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Writing Matters

Assumed Identities

In his famous love song on loneliness and ageing, J. Alfred Prufrock assures us that there “will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.” With this thought, T.S. Eliot’s conflicted character—the unprepossessing man who has become an icon of twentieth-century English language poetry—crystallizes both the individual struggle for authenticity and the countervailing necessity to preserve ourselves (actually, our selves) from the intermittent incursions of others by adopting a persona that is not genuinely “me.” When we’re honest, we all must admit to a profound difference between who we are to ourselves in our private moments alone or with those close to us and who we are as we present ourselves to the larger world. When Eliot presented Prufrock to the world in 1917, his character enabled a vocabulary suggestive of the myriad ways in which each of our identities is, in fact, made up of many, sometimes irreconcilable, parts. Looking back at Eliot’s poem makes clear what remains true about the observation of the face that we prepare to meet the faces that we meet and what has changed since the line was first read. As I walk through an airport in 2004, for instance, I am looking with refreshed attention at the faces that others have prepared (does everyone look scarier in airports now than they used to?) and, no doubt, they are looking anew at mine. Our identities individually are probably the same, but they have no doubt changed in others’ eyes.

The three stories in this section trace a path through several monumental moments of the twentieth century. These stories also share the additional observation that the construction of identity

cannot help but change over time. Michael Borshuk's story, "Brown-er's Dive," is set five years after Jackie Robinson's first appearance in a major league baseball game and two years before the United States Supreme Court's historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision desegregating American public schools. At this juncture in American history, the decision of a manager of a minor league baseball team in Georgia to replace one of his star white players with a young black batboy, named Joe Louis Rutherford, means considerably more than merely the substitution of one player for another. Borshuk's decision to name the batboy after another African American icon adds a further resonance to the manager's decision and the boy's performance.

Marshall J. Getz's "Tea with Graf Gazdag" takes place during the spring after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The narrator comes of age in his Hungarian-descended family living in Brooklyn, with his Jewish mother and lapsed Roman Catholic father who insists he's an atheist but who fears hell for himself or his son if they don't "do things right." Getz's story is told from the perspective of a grown man looking back on his childhood and recognizing the lessons it taught him about who he has grown up to be. The narrator's recollection of his childhood reminds us of the lessons we didn't even realize we were learning at the time.

Finally, Martin Morf's urban travelogue, "Journey to Brighton Beach," occurs during a morning not unlike that horrible morning in September 2001 and situates itself in the changed city that bore the brunt of the attacks. As this narrator observes the foreignness of the other people who move through the landscape—eating in restaurants and riding on commuter trains—he realizes what is marvellous and at the same time frightening about the modern city. Ease of travel renders it unavoidable that we encounter people unlike ourselves, some of whom may seem much more convinced about their own identities than we are about ours. Then again, they may have simply been more successful at preparing that face.

If the stories represent the intellectual problems of identity, the poems take a more sensual approach. Deirdre Dwyer's "The Two-Sided City" presents a quiet and nostalgic speaker in Tokyo in 1987, who thinks about a young child back home in Nova Scotia. Clearly, ease of travel is not without its costs. Dwyer uses images of the sunset turning colours and the soft feel of an infant's hair to

evoke the poignant reality that makes us always happy to return “home” after travelling. Of course, returning is not without its own particular problems, hinted at as the poem ends.

The quintessential emblem of the modern voyager is the suitcase, and the “she” in Marita Dachsel’s poem, “Suitcase,” proclaims, “I can go anywhere anytime.” And while such a proclamation of mobility is ostensibly powerful and freeing, it, too, is a mixed blessing. As “she” revels in the smell of sunscreen, her lover helps her recognize that it’s actually the smell of coconut oil that is, for her, an aphrodisiac. She also realizes, more importantly, that for all of her freedom to travel, she doesn’t want to leave him behind.

Where Dwyer’s poem may be said to focus on sight and touch, and Dachsel’s on smell, Michael Carrino’s “My Italian” uses sound—specifically the sound associated with an ancestral language—to suggest something about identity. The speaker’s question about why he (or she) never learned to speak the language of his (or her) grandfather points up, much like “Tea with Graf Gazdag,” that our sense of who we are does not come to us naturally, as perhaps we would prefer to believe, but must be constructed, sometimes quite consciously. The decision to learn a language we feel we “should” already speak emphasizes a sense of disconnection from some mythical past, but the poem also evinces a sense of the casual and the conversational—“Let’s walk. / I’ll practise my Italian / as I light your cigarette”—that alleviates the otherwise earnest considerations that so often accompany questions of identity. The poem doesn’t leave us in dismay over a lost ancestral communion and instead provides hope of something new.

The sense that David Hillen uses in “Antiphonal Camping” is humour. After all, as we travel to escape our familiar surroundings, we invariably find ourselves simply resuming our own familiar patterns in new locations. Similarly, as we travel to attain freedom, we no doubt encounter more rules. Freedom can often be an illusion. The discrepancy between the natural world and the rules enforced by people—“A chipmunk forays. / Animals must be kept on a leash”—allows Hillen’s poem to make a significant point about rules and freedom but to make it in a light-hearted way.

The stories and poems collected here make art out of diversity. They gesture towards the mixed blessings that accompany our desires for freedom, authenticity, and certainly in who we are.

I Grow Old, I Grow Old

And, if you believe T.S. Eliot, “I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.” Whether you believe or not, ageing is part of the inevitable process of living, and thus part of the literary experience as well.

Robert Lake’s “Kingfishers of a Feather” offers us the experiences of a third-person reflector, Ruth, also known as Alcyone. Ruth is a widow, a long-time exile from her childhood home in Nova Scotia, and the user of a gnarled old cane despised by her younger sister, Prunella. The story’s pull is entirely backward—towards the innocence Ruth once shared with Martin, the young “firebrand” she met at school who became a talented preacher in adult life. If these are materials ripe for the creation of nostalgia, imagine what happens when Martin declares, “I haven’t believed for ... for ... for longer than I can remember.” The next stage in the unravelling of this web is Martin’s funeral, where Ruth and Martin’s wife take opposing positions on opposite sides of the grave.

Old age isn’t quite as literal in “Abiding Blue Velvet” by Patricia Schultheis, though this story certainly speaks again about a past that cannot be renovated or repaired. The narrator (Deke) and his brother (Whit) are no doubt enmeshed in personal negotiations that make all the difference. But our attention as readers is given not to these upwardly mobile professional males, but to their great-aunt Elsbeth, who pretends, from the vantage point of her Baltimore apartment, that things haven’t changed all that much since she saw Bing Crosby at some unspecified time “before the war.” The story closes with Deke dancing the fox trot with his great-aunt to music “sung by a man who’d been dead for decades.” Music here is a touchstone which allows us to measure the passing of time, and also the right accompaniment to the difficult art of ageing gracefully.

Music is both of these things again in Adam Irving’s poem, “Dixieland,” but now it’s a metaphor too. You can never be sure exactly what a metaphor stands for, but here we know it’s the opposite of all our anxieties about ageing—anxieties connected with appearances (the men “look older” than they did), medical conditions (“cirrhosis of the liver”), and faulty memory. The jazz played in this poem is triumphantly defiant in the face of all these necessities and inevitabilities. The last word of the poem is “Play,” a word that has made frequent appearances by this time, both as a

verb and as a noun. As a verb it's what the musicians do: "The clarinet plays / The band drops behind him." As a noun it's the generic term that brings together "every performance" under the heading of theatre; we're reminded that the heroic defiance of time on the part of the musicians is mere make-believe ("just a play"), but this concession is in a sense not meaningful at all. It's a play, sure, "But what a play!" And the tenor sax should take it from there.

"The Transformation of Harvey Klein" by Shalom Camenietzki and "Life List" by Jean Van Loon have a great many features in common. On first reading you might not agree with this judgement. "Harvey Klein" is a wickedly comical account of a very conventional man who, at the age of seventy-six, has the good fortune to rediscover what Dr. Alex Comfort called the joy of sex. You'll want to go to the story itself for details. "Life List" is both an ornithological fantasia and a beautifully sensitive elegy for a marriage that is coming to a close because of the terminal illness of one of the partners. So the difference in tone between these two stories would at the outset place them in different worlds.

Still, when you look for patterns, here's what happens. The narrators (both male, both third-person reflectors) are about equally worried about ageing, even though Harvey Klein is seventy-six and Philip (in "Life List") is just over sixty. Both narrators have been deeply involved in long and gratifying marriages, and each of them is obliged to face up to physical changes which affect the spousal relationship. Need I add that each of them forms a temporary and undeclared attachment to a considerably younger woman? You'll be relieved to know that neither man changes his hairdo or buys a bright red sportscar. Both are shown making not the stereotypical decisions we might expect, but the choices that, in a radically diminished world, are still open to them.

Disorders

Why is so much fiction and poetry about disorder and disintegration? According to classical Freudianism, art and imagination are the products of a distressed mind in the throes of civil war, attempting to cope with inner conflicts. Fiction is a steamy tropical garden of repressed libido. A more believable, if less picturesque version of this psychological functionalism about art is suggested by contemporary psychologists: fantasy, dreams, storytelling, im-

aginative representation all give us a way of coming to terms with past difficulties and of rehearsing for future ones. We represent past and possible problems, sometimes in disguised or generalized form, and try to work out how to deal with them. This might explain why we love it when there's a neat happy ending; but it might also explain why we need fiction of disorder even when things are represented as irremediably wrong.

A wide variety of disorder appears in the stories and poetry in this section. We begin with two short stories about the most concrete domestic variety of things going wrong. In "Making the Bed" and "Mektub" the central characters are increasingly unhappy women, married to the wrong men, seeing their hopes come to nothing. The stories both give a richly detailed and convincing picture of the women's lives and despairs; but their cultural contexts couldn't be more different.

In the first, the Canadian writer Cathy Marie Buchanan tells the story of Lily, a middle-class Torontonion, worried about getting ahead in her job as a cosmetics demonstrator in the Ultra Drug Mart, and facing separation from her husband and son. She's full of regret for the past, and alarm for the future, and when she reads "Goodnight Moon" to her son at the end of the story, it's guaranteed to bring a lump to the throat of every reader who is a parent. But she's curiously inert: why isn't she doing something to prevent the break-up of her family—to keep her beautiful son with her? The story is pervaded by a sense that past mistakes are irremediable, and future grief inevitable.

In the second, by Mary J. Byrne, writing from Paris, Fatma is a Moroccan peasant, in a loveless arranged marriage and a demeaning housekeeping job. As in "Making the Bed," there's really nothing that can be done about the woman's problems; but here it's more a matter of the genuine external necessities of economics and a closed society. The story is told with realistic detail and affecting simplicity: Fatma's sorrow is more convincing because it's presented without breast-beating or exaggeration; it's reported matter-of-factly, as just another way things turn out. The story ends with something like a resolution: Fatma's reaction to the inevitability of her dreary life is represented in the Arabic expression of resignation to one's fate, '*mektub*': "it is all written."

Everything is coming apart in Susan Stiles' poem "To Guillaume IX." It is, she says, an "adaptation/response" to a poem

by Guillaume (or Guillem) IX, Duke of Aquitaine (1071–1127), whose works are the earliest recorded troubadour lyrics. His poem begins: “Faray un vers de dreit nien / Non er de mi ni d’autre gen, / No er d’amor ni de joven” and if you can make out the antique French, you can see that so far at least her poem is a translation; but soon she diverges into a much freer adaptation, capturing what she calls the “recklessness and playfulness and also despair” of the original. It’s clearly a picture of a disorganized mind, suffused with negativity, out of control—but it’s a joyful, funny affirmation all the same.

It’s unusual for *The Dalhousie Review* to print representations of visual art, but in this case we’ve been offered an irresistible opportunity. Janet Zweig’s “Impersonator 2002” is a work that, by using the digital technology of our time, creates what Robert Herrick described, 350 years ago, as “Delight in Disorder.” Herrick was referring to a specific aesthetic/erotic pleasure, namely, the male viewer’s joyful discovery that a woman’s appearance is not perfect, but all the more enticing because of some suggestive *imperfection*. This isn’t identical to what happens in “Impersonator 2002,” but there are parallels. The attractions of the display come into being because the messages are unexpected, unpredictable, arbitrary. The combination of precisely controlled form and random content is one of the features that identifies this display as a work of art. It’s not absolute disorder, to be sure, but a semantic disorder contained within grammatical rules.

Disorder can also be, in one way or another, a serious reminder of loss, as it is in Tony Magistrale’s poem, “Someday,” where the speaker “keeps thinking” that the woman will come back someday, and that “this fragile world / ought to have some permanence.” Loss and disintegration are presented in many of the other works in this section as moving away. Fatma must leave her family to follow her husband to a strange city where he’s found work. Lily’s husband and child are going to move away, while she’s left behind with her job.

But metaphorical travel can also suggest the pain that comes with loss. This happens in quite strikingly different ways in a matched pair of poems about deaths in the family. In Emannuelle Vivier’s “Looking Back” Papa travels from Paris to be with the narrator, but the news of little brother’s death interrupts the family celebration, piercing Papa’s heart like a bullet: “I spoke / He fell.” After a death

in her own family, the speaker in "Sometimes When They Go We Travel" by D. Nielsen comes to understand why a friend carried *The Bell Jar* everywhere after her brother's death. "It's a signal," she is saying. "I can be with you in a few minutes if you like."

"The Wife of Job," by Sarah Roebuck, refers to the most puzzling, in some ways the weirdest, book of the Bible. Should we admire Job, who, arbitrarily, cruelly afflicted in "an experiment of divine justice," repents and worships in sackcloth? What are we to make of the explanation God gives Job at the end, amounting to asking Job if *he* could make a hippopotamus? The epigraph to Roebuck's poem reminds us of the limited part Job's wife plays in this story, saying to him only, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die." Job replies, "You speak as any foolish woman would speak." Job's wife then disappears for the rest of the story, turning up only at the absurd happy ending to bear him ten more children (not the ones God removed at the beginning, but new ones, just as good). "Who speaks of the suffering of the wife of Job?" Roebuck asks. After all, they're not just Job's afflictions: she lost all *her* wealth and children as well. But Roebuck imagines her in sympathetic detail, raging against the God who takes away what he gave, what he made us love, what he has no use for. "Now," says Job's wife, "I live for nothing. I long for death, but it does not come." It's no news that there's plenty of male bias in literature from the past. But this poem isn't just that sort of knee-jerk critique. It's a deep and necessary reaction to the unsatisfactory response to the problem of suffering in the Book of Job.

In "Asteroid," Harold Skulsky muses on the recent scientific speculation that it's only a matter of time before we're all exterminated when a huge chunk of interplanetary rock hits the earth. The poem remarks that "the idea of being hung up out here was precisely target practice" by a malicious "marksman" sitting out there in space, hurling things at us, intentionally, perversely missing most of the time. This poem has a similar theme to Roebuck's: the arbitrariness and injustice of disaster; and the speaker here, like Job's wife, replies not with repentance and worship, but rather with a kind of defiance, waving in the face of the divine marksman the "dangerous" things of ours he can't kill. What are these things, "shameless and full of / exasperating light ... beyond the range of his weapon"? Skulsky doesn't say.

A less belligerent and more fatalistic stance is taken in the last item in this set, "Some Days the Heart Marches" by Matthew

Kennedy. The poem tells us: "Some days the heart marches; other days / it swoons and hesitates." *Mektub*.

Epiphanies

One special task of the artist is to find meaning in the apparently random flux of day-to-day experience. This process has been recognized and celebrated since the time of the Romantic poets; Wordsworth declared in *The Prelude* that "There are in our existence spots of time, / That with distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue" (12.208–10). What he means is that, in certain luminous moments, ordinary experience can embody transcendent meaning, and it is up to the artist (the poet, in his case) to show how and why it does. Modernist authors, though they used a different vocabulary, were nonetheless interested in the same phenomenon. In the early writings of James Joyce, a hundred years after Wordsworth, these luminous moments are offered as *epiphanies*. This term is borrowed from the Christian calendar, in which the Feast of the Epiphany (on 6 January) commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the Magi; in a more general sense it refers to any showing forth of divinity; and by analogy it came to mean the recognition of a sacred quality within selected scenes and images of the mundane.

In contemporary writing, moments of epiphany are often wrested with considerable effort from the urban landscape that most of us inhabit. If the city is Vancouver, as in Julia van Gorder's "Seawall, Third Beach," then the moment of epiphany can happen when ordinary people, with all of their follies and imperfections fully visible, partake in the ritual of recreation. The last two lines, with their address to the "Universe" and their call for a painter of masterpieces, are an indirect (and doubtless ironic) recognition of transcendent meaning that cries out to be captured in art. If the city is Halifax, as in Alex Nassar's "Halifax Harbour," the experience can be something as prosaic as a young man throwing stones into the water, and the medium of representation can be something as trifling as a photograph. But there is nonetheless a "rage of movement" that has been captured here, not only in the photograph itself, but also in the speaker's memory of how and why this moment matters. The apparently trivial occurrence is a special opportunity for A. Mary Murphy, who has developed the craft of writing very short poems, two of which are offered here. In the first of

these, “silence” becomes a “magnified absence” of almost metaphysical dimensions, and in the second the “perfect egocentricity” of the speaker’s little daughter is a quality that fills the universe. These are opposing kinds of plenitude, to be sure, but both are witness to the poet’s need to find amplitude in smallness.

If the writer’s urban landscape is the city of Toronto, as in Jocelyn Cullity’s “Minnows,” the only work of fiction in this final section, then the pressures of daily living—the streetcar rides, the apartments in old warehouses, the shared bathrooms, the competitive social posturing—make the search for “spots of time” all the more difficult. The title of the story refers to the way in which large populations strike us as impersonal: the narrator, Ariel, watches “people on the sidewalk in rush hour, like minnows darting closer and farther from each other as they move in a school towards a cavernous mouth of stairs going down to the subway where they all squeeze together and shimmy down.” To find out how Ariel discovers (or fails to discover) meaning in the urban aquarium, you’ll have to read the story. But one of its stylistic features deserves special notice, namely, Ariel’s compulsive habit of speaking to herself in the imperative mood: “Wonder if you look sad and alone, neither of which you feel. Sit up straight. Show your profile as you smile at the waitress and order another toddy.” The net effect of this technique is to give Ariel a curiously double consciousness: she is both the person giving the commands, and the one carrying out the orders. On the one hand she’s just another minnow, swept along by the maelstrom of urban life; but she’s also Ariel, named (perhaps) for Shakespeare’s “tricksy spirit” in *The Tempest*. Only a radically divided being could give herself the command: “Experience how extremely odd this is, given the circumstances.”

The need and the temptation to locate transcendent meaning within ordinary experience is nowhere more apparent than in our sexual behaviour, and in one way or another all of the remaining authors assembled here address this tendency. Sometimes the erotic epiphany, as we might call it, turns out to be an illusion. This is certainly the case in J.L. Bond’s “Believe Me.” The narrator wants us to believe that the roses and lingerie and pearls her well-heeled lover gave her signify true love, but halfway through the monologue she changes her tune because she no longer believes herself. The woman we observe in R.D. Patrick’s “Opiate” has a simi-

lar problem, though at a further stage of development. Here it is “lost love” that has acquired “the sad, dusky fragrance of romance.” The indulgences of the past are idealized with the help of nostalgia, style, and vanilla-flavoured coffee, but she knows that her lover “will not come.” As readers we may admire her for retaining at least her dignity, but it’s an admiration that includes pity, and pity is a very delicate cream that easily sours into contempt. The poem captures her at precisely this vulnerable moment, when all of these responses are in some sense part of the picture. “The Question” by Jason Guriel also deconstructs the notion that erotic love is replete with transcendent meaning, but the tone is quite different this time, no doubt because we are witnessing the beginning of a relationship, not the end. As the speaker walks home the young woman of his desires, he feels that he’s in touch with something awesome (“The universe strolled neatly past,” is his way of putting it), and facing something momentous: namely, *The Question* alluded to in the title. But then, in a gesture that seems wonderfully natural, the young woman slips her arm into his, and, without any help from the speaker’s metaphysical striving, “the question resolve[s] itself.” This may be an epiphany of sorts, but if so it is a recognition that divinity is present in the lightest human touch. An epiphany of understatement, we might say.

Eric Miller’s “Cara” and Gregory Muller’s “Stealth Mosquito” are poems that don’t fit easily into a thematic pattern, however flexible. “Cara” does make a claim to transcendent meaning: “Our pollutions are purifications.” But transcendence here is enhanced by white wine and twilight, both of which contribute to the notion that the lovers are in one sense “cabbage butterflies.” And if it’s insects you want, try “Stealth Mosquito.” The “she” of this poem is apparently just carrying out the act of invasion for which nature has prepared her. But everyone who understands how metaphors work must at this point become suspicious.

Daniel Mark Epstein is a poet of remarkable ingenuity, and that is a sufficient reason for publishing three of his poems, and for giving him the last word in this collection of voices. “Ronsard’s Dream” begins with the image of “rain / Drenching the bare thighs of Madeleine,” and we don’t need to be Freudians to know what wish of the speaker’s is being called up here, or in “the great white bull” of the second stanza, or in the action of “plung[ing] into her all night long” of the third. But Ronsard was not a poet who could

be satisfied with the sensual; hence the desire for the “eternal” in the final stanza, for a love that is not a series of repetitions but a moment of closure. “Alice” uses the celebrated imagery of Lewis Carroll to capture the moment of delicate balance between sensuality and innocence. “Fleur-de-lys” is an exercise in both botany and etymology. Here the act of naming the parts of a flower is represented as a kind of “magic,” a magic accessible to us now only because the poet has taken the trouble to reinvent it for us. Epiphanies can happen in unexpected ways, and are all the more memorable when they take us by surprise.