



An average
amateur
pays tribute to
the city's
old-style pool
halls

PERFECT PLACES,

With a sharp crack twenty-two colored spheres carom wildly around the table, coming to rest in a formation of infinite possibilities. I failed to pot a ball off the break, so my opponent steps to the table, bends forward, and sinks a red with just enough backspin to gently curl the dairy-white cue ball in glorious position to shoot black. He does so, with a flourish, then pots an easy red. He is playing with



IMPERFECT SHOTS

BY
DAVID
HAYES

confidence, and was smart enough to wear leather brogues with heels that tap as he strides purposefully around the table, signalling the intersection of intentions and results. Greedy with good fortune, he ignores the blue, an easy five points, in favor of playing black again. I mutter a Haitian curse un-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHIN SUGINO

der my breath. When he misses, he scowls at the ungenerous end pocket. He is up nine points.

It's 6 p.m. on a muggy summer's afternoon; a fine time to be in a pool hall. We are playing snooker at our local joint, the Billiards Academy, a bright, second-floor establishment on Danforth Avenue near Pape. There are faded black-and-white photos of hockey teams and long-forgotten horse races hanging on the walls here and there. Above one table a pendulum clock chimes on the hour. Video games are ubiquitous in pool halls these days, even though the electronic hubbub is annoying. There are a few here, but they are thankfully underused. The sleazy image of pool halls is kept alive in the form of regulations posted around the room: "Do not spit on the floors"; "Do not use profane language." A couple of regulars sit on stools at a counter drinking coffee and watching sports on television.

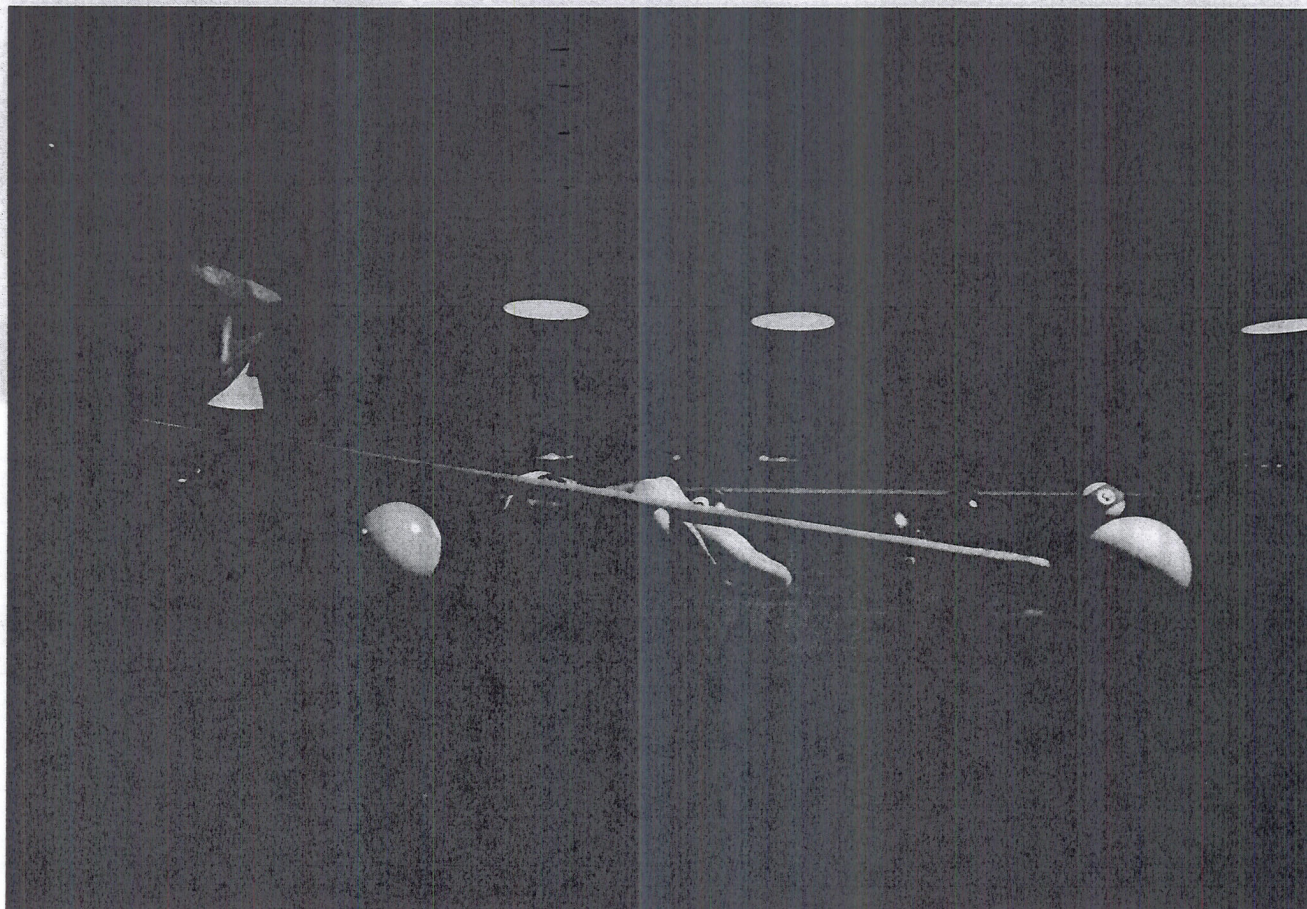
My opponent is a good friend, but in a pool hall we became adolescent males em-

bracing a manly pastime, testing each other's smarts. Women regard this with bemusement and a hint of derision, as if to say, Isn't it funny how even enlightened guys turn into turkeys from time to time. I'm inclined to agree, but just now it's time to assert myself, to regain the delicate balance between two equally average amateurs. I approximate the model stance: balance forward over the left knee, chin at cue level, left hand forming a well-arched bridge, cue sliding easily along a channel formed by a cocked thumb. Forget about the posed photos and stilted prose of instructional books; just imitate Paul Newman as Fast Eddie Felson in the 1961 film *The Hustler*. Newman's Eddie was the quintessence of cool, probably because his human qualities kept undermining his brilliant cuemanship. Take away the brilliant part and it describes the way most of us play. A few of my friends even bought their own cues, lovely two-piece jobs that make you feel like Fast Eddie even if you shoot like Donald Duck.

It is a game that appears to be ruled by the laws of geometry and physics: I understand that on paper the cue ball, aimed along an invisible line as immutable as science and struck left-of-centre, low and true, will drive my chosen red hard into the side pocket and leave me position on pink. I sight carefully, select the angle, take a breath, stroke. The red is an inch off target, although it might as well have been a foot. The cue ball lands in the opposite pocket with a resounding *thunk*, demonstrating a critical feature of the game: it seems that anything can be proven by mathematics, but when this knowledge is applied to phenolic resin balls on 10,368 square inches of combed woollen cloth, unwanted things happen with monotonous regularity. My sewer provides my opponent with two advantages: a four-point penalty in his favor and, more important, an almost sure guarantee that I am getting psyched out. Half an hour later, with twenty-two points left on the table and my opponent ahead by twice that, I forfeit with a terse "Rack 'em."

A MODEL STANCE: CHIN AT CUE LEVEL, LEFT HAND
FORMING A WELL-ARCHED BRIDGE, CUE SLIDING EASILY
ALONG A CHANNEL FORMED BY A COCKED THUMB

When I was a teenager, there were three rites of passage: losing your virginity, buying a bottle at the LCBO and getting to know your way around a pool table. One day, my friend and I summoned our 12-year-old courage and stepped into Coro-



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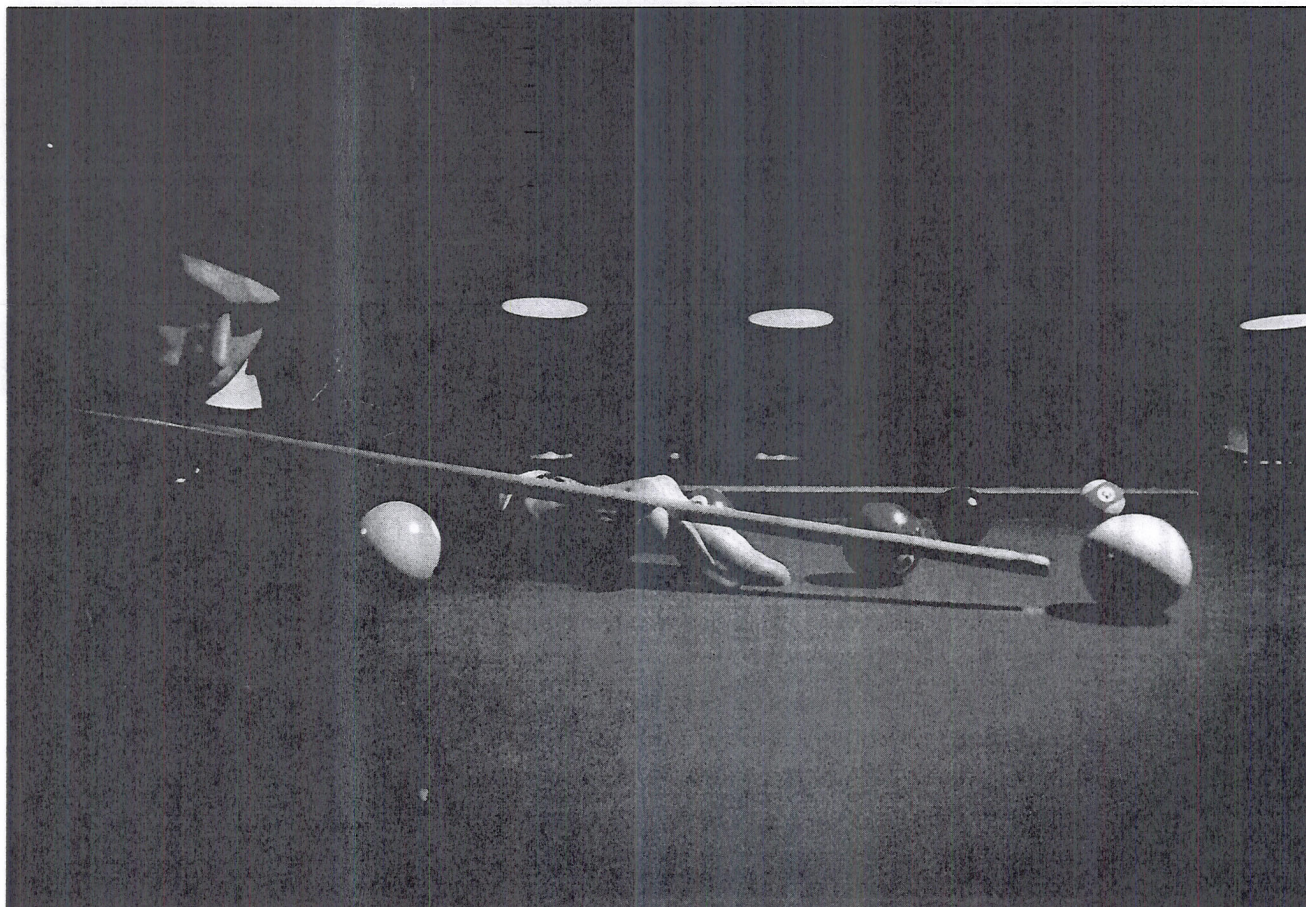
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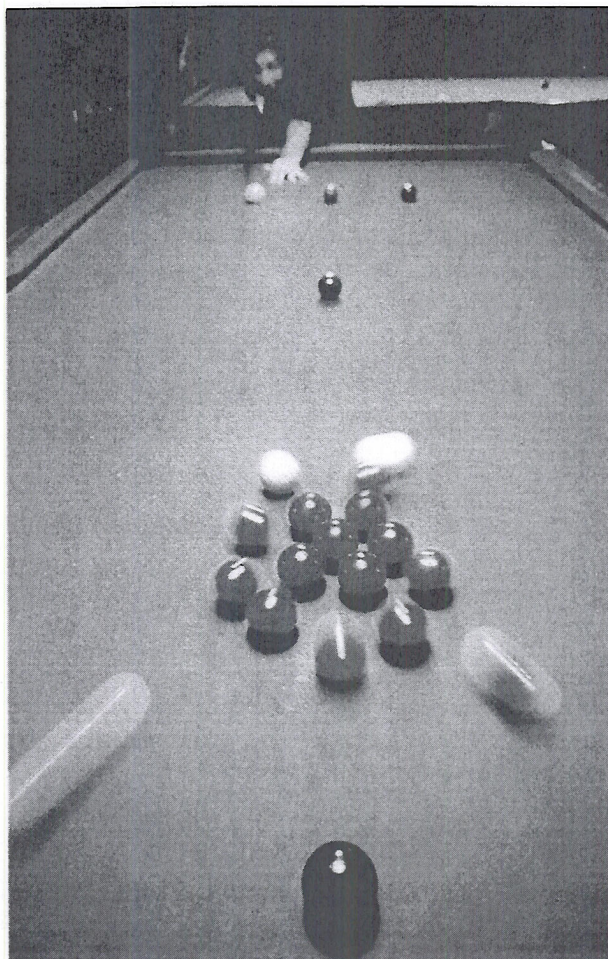
nation Billiards, our local hall on the upper reaches of Avenue Road, whose disappearance some years ago was widely regarded as a sign of the area's rejuvenation. It was most everything a pool hall should be: cool, poorly lit, dingy, spartan, filled with the unabashedly masculine odor of stale cigarettes and old wood. It looked dangerous, the kind of place mothers think about when they instruct children to keep out of trouble. It was as wonderful as we'd anticipated.

I remember a friend's elder brother prepping us. He said: "Walk calmly to the front desk and take a rack of balls. Go to any table except Number 1; that's where the sharks play. Take a house cue from the holders on the wall and lay it on a table. Roll it gently, watching for any sign of warp. Don't stare at anyone or you'll get punched out."

It was a well-known fact that anybody who played pool also smoked. I brought along half a dozen of my mother's Belvederes and a Zippo lighter with a flame like a welder's torch. Since I had been taught to play snooker by my father at a summer resort, I shot first. The tables at Coronation were old Brunswicks with cigarette burns along the rails, and badly worn cloth. The balls scattered with a delicious clacking sound. My friend took his turn and again the balls collided noisily. We banged around like this for several minutes as though we were playing table hockey. Two men wearing black slacks and black T-shirts glanced at us. They were shooting quickly and effortlessly. Balls clicked with delicate precision. They chalked their cues gently but assertively, and always stood out of the shooter's range of vision.

A few weeks later, we ventured into King Edward Billiards on Yonge Street, a tougher, more intimidating room. We played for hours, even though we only played two games. We spoke little, and rarely about anything other than the lay of the balls. A snooker match is not the time for small talk. When one of us made a difficult shot, the other rapped the butt end of his cue on the floor, as Jackie Gleason playing Minnesota Fats had done in *The Hustler*. No matter how inept our performance, we had the attitude down, taking to heart Fast Eddie Felson's words: "It's not enough that you just have talent; you gotta have character too."

The Squeeze Club is a trendy pool hall cum restaurant on Queen Street, west of Bathurst, where you can listen to great music and drink cappuccino or mango juice while you play. It has been done up very nicely, which is to say not very much at all. It looks and feels like a real seedy pool hall with very good, old tables and



WITH A SHARP CRACK TWENTY-TWO COLORED SPHERES CAROM WILDLY AROUND THE TABLE, COMING TO REST IN A FORMATION OF INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

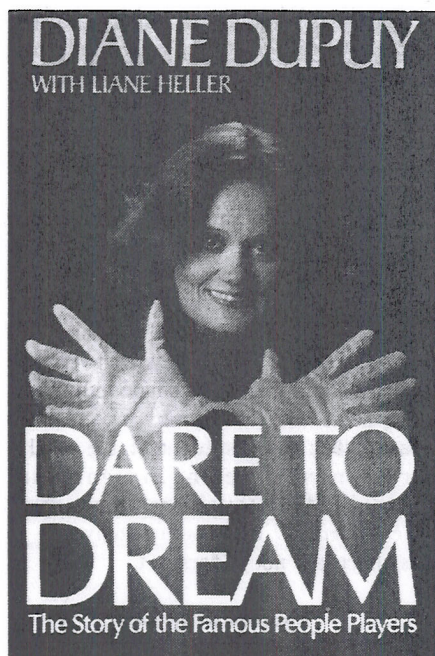
serviceable house cues. But there's something wrong. The hourly price is a bit steep, and too many patrons look like they're waiting to be discovered for the next series of Georges Marciano magazine ads. Once a guy made a sweeping entrance wearing a western-style hat, floor-length long-rider coat and lizard-skin boots. The girls at a nearby table made such a fuss over him that I missed a simple (even for me) bank shot.

I recently attended the grand opening of a place called The Q Club in the east end, not far from where I live. It has a bar, a restaurant and two poolrooms. The nicest tables are downstairs, where bar-flys can watch the action; the main floor is also supposed to be nonsmoking, a dubious notion for a pool hall and a rule nobody was enforcing when I was there. There were wall-to-wall people eating free canapés and drinking free booze, although that didn't bother me: most of

them hadn't been in a pool hall for decades and wouldn't be back. But the owner, a fan of bluegrass music, had the stuff blasting throughout the club and a live bluegrass band (his own, I understand) playing near the bar. If there must be music in a pool hall it should be the kind of smoky, fifties-vintage jazz used to set up a menacing scene in a pool hall in some film noir classic. You can't make a difficult two-ball combination while somebody is playing "Turkey in the Straw."

Of all the many things pool halls should be, trendy isn't one of them.

Snooker descends from billiards, a game that's been around for six centuries. An early version was played outdoors by the English aristocracy using one white and two red balls, a cross between lawn bowling and croquet. (It's incredible to me that so sublime a game could have been spawned from /Continued on page 148



**They said
it would
never
happen.**

**They were
wrong.**

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Perfect places from page 93

such tedious sports.) Later it was moved indoors and played on a table covered with green cloth to simulate grass. Consider its proponents through history: King James I, King Louis XIV, Mary Queen of Scots, Mozart, Napoleon, U.S. presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt. Despite so impressive a list of the game's supporters, our mothers' fears were not entirely misplaced. By the mid-nineteenth century, billiards had fallen into disrepute; it was regarded as a working-class pastime played in dingy, smoke-filled dives in the heart of industrialized urban centres; it was associated with the nocturnal world of saloons, gambling, prostitution and petty criminals, its noble lineage cruelly forgotten.

There are three main variations: carom billiards, played on pocketless tables; pocket billiards, commonly called pool and most popular in the United States; and snooker, the game favored in England and all Commonwealth countries. Pool is fast and loose, played on a small (about four and a half feet by nine feet) table using a cue ball and fifteen numbered balls. It is pool you see being played in *The Hustler* and *The Color of Money*.

Snooker originated in the 1870s when some British army officers decided to beef up billiards by adding colored balls. The name is said to have originated when an officer missed an easy shot and his opponent called him a "snooker," a term for a green recruit. It is played on a six-foot by twelve-foot table using fifteen red balls, valued at one point each, and six colored balls—yellow, green, brown, blue, pink, black—valued in ascending order from two to seven. A player who sinks a red may then shoot any colored ball (which is then returned to the table), followed by another red and so on. When the reds are gone, the colors are shot in order of value.

Efforts to televise snooker began in Britain in 1937 although, not surprisingly, it didn't catch on until the advent of color TVs. Today it is the most popular sport on British television, a phenomenon often dismissed by skeptics as unexceptional considering the British public's indiscriminating love of televised dart games and an annual twenty-four-hour lawn-mower endurance race. It was television that improved the game's image; now even qualifying matches are formal affairs in which players wear tuxedos, big-name sponsors provide considerable prize money, and the distinguished, upper-crust commentary provided by Clive Everton of the BBC lends the sport dignity.

There is nothing dignified about Crist's, on Bloor Street West in the Annex, on the

day a friend and I show up. It is a long room that looks like it was once a bowling alley, which it was. The entire place is painted a uniformly dingy caramel color, peeling in great patches. The video games up front are constantly in use, and the crowd a mix of older Greek and Italian men, young guys, arty types, a few semi-pros. For a while my opponent is distracted by a stunning, lanky girl in faded jeans who is playing with George Whiteside, the fashionable Queen West photographer. When they leave a guy comes by who looks like he stepped out of Capone's Chicago: he's short, stocky and has a five-inch crescent-shaped scar across his left cheek. He doesn't play any better than we do but who's going to tell him? A good pool hall is "the Perfect Place," David Mamet observes in an essay on pool halls, because "... people are supposed to spend their days here in pursuit of skill, cunning, comradeship, and money. No one is supposed to be pompous here, or intrusive, or boring; no one will be held unaccountable for the bets they make, or the way that they comport themselves."

My opponent, a fellow writer, is delighted that he's helping me with "research," although we both know what he's really doing is avoiding an approaching deadline. (Later I cannot summon the nerve to ask the manager, Carlos, for a receipt.) He has a deft, sure touch with a cue, but tonight a miracle occurs. I make a red, applying just enough backspin to pull the cue ball behind the black, which I send into an end pocket. Then a red in the side, followed by the blue and yet another red, this one rolling across two-thirds of the table and leaving me a clear shot at black. For a few sweet minutes, mind and body are gloriously fused, my brain a piece of NASA instrumentation meticulously processing data, my right elbow a finely machined hinge, my forearm flexible, incapable of deviation. The leather cue tip makes a quiet, woody pop as it hits the ball. When I falter, missing a simple shot because of overeagerness or carelessness, I step aside gracefully. I scored twenty-two points, my opponent is badly shaken, and I overcame, no matter how briefly, the weekend player's monumental capacity to mess up.

"Nice shooting," he mutters.

"Yes," I say.

The world seems a better place. ■

HAIKU

BY VINCENT GAMBI

Big greasy snowflakes
plunging to the street outside
the waitress 10 years older than she was 6
weeks ago