The Prize Jury

by C. P. Boyko

THEY PACKED UP their papers and filed from the classroom, as righteously weary as Crusaders exiting a sacked city. Christin, whose novel had been workshopped that night, sobbed for ten minutes in the washroom before joining her classmates at the pub. They all raised their glasses.

“Good discussion tonight,” said Ronnie, who had called her prose “pedestrian.”

“Some good points made,” said Preston, who had described her plot as “turgid” and “derivative.”

Glenda, who had used the words “hackneyed,” “boring,” “stupid,” and, most damning of all, “commercial,” said she hoped everyone was as gentle when her turn came next week.

Alec noted that Bruiser had seemed a little out of sorts. No one could decide if he had been in a good mood or a bad mood. When Brownhoffer was in a good mood he threw books and chalk brushes at them. When he was put in a bad mood by the worthlessness of their writing, he hit them with his fists. His nickname, however, was affectionate and ironic. He did not hit hard (though he obviously tried to), and his aim was comically poor. Besides, they all admired his passion, and felt guilty before it. As much as they might have felt compelled to, none of *them* had ever punched another novelist in the face for the flaws of her syntax or the poverty of her characterization; Brownhoffer, according to legend, had once bitten a student for using a sans-serif font.

That night, however, he had been strangely quiescent. He was hunched rigidly over his table at the front of the room as if bowed by stomach pains, chewing his lips and muttering sounds of expostulation, and alternately squinting and goggling at the floor, his eyebrows writhing like pinned caterpillars with incredulity. Occasionally—apparently at something one of them

said—his head recoiled, his neck became furrowed with chins, his eyes shut involuntarily, and his mouth slewed from side to side in disgust. But he had said little; and faced with his awful browbeating silence, they had striven to outdo one another in the ruthlessness of their criticism.

"What grade did he give you?," Pauline asked.

Christin withdrew from her bag the battered, dog-eared manuscript, which had been neat and immaculate only a week before. On the top page in blue pencil Brownhoffer had inscribed a large "F." This surprised no one, and hardly even distressed Christin: "F" was the only grade Brownhoffer ever gave. But the wide margins were still pristine and unmarked throughout. He had given no feedback whatsoever. This was unsettling indeed.

"What does it mean?"

"He must be in a bad mood."

"He must be ill."

"He must really, *really* have hated it."

"Unless maybe he—liked it?"

They all paused in thought, then simultaneously shook their heads. The idea was too terrible to be borne: that they might have censured with unprecedented violence the one novel that Brownhoffer had actually admired. Over several rounds of drinks they recapitulated their criticisms, and elaborated them, and added to them, and found them to be sound. Unless Bruiser had suffered a stroke, he too must have hated Christin's novel; anyone with any sense would. Reassured, they broke up and staggered, individually and in pairs, home to bed.

All except Christin, who went looking for Brownhoffer.

Though it was raining and near midnight, this was not a foolhardy task. Brownhoffer did not keep office hours, and could be found wandering the campus footpaths, chewing his lips and muttering angrily to himself, at any time of day or night and in any weather. Indeed, he was as ignorant of his surroundings and as indifferent to discomfort as Socrates, and had often been spotted carrying a furled umbrella through thunderstorms and an open one indoors. He was the most familiar figure on campus, an object of fear and pride and ridicule—laughable to freshmen, revered by grad students,

and tolerated by faculty. Everyone assumed he was a genius, and kept a respectful distance.

It was therefore with a feeling almost of sacrilege that Christin hailed her professor and chased after him into the botanical gardens. But desperation is the last stage before despair, and she was recklessly desperate.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Dr. Brownhoffer, but I was hoping I could talk to you about my chapters?"

Brownhoffer, however, was a difficult man to interrupt. Several moments passed before he realized that he was being addressed, and nearly a minute before her words began to infiltrate and displace his own thoughts. He awoke to Christin's presence as gradually and incompletely as a medieval clergyman awakening to theological doubts.

"Yes?" he said at last, as if answering the phone.

"I'm real sorry to interrupt you. I know you're busy—probably working on something completely brilliant."

In fact, Brownhoffer's mind was not, as was generally supposed, occupied with the composition of his long-overdue second novel. It was busy nursing grievances.

He had a veritable garden of these, as lush and various and dark and dripping as the one they now walked through. His latest grievance, the one that had absorbed him that evening and all that week, was held against a former student by the name of April Allen. She had betrayed him by not only successfully publishing her novel, but actually winning for it a nomination for the Hart Winslow Prize—whatever the hell that was. Brownhoffer, in his mind the greatest novelist of his era, had never been nominated for anything. April Allen had mailed him a gloatingly inscribed copy of her book the previous week. Reading it, or ostensibly rereading it, he had found it to be the most crassly commercial of trash—just the sort of thing prize juries ate up. He was appalled that she had learned so little from him, and incensed to discover his name in an unprominent position among a dozen others on the acknowledgements page.

"What exactly is the matter, Miss Shane?"

Christin took a breath. "You didn't like my new chapters."

Brownhoffer barked at the understatement. "No I did not."

"May I ask why?"

"That is your prerogative, surely."

"Well—why?" But as the professor grimly pursed his lips to begin pronouncing the indictment, her nerve failed. "I mean, I did everything you told us to—I *tried* to do everything. I avoided the obvious word. I used the first-person present for immediacy. I made my paragraphs longer and used less punctuation for momentum. I withheld; I mean, gosh, I deleted whole swaths of exposition, really I did. And I read all those books you told us to. Henry James, Proust, *The Human Comedy*—I know I don't read French and I know it's not the same in translation but I *did* read all of it, just like you said we should."

Brownhoffer awoke more fully to Christin, who was the source of a major grievance in her own right. She was by far the most earnest, conscientious, and therefore irritating student in his workshop that year. Of course, all his students were irritating, always; with their questions that could not be answered, their allusions to authors and books he had never heard of, and their referral to him for adjudication of all their esoteric squabbles, they constituted a perpetual threat to his authority and dignity. He defended himself with a pose of sorrowful disdain for their ignorance, and fobbed them off with plausible quotations and impossible homework assignments; but Christin Shane alone among them asked for his sources and completed the assignments.

"You read *all* of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*?"

"Well sure. Over the holidays. And James and Proust and Trollope, like you said. It was real helpful, too. Well," she admitted ashamedly, "Trollope's *Letters* were a bit dull in parts."

Brownhoffer grasped this straw. "That was the entire *point* of the exercise, Miss Shane. Give me your manuscript."

She handed him the disheveled heap of paper.

"Trollope's dullness is legendary. You don't suppose I directed you to him for his lyrical prose? You must know your enemy. Trollope's collected works provide the most estimable education in how *not* to write fiction. I

should have thought that was obvious; but I see the lesson was lost on you. Here! on your very first page: 'He held the door open for her.' Period. My God. My God!" He was genuinely angry now; pellucid prose had that effect on him. "I have read that same sentence ten thousand times in my life—*must* I read it again? If you can't say anything new, please, Miss Shane, don't say anything at all."

She hung her head. "I know. I *know*. I *tried* to make that lyrical, but I couldn't see how. There are some things I just don't understand how you're supposed to say them—creatively," she said, for the word "poetically" had been banned from Brownhoffer's classroom. "'He held the door open for her'—I mean, that's what he did. That's all he did. How else do you say it?"

"There are a million and one ways to say it; I could give you fifty off the top of my head. 'His hand lingered on the door to permit her egress.' 'He maintained the portal's agapeness to facilitate her passage.' 'In the doorway he paused, that her progress through the doorway might be unimpeded.'"

Christin shook her head in wretched admiration.

He made a dismissive gesture. "These are not brilliant by any means—but my God! they are a damn sight better than 'He held the door open for her.' Did he now? Did he indeed? Show me! Prove it to me. How did he do it? Describe his hold: Was it firm? Was it hesitating? Describe the door: Was it oaken? Was it glass? Describe the openness of the door: Was it ajar? Was it yawning? Describe him! Describe her! Where are the adjectives, Miss Shane? Adjectives!"

"But Dr. Brownhoffer, the door's not really important, is it?"

"Everything is important!" he screamed, crumpling the sodden manuscript to his chest. "Or nothing is important! *That* is what your writing would have me believe!" His wet face in the green shadows was grotesquely gnarled. "Nothing matters. All is vain. Why live? Why, indeed, go on living, if 'He held the door open for her'?"

Christin was crestfallen. Her novel had made her professor not want to live. She probably deserved her "F." Despair began to trickle through her.

"Maybe I'm just not cut out to be a novelist."

“No one is ‘cut out,’” he said, handling her idiom with distaste. “One must labor at writing, endlessly. One must *make oneself* a novelist.” He handed back the chapters of her novel and said with a sneer, “You’re young yet.”

This was the closest that Brownhoffer in thirty-five years of teaching had ever come to positive encouragement; but its effect was lost on Christin, who happened to know that she was already ten years older than Brownhoffer had been when he had published his novel.

They emerged from the gardens. The rain slackened to a fine drizzle. Christin’s face, although forever now bereft of hope, became wistful.

“Was it—was it very difficult to write *Gravy Train*?”

What she really longed to ask was whether it had been very wonderful to publish a novel—to package and disseminate across the world a deathless transcription of one’s soul.

“Of course it was difficult,” said Brownhoffer, his thoughts already reverting to April Allen.

“I thought so,” she sighed voluptuously, as if he had answered her unspoken question instead.

But the mention by name of Brownhoffer’s novel was too rare an occurrence not to have some effect on him, however belated. His posture became rigid and his expression wary. “You wouldn’t have asked that, had you read it.”

“I did read it—once,” she said. In fact she had read it once in the fall before class started and twice more during the holidays; but she had not understood it at any time, and did not want to risk implying a familiarity or fondness she did not possess.

“When? How? Where did you find a copy?”

“I don’t know,” she stammered. “Interlibrary loan. From someplace in Texas, I think.”

A change came over Brownhoffer. His pace slowed and grew languorous. His eyes became thoughtful and far-seeing, while his mouth became horribly, unnaturally contorted. Though Christin could not have known it, Brownhoffer was smiling.

"Yes, a very difficult book to write," he said complacently, and inaccurately.

Though Brownhoffer did not remember it, the writing of his novel had been a pure joy, for it had been an act of rebellion. He had started with the modest aim of becoming famous, and it had seemed evident, from the orderly succession of innovators that constituted literary history, that the best way to achieve fame was to do something different. So he studied other people's novels and soon discovered certain uniformities among them; these conventions of the form he called limitations, and proceeded methodically to smash them. He did away with plot, and characters, and punctuation, and paragraph breaks, and chapters, and dialogue, and comprehensible diction. As the work progressed, it became more than a bid for fame; it became his own personal war on the mundane. When it was finished, he realized that he had not merely reformed the novel, but destroyed it. His reward, he was sure, would be commensurate with his achievement.

He sent the manuscript in two boxes to a publisher chosen benevolently at random, and for a week confidently awaited the first stunned recognition of his genius. In the weeks that followed, expectation gave way slowly to puzzlement, and puzzlement, painfully, to frustration, and frustration finally to outrage. He sent the book to other publishers; the tone of his cover letters became increasingly belligerent. It was during these dark days that he refined his aesthetic philosophy, arriving at last at the comforting formula that recognition comes in inverse proportion to quality. The publishing industry —which quickly acquired in his imagination a composite identity, as though all editors everywhere were members of the same board, and had voted against him—the publishing industry catered to the public, and the average moron had no interest in or capacity for great works of art. He was surrounded by morons. Everyone was against him.

Into this darkness there one day came a dim ray of light. One of the university presses that received his manuscript mislaid it; it circulated like a gallstone through several departments before finally landing on the desk of an administrator in Human Resources, who took it for a CV. Impressed by its size and the confident tone of its cover letter, this administrator added it

to the stack of applicants for the position of assistant history professor. Brownhoffer's novel, by virtue of its daunting bulk, survived the pre-selection process; he was invited for an interview. He made it clear at the outset of this interview that he had no interest whatsoever in becoming an assistant history professor—a gambit which bemused and beguiled the selection committee. They offered him the job, and because he was broke, he took it. His prospectus, when submitted, revealed that he intended to teach Introduction to Roman Law through the critical dismantling of popular, not necessarily Roman-themed, novels of the present day. The selection committee had second thoughts, and at the last minute foisted Brownhoffer on the English department, which was obliged to give him, as the only "internal applicant," their poetry survey course. When it became apparent midway through his first semester that Brownhoffer was not teaching his students how to read poetry but rather how not to write novels, the course title and calendar description were surreptitiously revised. The dean, however, uneasy about having the college's first-ever Novel Writing class taught by an unpublished novelist, persuaded a friend at a vanity press to expand his operations as far into legitimacy as the printing of five hundred copies of *Gravy Train*. Four hundred of these, deviously miscategorized, made their way unread into university libraries; the remaining hundred were pulped; Brownhoffer himself had never held a copy in his hands.

All Brownhoffer knew was that his genius had finally been recognized by at least one advanced institution of higher learning and one avant-garde publishing house. He had been published; and that put him, not by degree but qualitatively, above his students.

"A difficult book to write," he said, "and a difficult book to read. But worth the effort, I daresay, for those capable of expending it, eh?"

Christin risked a grunt of agreement.

He chuckled conspiratorially. "*You* realize, of course, that great art is seldom—*accessible*. Art, if it *is* art, is transformative; and transformation is never easy. Indeed it is positively unpleasant."

Now Christin nodded readily, for the reading of *Gravy Train* had certainly been that.

Brownhoffer looked at his student more carefully, and was surprised to find on her face lines of intelligence where previously he had found only shrewish pertinacity and impudence. It occurred to him now that these might be the very qualities of his ideal reader. His manner became expansive and benignant.

"Literature is an act of communication—an act of communion, one might even say. Without finely tuned receivers, even the most powerful transmissions go unheard. I am quite fortunate in that my audience, though small, has always been receptive. Of course, all true art finds its proper home eventually. One need not despise one's detractors, for their detraction only proves their unfitness for one's message. The seed does not curse the sand, but goes on seeking the soil."

"But Dr. Brownhoffer," said Christin, after giving this aphorism a respectful pause, "what's the point of revising, then, if everything finds its own audience? Isn't one kind of novel just as good as the next?"

If Christin had asked this question an hour ago, Brownhoffer might have inflicted upon her *A Dance to the Music of Time*; now he laughed indulgently.

"It depends on whether you believe that one kind of audience is as good as the next."

Christin sighed. After six months in Brownhoffer's class, she knew that the only audience worth striving for was the one that Brownhoffer himself represented—and *he* hated her writing.

"Yes," he said, "doubtless there is an audience for everything. There is even an audience for 'He held the door open for her'—probably even a large audience, and one that will pay you handsomely and bedeck you with laurels and literary prizes for giving it prose that skims across the surface of the mind without raising a ripple. If that audience is your ambition, Miss Shane, you may yet have a bright future ahead. But I feel I must be honest with you."

Her face loomed out of the mists in his mind and became almost clear before his eyes. The rain, which he had at no point noticed, had now stopped, but drops still clung to her brow and eyelashes and caught the light

from a nearby window like tiny diamonds. A great tenderness welled up within him, both for her, and, at the thought of the kindness he was about to do, for himself.

"If your goal is to be *good*—well. I must tell you that there is no hope. You have worked hard; you have done your best; you are not to blame. There is no crank that you can turn to produce literature. There is no dictionary for translating the obvious phrase into the lyrical one. There is no formula for creativity. One either has the capacity to become an artist, or one does not. You do not. I believe that my candor will save you much heartache in the future. There is no need to thank me. It is the least I can do —for a fan."

And her face faded from his consciousness as he continued on his way, humming tunelessly and munching his lips.

CLINT LEWES APPEARED distressed. Indeed, he looked like a husband in a Victorian novel awaiting news of a parturition. He paced or sat fidgeting in various twisted postures, chain-smoking cigarettes and plucking non-existent flakes of tobacco from his lips. Occasionally he leapt with sudden resolve across the study to seize some knick-knack or framed photograph, turning it over in his hands with bewilderment and rue. He muttered continuously to himself, but a careful analysis would have revealed that his sentences did not parse. His gaze roved wildly around the room, but there was one object it did not touch; and that was the blank sheet of paper on his writing desk.

He had done everything; there was nothing left to be done. He had retrieved, opened, read twice, and verbosely answered that day's fan mail. He had couriered that week's three and next week's four book reviews to the eleven newspapers publishing them, but had not yet received a new batch of novels to be reviewed. He had long ago mailed out that season's stack of grant applications. He had written thank-you postcards to the facilitators of last year's writers' retreats and registered for next year's. There were four weeks till his next writer-in-residency at the public library, and he had already selected the books and quotations with which he would decorate his

office. He had completed the always unpleasant task of editing his latest book, a collection of topical essays. The last literary festival was a month behind him and the next a month away. He had offered himself to a panel discussion on the Future of the Novel that was ostensibly being held at an elementary school in a neighboring province, but had not yet heard back from the organizers, a klatch of ignorant and unprofessional fifth-graders. And he had done all that could be done to promote his most recent novel, including countless interviews for television, radio, and print, and innumerable readings in every kind of venue. He was expected to give one more twenty-minute performance next week at a retirement home, but he had already memorized forty-five minutes of text, complete with the pauses and small charming errors that would make his delivery seem unpracticed, even, in the words of one reviewer, "almost extempore." But otherwise, the invitations to talk about himself, about his influences, and about his work had dried up. They always did, eventually. No one was interested in Clint Lewes anymore. There was nothing else for it but to write another novel.

But what did one write a novel about? Though he had written thirty-seven of them, he had no idea how to go about it. Did one begin with a character? His family and friends were all bone-weary of being cast, more or less undisguised, in his *romans à clef*, and no one else came to mind. Did one begin with a setting? The study of a popular but critically underappreciated —doctor, perhaps? Or did one begin instead with an event, and allow one's setting and characters to take the shape dictated by the exigencies of plot? He clutched at this proposition hungrily, as if he had discovered one of the eternal laws of literature, and looked around the room for events. But nothing moved. He ran to the window and was disgusted to see only two children digging holes in the lot across the street; he had already written a novel about spelunking. He ransacked his past for memories of things that sometimes happened to human beings, but his life and the lives of everyone he knew seemed uncannily devoid of circumstance. The single most common question he was asked by fans and interviewers was the one about where his ideas came from; and though he was careful to expunge from his answers all trace of amusement, condescension, or boredom, the question had always

struck him as rather stupid. Today, however, he would have paid any price to remember what his answers had been. Where *did* he get his ideas from? Experience? Imagination? Books?

He had torn open the dictionary and was contemplating the dramatic possibilities of the word "partridge" when the telephone rang; he had forgotten to unplug it. He lunged for the receiver as though he would devour it.

"Hello, yes, Clint Lewes speaking, who is calling please, hello?"

It was his agent, Rob Robson. Did Clint happen to know offhand of any out-of-print books that might be reissued? Harbor Mountain were doing a series of Forgotten Classics for their fall list.

Clint did not; but he said, "Yes, certainly, lots—when do you need them by?"

"Oh, no rush."

Rob Robson was an unusually competent and effective agent, but Clint had no way of knowing that, having never had an incompetent one. Besides, he was constitutionally incapable of believing that everything possible was being done at all times to keep his name in the public mind. Therefore, Rob's unflappable lack of urgency acted on him like an allergen, throwing his entire body into a state of agitation and near-panic.

"Will tomorrow be soon enough?"

That was how Clint Lewes came to be writing a scholarly introduction to *Gravy Train* when, a month later, Rob Robson called him about the Godskriva Prize.

After a frantic process of sortilege and cross-reference in the university library's stacks, he had seized upon *Gravy Train* as one of the most obscure novels of the century; it was a small step from there to the conclusion that it was one of the most overlooked and underappreciated novels of the century; and from there no step at all to the conviction that he was the man best equipped to rescue it from oblivion and establish it firmly in the canon—while simultaneously establishing Clint Lewes as one of the preeminent literary theorists of his age: the man who had discovered Brownhoffer.

His enthusiasm for this project had suffered a blow when, in the course of clearing the copyright, he had discovered that Brownhoffer was not dead,

but teaching creative writing at a seedy community college. There was something disreputable and depressing about living neglected authors, perhaps because there were so many of them. Also, being alive, they were liable to say things that you had not foreseen, things that did not conform to your image of them or to your interpretation of their work; they did not belong utterly to you the way dead authors did. Clint had spoken briefly to Brownhoffer on the phone, and had found him at first suspicious and rude, then pompous and magniloquent. So, for the time being, he abandoned the idea of the critical biography and confined himself to a close exegesis of the novel, written in a tone, simultaneously abusive and self-congratulatory, that would hopefully make readers feel simultaneously stupid and grateful.

Clint was familiar with the Godskriva Prize as the most prestigious of all the literary awards he had never been nominated for. It was bestowed each year on the best novel published in any human language, and brought with it a sum of cash commensurate with its prestige. This year, according to Rob Robson, the Godskriva Collective had announced, or were about to announce, a new prize, to be awarded once only—for the best novel of all time.

Did Clint want to be on the jury?

Clint hesitated; wouldn't his being on the jury disqualify his own novels from being chosen? But he did not hesitate long. The certain prospect of power outweighed the uncertain possibility of recognition, however distinguished. And in some dim recess of his heart, Clint realized that he was not the sort of novelist who won literary prizes. His was an inferior product; that was why he had to spend so much time and effort advertising himself. How he envied men like Brownhoffer!—geniuses who could produce in a vacuum great works of literature that needed no one to publicize or defend them!

Which gave him an idea.

"Okay. I'll do it."

"Great. I'll submit your name to the committee."

"You mean they didn't ask for me?"

"I'm sure they're just waiting to hear you're available."

But this was insufficiently definite for Clint, who immediately launched his own personal campaign for selection. He flew to Oslo and hand-deliv-

ered copies of his books to the Godskriva directors; he let it be known, through the medium of his book reviews, that he was underoccupied, widely read, and in a reflective, munificent mood; he took everyone he had ever met out for lunch and casually pumped them for information; he sent telegrams to everyone who had ever written a novel and reminded them how fond he was of their work. His efforts paid off. The members of the jury-selection committee, terrified of committing any unpopular or controversial choice, solicited the opinions of a wide array of consultants; these consultants in turn hired their own consultants, and so on, till nearly every person who had ever written, published, or read a novel had been given a chance to nominate someone they believed likely to vote for the novels they had written, published, or read. Clint, by sheer force of his unrelenting ubiquity, was on several people's lists. His name, with fifty others, was put in a hat; and his, with only eleven others, was pulled out.

TWO HUNDRED NOVELS, all acknowledged classics, were distributed to the jury in advance. They were asked to submit their ten favorites—as well as up to five novels not on the list—as the foundation for further discussion. The organizers, in collating this initial data, were amazed and appalled to discover that none of the jurors' lists overlapped by so much as one title, and that all of them had exercised the option of adding the maximum five books of their own choosing—all except one juror, who ignored the instructions and submitted ten new titles and none from the original longlist. The Godskriva staff scrambled to find translations of all these esoteric works in the ten native languages of the twelve jurors, and when these were not available, scrambled to commission translations into English at least. Finally, a week before the jury was convened, the jurors were supplied with and asked to read all 175 novels on this not very short shortlist.

One did. Ilse Mienemin arrived at the hotel in Oslo bleary-eyed, misanthropic, and a philistine. Instead of attending the reception that evening, she went straight to bed. Next morning when the jury was convened, it seemed to her that everyone knew everyone else's name and that they were all on

friendly terms; Ilse, only Ilse, remained on the outside. This feeling of isolation—all too familiar to her from years of sitting alone in rooms writing novels—worsened her mood but strengthened her resolve. She would not agree with anything any of these people had to say. They were not real novelists. A real novelist understood that art required sacrifices; that to write about the world one must be removed from the world; that one could either enjoy life or write about life, but not both; that good work was only produced in the crucible of an unhappy existence; that originality and beauty only developed in isolation. Ilse *chose* to be dead to life, that her work might live forever. Yes; she was a martyr for her art. But then she looked again at the piles of novels littered across the table and around the room and at the fat stack of notes she had taken about them, and she drowned beneath a wave of futility and despair.

Clint suggested that they begin their deliberations. No one objected to his assuming the role of foreman. It seemed natural that one of the three native speakers of English, the *lingua franca* of the jury, should take charge; the confidence with which they spoke lent them an air of authority that the others could not compete with (except perhaps Max Ür, who, to conceal and compensate for his poor understanding of English, which rendered him effectively deaf, launched periodically into impassioned diatribes on the superiority of good literature to bad, the importance of integrity and sincerity in an author, and the supreme value of truth). Of the other two English speakers, neither was interested in leading the discussion; one was insane, and the other drunk.

Buchanan Dewan had, at twenty, and despite the protests of his friends and family, married the prostitute he was in love with. This act made him a social pariah; and his wife, who had married him in order to infiltrate a better, richer class of people, felt that she had been tricked. After five years of intense domestic misery, she took all their money and ran away to the Bahamas, leaving him with nothing but syphilis. That had been forty years ago. To feed himself he had turned to novel-writing, not being suited for any other type of work. Unfortunately, his reputation in literary circles progressed as slowly as the disease, and therefore in inverse proportion to his

capacity to enjoy it. He was now in the advanced stages of both senility and fame. He had constructed in his mind a resplendent Fairyland to which he escaped for most hours of the day from the hardships and disappointments of his life. To his admirers he seemed a sort of bodhisattva, giggling and sighing forgivingly as he contemplated the foibles of the universe; in fact, he was playing checkers with elves.

Tiffany Pram had been writing in full spate when she was called to Oslo. After months of struggle and false starts and chewing her pen, she had finally made a breakthrough; the story had taken off, the characters had come to life, and the sentences seemed almost to be writing themselves. Yet she was no mere spectator: every page bore the unique stamp of her intelligence and humanity. She was, every day at her desk, plumbing the profundities of her own genius. This was the best thing she had ever written, the best thing she would ever write. And then she had been torn away from it. From a creative deity presiding over an entire universe, she had suddenly been reduced to a middle-aged woman on an airplane asking three times for extra ice. She was not a dreamer awakening, but a fully waking mind being abducted by a dream. It was drizzling in Oslo, but the fog and the rain-blurred streets felt like symptoms of her own straitened perceptions. The real world was unreal; what was worse, it was trivial. In her novel, every line of dialogue was character-revealing, every action was pregnant with its consequences, every gesture was imbued with symbolical significance; here, outside her novel, there was nothing but small talk, false smiles, and nervous tics. Would she like a porter to help with her bags? Would she like to eat a little something before the reception? Would she like to meet Mr. Buchanan Dewan? She blinked incredulously at the cardboard figures cavorting about her, pelting her with their inane solicitudes like television commercials come horribly to life. She got drunk, and resolved to stay that way till the nightmare was over.

Clint suggested that they begin at the top of the list and work their way down. Was Novel #1 the best novel of all time? After ten seconds of silence, everyone began talking at once. Clint motioned for silence, then granted the floor to Guntur Kunthi Kesukaan, who seemed in greatest need of it: he was

holding up both hands and writhing and hopping in place—and anyway had not stopped talking.

Over the next hour, Guntur delivered a moving paean to Novel #1; it was one of his own nominations, written by a friend of his, and translated for the jury into English by himself, so he knew better than anyone its excellence. The story of a poor village that wins the lottery, *The Lottery Pool* follows the villagers' gradual discovery that riches are meaningless if everyone around you is rich too. Only a hobo passing through town is willing to do any work for pay, and, able to set his own prices, soon departs again with the villagers' fortunes, after cutting their lawns, trimming their hedges, and painting their houses but leaving their roads, park, and school in their original state of disrepair. Guntur began his eulogy to this novel in a gracious and grateful mood, welcoming his new friends by flamboyant gestures into the comfortable and spacious sanctum of his tribute. But the momentum of his rhetoric soon carried him past eulogy to apology; he began anticipating criticisms in order to refute them; his tone acquired a shrill and defensive edge. The tale was not at all allegorical or fantastical, he assured them; the novelist had researched lotteries meticulously and had even lived for several months in a small town. Realism was very important to the author; once, needing to describe convincingly the contents of a woman's purse, he had run out into the street and snatched three of them. Several times Guntur used the word "autobiographical" as an unqualified accolade. He also stressed how hard the author had worked at the novel, and how many revisions he had submitted it to; he was a perfectionist, and the result of his perfectionism was, quite simply, perfection. If the other jurors did not agree that this was a perfect novel, they were crazy. If they could not understand the power and beauty of this novel, they could not understand the power and beauty of his country; this novel *was* his country. If they did not like *The Lottery Pool*, they must be racists. If they did not like this book, they did not like *him*. Well, was that it? Did they all hate him? No one spoke. Guntur collapsed sobbing into his seat, vowing to kill himself as soon as the opportunity arose. Clint—who, with the rest of the room, had not understood a

word of Guntur's heavily accented speech—thanked him for his conviction and invited responses.

Lun Li Tseng, who genuinely loved every novel she read, said that *The Lottery Pool* was wonderful. Ilse Mienemin said that it was a piece of crap. Ndatti Mbalu agreed, citing its unnecessary length. She herself wrote with great difficulty, never producing more than 250 words a day after eight or ten hours of intense, hand-wringing, hair-pulling effort; consequently she hated long novels. Hiroki Yomo begged to differ: The novel's size was one of its great strengths, allowing the reader not merely to look into it from outside, but to enter and become part of its world. He himself wrote with great facility, never producing fewer than five cinderblock-sized novels a year. He wrote constantly, jotting down notes and composing entire chapters while riding buses or drinking in pubs with friends or waiting in line at grocery stores. He had, that morning while Guntur spoke, written the first five thousand words of what was to be a sweeping satirical epic about an international literary prize jury; his snickers of delight and self-satisfaction had contributed in no small part to the other man's paranoid breakdown.

Blanquita Reverberone de Calle hastened to agree with Hiroki: The length of this novel was very—long; and length in a novel was something that was—a good thing. She had been waiting desperately for some such intelligent but general comment to which she could affix her support, for she was anxious to conceal the fact that she had read none of the novels. For the past month she had been deeply preoccupied by her agent. Arturo certainly had some of the characteristics of an ideal agent: He was madly enthusiastic about her work, and loved unconditionally everything that she wrote. He was also a tireless promoter, inflicting his enthusiasm on everyone he encountered. But he was not successful. In the ten years that she had known him, he had not managed to sell any of her novels to anyone. And as she was his only client, he had been for ten years without income; she let him sleep on her couch. For nine years and eleven months she had attributed his failure to mysterious market forces; but a month ago she had begun to suspect that Arturo was incompetent; a month ago she had met a new agent. Esteban was everything that Arturo was not: impassive, disdainful, and effective.

He told her that her novels were not by any means great literature, nor could they pass as potboilers—but that was no reason why they should not be bought and read. To prove his point, he flipped open his phone and made three brief calls, at the end of which he had elicited a three-book contract, an interview on national radio, and an invitation to sit on this jury. However, she had not seen him again since their first meeting. He did not return her calls, nor answer her letters, nor honor his appointments with her. His secretary's secretary explained that he was kept very busy by more important, more lucrative clients. Meanwhile Arturo continued to sleep on her couch and moon about her apartment, rereading her manuscripts and sighing, gasping, and weeping with admiration. She didn't know what to do.

Max Ür cried, "Kunst entsteht wenn Frustration auf Freizeit trifft!"*

Clint thanked him. Did anyone else have anything to add? Buchanan? Tiffany? Konstantina?

Konstantina Kurgev had said nothing thus far, for she did not know exactly how she felt, and she had made a vow to never do or say anything but what she felt. This had originated as an artistic principle, one which she had developed during her first experience working with an editor: How dare anyone tell *her* how to write *her* novels! How could she put her name on the cover if it was in fact the production of a committee? And so on. In this way laziness and touchiness conspired to mask themselves as integrity and honesty. She made no changes to her prose that were not corrections of errors, and even preserved some of the errors as idiosyncrasies. She stopped writing by schedule and instead waited for inspiration to strike—and so stopped writing. This philosophy of zero compromise found a home in her heart and soon spread to every corner of her life. She strove to make her existence a true expression of her deepest, most unique nature. This meant renouncing many things that she found disagreeable, such as baths and vegetables. She slept when she was tired and not when the clock told her to. She demanded money from her mother and their car keys from her mother's boyfriends, and she received these allowances without giving thanks. As an artist she felt exempt from the soul-staining tedium of a job, and she could no more feel

* "Art is produced when frustration meets leisure."

gratitude for this dispensation than a plant could feel gratitude for oxygen. Above all, she spoke her mind. But this she found easier to do at home with her mother than with a roomful of strangers. The matter was complicated too by the fact that often she did not know her own mind—or rather, that some parts of her mind often contradicted other parts. She would have loved to leap to her feet and rain excoriations on this novel as a piece of trash and nonsense; equally she would have been pleased to leap to her feet and pour praise upon it as a masterpiece of fearlessness and insight. But in fact she was ambivalent. She liked the story but didn't care for the prose, was charmed by some of the characters but repelled by others, loved especially the beginning but thought the end dragged on. She could hardly leap to her feet to say all that. So she shrugged, scowled, and said nothing.

It was now nearly lunchtime. Clint decided to call a vote, reflecting that at this rate they would require three months to complete their deliberations. They had been given three days.

He was even more alarmed when the vote was close. Not counting Max, who had voted both ways, *The Lottery Pool* escaped being precipitately named the best novel of all time by a single abstention. He realized that he must be more careful in the future to withhold all power of choice from the others until the options had been whittled down to a few finalists—which few must naturally include Brownhoffer. In the meantime, the frustrations of democracy vented themselves, as they usually do, not on those who had voted poorly, but on those who had not voted at all. Who had abstained, he demanded, and why?

"Don't look at me, chum," said the telephone technician.

István Bakic had not voted because he was not in the room; indeed, he was not in Norway. His exit visa had been denied at the last minute, without explanation. Consequently he had subjected his conscience to a minute probing, which inevitably turned up several peccadilloes. He had burned most of his library and denounced his mother-in-law to the secret police before it occurred to him that perhaps his government objected not to him but to the Godskriva Prize. To be sure, the novels he had submitted were all on the national approved reading list, but perhaps the Ministry of Arts and Cul-

ture resented the implication that there could be any higher authority than themselves, let alone a foreign one. In any case, he had received no official prohibition to participate, so he supposed he was obliged to see it through, if only to save face. He had already told all the poets, novelists, playwrights, journalists, and bartenders in the city that he was travelling to Norway to sit on the Godskriva jury; now he had to tell them that the Godskriva Collective, as a special favor to his renown and to his ulcer, had permitted him, alone among the jurors, to take part by telephone. Luckily the prestige of an international telephone call was on par with that of international air travel, both being equally rare. He arranged for the call to be put through to him at The Punctilious Goose, haunt of the capital's literati and purveyor of the capital's most popular imitation stew.

Despite his many hours of promotion for the event, István was astounded by the turnout on the day of the call. In addition to the expected writers and reporters, there were government spies angling for promotion, bored clerks hungry for entertainment, displaced peasants who had never seen a telephone, and the usual prostitutes and hawkers and beggar children drawn by any crowd. Altogether a festive, almost carnival atmosphere prevailed, which István did not think consonant with the dignity of the occasion. Five minutes before the scheduled phone call, he exited discreetly, reentered majestically, and made an admonitory speech to the assembly about the delicateness of the telephonic mechanism. A reverent silence fell; even the pickpockets were still. At five minutes past the hour, the telephone rang, loud as a church bell in the cramped and tense room.

"Hello please, István Bakic speaking here, who is it there thank you?"

Not at all deterred by István's use of English, the caller replied in his own rich, demotic native tongue, "Does your sandwiches have pickles? My missus don't eat pickles."

István told the caller to get off the line.

It was nearly two hours before the phone rang again, by which time excitement had replaced reverence and restlessness had succeeded excitement. István hissed for silence.

"Hello please, István Bakic speaking . . . Hello? . . . Hello? . . . Hello! . . . Hello . . . Hello? . . . Hello . . . Hello? . . . Hello! . . . Hello? . . . Hello? . . . Hello! . . . Hello! . . . Hello please . . . Hello . . . Hello . . . Hello."

By his fifteenth or twentieth repetition of this powerful English word, István began to feel that the dignity of the occasion had been compromised. But he did not know what else to do. The line was not completely dead: occasionally from out of the tides of static there came ghostly knocks and taps, or tinny muffled sounds that might once have been voices. He dared not hang up; they might not call back. Meanwhile his audience began to fidget. In his consternation he shouted at them to shut up, their racket was interfering with the transmission waves. His old friend Janusz stood and explained softly and with greater tact that, though their national telephone was technologically superior to its foreign counterpart, a telephone connection was only as strong as its weakest link; he thanked them for their patience. Nevertheless, several people rose, muttering, and began shuffling towards the door.

"Wait!" he cried. The receiver, pressed deep into his face, had come to life.

"Hello, István, are you there?"

It was Clint Lewes. István shook the telephone over his head triumphantly; the deserters returned muttering to their seats.

"Perhaps you could help all of us here in Oslo out, István, by saying a few words about what you thought of *The Lottery Pool.*"

"But of course, Clint. My pleasure."

It was the moment for which he had prepared so many times in his imagination. He cleared his throat, tweaked his posture, and embarked on an eloquent and largely grammatical speech, adaptable to most of the books on the shortlist, about why this novel was sadly inferior to many, if not most, and indeed perhaps all novels produced in his homeland over the past forty years since the Tremendous Revolution. When he was finished, the room exploded into applause which was, aside from that of the government spies, spontaneous and heartfelt.

“István? Hello István, are you there? I’m afraid you were cutting out rather a lot. Do you mind saying that again?”

By the third repetition, István began to feel that his lecture had lost its freshness; by the sixth, that it had lost its fluency: he could not complete a sentence without making sure that it had been received. By the ninth repetition, he was stuttering plaintively into a void. Eventually the telephone technician came on the line to inform him that the jury had adjourned.

The next morning he tried a new tack: he pretended that the connection was fixed. He spent the day with a serious, thoughtful, judicious look on his face, which he occasionally seasoned with nods and grunts and isolated phrases of grudging agreement or considered disagreement. Unfortunately, this performance proved less entertaining than his humiliation of the day before, and his audience began to melt away. To hold those who remained he began to shout and wave his arms and kick his legs and call his imaginary interlocutors anti-revolutionary swine.

Nevertheless, by the third morning only a few of his novelist friends, one extremely discouraged spy, and the resident alcoholics remained at The Punctilious Goose. István abandoned all pretense of dignity and sprawled across a corner table, the telephone receiver jammed between his shoulder and ear, drinking, chain-smoking, eating cold stew with his fingers, picking crusts from his free ear, and wallowing in his degradation. He overheard brief fragments of the jury’s deliberations but saw no point in contributing, now cynically certain of being cut off whenever he spoke.

“. . . And beside of this, Loach is not a nice person.”

“He’s an asshole, you mean.”

“Yes, just so: an ass hole. He leaved his wife and two children alone and ran away with someone else.”

“Please! The author’s character flaws have no bearing on the value of his novels.”

“*I* disagree. In this case, the strong morality of the novel is totally weakened by the novelist’s own immoral life. I call that ‘hypocrisy.’”

"On the contrary, it is all the more impressive an achievement! He has, in his work, surmounted his own limitations. Like all good art, this novel transcends its authorship."

"*I* heard that he has narcolepsy. It must be difficult to write with narcolepsy . . ."

". . . Wait, wait, wait. I think the Nazis were not nice persons. Are you saying that the Nazis *were* nice persons?"

"I just think she is not fair to the Nazis. By making them all villains, she comes dangerously close to taking sides—to propaganda. Art should be neutral. Art should not be political. Art should exist for art's sake."

"But, my God! If you lived during the war, and witnessed the atrocities that she must have witnessed—!"

"Excuse me. I believe Cottan was born much after the war."

"Never mind. We agreed biography is not relevant . . ."

". . . Große Bücher verkaufen sich wie Gymnastikmitgliedschaften im Januar! . . ."*

". . . What I do not like is that Gawfler *tells* us how Lord Newbotham changes. This is not good writing. Good writing is to *show* us how Lord Newbotham changes."

"That is a large piece of nonsense. One of the wonderful abilities of the novelist is to *tell* stories. Telling and showing are not different; telling is only showing more quick. If you want to be shown everything, word by word, motion by motion, you should go to films."

"Well, some novelists could learn much from screenplays, I think."

"On the counter hand, novelists must learn from screenplays how to *not* write novels. The same as photography confiscated realism from painting, movies should have now confiscated description away from novels. But look at this: five pages to describe the face of Lord Newbotham!"

"Excuse me. Gawfler I think was writing before the time when movies were invented."

"That's his tough luck. Art progresses, like science . . ."

". . . István? Hello, István, are you there?"

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* "Big books sell like gym memberships in January."

Clint spoke rapidly. They were out of time. They needed his vote. They had narrowed the finalists down to two.

István roused himself from his stupor and looked around. His friends had left; the drunks were passed out. To what he was about to say there would be only one witness: a thin, hawklike man who sat on the far side of the room and appeared to be absorbed in cleaning his fingernails with a fork.

A spasm of petulant disgust shook the novelist. Only he had been denied permission by his government to fly to Oslo. Only he had been ostracized and muzzled by a faulty telephone connection—for which, he now had no doubt, the local technology was to blame. Only he had been humiliated in front of his neighbors, his colleagues, and his friends. None of this had happened to the other jurors; none of this could have happened anywhere but in the Land of the Tremendous Revolution.

Clint took a deep breath, and summoned all the hysterical superlatives with which twenty years of blurb-writing had equipped him. Did István vote for Brownhoffer's *Gravy Train*—a fiercely intelligent, vastly unique, inexorably complex, tragically beautiful masterpiece; a truly *novel* novel, a work of jaw-dropping intensity and spine-tingling genius, a triumph of the human spirit, a stirring dissection and fearless glorification of the ineluctable mystery and inestimable strangeness of existence by a shrewd observer of the psyche and astute physician of the soul operating at the very pinnacle of his powers? Or did István vote for Zoltán Szatt's *Pig*?

Zoltán Szatt was the most popular and beloved novelist of István's country, and *Pig* his most popular and beloved novel. Clint had selected Szatt as Brownhoffer's rival because none of the other jurors had seemed to feel at all strongly about him. But the results of the final vote had surprised and horrified him. Not counting Max, who voted both ways, the results were five against five. While it was true that none of the opposing five were particularly fond of *Pig*, they were united in their hatred of *Gravy Train*, and were tired of Clint having his way.

Clint urged, indeed pleaded with István to set aside all patriotic considerations and choose the novel most deserving of the prize by artistic merit

alone. This plea was unnecessary. István staggered to his feet and gripped the receiver like a microphone. The spy put down his fork.

THE OLD MAN sat deep in the gloom of the restaurant, hunched rigidly over the table, chewing his lips and muttering sounds of expostulation. The waitress, after contemplating him for a minute, crossed the room to check that his cups, cruets, shakers, and dispensers were still filled. She frowned at their untouched state.

"You got to eat, Mr. Brolly, or that big old brain'll shrivel up like a pea in the sun."

Her voice, warm and solicitous, stirred him subconsciously and set his teeth on edge, like a dentist's drill heard through a wall. He became aware of a bowl of soup on the table under his face.

"What is this? I didn't order this!" He put his finger in it, and grimaced in satisfied pessimism. "And it's cold! Bring me something hot!" He pushed the bowl off the table with his elbow; it shattered on the floor, sending soup and noodles everywhere.

The waitress sighed and glanced humorously at the interviewer, who sat at the next table, out of harm's way. "He'll realize he's hungry by about bowl number three," she said, and went to fetch a mop.

The interviewer shuffled her notes. "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions now?"

"Go away! I don't give interviews."

"Well, maybe we could start there. Why don't you do interviews anymore?"

"If I answered that, I'd be giving you an interview, wouldn't I? Go away."

The interviewer did not go away, but was silent for a minute, having noticed that if she did not speak or move the old man tended to forget her presence. She could not go away: her editor had made it clear that one more failure would mean termination. She had already been fired from every other newspaper and most of the magazines in town, because she was con-

stitutionally incapable of handing in a story shorter than forty thousand words. Although the old man was notorious for not talking to the press, her editor believed he would talk to her—for she had once been his student.

"Excuse me, Mr. Brownhoffer?" A young man clutching a notepad approached the table diffidently, driven forward by a group of gesticulating friends. "You are Mr. Brownhoffer, aren't you?"

"No."

The young man laughed at this joke and relaxed a little. "I just wanted to tell you what a really huge fan I am—I mean, what a really great book it is, your book. I read it three times and it's just really—great." He giggled nervously and stamped his foot to drive away ineloquence. "I mean, I read a lot of novels and yours is just really—the best. I know everybody says that, but what I mean is, I think it's something completely new. It's not just another novel. It's a whole new kind of novel. What you've done is given new life to the novel. You've resurrected the novel is what I mean to say, and could I have your autograph?"

"No."

He laughed gratefully at the old man's disarming sense of humor. Then he darted forward, placed the pen and pad on the table, and darted back, as if feeding a skittish animal.

Grumbling, his eyes shutting involuntarily and his mouth slewing from side to side in disgust, Brownhoffer picked up the pen and scribbled:

GO AWAY
AND LEAVE ME ALONE
YOU FOOLS

Then he threw down the pen, lurched to his feet, and stumbled out of the restaurant. The waitress, tsk-tsking indulgently, watched him go. The young man's friends came forward to see what the famous novelist had written, and to admire his wit and his penmanship.

"Too bad he didn't sign his name, though."

"No no, that's what makes it valuable."

Christin left some money for the soup and broken bowl and hurried after her former professor. She caught up quickly, for as soon as he was out-

side Brownhoffer was again seized and slowed by his thoughts, as if by quicksand.

"You used to feel differently about your fans," she said.

"My fans used not to be idiots."

"You told me once," she said, "that every work of art finds its own proper audience."

"Who *are* you?" He peered at her closely, and slowly and imperfectly recognized the lines of pertinacity and intelligence on her face. "Why—April Allen!"

"Christin Shane."

"Why—Christin Shane! Yes, you were one of the good ones," he said, taking her sadly by the arm.

Christin laughed bitterly. "Not good enough, as you can see."

"A real spitfire, I recall," he chuckled, handling his memories with sentimental self-pity, like an aging actor mooning over his old headshots. "All of Trollope!" He sighed, then chided, "Why haven't I seen your name on the bestseller lists?"

"Because I took your advice, Professor. I gave up writing novels. Now I do this. Ask questions like," she rummaged facetiously through her notes, "How has fame affected your writing habits?"

He made a sound as if preparatory to spitting. "Fame is when a lot of fools are interested in you because a lot of fools are interested in you. Why did you stop writing novels?"

"You told me to."

"Nonsense. You were one of the good ones."

Her hands were shaking; she stuffed them in her pockets. "You told me that I would never be good. You told me there was no hope. Those were your exact words."

He brushed this aside with a casual gesture, dropping her arm. "I was in a bad mood. You mustn't take such things to heart, or you'll never be a first-class novelist. Novel-writing is primarily hewing your own path, no matter what anyone else thinks of it. No, I remember your work quite vividly. 'He held the door open for her'—eh? Not bad, that. Quite—*different*.

The world needs more of that sort of thing just now. An antidote to all the foul, obnoxious, idiotic trash being produced."

Was it possible? Ten years of her life wasted! How much she could have written in ten years! She should never have listened to him. But then, why was she listening to him now? What did he know, anyway? On the other hand, what did anyone know? Despair, like a hand laid upon her mouth, threatened to suffocate her. Desperately she clung to the immediate task, to her role as interviewer.

"Do you read a lot of contemporary fiction?"

"I read the bestseller lists. That's enough. Ugh!"

"Who *do* you read? Who are your influences? Do you miss teaching? What are you working on now? What time of day do you—"

But she had lost him. His mind had returned to its tethering post, and was slowly wrapping itself around its grievances: that no one understood his work, and he was damned if he was going to explain it to them; that recognition had come too late to do him any good, and now he had nothing left to say; that perhaps he had not said what he had wanted to say after all, or done what he had intended to do, and there was no one capable of continuing, or of correcting, the work he had started; that he was the greatest novelist of all time and still they served him cold soup.

Then, after a minute of angry muttering, a pleasant thought occurred to him. His deep, melancholy eyes for a moment almost twinkled. He again took her arm, and led her in the direction he believed his hotel lay. It was nearly time to burn the day's mail.