

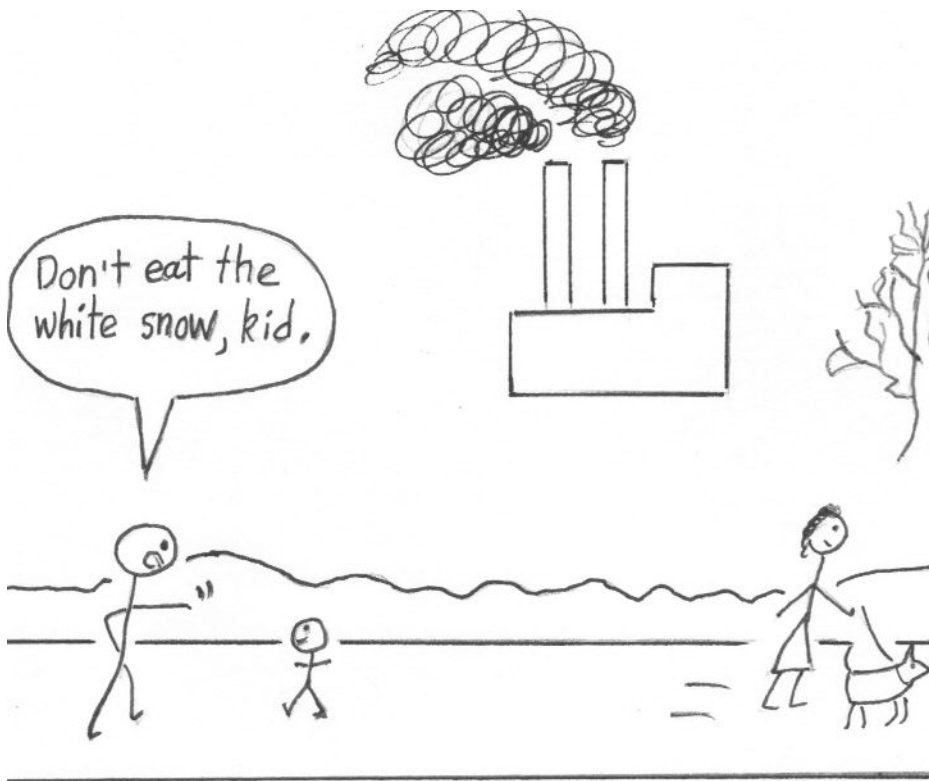
Speaks

by Alex MacDonald

Advice

This is not for public consumption
you know that, but what do they think
the stupid fools that at the miserable end
with a plastic tube down your throat
and a wire clipped to your finger
and a needle pushed up your vein
pumping morphine for the pain
that some conscious spirit escapes
into a world of light, looking downward
at the self which was? You know
as well as I that is inane,
that life to come is nothing but a fraud
practised by those whose gold is pumping God,
there is no God and death's the end of all
mere oblivion and I'm glad of it
because it leaves us free to do here
what we please or can get away with,
not that I recommend committing crimes
as they are called for if you're caught
life can be unpleasant, instead
go to work with subtlety and guile
to get what you can get any safe way
you can, there's the sport for a man if
you take my meaning, it's a game
of skill and cunning, yes and chance,
but keep your eyes upon the odds
only suckers play long shots and the goal's
never to be a sucker but to win
whatever's out there for the winning.
Sex is worth scoring now and then
although it can be messy, money's good
for money is the magic of the world
it can do anything, and yet for me
I like to set sights higher, I tell you
the very best thing to be had is power,
it is the true nectar of the so-called gods
whether they hurl their lighting bolts,
play roulette with saved and damned

or simply withhold the good things they could give, it is their heaven to enjoy such absolute power to exert unstoppable force, exult in ultimate mastery and give answer to no one—that's the prize for me, lad, to be great and get those lousy bastards that I hate.



Girl

setting: a rink beside the school
and the twin-spired church,
snow banked along the edges
and across the street houses with plumes of smoke
curling toward the black starred sky

characters: me of course and her
of the white skates, black tights,
short plaid skating skirt and white
fluffy sweater, mona lisa smile
and long eyelashes; others
on the rink glide past like ghosts

action: how I bend down
begin to dig, gather speed
cut cleanly on bright blades
toward her flying and hit
the rippled ice, throw out
legs and arms in frantic dance
to stay upright and how she places
her hand on her mouth and turns her head

theme: pride I suppose which comes
before an almost fall except I was not proud
so much as hopeful she would notice me,
that girl whose presence proved Beauty
in the world.

Time

it used to be
that when I phoned time
I got the Word,
now all the clocks in my life
are different
and I don't know which one to believe

I can understand
why the quartz analog watch
on my wrist would be off,
sinner that I am
why should I have the correct time?

But when the digital windows
on the computer and the telephone
are different, and neither
matches the mechanical voice
at Time of Day then I know
there's trouble

for we are all as on a speeding train
swept with confused alarms
buzzing, ringing, beeping sirening
timeless moments
when tides are at the flood
and images cascade
from then to now and back.

I remember when time
meant looking at my wrist
and saying Yup—
two freckles past a hair

and now it means, now
it means now
it means
now

English 100

This is not fair. I have done
 everything you asked for
 in your syllabus and handouts,
 your patronizing little
 fireside chats in class:
 I have a thesis in the first paragraph
 I have followed the order of the poem
 I have made references to the text
 and given line numbers in parentheses,
 I have a cute little conclusion
 which I waggle at the end with a twist.
 So why did I get sixty-three?

Never mind, I asked you that already
 and you said it was a judgement
 of overall quality, which means
 you cannot really say, can you
 Or rather, you could say, if you would,
 you could say that it is
 the careful and highly scientific
 tabulation of your superstitions
 about the world plus
 your received opinions and
 your prejudices, which produces
 a letter grade which you translate
 by mathematical formula
 into my percentage:
 let the fact that I am young
 and you are not anymore
 and you don't like that be x ,
 and let the fact that I am
 a woman and you are
 quite ambivalent about women
 be y , and take as you always do
 the lowest common denominator and
 out of that comes, like magic, sixty-three

You tell me not to confuse
 sixty-three for the paper
 with sixty-three for me.
 Oh no, I am one hundred percent
 and just happen to have written
 a sixty-three paper. Puke to that.

Does it matter to you at all
that I might have put my soul
into this paper, that you
might have killed my soul?

You tell me this is not fair
that I overlook the comma splices
suggest I focus my thesis better.
Focus yours buddy!

At least there is one thing
we agree on, that this is not fair
you old fool
why don't you know how to make it fair
after all this time?

English 110

Good morning students
 I want to begin today
 with an apology for our last class?
 I was caught in the N.F.L.
 and the P.I. was down;
 for those of you who were not here
 the last time let me explain
 that N.F.L. is Negative Feedback Loop
 and P.I., of course, is Perky Index,
 illustrated on the graph which I drew
 on the board before class:
 the Perky Index was down.

What accounts for this?
 I forgot to do positive affirmations,
 that it would be a good class
 that I would be perky, and as a result
 I was unquestionably scattered.
 But this does not account for all of it,
 I could refer to tidal destruction
 of personality which gives
 intimation of the end
 but let me only say
 that last class I was a little dead.

But today my friends
 here in this very room
 have I got a class for you.
 We shall release our inhibitions
 and prepare to read—poetry!
 Exercise our lips
 breathe shallowly and deeply
 massage our face muscles
 and before long someone moans
 then another and soon
 it is all too much,
 we have to be up and out of our desks
 leaving them like shells on the floor
 dance madly in the aisles
 writhe in Dionysian revel
 push the Perky Index over the top
 and wonder as we begin to strip
 that just the other day
 we were bored with literature.

The Professor Retires

What is it to retire?

Is it to go to bed
because the television
has been duly watched
and I am just so tired
of this incessant good news?
another day of peace in the world
no conflict anywhere
except on the local news
an Anti-Boredom March
in Saskatoon where an elderly
woman almost spoke rudely
to an off-duty police officer,
and a demonstration by students
in Regina protesting that government
is giving them so much money
to study that it is corrupting
their work ethics.

What is it to retire?

Is it to take my car
to the service station
and say please re-tire it folks;
you may recycle the old tires
to make sandals
for ageing hippies?

What is it to retire?

Is it to take the number
on my office door
which happens to be 321,
and put it in
the Teachers' Hall of Infamy
for all the tests
I've scored?

What is it to retire?

Is it to be tired once,
get a second wind
then poop out once again?

(do you feel better now
that you've had that little snooze
in your chair? No, because
I had to teach this afternoon
and now I'm re-tired)

What is it to retire?

Is it, then, to be retiring,
a soundless bump on the log
when all the other frogs in the room
are croaking up a storm?
(did you know he is retired now?
Now? He's been shy and retiring
since the first day I met him,
rather a stick in the mud
if you must know, he usually refused
to join in the orgies
after faculty meetings.)

What is it to retire?

Is it to weep sad tears
as each beloved textbook
is packed away, to think
of all the love in writing them
and all the joy in reading them,
or is it to throw them
down the stairs and laugh with glee
to think I'll never see
the stinking things again?

What is it to retire?

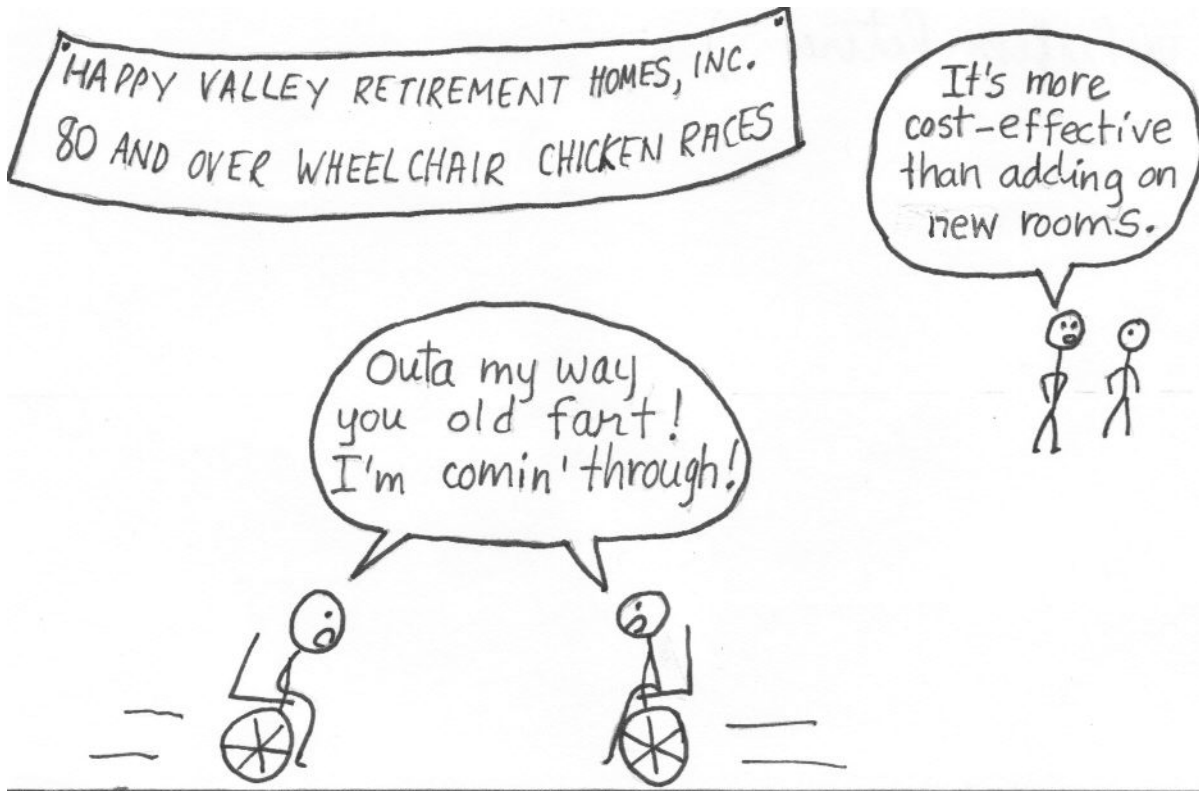
Is it to walk
with swelling violin music
toward the setting sun
or
is it to walk
with agitato drum beat
toward the end of the plank?

What is it to retire?

Is it to remember
in companionable silence
good things achieved
friends known and loved
sorrows and losses endured

and to be able to think
that it has been a gift
to be alive?

Yes, all that but also
one more thing—
that with today's actuarial
assumptions of median
mortality in the retired population
we ain't finished yet baby,
maybe we still got
some serious senior
boogaloo
to do.



History of the Bikini

Be cool
 boys and girls
 put on your string things
 be free and easy
 and hip in the shine
 sun shine and bless
 the ozone layer
 for it do signify
 that we are not
 walking skeletons doomed
 in the end to fry.

These little pants
 like cheese and wine
 and crusty bread
 came out of France.
 Were they a plot by
 the military-fashustrial-complex
 to enslave us with
 a false sense of liberation?
 And can you dig it, is this
 about the bikini at all
 or about oppression, war and guilt
 and many megatons of similarly
 heavy intellectual shit?

Hey Superman!
 with your x-ray vision
 can you see through it?

Boadicea
 ancient warrior queen
 defended her world
 by slaughtering and burning,
 and when defeated
 made a fashion statement--
 to kill herself
 rather than to submit.

Or go back further
 to 4004 BC
 in the afternoon
 when Adam and Eve
 were escorted out of the garden
 ignominiously tugging for shame
 at the elastics of their fig leaves.

Be cool
boys and girls
put on your string things
be free and easy
and hip in the shine
for it do signify
that we were born
after all and in the end
to fly.

Essay On Mind

I watch Cody
the golden retriever
sleeping tonight in the den.
One foot twitches as she
chases cats or fat rabbits
in her dreams. She wakes
when James comes in,
picks up the teddy bear
and keens welcome.
She walks in narrowing circles,
sits down to scratch
and accidentally--I guess--
knocks the bear out of her mouth.

When begging for pizza
brings no result
she stands at the door,
pointing with purpose
to the great world
of the back yard.
I open the door for her,
but rather than go out
to do her business
she retreats under the table
and curls in a ball.
She watches with one eye
every movement,
in case we--accidentally--
drop food on the floor.

From My Office Window

This Easter morning truly
a glorious mystery

the stillness of an almost windless day
except for the tire noise
of a security vehicle
on the still winter-gritty
parking-lot below

except for the insistent raucousness
of a crow on the light standard.
O hail to thee inhuman
black-feathered fact
destroyer of a song-bird eggs
blithe thou never wert.

beyond--the trees
coned and sharp-needed varieties,
and those with bare branches
not decided yet what to wear.

beyond—the road
and the sloping field
of khaki-coloured grass,
the lightly-rippled water
of the marshy lake,
the city panorama
punctuated by refinery, steeples
and the towers of downtown.

and beyond—the low horizon
hazy in distance,
and looking upward the light
blue sky of Spring
deep as eternity and perfect
with a stratospheric vapour trail
disappearing as it moves
from West to East.

Mayfair Crescent

these once beautiful elms
ulmi americanae
 prairie elms
 planted forty years ago
 in the new subdivision
 grew into gothic arches
 over the leaf-shaded street

the first year of the canker worms
 was followed by several more,
 blind miniature serpents
 the size of the white end
 of one of your fingernails,
 thousands upon thousands of them
 hanging from their glistening threads
 turning the leaves into sad lace

for years the elms fought back
 with a second growth of leaves
 in July—now the branches are bare,
 barely shading the street
 from the summer sun

natura naturans?
 flesh-eaters, stingers, infesters,
 earthquakes, cyclones and tidal waves,
 and ourselves, spreading
 inexorably over the planet
 laying waste to the green world
 as these hungry worms have done,
 vying for territory and food

the poorest among us make more people
 the greediest among us make people
 the collateral damage of their schemes,
 the worst among us do things to people
 it is hard for many of us to imagine,
 and is all of this not part of nature
 and do all of us not have to live
 however we can
 and according to our natures?

well now, that's a tough one, about us.

but suppose there were a college for canker worms
 here on Mayfair Crescent?

we could enroll the little tykes as pupils,
catch them before they hit the ground
and pupate all on their own
if you get my entomological drift
or is that etymological?
whatever, we could
teach them to be good stewards
of *ulmus americana*,
no clear-cutting, but taking
only half the leaves
from somebody else's trees

if we could set it up
so they always ruin
somebody else's trees
we'd have this
canker-worm problem
licked.

The Paradigm Transference Machine

There does indeed seem to be
 absolutely incontrovertible evidence
 of human miserableness,
 evidence that brothers and sisters
 will try to trick, trap and wreck
 each other, will lie the slick
 and cry the false
 and hurt especially the ones
 who have done them no harm.

Here is what we may call
 an hypothesis: that this fact
 of human miserableness
 is not at heart a problem
 of heart but is in fact
 a problem of mind—
 a problem that information
 is not being transmitted
 and received so that what we've got
 is a failure to communicate,
 what we've got is knowing not
 what we do, not really.

We live by paradigms
 built from a thousand little
 lego blocks of received wisdom
 and sense impressions including
 whiffs of aggression we think we smell
 and words in black and white
 which should be definite enough
 yet we construct the christian view
 the marxist view, the left wing view,
 the right wing view, the wingy view
 or the whatever view as it might suit
 us to believe and all of us apparently
 looking at the same thing.

If only the bunch of us
 could sit in the comfortable chairs
 put the comfortable headsets on:
 the robber and the robbiee
 the shunner and the shunnee
 the gossipier and the gossippee
 the power and the powee
 the preacher and the preachee
 those of different religious traditions
 and those who differently pee.

And when we are comfortable
the Communication Enhancement Specialist
would program the machine
for temporary paradigm transfer and
ZAP! we would see the world
through another's eyes and walk a mile
in another's moccasins, but then...
could we ever go back
to our former paradigms
or would we have to evolve
to accommodate such different realities
or go mad?

However, while we are waiting
for the paradigm transfer machine
to be invented let's sit down together
and talk it over.

