

Literary page

Ratios

by Neil Scotten

Another tile had fallen off. It lay face downward in the middle of the bath surrounded by a sprinkle of plaster. Mike picked it up, dropped it, metal tile against metal bath, then placed it with the others in a shaded corner under the sink. There were at least five shady places in his bedsit where he would hide the fallen tiles. It made it look better. He would spread the shabby metal squares amongst them following a strict mathematical principle.

He sat down on the good end of the sofa. The curtains blew out from the half open window, a car revved then sighed down to a tickover with a rattle. Loose timing chain. Mike began to think about ratios. Could the capitulation of the tiles to gravity tell him what day it was? One had fallen off on Wednesday just as he was putting the final touches to Henry VIII. It was a 1/9 scale plastic construction kit and the reverse of the box had demanded that the figure be painted in a colour scheme dominated by ivy-leaf green and primrose yellow. The green had run out first then the white, so the King had been uprooted into the 1960s and now sported an orange tunic trimmed with psychedelic purple and pink ermine. Through mis-painted eyes Henry glowered at Mike.

...disturbing drawings of tortured faces executed in black ink.

A few days previous to this he had returned late and found two new gaps of empty wall in the bathroom. Was it the Sunday he had gone to the woods for spiritual nourishment and spent the day dodging glue sniffers, their heads in supermarket bags, or the day before when he had challenged intergalactic warriors in the amusement arcade and lost twelve pounds? Mike couldn't remember. Anyway that time he had found an upside-down black beetle beneath the pink bathroom mat and flushed it down the toilet. He had felt bad about it afterwards. The ratio worked out at a tile every three days. If it was Saturday today then the next avalanche was due on Tuesday. He would be out then, folding pages for "Shriek" the radical magazine he was involved with. Mike compared his toothpaste ratio, a large size tube every six weeks. The tiles were the more reliable timekeeper.

Distant then nearer came the roar of a train passing, the sound blown by the wind. Beneath Mike's window the car

idled. Big end knock or a burnt out valve. Most people living on his road had daytime jobs. There was little activity for a Saturday. He discarded his ratio and decided that today was probably Friday. Henry stared lopsidedly. Mike regarded his creation and thought of fat owls.

The overpowering smell in the room reminded him of his half-eaten food. He left the sofa and looked at his plate: super-cod steaklets, tinned new potatoes and marrowfat peas. One steaklet for three potatoes. Dye from the peas had collected in a reservoir, the remaining steaklet acting as the dam wall. The sofa twanged musically. Mike hesitated then ate.

When he was through a cairn of anaemic peas lay on the side of his plate. He flattened them out and pressed them into a neat triangle, covering them with a parallel knife and fork. Just like kindergarten. A vision of Mrs Blick, the formidable dinner supervisor at primary school, flitted into his mind. Mike remembered how when he was five she had walked up and down the lines of tables shouting "eat!" to the terrified children. He had tried everything at that time, spreading the food around the plate so it looked like he had eaten some of it, throwing it on the floor, putting it in his pocket. Hiding it beneath the knife and fork had been the best tactic though. One day Mrs Blick had stood behind and forced him to eat red cabbage salad. He had been sick all over the yellow table and since then the thought of red cabbage had made him inwardly tremble.

He put his messy plate on the bare patch of the red and purple paisley carpet. The payphone downstairs began to ring. Mike and Henry looked at the door listlessly. Neither moved. Approaching footsteps thudded on the stairs and both listened for the loud creak of the top stair where the carpet had worn through. Simultaneously a peremptory hand hammered on their door and an irritated voice shouted "phone!". Mike raised himself from the rickety table, dunking his toes in cod grease and pea dye. "Bugger it!".

Downstairs he picked up the phone. It was Jenny. He had met her at the "Shriek" office where she did artwork, disturbing drawings of tortured faces executed in black ink. Mike admired her yoghurt pallour which concentrated the impact of her intense, ivy-leaf green eyes. He remembered the yellow button earrings he had stolen for her and the colours made him think of Henry, now alone in his room perched on the dresser. A while ago he had serviced Jenny's car, an ageing black Ford. Mike thought of her as his girlfriend. It made him feel better.

"Hello, it's me. Hello? What've you been up to?"



"Nothing much. Mucking about," Mike said.

A train was on the line. Noisy earpiece. Rearrange carbon crystals. He banged the receiver on the wall and the train stopped.

"-ike? -ill there?"

He thought about the previous time they had met, six tiles ago. The line became clear and Jenny talked. They had been to a one-day festival of anarchist films and missed the last train back. Curled up together on the railway platform Mike had felt awkward, he admired this girl but somehow not in that way. The outing had been a failure.

She told him about Rik the new editor of "Shriek" and how he was going to make her his personal assistant. Mike listened. A buzzing had started in his head. A car drove past. Transmission whine. Limited

slip differential 22:12.

"You spend too much time on your own, do you know that Mike? If you don't get a proper job again you'll forget how to meet people and become eccentric. You're weird enough already."

Jenny talked on. The buzzing got louder.

"Goodbye"

"Bye".

He returned to his room, the smell had subsided. Mike had forgotten to ask her what day it was. Henry regarded him from the dresser with pop-eyed psychedelic regality. Six wives, 6:1. Mike arranged himself in his unmade bed and reached for the plastic construction kit catalogue underneath. Who could he create next? What would William the Conqueror look like with purple chain mail and a primrose yellow sword?

FM 88 CJSR Weekly playlist

#584 WEEK ENDING NOVEMBER 2, 1988

THIS LAST WEEKS WEEK WEEK ON

CC = Canadian Content

| | | | |
|----|----|---|--|
| 1 | - | 1 | Pursuit of Happiness — Love Junk — Chrysalis/MCA/CC |
| 2 | 3 | 3 | Richard Thompson — Amnesia — Capitol |
| 3 | 1 | 3 | Sarah McLachlan — Touch — Nettwerk/Capitol/CC |
| 4 | 8 | 3 | Jim Serediak — On Nature's Edge — Forest Choir/CC |
| 5 | - | 1 | Charlie Parker — Bird (OST) — |
| 6 | 6 | 6 | Jennifer Berezan — In the Eye of the Storm — Sealed With a Kiss/CC |
| 7 | 2 | 3 | Skinny Puppy — Vivisect VI — Nettwerk/Capitol/CC |
| 8 | 9 | 2 | Was Not Was — What Up Dog? — Fontana/Polygram |
| 9 | 10 | 5 | Randy Newman — Land of Dreams — Reprise/WEA |
| 10 | 5 | 4 | Joe Hall & the Drift — Direct to Delete — Locomotive/CC |
| 11 | 15 | 2 | Don D.T. Thompson — Bluesprint — Top Hat & Tails/CC |
| 12 | 4 | 3 | Feelies — Only Life — A&M |
| 13 | 20 | 3 | William Ackerman — Imaginary Roads — Windham Hill/A&M |
| 14 | 19 | 3 | Michael Brecker — Don't Try This at Home — Impulse/MCA |
| 15 | - | 1 | Unit E — One World — Mole/CC |
| 16 | 14 | 3 | Smiths — Rank — Sire/WEA |
| 17 | - | 1 | Chesterfields — Crocodile Tears — Household/Carrel/U.K. |
| 18 | 28 | 4 | Ofra Haza — Shaday — Teldec/WEA |
| 19 | 17 | 2 | Various Artists — A Winter's Solstice II — Windham Hill/A&M |
| 20 | 7 | 4 | Beatnigs — Self-titled — Alternative Tentacles/U.S. |

EPs

| | | | |
|----|----|---|--|
| 1 | 3 | 4 | Rin Tin Tin — Give Meech a Chance — Independent/CC |
| 2 | 6 | 5 | This Fear — Custom 500 — Independent/CC |
| 3 | 10 | 2 | Color Nine — One Color Grey — Ind./CC |
| 4 | - | 1 | Wickerman — Frightened — Ind./CC |
| 5 | 1 | 4 | Just Norman — Burt Convey — Ind./CC |
| 6 | 5 | 2 | Big Audio Dynamite — Just Play Music — Columbia |
| 7 | 7 | 3 | Bruce Springsteen — Chimes of Freedom (EP) — Columbia |
| 8 | 9 | 2 | Against the Grain — Eternal Holiday — Ind./CC |
| 9 | 8 | 4 | Argument Club — Long Death of the Emperor's Wife — Ind./CC |
| 10 | 4 | 4 | Sun Gods — Hail the Yellow Sun Man — Ind./CC |

