

# ALBERTA

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*Edited by Aritha van Herk*

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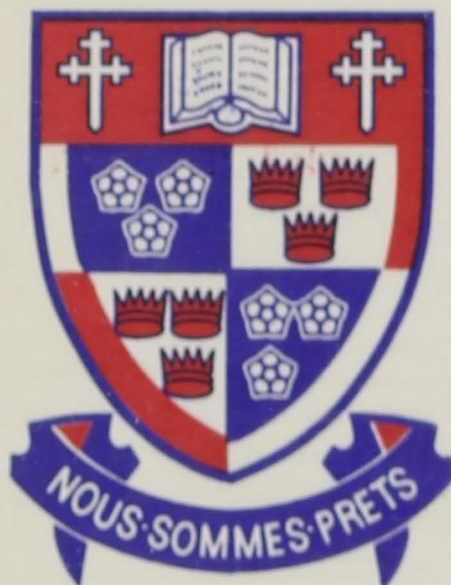
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ALBERTA

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REBOUND

Thirty More Stories by Alberta Writers

Edited by Aritha van Herk

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## All The Trimmings

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FRED WAH

You never taught me how, but I remember your frown, particularly that, your frown, whenever you confronted something new in your world, like our basement, how to move around the furnace, or a gun, how to aim it, or logging, say, how Lucky Doi's caulk boots sound on the running board of his deep-green Fargo pickup, or, better still, your scowl of incredulity at how to gulp quickly Granny Erickson's christmas pickled herring while her beak-nosed challenge sat in the kitchen chair opposite your dark bird-eyed defiance (oof dah) or when Betty Goodman ordered stewed oysters for lunch and you got me to wait on her while you went to the can and puked, all those puzzled moments in the new world when your brown brow squinched up while you translated vectors or politesse or measurement or celebration or strange foods or weird Europeans or, through gold-rimmed reading glasses, the day's page one world wars page two Baker Street page five sports *Nelson Daily News* spread out over the gray formica table top in the back booth of the Diamond Grill, all these moments nothing but your river of truth, fiction, and history, nothing but the long nights of a Chinese winter waiting for the promised



new/old world of mothers fathers brothers sisters, river of ocean, river of impossible passing, too large and formidable even later spinning your days out under Elephant Mountain such encounters with possibility criss-crossed on your forehead, indeed, your whole body wired taut for daily brushes with what, the foreign, that jailed Juan de Fuca immigrant in your eyes as you looked, now look out to the sea this sentence makes, puzzled, cryptic, wild, bewildered, exed and perplexed thought so far away and other, but then your lower lip bites up and under your teeth, hands, fingers, eyes, laughing, how, to . . .

But then you by now, like everyone else in town, we've all, walked past the sign in the window of the Club Cafe—

SPECIAL CHRISTMAS DINNER

\$1.50

ALL THE TRIMMINGS

—the same christmas dinner Sammy Wong has cooked every year since he bought the Club in 1938 from his cousin who went back to China to find a girl. Sammy didn't. Never bought or brought a wife. Only girls he knows are his waitresses and Edna has been there the longest; she's a steam-boat and makes sure Sammy keeps the place tip top. She pretty much runs the front of the cafe. So, even the sign, she probably made that, a few sprigs of holly coloured with a green wax crayon and "All the Trimmings" in red, sits now getting stained from the condensation running down the window in the heated steamy and smoky cafe. The only thing Edna doesn't like about his christmas dinner, and she tells him, too, is that special cranberry sauce he makes every year, "you're not gonna make that again, it's too tart, the jellied canned stuff is nicer, sweeter, darker." Sammy just glares at her from over the stove. He

thinks, tart? "All time I make this—what's a matter with you?"

Just across the street the New Grand Hotel has a sprayed-icing window stenciled in with "Season's Greetings." Their dining room will be closed christmas day but for New Year's eve the hotel is holding a gala banquet and dance. For this, hotel magnate Dominic Rissuti, the cigar-smoking rotund president of the Columbo Lodge and local nickel mafiosi, has hired the Melodaires who do mostly popular songs like "Mocking Bird Hill" (their saxaphonist, Lefty Black, has swooned a lot of the town's women with his lilting rendition of "Deep Purple"). For \$8 a couple you get a sit-down dinner with a choice of ham, roast beef, or grilled salmon steak, a bar that opens at six-thirty (drinks 3 for \$1), noisemakers, and a glass of special punch to welcome in the new year. All this come-on appears on a big display ad that has bubbles rolling out of glasses on page two of the *Nelson Daily News*. The only problem Rissuti has run into is getting a liquor license because New Year's eve falls on a Sunday this year. In Al's Barber Shop next door he complains to some of the guys, "That goddamned police chief says he won't sign the license. What do I gotta do? Go to the mayor?"

Eadie Petrella, the owner of the Shamrock Grill (gauze curtains, no juke box), never could figure out how Lok Pon managed to get his turkey so moist (fifteen years cooking in logging camps) but what he remembers is that first christmas he worked for her she came into the kitchen and watched over him all morning garumphing around while he filled and trussed and basted, no smile, no talk, particularly the no talk, she usually goes non-stop, at least in the kitchen to the waitresses, always babbling something he can't understand anyway, so now, after six years of



cooking at the Shamrock, he watches her cocked over his stove testing his gravy, smacking her lips, eyeing the three birds he's cooked racked over the warming oven, and her eyes pinch slightly with an mmm (he knows it's good) and she turns away with a haughty "Better get those brussel sprouts started" not to him but to his half-wit helper and dishwasher so he's left standing there by the steam table with lots to do yet and curses her under his breath—"You mucka high."

Except, by the time the holidays are over we've all, even at the Diamond Grill where the plum puddings with rum and maple sauce continue in high demand, we've had enough of turkey and ham and stuffing and mashed potatoes and know that the real gung hay fa choy Chinese New Year's celebration sometime in January will bring on the Diamond's legendary Chinese banquet with local high muck-a-mucks like the mayor, a few aldermen, the police chief and fire chief, steadies like the early-morning pensioners and CPR shift workers and cab drivers, even the waitresses set places for their husbands or boyfriends in the booths disguised now with white tablecloths and dishes of quarters wrapped in red wrapping paper and lichee nuts, both chopsticks and cutlery, bottles of scotch and rye, this once-a-year feast tops the whole season as far as I'm concerned starting even with birds-nest soup and then the dishes come too fast, barbeque pork, chicken and almond chop suey (incredible washed down with Canada Dry gingerale), beef and green pepper, snow peas, fried rice, steamed rice, deep fried rock cod, abalone, jumbo shrimp and black beans finished off with ice cream or jello and lots of leftover christmas cake and a few speeches even the mayor's toast to the shy Chinese cooks who stand just outside the swinging kitchen door in their dirty aprons faces

glazed with sweat, Shu the chief cook looks to you and says something in Chinese and you translate, "He says please come back again you're all welcome, lots more in the kitchen." Then somehow, all that mess disappears and the floors washed by six the next morning when you open up.

Then what is that taste, mulled memory, kitchen sediment. Your hands and body fill, pour, stir. Dark brown eyes the Aleutian land bridge over the stove—and dancing. How do I make your tangy sauce for seafood cocktail so good my mouth waters in this sentence saying ketchup horseradish lemon tabasco maybe a dash of soy. Something gave pure zip. Your shoulders. I thought the sharp, red bottle in the top cupboard. Reach. Was crabmeat. Even something creamy crunchy celery tomatoed and all that spooned into short, glass, fluted what I thought were like sundae dishes first lined with a lettuce leaf a few dozen made up in advance and kept on a shelf in the walk-in cooler. I'd sneak one. Or two. Boston Cream pie on a slack and snowy Sunday afternoon. Where did that taste for such zip charlie chim chong sang von lung chung come to your mouth in a shot shout as you clicked your tongue eyes sparkled if it was too hot too much kick they'd water it a bit and you'd cut the sauce with what, HP, or maybe that other dark brown steak sauce A-1 under the counter by the cutlery trays. Not cayenne. No, that was never your spice. Chili powder. He looked more Mexican than Chinese and I thought fiction could have made him Philipino. So, of course, chili or tabasco. But of yours, something with more smack than gut, not pepper, further forward on the palate to match the sea brine but with bang, Oooo-Eee, the boot to begin every banquet and Chinese new year. That now then is winter lingulate imprint in December. Under the breath. Just outside. Massive dark hole swirl of oriental nebulae,



just outside. Or just next door, the mayor, the pool hall, anyone else, everyone else. And all time. Whats a matter? You just smiled, laughed and said "Pretty good gung hey, eh Freddy?" Fa choy! That's how.

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FRED WAH was born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan and grew up in the Kootenay region of British Columbia. He was one of the founding editors of *TISH*, he is a contributing editor of *Open Letter*, and a managing editor of *Swift Current*, an electronic literary magazine. He is the author of more than a dozen books of poetry, and received the Governor General's Award for Poetry for *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985). He now teaches Creative Writing at the University of Calgary. "All the Trimmings" is his first published short story.

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