

Gerald Hill

## One Night Poems Fell

from the pressbox of Northlands Coliseum  
to the ice surface. One of the linesmen,  
true to his name, read  
the lines, blew his whistle,  
signalled with his arms.

One poem settled in the penalty box,  
stayed there for the rest of the game,  
wouldn't come out, an innocent poem  
that never did anything wrong.

A poem slipped under the door  
of the Oilers' dressing room,  
sucked an orange with the boys.  
Pinned up next to the photo  
of the '84 champions the poem  
terrifies visiting teams  
who fear tradition and what  
the poem might mean.

One of the wilder poems  
deflected off the glass  
into the crowd, cut  
the side of a young boy's head.  
He cried. They gave him  
the poem as a souvenir.

A few of the harder poems  
scored on Curtis Joseph  
high to the glove side.  
Joseph read them  
disgustedly, squirted  
his face with Gatorade, spat.

One poem jostled the opposition goon  
who swore, dropped his gloves  
but refused to read.  
His mother never wanted to raise a goon,  
can't bear to watch him get hurt.  
She'd love to see her boy  
in the corner with a poem.

A couple of poems were sucked outside  
and settled on Gretzky's statue.  
He carries not the Stanley Cup but poems  
above his head. You can trade the man  
but the poems stay.

A poem slipped into  
one of the coach's notebooks.  
When he spoke to his players  
they skated so freely up the wing,  
passed gently but hit hard.

A single poem  
fell to centre ice, face up,  
froze there. When the players  
face off they struggle for possession  
of a tiny black word.  
Again and again they hunch  
over to read.

Most of the poems  
fell like inserts into programs. *What's this?* people said,  
*a poem?* and they read until  
the first intermission.

Is anything as silent  
as 17,000 people reading poems?

Joanne Merriam

## Vignette from Quebec Major Juniors

A perfect desire  
rises from the crowd, a heartbeat  
pounding home-team! home-team!

Some expressive beauty (not  
like a well-turned banister  
is beautiful nor like you, my love,  
are beautiful, but beautiful with the fury  
of nature's chlorophyll dynamos)  
comes over them,  
awestruck by the terrible perfection  
of the rink with its beveled edges and ice  
smooth as half-sucked lozenges,  
the goalies staking out territory with huge  
casual parabolas, and one of their own  
gets by the giant on the visiting team  
and HE SHOOTS HE SCORES  
a roar rising

or the occasional explosion of violence,  
into which the audience, beautiful,  
thrusts itself

two guys (who you just know are  
the types mothers trust their daughters with  
foolishly)

say YOU WANNA GO?

And YEAH. YOU WANNA GO?

gleefully throw down helmet, gloves, sticks

and go

until the final uppercut

when the crowd surges up, gorgeous.

Their mouths say O

Bob Wakulich

## Hockey Games and Naked Ladies

Standing on the icy sidewalk, Crank could see light bleeding from the edges of Harvey's bay window curtains. He had tried to call twice, letting the phone ring a total of twenty-seven times.

He pressed a thick mitten to the stairwell door and pushed. A resident mouse ran for cover and a bare light bulb hanging from a cord at the top of the stairs began to sway, pulling shadows back and forth.

The staircase squealed and creaked with every mukluk step, Crank appearing as a green mass of moving parka with a steaming breath. At the landing, he saw a note taped to the light's pull chain: "GO AWAY." He pounded on the door.

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Harvey sat in cross-legged bliss on a beanbag chair, a set of high-tech headphones drowning out reality. The floor had been shaking a little, but he'd shrugged this off to another low-flying plane waiting to land at the airport. This assumption had to be discounted when he glanced across the room and saw the corner of a plastic card wriggling its way up to the lock.

As he reached over to shut off the tape deck, the card found its mark and the door flew open, the chain-lock assembly breaking away from the door frame. Harvey's headphones pulled themselves off as he instinctively dove for the rug. Above him, a pile of library books toppled, showering down from the desktop. A rush of cold air wafted across his back.

He slowly looked over his right shoulder and saw a clump of black beard protruding from a faded green hood. “Get that skinny ass of yours in gear, Harvey! The hockey game’s on!”

“For chrissakes, Crank...”

“Time’s a-wasting, son!” Crank imposed himself on the room, a weighty boot coming down squarely on a pair of stray granola bars. “Playoffs, man! Seventh game of the quarter-finals!” He raised his mittens. “Goddamn game of the century!”

“So?”

He lowered his arms. “Can you spot me a twenty ‘til Monday?”

“Jesus.” Harvey sat up amongst the fallen texts and pointed at the stairwell light. “Can’t you read?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Come on, let’s go!” Crank slapped his mittens together. “Get on your galoshes, son. We’re going to *The Plaza*.”

“I’m busy, Crank. It’s freezing outside. I can’t.”

“Sure you can! A big, strong college boy like you, hey, no problem! Why watch midgets when *The Plaza* has a six-foot screen? It’s a goddamn wonder of modern times!”

Harvey looked down at his scattered reference books, dislodged bookmarks and scribbled notes. “So what? Why the hell do I...” He caught sight of something red, his ski-jacket in mid-flight. It draped itself over his head. He pulled it away with a jerk. He watched as Crank pushed through the room, turning off the kitchen light, shutting off the amplifier, bits of snow dropping from his boots. “I can’t go, Crank. I’ve gotta do an essay.”

Crank stopped and put his mittens on what were probably his hips. “Like hell. Essays’ve got nothing to do with anything.” He glanced over at the tape deck. “Seems to me you were taking a break anyway.”

“I...” Harvey lowered his head. It was possible to talk Crank out of these things sometimes, settle him on the couch and let him cheer while furtive attempts were made to get some work done, but the bloody TV was on the fritz and there was absolutely no liquor on hand.

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Harvey settled into the passenger seat of Crank’s aging Toyota and tried to wring the cold from his hands. “So what’s so great about The Plaza these days?”

“Strippers pulling gee-strings.” Crank revved a little more life into his engine. “Shipping ‘em in from the States somewhere.” He put his defroster on high, put his car into gear and pulled out, the rear wheels spinning on the snow-packed road. “They’ve got a short blonde with incredible thighs. She grabs her ankles and reels back on a bearskin rug.” Crank flipped back his hood and looked over for a reaction. Harvey tugged at a sideburn and cast a wary eye at some sloppily-parked cars.

The *Toyota* began to slide, its rear wheels suddenly deciding to try to take the lead. Crank gave the steering wheel an abrupt half-turn. “There’s a harem girl, and a jungle Amazon. Quality stuff.”

Harvey grabbed at his armrest and sat quietly. Near-wipeouts had become an expected minor irritation in the whole of Crank’s winter driving style. When the car straightened out, Crank smiled and squirmed in his seat. Harvey crossed his arms and sighed. “What’s all this crap about naked ladies? What about the hockey game?”

“You can’t watch hockey all the time. If you quit looking up references once in a while, maybe you’d find out about these... Oh, Christ!”

As the *Toyota* slid sideways through a four-way stop, Harvey closed his eyes and wondered briefly about fate and divine intervention.

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The red carpet in the lobby of *The Plaza Hotel* was starting to show traces of its underweave. A thin, shriveled woman was perched on a stool behind the registration desk with her nose dipped into a copy of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Mystery Magazine*. Crank pulled off his mittens and threw her a salute, and she gave them a tight-lipped smile as they headed for the *Casanova Lounge*. “Somebody told me that she watches for cops,” Crank muttered, unzipping his parka. “Pushes a button or something.”

The bar was still only dotted with patrons, but Harvey heard a loud, obnoxious and familiar laugh through the half-darkness from somewhere near the back. “Jeez Crank, I think that’s my prof.”

Crank smiled. “All yer basic hoi-polloi.”

“The one I’m doing the essay for. He gave me an extension.”

“Well, I guess we won’t be joining THAT table.” Crank surveyed the room, a lop-sided ell-space with the bar counter running along the wall beside them. The stage and the giant TV screen were in the far corner. Harvey peered through the dim lighting, shadows and pockets of cigarette smoke, taking note of the waitresses and their high-cleavage German barmaid attire. “Perfect!” said Crank. “Front row centre!”

Within five minutes, they were settled in at a table near the stage working on two jugs of pale ale. The room swelled

with waves of students in team jerseys, war veterans sporting their parade berets and honest working men slapping the backs of each other's company shirts. Harvey downed a glass of draught, unable to shake a pervasive ooga-booga feeling. "Who's playing, Crank?"

"The LEAFS, man. The Leafs."

"The Leafs and who?"

Crank stared at the blank TV screen. "The Islanders." He shook his head. "Just yell for the blue guys, okay?"

"Hey, Johnny!" someone yelled. "Take it off, Johnny! Take it off my tab!" Yelling and catcalls continued as a short man in classy casuals walked to centre stage and adjusted his bolo. He signalled for quiet. "I guess you're all ready!" The yelling surged. "The girls are ready too!" The crowd noise dipped. "They'll be dancing between periods and after the game." The room had almost fallen silent. "We'll be turning on the game in just a minute. Enjoy."

There were various reactions to this arrangement, but Crank seemed to speak for the majority. "Those intermission guys can really be morons sometimes anyway." He poured out another draught. "Yeah, and that idiot with his replays." He squeaked his voice. "There now, you see how he shoots that puck? He gets it right on his stick and he shoots it right in. Let's see that again. Back it up here. See there? It's right on his STICK. See that?"

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The opening period proved to be a rough and tumble affair, much to the delight of those in attendance. A pushing match started in the first minute of play, and the game was barely seven minutes old when both benches cleared for a major slugfest. Harvey offered some color commentary. "Looks like a dance marathon."

Crank slapped the table when one of the linesmen fell down. “All right!” He signalled for another two jugs. There were lots of booming bodychecks and a number of pas-de-deux’s, but it was still a scoreless tie after twenty minutes.

A chorus of moans rose when the screen went white, but wolf whistles filtered through when the short blonde dancer bubbled onto the stage. Ragtime music bellowed out from woofers and tweeters as she unrolled a fake fur rug, peeled away a flimsy negligee and began her session. The crowd applauded and cheered as she jiggled and jostled away her gee-string. Harvey spilled some beer into his lap. The crowd yelled out for more.

In what turned out to be the finale, she went into her standard backreel. Crank pointed and squeaked his voice again. “See the way she moves her ankles there? Let’s see that again. Take that back. There, see those ANKLES?”

When the music stopped, there was a burst of applause as the blonde stood up, bowed and started to gather her props. The TV came back on just as the puck was being dropped at centre ice, and the patrons cheered the perfect timing.

Both teams started out the second period short-handed, which seemed to put a damper on the dropping of gloves. When the Islanders scored, many in the room were certain that it was offside, and when they scored again a minute later, the major complaint was a high stick. Crank took a large swallow from his glass. “Goddamn Leafs. I got five bucks on this.”

“That dancer was great.” Harvey’s look was distant.

“The what?”

The Leafs scored on a deflection from the point. All the heads in the room rose half a foot. Crank began to pound the tabletop, and others joined in.

The Leafs were still behind when the period ended. Patrons piled into the lounge washroom and the waitresses were backlogged with requests. There was sitar music coming from the woofers and tweeters as the second stripper busied herself with an economy version of The Dance of a Thousand Veils.

Crank, an old hand at bypassing restroom traffic tie-ups, headed for the hotel tavern facility. Harvey had already taken a break during the period, and he happily counted scarves until he heard a familiar voice moving towards him. “Down in front! I can’t see the dancer!”

Before long, the inebriated but scholarly presence of Doctor Mitchell was leaning heavily into his table. “Excuse me.” He was a little shaky and out of breath. “Do you mind if I sit here for a minute? All these people insist on standing up to discuss power plays. Is it all right if I...”

Harvey turned, and the two exchanged pie-eyed stares. “How are you, Professor?”

Doctor Mitchell eased into Crank’s chair. “I’d be fine if I could see. Terrible planning.” He watched a scarf fall to the stage. “Tell me something, Dadich.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“Do you always get snowstorms in late April here? I thought things were bad enough in Oregon.”

“We get a big storm every year. Sometimes we get a hailstorm in June, too.”

“Horrible business. You’d think it would keep these people at home.”

“It’s the hockey game, sir.”

“Ah, yes.” Another scarf fell. “It’s almost like the Romans, you know. The Christians and the lions, the coliseums.”

“Yes sir.”

“Are you cheering for anyone, Dadich?”

Another scarf. “Pardon, sir?”

Doctor Mitchell stood up. “The hockey game, man. Which team are you yelling at?”

“Oh, the Leafs, sir. The blue guys.”

“Yes, I’ll try that.” He looked at the dancer. “See if you can get me a scarf, Dadich. I really should get back.” Doctor Mitchell swayed a little, squeezed between two tables and tottered away.

The third period was two minutes old when the TV came back on. No one had scored, but a fight had just ended and two players were shown heading for their dressing rooms. The crowd yelled in disapproval. Someone at the back told everyone to SHUTTUP. A spotlight came on behind the bar. A policeman walked in.

When the Leafs tucked in the tying goal on a drop pass, Harvey had to duck to avoid a number of flailing arms. The policeman left. The spotlight went off.

As the period wore on, Harvey noticed that more and more patrons took on glassy-eyed stares. Even Crank had drifted away, his attention nailed to the screen, his hand holding tight on his draught glass, which Harvey refilled whenever he topped off his own.

With five seconds left in the game, the Islanders drew a penalty for interference, which prompted a face-off in their defensive zone. The Leafs pulled their goaltender and a great many patrons wrung their hands.

A shot from the point bounced off the Islander goalie and bounced around crazily in front of the net. Everybody in the room stood up.

Players were poking, prodding, falling. People at the back of the bar began to wail. “Come on! Come ON!” yelled Crank.

An Islander defenseman fell on the puck like a soldier trying to smother a live grenade. The horn sounded and the patrons collectively sunk back into their seats. Someone called for a penalty shot. Crank mopped some sweat away from his forehead and waved for the waitress. “Whoa! Well, I always did like Sudden Death.”

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Halfway through a beer commercial, the screen went white and Johnny reappeared on stage. “We’re gonna have another girl on in just a minute, folks.”

Crank, his glass raised to his lips, froze. “What?”

“As soon as she’s done her thing, we’ll get back to the game, okay?” A long, melodic raspberry resounded throughout the room.

Harvey could see scowls forming on a number of faces, including Crank’s. “This woman dances forever. She’s gonna dance right into the overtime. We’re gonna miss it.”

“Maybe she’ll do a short set,” said Harvey.

“Like hell. It takes her ten minutes to set up.”

It was at least another three minutes before the dancer appeared and began to arrange a collection of large stuffed animals on the stage to the beat of drums. She feigned attacks from a few of them. Some patrons laughed, while others looked at their watches.

When the menagerie had been arranged just so, she started to move and gyrate around them, dancing through the first few minutes in a relative calm, slowly stripping away pieces of loincloth. “Hurry it up!” someone yelled. There was laughter, and the room began to fill with heckles.

The dancer looked perplexed, but kept on, carefully and tantalizingly pulling away each piece. She managed to raise a few cheers when she picked up a chrome rod and did a mock limbo, but when she finally pulled away the last slice of loincloth and raised her arms, someone yelled, “Okay! Back to the game already!”

The dancer went down on her hands and knees and did a pelvic tilt in time with the beat. She caught sight of Crank staring at her in an apparent trance. She leaned way over and blew him a kiss.

Crank flapped his hand. “Go dance outside!” The yelling and heckles became a frenzied drone.

Crank slammed his draught glass on the table. “That guy is dumber than a sack of hoe handles!” He stood up and stomped towards Johnny. Harvey could see the dancer’s look of confusion growing. He sighed.

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Crank leaned over the bar. Johnny straightened his bolo. They both showed off their best phony smiles. “Maybe you should give the people what they want, pal.”

“We pay the girls to dance,” said Johnny, “and that’s what they’re going to do. If you don’t like it, go someplace else.”

“I really don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation, friend.” Crank pointed at the ceiling. “You don’t want to end up with a lounge under the stars, do you?”

Johnny straightened his bolo again. “It’s my place, my TV. We pay the girls to dance.” A couple of draught glasses broke against a wall. Crank continued to point.

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The jungle drums stopped with the dancer in mid-thrust. The room exploded in applause, which continued until the screen lit up to reveal the teams shaking hands at centre ice.

The dancer, feeling exposed by the lack of music, grabbed at pieces of loincloth and tried to cover up. “You people are sick!” she yelled.

The patrons remained silent as they sat and watched the replay. The dancer continued to yell. “You bunch of hicks!”

“Let’s see that again now.”

“You ignorant bastards!”

“He just let it go from the blue line there.”

“What kind of men are you?”

“You kids out there, see that?”

Crank came back to the table and grabbed his parka. “Let’s go someplace else, Harvey. ANYplace else.” The dancer was still yelling, but stopped when Crank looked up and pointed at her. “Don’t you understand? You are a pleasant DIVERSION, lady! A DIVERSION! That’s all! THAT,” he said, pointing to the screen, “that is a VOCATION!”

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The following Monday afternoon, Harvey handed Doctor Mitchell an essay about societal influences on contemporary communication policies. It included a section of loosely-related field research. The paper was wrapped in a white silk scarf.