



Scenes from the

Sugar Bowl Café



Alice Major

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BS Poetry Society
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Action locksmith

We've heard it all before —
tramped down like hackneyed
snow on a leftover day
in January, repetitious as coffee
in this unremarked café.

What can a poet say?
Trivial revelations. Life passes,
roots become important as you age.
You're forty and you know
you aren't going to live forever.

Across the way, "Action Locksmith"
puffs out smart new awnings
in white-on-burgundy. They list
the store's treasury of offerings:
Window bars. Safes. Cabinets.

And the cryptic "Mobile Service."
(Shouldn't locked-up things stay put?)
The café waiter puts a new tape in the deck —
unlocks a door. *Jacques Brel*. In retrospect
old seductions sift the air like smoke.

Tout un éternité d'amour. What can
a poet say that hasn't all been said before —
tamped-down dottle in a pipe that won't light.
Of course, no one smokes any more.
Times have changed.

Sun in the calm banality of mid-
winter, mid-afternoon, mid-life,
leans street-pole shadows against
the Action Locksmith canopy — casts
bars across the sign for "Entrance."

As though even getting in the store
shouldn't be too easy. By the door
a bus-stop bench endorses
"Herber's Vehicle Repairs."
(Everything runs down.) There

sits a woman of a certain age.
She smokes a cigarette, palm
held flat against her lips
like some old French chanteuse.
Her face mortally still. Nothing moves

except one foot, hanging from the knee
and jiggling vertically, like the foot
of a sewing machine. Reminds me suddenly
of Home Ec class. "Lock-stitch."
A finishing-off manoeuvre, in which

the needle punches up and down in place.
Three Asian girls wait nearby, shifting
foot-to-foot. The city's face is changing,
can't stay still. But that's not news.
It always has. Although we're not sure

what will come of it, how we feel.
The bus lunges up, sucks passengers
into its steamy lungs, leaves the sidewalk
empty. Except for the man hacking
at the packed-down snow with a steel

shovel, a rhythmic clang on concrete.
He shoves jagged cakes of allegory, myth,
symbol out onto the street.
What can a poet do, but pay for her coffee?
Action. Lock. Word. Smith.

Rent to own

We're moving on, on to the millennium.
And I'm back in this café, table-tourist
on a continental plate that's surging west
by inches. That's tectonic drift
for you. Hurry up and wait.

Across the street, the sign is new.
Chinese Smorg. Hey, we're nothing if not
multicultural. Next floor up, a queue
of "For Rent" placards lines the windows.
All this space we could fill up

like a coffee cup. Here in the cafe
banjo music perks along, harmonica
yipping like a puppy. *She'll be coming back,
coming back, coming back,
she'll be coming back soon.*

And I'm tapping my foot, feeling fine.
Outside, an oriental man pulls up,
struggles to fit his brown Impala
by a parking meter. Then looks for change
to rent this little space for a time.

He tosses quarters in his palm, like a
short-order cook flipping hash browns.
Didn't fill the meter full enough, so later
the parking cop strolls round, impales
a flag of paper on the windshield wiper.

Territorial rights re-staked. Across the street
on the *Rent-to-Own* store's sign,
half a maple leaf is soldered to the "R."
Looks like the logo of a certain party
with a right-wing stripe, a political star

rising. You could get depressed about it.
But tectonic plates keep moving. So gradual
you'd hardly notice it, but the slip-and-grip
hauls up mountains, makes continental
change. *Coming round the mountains*

when we come. The Rockies are west
from here a ways. Time sticks and slides along
the planetary crust. Wait here long
enough, and the earth's magnetic pole will
flip again, like it does every now and then

— a pancake on a griddle. Rocks
will lay down their magnetic track,
like opinions of a different stripe
on the ocean floor. *We'll be coming back,
coming back, coming back...*

Report a poacher

The instructions are mysterious at best.
"Report a Poacher." Bright red letters
on a panel van, Fish and Wildlife crest
stamped official on the door. The driver
wears a hunting vest, asks for café latte

and a sticky bun. So — what's to report
here on 124th Street?

No elk tethered to the parking meters.
No caribou or mule deer poking antlers
around the bike racks, or muskrat

slipping slick down the manhole cover
in the middle of the road. We're a long way
from forest. Hunting season's done
and anyway there's gun control
passed at last by Ottawa and all.

"Can I sit here?" Two girls size up
the Fish and Wildlife guy. He's
good looking and he knows it. Slides
in beside them, cocks the metal flap
on the sugar canister like a rifle.

One of the girls sits up, perked
like the straw in a soda, laughing
at the poacher's lines, looks like
she knows where the traps are laid.
The other looks annoyed.

Next table over, two more guys
are talking women. "They've been
boxing the hell out of me," says the one
with a river-gravel voice. "I roll over
in the morning and the other side

of the bed is empty and no one's
in the kitchen. I'm not going to fool
myself." He keeps reporting,
filling in the blanks. His friend pulls
at his moustache, shakes his head.

Crash goes crockery.

Everyone looks around to see a latte glass
upended on the floor, while the guy
from Fish and Wildlife is slapping at
his crotch like suddenly it's blackfly

season on the street. Coffee swirls
everywhere. The two girls
hand him soggy serviettes. "Gee,
I'm awfully sorry." The second smiles.
Report filed.

Channel switching

"Not everyone can channel,"
says a guy with a belly like a bowl
of popcorn, hair cropped to his skull,
beaming in on his café companion
like the remote control

on a VCR. "I've been doing it
since it was trans-corporeal
meditation. I was doing it before
it was New Age. I was
doing it back when it was

occult!" His black moustache
is a crescent pinned with the fat part
just below his nostrils, ends turned down.
Looks like it's cut from construction
paper, something unlikely pasted on.

"I was raised without a lot of dogma,"
he announces. Two men come in
followed by a dog with a red bandana
round its neck, the ends pointed
like little crimson ears.

The dog goes sniffing round the floor
with its delicately pointed muzzle.
A girl clicks her fingers, inviting it
to her table. It wanders over
to consider what's available.

"I've researched everything.
I did Mormonism. I did Catholic,
I did Hindu." His companion, sitting
dapper and elderly in a straw hat,
asks "What about Presbyterian?"

"No. Never Presbyterian."
He barely takes a breath. "I did
Judaism. Did the Nazarenes.
I did Buddhist." The dog returns
to flop beside its owner

who has a cup of cappuccino
and a keyring in his hand.
He wears a turquoise sweatshirt
that reads *Ikeda - Tokyo*.
Maybe some new brand

of VCR? The channel surfer
switches to the Pentecostals
like he's going to work his way
through all forty-seven channels
offered by the cable company.

A spiritual TV guide
with no mute button.
The dog gets bored, flattens
back its ears and yawns
a jaw-unhinging gawp, a squeal

like an audio system gone awry.
The owner sets his empty glass
on the table, looks absently
towards the floor and promises,
"We're going soon."

Market share

Breezy young man wears
capitalism like a business suit
bought ready-made, no alterations
necessary. "I'll have a latte
and my choice of square,"

he tells the baseball-capped boy
who minds the cappuccino
machine's snorting bull
market. Then hops a stool
to lecture a friend on

market theory and the need
for self interest. "People think greed
is something negative,"
he says passionately. "It's like,
it's like ..." he searches

for words with his right hand,
"... well, d'you ever read Ayn Rand?
I like her philosophy. Greed's
just that thing that makes
the market go round."

His cell phone chirrup
like a cheery broker. "How's it going?"
he replies, digging at his stool
like he's wearing stirrups
and it's trying to buck him off.

"No, I'm in a meeting."
He pauses between sips.
"Well, we haven't had a good
lawsuit in a long time." He flips
the phone into a vest pocket.

“Guess we’re being sued.”
Offhand, as if he’s ordering
a white chocolate Nanaimo bar.
“You’re not worried?” His friend
picks at icing bordering

his cinnamon roll, dough curled
around itself like ticker-tape.
“Nah,” he says. “I have no fear.
Ever since that Cheryl thing.
No fear!” As if “that Cheryl thing”

was a market correction.
Or a championship rodeo ride.
All you have to do is hang on
eight seconds and provide
the stock answers.

Better taxidermy

Traffic’s moving slow. Cars nudge
past the girl in an orange hard hat,
pony tail hanging lank below.
Her back’s to the café window
and criss-crossed in neon.

The construction crews are back
like beavers plugging up the damage
after winter. Eighty years ago
this road was just a cart track
north to aspen bush and clearings

scratched out for homesteads, then
on to muskeg country and the Peace.
Now it’s asphalt lined with pawn
shops, bus stops, Chinese restaurants,
and the furrier’s window

always announcing clearances.
Muskrat, beaver, fox fur coats
drastically reduced. Grinding up
the road, a grader scarifies
the asphalt’s skin. Behind it, drives

a truck unloading piles of bitumen,
black, steam-swollen droppings.
Impatient to get past, a blue sedan
switches lanes. Painted on its side,
in white, is “Better taxidermy.”

And the question naturally occurs
— better than what?
Imagine muskrats pondering
this question. Might as well get stuffed.
There’s not a big percentage in

winding up a hat. Wildlife
hasn't many options nowadays
with mechanical beasts turned loose
to make clearances and leave
habitat so drastically reduced.

Coin of the realm

"Nickels!" The girl with suspenders
and an Aussie drawl is tickled.
"That's so cute. You really
call them nickels." She slides
her handful of change freely

into the tip jar, cutely labelled
"For our counter intelligence."
Nickels lying on their little beaver
backs. There's something, well,
endearing about a country

where one coin's called a "loonie"
while its next-in-line big brother
is a "toonie." Like we've all
been drawn as characters
in furry ears by Warner Brothers.

Even beavers have a Disney
air — our founding rodent, naive
bucktoothed precursor of the Mounties.
Boy Scout respectability.
Beavers even stood for chastity —

compilers of old bestiaries
believed they had the habit
of biting off their testicles.
Surprising we had any left
to put on nickels.

Still, credit where it's due —
the beaver coined a basic
national characteristic:
the stubborn rebuilding
of dams. We keep trying

to hold back the inevitable
and keep our small pond separate.
We chew with animation,
not sure it does much good —
but it beats emasculation.

Food play

The cinnamon bun would feed
a large anthill for a year. I push
uneaten bits aside, turn a page
in the paper. From Saltbush
Flats a woman writes Anne Landers

about the waste of food in slapstick
comedy. Cream pies thrown around.
Comedians duelling with drumsticks.
“I don’t see why it’s funny,” she complains.
“It sets a bad example for the kids.”

Voices echo in my head. “*Don’t play
with your food.*” “*Think of all
those starving children in ...*” Bengal.
China. Africa. I’d contemplate
the unfair distribution system

that filled my plate with broccoli.
Now my bun rebukes me
with sticky plenitude. A wasp
blunders in the door. His thorax
is acid autumn yellow and jerks

like a dowsing rod as he crawls
along the window, seeking a way
past glass to the slapstick-blue sky.
Bees play with their food all the time,
I recall. They roll around roses

like kids in blankets. “Here.
Help yourself,” I silently invite
the hornet. Instead he crawls
across Anne Landers, his bright
back end stabbing emphasis:

*"Your eyes were bigger than
your stomach."* I feel my eyes
grow big as saucers, twice the size
of dinner plates. Think
the waitress must be staring.

I could finish it and feel my thighs
thicken. But now the food I eat
causes me so much more guilt
than the full plates I tilt
into the garbage can. At last

the waitress takes my plate away.
The wasp lifts off heavily,
swings in the air like Chaplin
on rollerskates, miraculously
finds the door back out.

Transit signs

The café window's steamy from the breath
of coffee pots, while Louis Armstrong gruffs
on the radio. The door lets in a draught
of ice and hot exhaust from vehicles
waiting for the amber light to telegraph

that things are on the move again.
A rusty pick-up across the road
brakes, hard, and its load
of cardboard cartons shakes
like a house of cards. While Louis sings,

*A man wants a chance
to find a loving wife
a chance to give his kids
a better life —
well hello, brother, hello.*

Only a generation past, trains
moved wives — loving or unloving —
out here to bare sidings
on the snowy prairie, where wagons
took them on to makeshift cabins.

Now panel vans flock and wheel
like automotive homing pigeons
banded in their owners' colours.
"All-West Plumbing" in white on teal.
"Classic Cabinets and Kitchens: Where

Service Comes First" — a blue crest rimmed
in red. And then a flat-deck towed behind
a four-by-four. On its long, bare platform
sits a kitchen stove, domesticity resigned
to constant, arbitrary relocation.

Retrograde motions

What goes around comes around. The woman clinking bracelets in the next booth dumps cliché in her conversation like packets of sugar substitute.

What goes around comes around way too fast, I think eying a magenta-printed poster pasted on the counter below the biscotti jar.

'80s *Retro Party*, it invites. *Costume prizes.* Whatever could I wear that's Eighties Retro? A decade that defied both style and substance. Besides,

I'm probably still wearing it. The cliché lady is wearing a purple tracksuit. Seventies Retro. "How long were you two together?" she asks delicately.

Three years, her companion groans deeply, raises her mug like an anchor. *There now*, she stirs soothingly *Time's a great healer.*

You'll see — You'll soon feel better. I wipe coffee circles from scarred melamine in front of me and think, Time wounds all heels.

Then wonder what my ex is wearing nowadays. Probably a condom. Round his neck. *Listen*, says the round-the-track-suit lady, *have you thought*

of getting your stars done? I had my stars read when Steve and I split up. Gave me a whole new perspective. Her friend

brightens up, re-energized by the paranormal. *No, but I had an angel reading done last Friday*, she replies. *This woman's really*

good. She saw my guardian angel. Dressed in lavender, wings and all. And she thinks he'll come back to me.

Angels yet! At least I know what I can wear to parties when Nineties Retro rolls around. Wings and a harp. *That's good.*

coos tracksuit lady. *Very good. But you should have your stars done too. Stars are more definitive.* She tugs velour-clad hips,

frowning, picks up the check.
I think of stars and recollect
that Vega will eventually become
the pole star twinkling
in 20,000 years,

to mark definitive north again
with the slow wobble
of earth's axis. Now and then,
my ex wobbles and sends out
cryptic coded signals

as if he'd like to raise
some old twinkle out of me.
What goes round comes around.
But 20,000 years would be
too damn soon.

Persephone on 124 Street

Winter gives up abruptly here, drops
like a penny through the torn crease
in a coat pocket. Not noticed,
as we all scamper for release
in the glinting scurry of the melting snow.

Water goes running down the street
to the languorous-but-lively beat
of Calypso tunes. *Down the way*
sways the CD in the coffee shop,
sun shines daily on the mountain top.

At the table by the window, sits a girl
with sunlight in her hair, a ragged nest
of straw spun suddenly to gold.
Her tee-shirt reads "six inch nails."
She clicks the coffee mug she holds

and hums along. Outside, pedestrians
limbo into summer. A heavy man
wears his jacket open, a tee-shirt
stretched across his bouncing stomach
like a beach-ball's striped skin.

Followed by a policeman, jacket
off entirely, letting the air go free.
The walkie-talkie riding at his hip
swings up and down, like the twitch
a hula dancer gives her grass skirt.

Then six young men go two by two,
like pallbearers in formation, except
it's not a coffin they have hoisted
on their denim shoulders, it's a green-
flowered sofa — a throne for the queen

of May, a chintz cortège. As they pass
one of the bearers turns to gaze
at the girl's hair shining through the glass.
She smiles and waves, and suddenly
gets up to go. She leaves the café

door open and lipstick on her cup.
It feels like summer's dancing up
from ritual darkness. All the nails
and manacles have popped loose
and we're the lucky ones who got away.



About the Author

Alice Major was born in the shipbuilding, whisky-distilling town of Dumbarton, Scotland. She came to Canada at the age of eight and grew up in Toronto, before moving west in 1979 to work as a newspaper reporter in Williams Lake, B.C. Today, she earns her living in Edmonton as a freelance writer specializing in (of all things) utility regulation.

Her first poetry collection, *Time Travels Light* was published in 1992 and her poetry has appeared in numerous literary magazines across the country. In 1996, she was a finalist in the long poem competition sponsored by *Stand* magazine, (one of Britain's foremost little magazines). She has a new collection forthcoming from Bayeux Arts Press, entitled *Lattice of the Years*.

Alice is a past president of the Writers' Guild of Alberta, chair of the Edmonton Arts Council's peer review jury for 1998-9 and vice-president of the League of Canadian Poets.

Canadian Poetry Association

The Canadian Poetry Association was founded in 1985 to promote all aspects of the writing, reading, publishing, purchasing, performing and preservation of poetry in Canada. *Poemata*, the lifeline of the CPA, features news articles, chapter reports, poetry by new members, book reviews, markets information, announcements and more. The CPA also coordinates members' poetry anthologies as well as other publications and activities.

The Canadian Poetry Association promotes the creation of local chapters everywhere in Canada. Local chapters often organize readings, workshops, publishing projects, readings and other poetry-related events. CPA Chapters currently are in Guelph, Hamilton, London, Fredericton, Parry Sound, Toronto, York Region, Moncton and Sarnia. CPA London also maintains a website: <http://www.mirror.org/groups/cpa> and listserv <cpa@wwdc.com>.

In 1996, the CPA inaugurated the CPA Shaunt Basmajian Chapbook Award, the Canadian Poetry Association Poetry Series, the Canadian Poetry Association Award for Contributions to Poetry, and Canadian Poetry Association Life Memberships.

Join the Canadian Poetry Association

Membership in the CPA is based upon the calendar year (1 January to 31 December) and includes a subscription to *Poemata* magazine. Local chapters may have their own membership requirements and/or additional fees. You don't even have to be a poet to join. Publishers, schools, libraries, booksellers, and other friends of poetry are most welcome! Regular membership \$30. Seniors and students \$20.

For a membership form, or to join, please write to:

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This annual award honours Shaunt Basmajian, poet, publisher, and founding member of the Canadian Poetry Association.

**Prize: \$100, publication of the winning manuscript
+ 50 copies of the published chapbook.**

1. Entry should be a manuscript of poems up to 24 pages in length.
2. Poems may be published (other than in chapbook or book form) or unpublished, and may be in any style or tradition, including concrete poetry and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry.
3. Manuscripts must be typed single-spaced. The title, but not the author's name, should appear on each sequentially numbered page of the manuscript. A separate sheet should give the manuscript title and the author's name, address and telephone number.
4. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable.
5. Copyright will remain with the author.
6. All entries will be returned after the winning chapbook is published if an appropriate SASE is enclosed.
7. The winning manuscript will be published as a chapbook in the Canadian Poetry Association Shaunt Basmajian Chapbook Award Series.
8. The author of the winning manuscript will receive 50 copies of the resulting chapbook, plus \$100 (Canadian) cash prize.
9. All entrants will receive a copy of the winning chapbook.
10. Judging will be by a CPA committee of three.
11. Entry fee is \$15, by cheque payable to the Canadian Poetry Association.
12. Annual deadline: Entries must be postmarked by March 31.

Send entries to:

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Canadian Poetry Association
Box 22571 St George PO
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BS Poetry Society

The BS Poetry Society is an incorporated not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing and supporting opportunities for the literary arts, especially for new writers, and for all aspects of poetry in the Maritime Provinces. Since 1986, this has seen them host workshops, poetry sweatshops, poetry competitions, and author readings throughout the Maritimes — often in cooperation with other regional and national arts and writers' organizations.

BS Poetry Society has also published periodicals, including *BSPS Journal* (later called *Poetry Halifax Dartmouth*), and several member-generated book and chapbook projects.

BS Poetry Society is recognized as the autonomous Fredericton Chapter of the Canadian Poetry Association. The CPA promotes all aspects of writing, reading, publishing and preservation of poetry in Canada. Currently, the main activities of BSPS are the weekly Ashes, Paper & Beans: Fredericton's Poetry & Writing Show on CHSR 97.9 FM and the River Readings author series.

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Scenes from the Sugar Bowl Café is social satire. These narrative poems poke fun at the myths and apparatus we adopt in a northern Canadian city, not that far from wilderness at the tail end of the millennium. They set the local in front of the global — fish and wildlife officers ordering lattes, Persephone coming back from a northern Alberta winter.

“Alice Major is one of the most gifted and imaginative people’s poets in Canada. As a poet, I marvel at her talent. As an editor I feel privileged to have published her.”
— Ted Plantos

“In *Time Travels Light*, Major explores the nature of time and memory, and examines the various transformations that occur in the lives of individuals and families with humour, feeling and depth. Her images are precise and memorable.”
— *Calgary Herald*

“With deceptive simplicity, Major aligns herself with the elements. She manages to call up electromagnetism, Fibonacci numbers, relativity, and entangle them in our day to day world, recasting much of ordinary experience at a mythological level.”
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