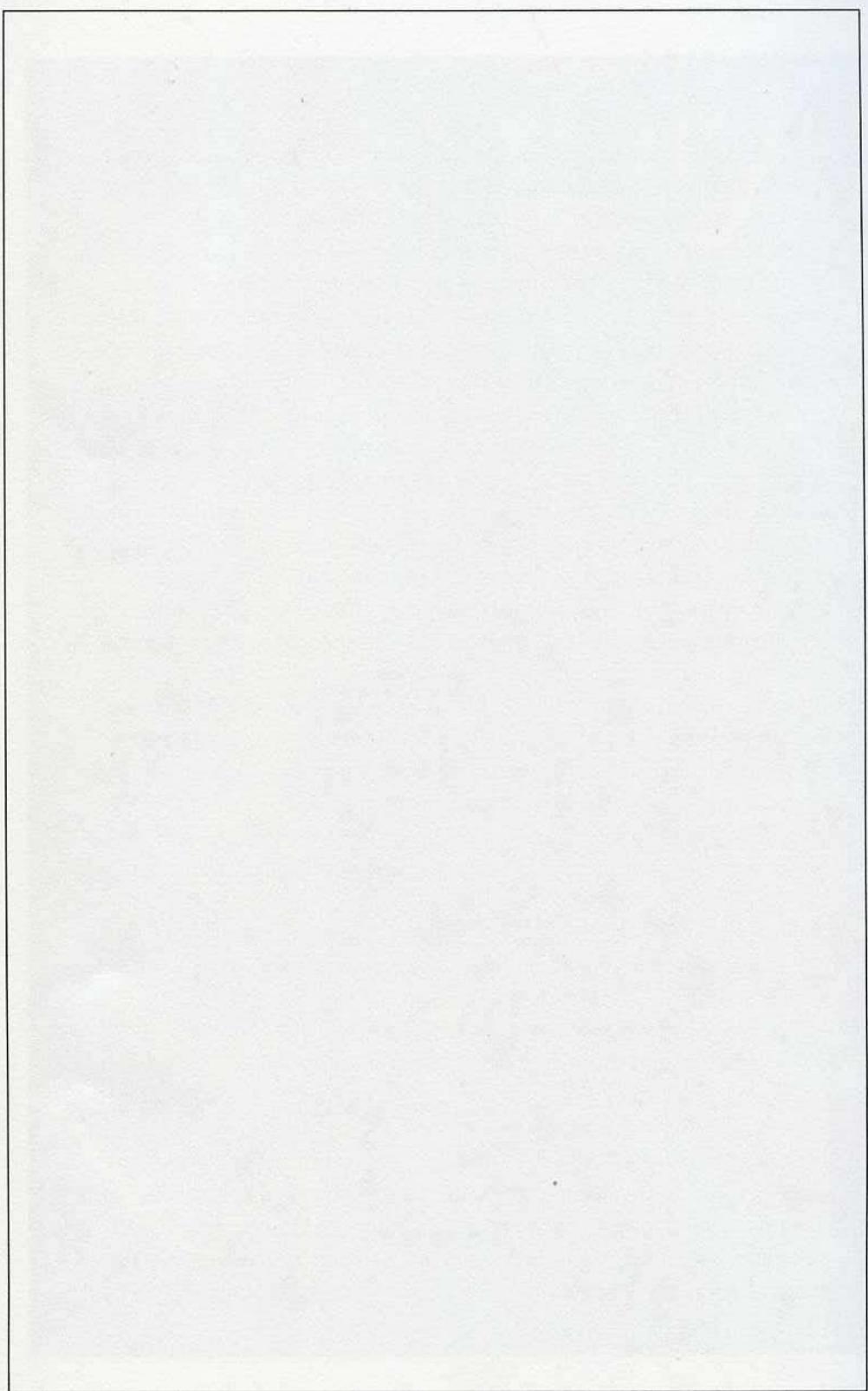






LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Mechanical Gadgets 62	JPEG	184 K
2. Nature 62	JPEG	200 K
3. Nature 67	JPEG	228 K
4. The Mirror of Peace	JPEG	1.4 MB
5. Seashells 51	JPEG	288 K
6. Spring Blossoms 84	JPEG	232 K
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Lindsay Diehl / EVERYBODY'S GOT A PRETTY FRIEND

"When I was younger, I used to think I was on television, like every day. I'd go to the bathroom mirror and announce dinner to my unseen audience."

I pick my girlfriend up from the ferry. She's been chasing a drummer from a rock'n'roll band. She's coming back from Courtenay. She throws her bag in the backseat and climbs in. She leans her long neck towards the traffic outside. "Thanks for picking me up." Her hair is matted in the back and there's something red on her shirt. She's wearing last night's makeup, smeared under her eyes. Her breath smells like shit.

"Open the window," I tell her, "you smell like shit."

"I hate leaving him," she explains, "it hurts to leave him."

She looks tragic, like the girl in that movie. The one that has to be saved.

She sighs. He's out of town three out of every four weeks. He doesn't call.

"I just wish there was some way to go on the road with him."

She's looking at me because she can't drive.

I met my boyfriend a couple of years ago, disco dancing at the Commodore. He was wearing a cowboy hat that shadowed most of his face, but revealed his thin chin and thick lips. He sort of puckers his lips, when he talks, and when he dances. It reminds me of that rock star, the one with the lips.

My girlfriend's hair is brown, but she dyes it blond. She always has dark roots showing. She buys the dye at the drug store. She takes her time to decide. Frosted Meadow or Sunny Days? "Hey, did you ever notice these dyes are named after strippers?" She's laughing, she didn't use to give a fuck. Now everything is a drama.

My boyfriend has a very good job. He can afford to sit in his living room all day. Sometimes, when I come over, he's just sitting there. He doesn't have a tv. He just sits there for hours.

My girlfriend gives directions to a studio in North Vancouver. I park in some alley behind a Big-O-Tires and she comes out to greet me. "They're all here," she says smiling.

Inside, there's a drum set and some amps. In the corner, there's a bed. Some guy gives me a beer.

"Hey."

His hair is spiky and he's wearing a bandana. He looks like one of those singers. The ones that used to be on the music channel, and paint their faces.

I met my boyfriend disco dancing. We were both in costume. I was wearing a body suit like the ones the dancers used to wear. I had rented it from down the street.

"I remember," my boyfriend says. He smiles in his sleepy way that makes me want to hit him. "You were wearing something silver. You were shiny, the prettiest thing I'd ever seen."

The guy that brought me the beer is the lead singer. He also plays the lead guitar and writes most of their songs. He smiles. By the end of the night, I've agreed to go to Quesnel. My girlfriend's excited. She won't stop kissing my cheek. But we have to bring someone else. It's a three-piece band.

My boyfriend plays the guitar. He busks outside the liquor store and IGA. He writes songs about his travels in South America. About the poor people who have so little, but are so rich. He has a song about me, he says. But I've never heard it. He gets nervous singing, around me.

Quesnel is a seven-hour drive from Vancouver. My girlfriend can't drive. Neither can the girl she brought along. The girl she brought along has a boyfriend, too. What a perfect trio, I think. Except my girlfriend she's kind of different.

My boyfriend works for the movies. He's in the union. Sometimes he builds the set. Sometimes he's the first aid attendant. Once he was an actor. He said something to that guy, the one that does all the action movies. They were in a helicopter or something. My boyfriend was trying to convince him not to jump. Something like this. I never did see that movie. Which is weird, I see most everything.

His dick is thick. One of those ones that's actually thicker on the top than it is on the bottom. But he knows how to use it, like a plunger.

I see us on a table or a counter. And I have long black hair, and asian eyes. I'm looking down at his dick, and damn, it's big. "Will you shut the fuck up?" My girlfriend says, "I swear, you are such a perve." But she's laughing. And it's fun again. And we're speeding down the highway.

My girlfriend used to talk to my boyfriend all the time. Now, they don't get along. Nothing's really changed, except my girlfriend doesn't like him anymore. He's "pretty-ish, I suppose." But she says he's like "false advertising." What, with his long, tangled hair and his bare feet, he seems like a new Jesus. But he's like that contest on television that promises millions. The one where you order all those magazines, but nothing ever really happens.

The band is playing at a pub in Quesnel. There's no one dancing. Some people are eating. A lot of people are looking at our table. The girls from the city. Like those girls that press their faces up against the limousine windows and scream at the movie stars. My girlfriend is smiling, but she says she hates these people. The table beside us is having a birthday party. They keep hitting our chairs when they pass by, and yelling out the names of Black Sabbath songs they want to hear.

My boyfriend doesn't care about money. He just makes enough so that he can smoke dope for the rest of the year. He thinks it's really funny. He says he's cheating the system. He's flipping the bird or whatever. He says this at parties, wherever we go. Later, when we're making love, he twitches inside me. He bites my ear. "Do you believe in me?"

During one of their intermissions, the lead singer sits beside me.
“What do you want from me?” he asks.
I give him a face like I don’t know what he’s talking about.
The girl my girlfriend brought along is necking with the bass player.
My girlfriend is upstairs with the drummer.
“Chicks,” he says.
And then he says something. Words that seek out the world around
them and create an order. Everything makes sense, and he’s all right
with that. It must hurt to say words like that.
He says, “I’m in it for the Rock’n’Roll.” He says, “Sex, Drugs, and
Rock’n’Roll.”
It’s something he’s heard on tv or something.

John Pass / TWO POEMS

Raspberries, Roses

Come into the huge and intractable beauty
of what I thought I knew, dumbfounded

at the lucent breadth
of uninhabited context, immense locality

where self's wisp just reminded whispers, *oh*
the terrible artifice of human thought.

I was at that creek-mouth

of which I had written and remembered
so much . . . all sloughed away, overwhelmed
in an instant was the desperate, puny array

of particulars. But for their history so belittled
or because of that (my surprised relief)
I was satisfied, speechless. But eager to say

what it was gave body, tradition, happiness, depth
of field to the moment you'll appreciate

my difficulty. Later I looked at the fingerless palms
of nasturtium leaves outstretched from a low planter

with needy recognition, a stupefied receiving presence
out of hand as on the first day

of summer vacation I turned away
from the raspberries, roses, reaching
under the sky's blue bowl
for mine.

Trumpet Vine

Here was clamour and occasion.
Brash embellishment. Here at the horizon
of accomplishment trumpets nodded

abreast the green surf of foliage
about the eaves. Unfinished hang

celebratory notes, the fanfare
thread of the dark in the throat

of each bloom tugged
from the earth and under-earth
of its birth. Unfinished hangs

each muted self stepping
back from, swept
 out of its solo.

Its Jericho.
At the spot-lit core of sunlit world

a played-out hand over the heart cradles
its spilled horn, garland.
Phantom fingers twitching after

leading intricacies, intimacies of extended
melody (attachments chill and stringy)
pull closer

the duvet of November fog those mornings
light seems to push from within
the downcast leaves, their brasses
and umbers gleaming.

Meredith Quartermain / LYRIC CAPABILITY: THE SYNTAX OF ROBIN BLASER

I don't know anything about God but what the human record tells me—in whatever languages I can muster—or by turning to translators—or the centuries—of that blasphemy which defines god's nature by our own hatred and prayers for vengeance and dominance—

that *he* (lower case and questionable pronoun) would destroy by a hideous disease one lover of another or by war, a nation for what uprightness and economic hide-and-seek—and—*he* (lower case and questionable pronoun) is on the side of the always-ignorance of politics

in which we trust—the—*polis* is at the 'bottom of the sea,' as Hannah Arendt noticed—and—*he* (lower case and interrogated pronoun) walks

among the manipulated incompetences of public thought
(Blaser, *Holy* 346)

Thus opens "Even on Sunday," Blaser's poem written for the gay games in Vancouver 1990, whose title has become the title of the first collection of critical work to focus solely on his poetry and poetics. Edited by Miriam Nichols, *Even On Sunday: Essays, Readings, and Archival Materials on The Poetry and Poetics of Robin Blaser* is a long overdue beginning to a critical exploration of Blaser's multi-layered and visionary writings.

The book begins with Blaser's poem "Great Companion: Dante Alighiere I," which is highly appropriate, since Blaser's vision of the poetic voice originates with Dante. The poet's task, Blaser says, is the task of hell:

Inferno—facing Dante's theology—even out of a Roman Catholic childhood—of the immutable and unchanging—recognizing that it is the vocabulary of his cosmology—of creation and continuation—in the body of thought—

this entanglement of language and death—mortality's speechlessness—repetitious or masquerading in our own vocabulary of such territory—I walk into a crisis of where Hell is . . .

(9)

And hell is the problem of western paradigms for truth. "Churches,/ States, even Atheisms are given to personifications of/ totality," argues Blaser, but they are merely "exchanging bed linens."

The archival materials usefully open the field of Blaser's poetics and give this collection a wonderful range and variety. These include Blaser and Spicer's animated postcard correspondence "Dialogue of Eastern and Western Poetry," annotated by Robert Duncan and edited and introduced by Kevin Killian; Nichols' comprehensive 1999 interview of Blaser; photographs of Blaser from childhood on up; and long excerpts (in print for the first time) from Blaser's 1974 lectures ("Astonishments") on Dante and on Joyce. "Dante Was My Best Fuck," Blaser laughingly says is the title of the Dante lecture. The talks were informal in the sense that they were given to a small group of people (Warren Tallman, Daphne Marlatt, Angela Bowering, Martina Kuharic, and Dwight Gardiner) but they were prepared, like all of Blaser's work, with extensive scholarship. And they reveal a far-ranging poetic vision and philosophical investigation established early in Blaser's career.

The "human element is no longer a visibility in the world at all," Blaser says in the talk on Dante, "but a closure of relationships, interrelationships, a lyric voice that speaks only of itself and closes into itself, no longer narrates the world and the actual astonishment of the world." Calling for recognition of poetic knowledge in public life, and of public life in our poetry — the intelligence in which we imagine ourselves — Blaser laments "the unrecognized disaster of a world devoured into human form, rather than a world disclosed in which we are images of an action, visibilities of an action, an action which otherwise is invisible, larger, older, and other than ourselves." And if Blaser's language here is elusive, that is because the visionary and lyrical task he has set for himself is enormous and cannot be reduced to so many simple propositions. It is the task of a lifetime's

work steeped in philosophers of politics, aesthetics and epistemology, unfolding in the serial poem *The Holy Forest*, which takes its name from the forests where the poet wanders in the *Divine Comedy*.

For Blaser, the "unrecognized disaster" is the "blasphemy" committed when human institutions substitute limited certainties for the totality of the possible — the totality of the forest. This is what Dante's hell shows us — a theme Blaser sounds again in *The Last Supper*, his libretto composed for Sir Harrison Birtwistle's acclaimed opera. In answer to this disaster, Blaser seeks not only to revive the public world but also to re-enact the lyric as a staging of public voices seen through the lens of a "singularity" of body, soul, and intellect. "[K]nowledge (logos) is an activity, a revelation of content, requiring the specific, the particular, the place" he says in "Particles" his 1967 essay on poetry and politics. "The worst violence," he comments in the 1999 interview, "is an abstraction of abstraction, over and over again." As a refusal to abstract, the lyric voice is crucial to democracy and crucial to life. For it is not God, but man, who is dead, Blaser argues (suggesting this was Nietzsche's conclusion also).

"The Knowledge of the Poet," Blaser's talk on Joyce, shows much of interest on the genesis of Spicer's and Blaser's poetics, their roots in some of Joyce's early works, and their reading of *Finnegans Wake*, and much as well on the public world and the nature of poetic form. On Joyce's puns and language play in the *Wake*, Blaser comments "There is no escape from the business that death is inside the language. . . . And as a consequence of the death of the modern world, the death of God and so on, all has to be worked in terms of the sensitization to language, the consciousness of language. This is why contemporary poetry talks about itself all the time." The talk suggests that for Spicer and Blaser, both love (not as mere sensation or desire) and "methodology of thought" are key to the activity of poetry. And although language may be the seat of death, it is also the source of the "other than the world" — the other that is not explanation. The "fall out of . . . realms of assurance and explanation and ultimateness," Blaser argues, has always been central to great art.

In the 230 pages devoted to essays and readings, Nichols seeks, like her subject, to cross boundaries between two turfs traditionally

heavily guarded and walled: the realm of poetic knowledge, and the realm of academic criticism. Her grouping of “critical essays” and “readings” together and intermingled leaves open the question of where academic scholarship ends and lyrical knowledge begins, suggesting, and helping to create, useful cross-fertilization. This is highly appropriate, considering Blaser’s project is the “recovery of the public world” through both scholarly philosophical investigation and the voice of lyric singularity — where the poet works in a

density and binding of thought, a re-tied heart that is only the other face of the untied heart. It may be full of blasphemy and praise simultaneously, as if they were the same condition. . . . To begin a life is to think. The feeling is held in the medium as a suddenness, image, a movement, and gathering out of the imageless. The form is the vital movement of image out of the imageless. Language is itself a first movement of form, a binding *rhythmos* or form of the mind.

Well versed in contemporary philosophy and the Olson-Duncan-Spicer-Blaser school of writing, Nichols is ideally positioned to open the way to a better understanding of Blaser’s work. Her “Introduction: Reading Robin Blaser” details the history of Blaser’s publications and their reception, then sets out his connections to Whitehead, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, and Arendt. She shows compellingly how Blaser’s project not only challenges absolute rationalism, but how it does so in a way parallel to and complementary to the challenge presented by such major thinkers as Derrida. “The vocabulary of his poems and essays frequently *evokes* the poetic and theoretical trends that have come along during the course of his writing life,” she argues, “but it also suggests an errancy in relation to those trends. . . . [T]he reader looking for evidence of this or that philosophical system will find instead a rhetoric that bends philosophy toward poetic performance and Blaser’s own reading of modernity.” In addition to perceptive scholarship, Nichols provides capable and sensitive editing, which carefully maintains in transcriptions of the taped lectures and interview the rhythms of speech and conversation and their fragile but important connection to thought.

One of the most delightful essays in the collection — full of wit and word-play — is George Bowering's "Robin Blaser at Lake Paradox." Taking on Olson's famous statement to Blaser, "I'd trust you/ anywhere with image, but/ you've got no syntax" (Blaser, *Holy* 184), Bowering embarks on a sinuous exploration of Blaser's syntax in "lake of souls (reading notes)" (from the *Syntax* collection), an exploration which simultaneously interrogates the syntax of criticism. Pointing to parataxis as key to Blaser's poetics and politics, Bowering writes, "Syntax means the way things are gathered, tactics for getting language together. Words, specifically, listen among fellows. A grammar of something is a set of principles showing the way it works. The rules, a strict grandma might say, a program for letters. But syntax: I guess that as synthesis is to thesis, so syntax is to tactics."

Readers who have difficulty with Blaser's syntax, says Bowering, are not stumped because of "zigging of the sentences but [rather] the learned referentiality" in the poems. And Bowering is scathing about

Canadian literature critics who like the untroubled sentences and straight-ahead similes they can purchase in the lyrics of autobiographical Canadian poets. They want to find out about an individual's exemplary pain at the loss of a father to cancer, or the ways in which killer whales and the rest of nature can be compared to human beings, to the shame of the latter.

Blaser's project, Bowering concludes, is paradise itself, as it is found in fragments all around us — as it is found in a "gyre of quoted texts" — a poetry that is not designed to praise the transcendent, but rather to enact the sacred.

"That's the drawer of poetry, closed to keep the lake/ from flooding," begins Fred Wah's #114 from *Music at the Heart of Thinking*. Wah's poem responds to Dante's "lake of the heart" — "the pool at the centre of the forest," which is one of the keys to Blaser's poetics. ("I want to move from the simple geography, the limited geography of my own place and my own time," Blaser says in the Dante talk, "I then fall into history" — into time on a completely different level so that my present flows backward towards origins,

primary thought, and begins to join the major movement of . . . poetic thought in the twentieth century.") Nichols has included #110 to #119 of Wah's serial poem which follows, like Blaser and Spicer, what Wah calls the "practice of negative capability and estrangement [learned from] playing jazz trumpet." "*[I]t is probably the secret of syntax/ itself,*" Wah continues,

Indefinite junktures of the hyphenated -eme-clutter posing in wait for a synapse or quilt of meaning. Nothing's wrong, in other words. *a humming sound, of bees perhaps.* Just throw it into the drawer (twisted threads); mess is poetry's mass.

In Norma Cole's notes on "The Fire" and "The Moth Poem," we find again the practice of negative capability — both of these writers echoing Blaser's own practice, comparable to Susan Howe's antinomianist voicings in *The Birth-mark* essays. While carefully considering Arendt, Agamben, Merleau-Ponty and others, Cole's piece refuses to claim mastery; instead, it offers fields of sense and the possibility of emergence.

In addition to these readings from scholarly poets, Nichols has included five, more conventionally academic papers by David Sullivan, Andrew Mossin, Scott Pound, Paul Kelley, and Peter Middleton. Three of these offer various ways into the *Image-Nations* poems. In his thorough examination of Blaser's philosophy of the public and the real, Andrew Mossin writes "I take him to mean that only through a genuinely dialogic poetic practice, one not seeking the self-affirming closures of a transcendent or idealized subjectivity, can poetry begin to suggest the repleteness and incommensurability of worldly experience." After considering the push-pull relationship between "I" and "you" (a mode of apostrophe) and contrasting them to the work of Emily Dickinson, David Sullivan suggests the *Image-Nations* poems are "an amalgamated nation of friends who correspond with, to, and for each other." And Scott Pound comments, "Relationality is therefore exposed, not as one might expect, through the establishment of a generality that produces 'coherence,' but

rather through the perpetual re-opening of the series to the differences that animate it."

Examining a poem from the *Pell Mell* collection, Paul Kelley neatly expands on the "incommensurability of worldly experience" in his study of "The Iceberg" where he considers the paradox involved in translating experience into speech, the necessary silences invoked, and the ways in which silence is composed and situated historically. His essay reminds us of Blaser's insistence that our experience, like the iceberg whose tip represents only a tiny portion of the whole, must always address an undisclosed, much larger other, and reminds us, too, of the crucially fragmentary nature of our paradise.

Peter Middleton's valuable essay "An Elegy for Theory" on Blaser's "Practice of Outside" provides a historical perspective on Blaser's work, exploring in detail how Blaser's poetics emerged against the shift from the subject-based humanism of New American poets to the notion of subjectivity as linguistic projection in the post-structuralist language poets. Blaser's influence on such prominent writers in the latter group as Charles Bernstein becomes clear in this discussion. But Blaser, Middleton shows, departs from the post-structuralist agenda in important ways. Arguing that Foucault's stance is deterministic and antidemocratic, and reclaiming Olson from the trash heap, Middleton suggests that "Blaser imagines a poetry of a newly comprehended subjectivity in language, which can make effective representations in public spheres, and not simply remain closed in a verbal circuit of unbroken self-referential chains of syntax."

Blaser asks us to imagine a syntax for the human condition that is more subtle than a world of competing fascisms. It is this question of syntax — how to put together, without foreclosing in totalitarian abstractions, the fragments of our experience, and how to maintain necessary uncertainty in mapping the real — that emerges in all of these assessments. Like Pound's *Cantos* and Olson's *Maximus*, Blaser's spiritual/philosophical autobiography is visionary and wide-ranging — what Creeley calls "a form of taking it all."

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