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Prairie Fire Press & McNally Robinson Booksellers present

Writing Contests 2010



The Banff Centre Bliss Carman Poetry Award*

(1, 2 or 3 poems per entry,
max. 150 lines per entry)

Judge: Christian Bök

Short Fiction

(one story per entry,
max. 10,000 words)

Judge: Joan Thomas

Creative Non-Fiction

(one article per entry,
max. 5,000 words)

Judge: Hal Niedzviecki

**Deadline for contest entries:
November 30, 2010**

Contest Rules

- Entry fee is \$32 per entry. This entitles you to a one-year (4 issues) subscription to *Prairie Fire* magazine. Make cheque or money order payable to *Prairie Fire* and enclose with your entry.
- Do not identify yourself on your entry. Enclose a cover sheet with your name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, the title(s) of your piece(s), and word count (prose) or line count (poetry).
- On occasion *Prairie Fire* Press makes subscriber names and addresses available to external organizations. If you do not wish to receive such mailings, please state this clearly on your cover sheet.
- Your entry must be typed on 8 1/2" x 11" white paper and the pages clipped, not stapled. Prose must be double spaced. No faxed or e-mailed submissions, please.
- Each piece must be original, unpublished, not submitted or accepted elsewhere for publication or broadcast, nor entered simultaneously in any other contest or competition for which it is also eligible to win a prize.
- You may enter as often as you like; only your first entry in each category will be eligible for a subscription.
- Winning pieces will be published in *Prairie Fire* magazine, with authors paid for publication.



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The Banff Centre
inspiring creativity

*The Poetry first prize is donated in part by The Banff Centre, who will also award a jeweller-cast replica of poet Bliss Carman's silver and turquoise ring to the first-prize winner.

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POETRY



Scar

Yi-Mei Tsiang

My belly sports a Mona Lisa's smile
because what surgeon doesn't secretly
want to be an artist?

Abby, my daughter, walks her fingers
along that red, closed door. Examines
the hinges of my body.

Her index traces my scar like
a road map, defines the uterus
as a curved path and she draws a finger
against her abdomen to slice the line
of her own womb.

We make a game of it,
her curled body in my stretched shirt,
her father wielding a butter knife
to slice her body away from mine,

birth a *ta-daaaaaaa!*,
a magician's slight
of hand.

It is a Disney version of her birth,
and one day I'll tell her the truth;

That I was drugged and strapped
to the table, that my body lifted
with the force of the surgeon's pull,
that she came, screaming from my
still-steaming opened womb,
and that we both choked on the
foreign air between us.

Picture

Yi-Mei Tsiang

I am draped over my father's lap, in fuzzed pajamas.
My hand just under his chin, and he is smiling.
My mother has written in small comments,
word bubbles that hover over us like historical footnotes;

See? It's not hard to make dad smile

I can not imagine this scene without
the hand scissored comments, without
my mother's voice, in script.

This is what's left of him,
the smudges and false voices.
I wish she had written instead

*The smell of your father, pressed cotton, tea,
sesame oil, the space between your hand
and his face, an inch of air and then
his chin in your hand, the small stubble
of night, dark and rough against your palm.*

Words that could pin down, preserve.

Dilemma of a Drunk Beat

Vincent McGillivray

This is New York City: can't the night be quiet carriage
or freight-train mescaline prophecy? It's not
that I don't like the cello, it's that the notes
are too well aligned—a soundtrack with no body
of reference. When Corso stumbles in, he's
attracted instantly to the phonies, of which
he sees many, in any room, any city, any
given time. His unpredictable spine climbs
straight out his mouth and tickles the ear
of a pretentious art collector:

*You wouldn't know art if it stabbed you
in the heart, and painted death with slow
wide strokes.*

Too much revelry for a restless chemical belly.
Volcano erupts on lace white carpet. Cesspool
of beans and junk and wild eyes for the world.
From eleven stories I watch the fury of his hair
as they escort him to a taxi.
And us, back to perfect
stringed progressions
above.

Last Light

Vincent McGillivray

Open the window to February.
Let ice-wind shape curtains into
young brides spinning.
Open doors: invite thieves
to pillage plastic collected
through years—years that flood
over the brain, a speed bump now,
out back of the skull to join
timelessness.
Cease your ticks, your
little phrases uttered in
tense heart-rush. Let phones
ring rumor to whisper.
Peel ego off the soul;
expose child again.
This is last light, moment
of final power. Let the nurse
see blue ice streams trickle
beneath pale skin.
Laugh at randomness, she
won't catch the humor.
You wouldn't either—then.
This is last light, moment of final
itch.
This is last light, moment of final
shell awareness.
This is last light,
moment of all roads merging
straight out
on the
long
exhale.

Do You Want to Come Over?

Vincent McGillivray

You forget eyes after time in space,
learn to plot space with lids drawn.

New yellow walls raise fiery suns on frozen nights.
Your vow to boycott love, wavering in a waxen vault.

If finding soul, the apotheosis of love, eyes the interloper.
She spins a universe one revolution for every view stolen.

You feel the swirling mechanics now—
vow so flimsy it snaps by half-spin.

The touch, the taste—tendrils of electrical tape.
Stockholm syndrome: oh, this heavenly captor!

You wouldn't have fallen,
but you are not your eyes.

Telescopic

Vincent McGillivray

When I found beauty, I bought a jar
unadorned so the world could know.
Tied red ribbons around its neck
so you could curl inside.

My fresh black suit, not of malice:
dream trails sweeping moon sand
straight to star grass,
further into prayer.

Until mind is a fractured ball of glass.
Poor old burro hauling coal, not stars.
Incredulous—still singing like an angel,
dancing like a marionette.

When I found beauty, I bought a jar
with coins banked to clinch forever.
A ship in a bottle, the hole says,
will find its way to sea.

The Field

Davide Trame

It's here when the train stops before the railroad tracks
spread into their net into the station,

and I am here, in my commuter's day, full sail,
among the autumnal crowd sitting and standing, jostling

by the train windows, faces nodding in their world of wires,
elbows, shoulders, brushing steps, ringtones, busy breaths,

time. And in the field outside the shrivelled crowd
of bronze maize, cornstalks in lowered sunlight.

I gaze at the bronze, thin, twisted lines
in their stillness, a still standing

extinguished crop, so close, so known
in the low glow in which I was born.

Now from the window, the passing of time,
the clanking, the shrieking of the railway lines.

No, we have not yet arrived, the train stops again,
its never being on time is like us, the same.

And the cornstalks stare, in a breath of air they slightly sway.
I'm not sure anything has ever passed away.

Star Gazing

Tyler Clancy

One day,
billions of bits of
a dead cold long dead
star

threw pieces of itself as far
as the decimals between
one and
two
(flooding the universe's basement).

Now,
billions of bits
of our onthesmallerside
middle-aged star
throw pieces of itself

all over the late night
subway girls
who spin my thin neck like the world
in their soft, windy dresses.

Prowling

J.J. Steinfeld

For a start,
take my photograph
in the dark
the darker the better
with perplexing colours
the shades fiercely named
show it to those
that prowl in the night
seeking disoriented souls
imagining brightness.

Better yet,
paint my portrait
in the light
the brighter the better
with unimagined colours
the shades without names
show it to those
that prowl in the morning
seeking frightened souls
imagining darkness.

Salmon Croquettes

Qiana Towns

The recipe says they're soft
enough to eat. But they remind me
of the bones left in the tarnished urn

and I can not bear the idea. So I rescue
the bones, place them aside as I break
the meat into flakes and mix it with peppers

and onions, crackers and eggs. I mash
the mixture into circles, place them
in the hot grease wading in Mama's cast

iron kettle. As the patties brown,
I break the thin bones from vertebrae
to count the annulus marks for age,

bop to crackling lard rhythms
the way the mamas had in red clay
kitchens. When the patties are done, I lay

each against paper napkins to drain fat,
step back to admire my first claim at matriarchy.

Oxytocin

Kimberley-Blue Muncey

I
Before

In this body, the heartbeat
minor, then major
thump
alternating pulses that push our blood through
my veins, until my whole belly
convulses around you,
billows and tightens.

During the night,
the furnace kicks on and you kick
off, the fluttering fury
finished.
This quell of quiet aches.

A purplish plum impended still,
your crescent spine prone against my tailbone.
Breathe!
Inhale, exhale, and labour
to hear a hint of you.

Suddenly stirring stalwart
inside, a steamroller
rundling around,
you are here now.

I relish the churn of bodies,
the closet keyhole channeled through me.
I remember my body relinquished.

The Papier Mache Milton Acorn

Mark Sampson

for J.J. Steinfeld

Still surly, sunken
even as a *papier* portrait
I mistook his likeness for a farmer
as I passed while biking with my mom
Squealed my brakes and yelled
“Holy shitballs—I think that’s meant
to be Milton Acorn”
and made her double back
even though she,
Islander all her life,
had never heard of him.
Sure enough, there it sat
in a chair outside an art gallery,
scruffy, sculptured icon in checkered shirt,
like a scarecrow meant to frighten tourists.
He smoldered over tony Victoria Row,
all neat cobblestones and patio restaurants,
this potato city’s best attempt at *chic*,
disapproving, of course.
Disapproving of this Island’s course
I stared at that verisimilitude
of exhausted fury,
was bedazzled by the mysteries of *mache*
(all those unwholesome angles)
and doubted my eyes.
Doubted what I knew to be true.

So
I took another writer back there
to where the hideous thing sat, said
“Is that Acorn?”
Oh yes, he replied

as if it were the most obvious fact.
He knew Milton, see
in the last five years of his life.
Knew him when he forsook the
booze for orange juice, a vitriolic,
diabetic Communist carpenter crank;
knew him when he would crash down
at your restaurant table,
slap the Formica top with a copy
of *The Globe and Mail* and scream
“Lies!”
(inadvertently—perhaps—spitting all
over your lunch);
knew him when Islanders would
cross to the other side of the street
if they saw him coming;
knew him before they named a festival
in his honour,
before he was immortalized in papier mache.

Months later I learned that teenaged hoodlums
had made off with the sculpture.
Got all the way to Victoria Park
before abandoning it in boredom,
propping Milton gingerly against a tree.
There the authorities found him, unharmed
(too ugly to destroy?)
and returned him to the gallery.
I asked the other writer
if he thinks the thugs knew who they were stealing.
Of course not, he says, impoverished roll of his eyes.
Again, so obvious.
And I learn why I don't live here anymore.

I learn the thing was sculpted by an ophthalmologist.

Daylight Saving

Mark Sampson

Time's evil twin, this slow tick toward spring
and the wet melt of snow slips through your fingers

Like possibilities, it aims your day toward a moment that lives longer,
feels longer than it should, stretches out its chances like silt

How do you find the new self you crave in this city
when you can't even stay awake long enough to turn your clocks ahead?

It drains you to think of them, the opportunities, the hours that move on
without you, the friends who move on without you

No sleep could cure your body of this exhaustion
No victory could taint this exquisite defeat

You've picked your choice; it sits on your lips
like time itself, words you didn't speak

but should have. Easier to play the role picked out for you
by someone else, at a time when all clocks ticked in unison

Is there any way to see this slow march forward
as anything but a labyrinth that aims to trick you?

Time is a collage, not stark lineage
So take solace in that as you move from empty room

to empty room, turning clocks ahead one hour
It feels like a minor crime against time itself

and a leap of faith that you'll awake the next morning
perfectly aligned with the world around you

It breeds an unease that starts in your toes
and climbs all the way to the cavity in your chest

But don't fret: you need only to survive another horrific fall
and you will get that hour back

Daylight Standard

Mark Sampson

And you will get that hour back
full moon and fading season
It comes like a thought
like a wish, a gift
a prayer answered
an unexpected call from a friend

See it on your clock
in the glow of the green
Fill that extra hour with hope, with resolve
with toil and ambition, or else
a lazy afternoon of leisure and lust
Breathe it in. Let it out.
Give it away, or else hoard it for yourself

Feel the weight of your second chance,
the crisp autumn possibility of it
That's the fading season you sense
through the window
the falling dark, the bruised afternoon
the bite in the air
the lusty gaze that turns and says:
Use me however you wish

But the moment is short. Interrupted it is
by a sudden knock at your door
Your face fills with blood, embarrassment
You know who it is
(and why she has come)
Time's evil twin, this slow tick toward spring

drifting

Anne Baldo

snake skin in the sand,
paths stroked smooth
by cold and beaded stomachs. numb
limbs of trees, bleeding
pulpy green in spurts of shoots and leaves.
the sky anesthetized to our eyes by white
wine and weather. breath cold as broken china
chips lips and cheeks. pale fingers knot
and loosen, grip at wrists. we kiss
with our whole faces. turn away from atmosphere,
the sudden rush of blue
the white space between water and air.
try to find each other again in the clouds,
in a sky without stars.

3001: a space iliad

Yassen Vassilev

troy comes out of orbit
rituals are held by priests and mirrors
conceiving the new saints
in the last sanctuary of god
where from light years
laws forbidden love
indigo children are born
androids androgynes
and the last parents
pay for the future
stars drop down from the two snakes
andromache and andromeda

laocoon laocoon
we are warned
the limits are surpassed
between painting and poetry
between art and life
between matter and mystery
words become mechanics
art is reloaded

Over Under Over

Darryl Whetter

the tectonic push
the tidal pull
secrets written thirty
kilometres deep. thirsty
rock sliding, shearing
through the millennia.
sedimentary folds and igneous affronts,
the hardest forcing
the hard down
or around. this slow split
forever recorded

the planet revolving,
revolutions genetic and atmospheric
carrying chance, trial,
the uncertain scurry
not water but air
not here but there

310 million years later
oceans lapping, the Fundy tongue
squirming into the Joggins
mouth of old teeth prying
out the fossils coughed
then gulped down
to water again

Time is a Slut

Robin Richardson

Gone mad at Sea I followed the clock,
The smug exposed ankle of age
We smuggled, courted the martyrs of our bed time stories
It wasn't the quiet sway, nor the oysters, torn in half
That drove me
It was the clock, bloody despot
Mad-eyed, she fought, dragged backwards
The bitch kicked, winced and was frayed like a belt
Gnawed through
I used her
Monster
To stave off boredom
For an hour or so, or a year
It isn't easy letting stained skin down gently
She tore her clothes (she had no clothes)
And choked
The tip of her tongue a lovely baby blue
She licked my ear
Like Claudius
And would not let me go.

Isotopes of Mercury

yaqoob ghaznavi

eons ago I made two burnished copies
but one disappeared near the dark sea
the isotopes, quicksilver on the run
Borneo tiger howling in the hills above

but one disappeared near the dark sea
in the jungles of Sumatra or Madagascar
Borneo tiger howling in the hills above
wandering with the ghost of generation past

in the jungles of Sumatra or Madagascar
my stepmother maintained she was
wandering with the ghost of generation past
beautiful and wanted after a day at the spa

my stepmother maintained she was
meant to marry an eccentric prince
beautiful and wanted after a day at the spa
the priests were told, newspapers alerted

meant to marry an eccentric prince
but my father burned in with his racing car
the priests were told, newspapers alerted
in an act of love, an act of treason

but my father burned in with his racing car
stealing the bride and the wedding gown
in an act of love, an act of treason
soldiers were called, borders sealed

stealing the bride and the wedding gown
eons ago I made two burnished copies
soldiers were called, borders sealed
the isotopes, quicksilver on the run

why I love goats

Edith Speers

i love goats because they are glad of it—
they don't ask any questions
about what you mean by it
or where it's going to lead to

their mates do not get angry
and their kids don't mind
goats never worry about whether
there's going to be enough love to go around

if you love goats they love you in return
and when you go away
they go back to chewing their cuds, eating grass,
and having fun—being goats.

goats don't have any special rules about love,
they don't worry about it one little bit
goats just love to be loved—
that's why I love goats.

Night Sounds (a pantoum)

Paul Vreeland

I am a passenger aware of your absence, I dare not sleep.
Remember the barking of dogs, it took only one
to set off a chorus echoing through the hills and hours
you could hear the roar of the surf beyond the palace and Place de martyrs

Remember the barking of dogs, it took only one
and the trains pushing the same sound that passes through the blue prairies
you could hear the roar of the surf beyond the palace and Place de martyrs
in the dark hours, bells in the memorial tower

and the trains pushing the same sound that passes through the blue prairies
Remember the constant drums, drumming voodoo at 4 a.m.
in the dark hours, bells in the memorial tower
under a full moon, lonely as cargo

Remember the constant drums, drumming voodoo at 4 a.m.
tripping the alarms on the hearses lined up before dawn
under a full moon, lonely as cargo
sounds that populated the biographies of our nights

tripping the alarms on the hearses lined up before dawn
setting off a chorus echoing through the hills and hours
Remembering sounds that populated the biographies of our nights
I am a passenger. Aware of your absence, I cannot sleep.

Decisions

Lynn Atkinson

Blue dress or red?

10 floors above she
steps
into the blue—

Redheaded finch at the feeder
catches my eye
just
as she hits
birdseed blood and bones
on blacktop

I decide on white.

Dressing Lynn

Lynn Atkinson

My husband
holds my body aloft
wrestling wayward clothes
on limp limbs.
I think of Hercules
who despaired of holding up the sky
Almost there, he says
kneeling at my feet
my shoes, the last labour
Of he who moves my earth
before his morning coffee.

NON-FICTION



Penis Envy, and Other Theories

Jean Braithwaite

When I was a child I was convinced I was a genius, despite my mother's best efforts to discourage me from self-aggrandizing beliefs. My father had grown up being called a genius by his mother, and my mother was determined to nip the unattractive habit in the bud with me. In any case, when I was eight or nine I found a book on the psychology of child-raising in the shelf in the headboard of my parents' bed. Child-raising was a topic that interested me; I was eager to critique my parents' performance. I read the book. The chapter on sex education was particularly fascinating.

Sooner or later, the book explained, every girl—especially if she had brothers, or depending on her father's degree of modesty—every girl was bound to notice a difference between her body and the male body: she was missing something. At this point she was likely to become upset, feeling that her own body was deformed or inferior, longing desperately to acquire a penis of her own, perhaps supposing that she once had one which had been confiscated as a punishment. The parents should reassure the anxious little girl and explain sex differences and reproduction to her in a simplified, upbeat way that emphasized just how indispensable a vagina was.

I had often been bathed with my little brother Dan, and my father, proud of his body, was also rather lax about nudity around the house when I was young. So I was already acquainted with some examples of the male organ and had an opinion about it. It looked stupid. Every time I happened to see a penis, I felt complacent about the streamlined beauty and efficiency of my own crotch. A penis was an obvious liability, an obstruction that was likely to catch on things and be a constant nuisance. I could tell that Dan didn't share my views about the superiority of female anatomy; his glee in handling his "pee-er" was apparent whenever we got caught short and had to urinate outside, in the desert that surrounded the new Tucson subdivision where we lived. Dan's silly bad taste was one more reason to look down on him, almost with pity. He wasn't in my league in either brains or body.

The fact that my own experience completely contradicted the book did not cause me to reject the book's information outright. I was passionately devoted to book-learning. I had an unquestioning faith that the theories in scholarly books were correct, and that I could work out their ramifications correctly. I assumed that penis envy was authoritatively known to be something girls usually felt, and so it seemed logical to conclude that the average little girl didn't have as much sense as I did.

At the age of fourteen, like many a teenage girl then and since, I became convinced that I was too fat. (At 5'6" I weighed 125 and wore a size 12. When I look at pictures from then I look rail thin to my eyes now.) My wish for a better body had something to do with wanting to be a great runner, and something to do with wanting boys, and something to do with perfection just for its own sake. It seemed clear that the quickest way for me to lose the five pounds I thought I should was just to stop eating temporarily. This of course was not the method generally recommended to teenage girls, but I knew that if I announced an intention to diet in the usual way, my parents would interfere. My father would insist my body was beautiful just as it was. My mother would insist my mental perspective was all wrong. So I kept my own counsel.

My health-class textbook said it was better to diet slowly and gently. But it also explained the energy-balance theory of body composition: a calorie is a calorie is a calorie, and weight gain or loss is a simple equation of calories eaten minus calories exercised. If you eliminated 3500 calories you would lose one pound of fat no matter where or how you cut them out. Therefore the optimal policy for me was to eat nothing whenever my parents weren't watching and as little as possible when they were. On the energy-balance theory, there was no physical reason for this method to be ineffective.

No doubt, slower dieting would be more comfortable, and so probably for most people that was psychologically easier. But I was stuck inside my family: in my case protecting my privacy and freedom of action was much more important than being comfortable. So I persisted in my original plan despite expert opinion and even though it mysteriously failed the first couple of hundred times I tried it. For the next eight years I never stopped trying to bring my body into line. Faith in theory permanently altered my relationship with my body.

Like many another teenage girl, once I began trying to resist my own natural appetite, I got gradually fatter and fatter. For years fat was the central mystery of my life. I remembered very clearly a time before, when food had been a matter of relative indifference to me. Furthermore, I felt that my personality was fundamentally no different than it had been then. But my personality must have changed, because now I was fat, which was evidence of overeating or underexercise, which was evidence of a weak will and lack of character. But I didn't feel different. But I must be. I was unable to resolve the paradox by studying, because none of the theories I read about in books and magazines applied to me.

Experts said, for instance, that many fat people overate because they felt unloved and so substituted extra food to make up for the other unfilled need. Fine, that made perfect sense,

for people who had all those cozy emotional associations with food. But it was nothing to do with me. Certainly I felt as underappreciated as the average teenager. But I knew that wasn't what made me want to eat. I knew what I wanted for myself, from myself: to be attractive, athletic, socially successful, and, above all, admirable. I believed that eating when I intended to fast was incompatible with all these goals. So I had no good explanation why the desire to eat would build up stronger and stronger in me until it overwhelmed all other desires, all my resolve and self-respect. It had to be true that I was guilty of enormous greed, at least on some occasions. But the idea that I might have confused food with some other kind of comfort or gratification was absurd. Food to me then meant the opposite of all happiness and I got no pleasure from it except for the immediate, literal, physical, short-lasting and shame-filled relief of the desire to eat. But where did that intense desire come from? Not from my unsatisfactory love life, I was sure. I believed at the time, and I still believe now, that this was a fact I could know about myself as surely as I could know that I never envied anyone's penis.

Theories are usually theories about someone else, aren't they? Picture Freud, sitting in his armchair, speculating on the female experience, trying to put himself into a woman's shoes, imagine female life from the inside. What do women want, what do they really want...? Suppose I were a woman.... To begin with, I wouldn't have my.... Oh, God, how horrible! Poor, poor women—to be so stunted! Their lives must be haunted with an unending sense of loss....

It's similar, when people who haven't been fat, who haven't subjected themselves to systematic deprivation and felt the power of the cumulative hunger that results, set themselves up as obesity experts, cooking up theories to explain the people they study. Let's see, let's see... it stands to reason that the obese must be psychologically or behaviorally different from normal people, because if they were simply responding to hunger, like anyone else, why then, they wouldn't be fat, would they? They must be overeating for some reason. But what? Culture of instant gratification? Compulsion to fill up some deep-seated emotional gap? Perhaps if we intervene even more aggressively, with even younger children, make them understand that they must watch what they eat, that their physical and mental health depends upon it?

I no longer think I'm a genius. My parents live far away, and are not together, and since they're both over 70 I'm fully in charge of my own life. I feel rather less confidence in my ability to understand and control it now than I did at fourteen, despite the thousands of

books I've read since. Or because of them—theory upon theory upon contradictory theory. But what can any of us do, really, except weigh out the evidence and then, tossing our own very lives into the balance, make our best guesses?

This is my theory: I became fat because I was trying so hard to be thin. Deprivation made me ravenous, and simultaneously sent my body into its most fat-conserving state to deal with the artificial famine I had created. Nobody has invited me to take charge of the rest of the world, but if it were up to me, I guess I wouldn't have little girls be told that they can shape their own bodies as they choose by diet and exercise. Or grown men and women that they're abnormal psychologically if they're fat. Of course, plenty of fat people have embraced the idea that they are neurotic and will be able to be thin someday when they can fully understand and manage their emotions. But then, there are probably a fair number of women willing to believe that they must have unconsciously envied their brothers' penises, too. Since experts said so.

Some Might Say a Dangerous Lady

Simon Anthony Prunty

At first, I never suspected I would become one of her many admirers, another needy heart among the fan-club. But in time I was ensnared with no less precision than I came to expect, and perhaps feared, her eyes being the vicious trap that they were. She could incite love, lust, rage and inspiration, haunting you like death or filling you with a new vibrant lease of life. Every man, regardless of his strengths or failings, was subject to her, but never, even in her weakest moments, was she subject to them. Like some priceless work of art she dazzled every eye that beheld her, eyes that glared at her in silent admiration without so much as a single bid for possession. Perhaps they felt unworthy, I sometimes thought, fearing they would only bring fault to her perfection. Besides, with enough drinks swimming in your belly and foolishness filling your head, you would often entertain the desire to see her in still-life, frozen and suspended, unable to rot or spoil. She noticed this wish in the eyes of her admirers, and through casual conversation she often told me of how it burdened her terribly. I had my doubts. She often received compliments like a monarch, as if the arrival of praise was long expected and all too predictable. She knew well of the beauty with which she was painted, and she would certainly relish the attention, but for that I held no prejudice. “My mom,” she once confided in me, “said I should enjoy the attention I get, because in seven or eight years I won’t see it ever again.” Fair enough. Who was I to argue with a mother’s grief for her long-lost youth? But as I once reminded her between gentle sips of whiskey: no one with even a shred of humility in their spirit can live life as nothing more than exhibition.

She was human after all, or so her audience needed reminding, and she’d certainly had lovers to keep her warm at night, no doubt. But the fact that you rarely encountered or so much as laid eyes on one of these lucky souls gave her the faint air of a black widow, suggesting these elusive men had perhaps been devoured by the woman they dared to adore too much.

In her presence you were unreachable, utterly removed from the world around you, and once greeted by her *Mona Lisa* smile you were engulfed by an almost drug-addled euphoria, a hypnotic rush that gave birth to a desperate addiction. I can only imagine that somewhere some lonesome idiot is at this very moment trying to decipher the meaning of her mysterious smirk, convinced of some elaborate code that exists beneath its initial charm. Or perhaps he’s writing a rambling piece of prose under dim light with the futile intent of satisfying his own fleeting infatuations, but let’s not go there for now.

As I've already confessed, my awareness of her effects upon the male psyche made me no stronger than the next man-child. But it did delay her spell long enough for me to at least find amusement in the wild adoration that showered her. In every direction you could watch absurd displays of worship and desire passionately performed for her consideration, mating rituals too theatrical to seem sincere or even human for that matter; and yet they were, leaving no doubt in my mind that the trials of Salem would have promptly deemed her a witch. For never would you see so many mortal men reduced to puppets without the assistance of the black arts.

And so, with a dreaded inevitability, I too became another tropical bird flashing the kaleidoscopic colours of his chest plumage, bobbing his head back and forth in a frantic dance for his female's approval. My God, how disturbing it is to narrate your own behaviour from the third-person perspective of a horny Amazonian bird. It can be forgiven, I suppose. Bear in mind, detachment from oneself, in the out-of-body sense of the word, is a symptom that arrives with every primal urge, and I was nothing more than another deviant in the Darwinian sex-race.

With each thought of her came a sudden force behind my pen, pushing ink across blank pages and scrawling a great gospel of fancy. Somewhat embarrassed by this, I feared I might be reverting back to some form of adolescence, but the benefit of the doubt seemed to hold steady my literary conviction. "I could be your muse!" she declared with great elation, her eyes beaming with excitement, and possibly arousal, but that may have been wishful thinking on my part. I never regretted telling her of what I was writing; beauty, in any form, deserves acknowledgment, even at the risk of bloating an already swollen ego. But I never believed her to be purely vain, at least not in any sociopathic sense. I would observe rather than judge. That, I felt, was left to the merciless hands of time, the very hands of which her mother gave stark warnings.

For now, however, I was quite content to visit the bar in which she worked and fill the air with the scrawls of pen on paper while she offered me whiskeys and cheeky smiles, and I to her a brief glimmer of immortality in the saturated pages of a moleskin notebook.

SPOTLIGHT ON ANNA QUON



An Interview with Anna Quon

By Afton Doubleday

Anna Quon is a poet, novelist and freelance writer from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Her first novel, *Migration Songs*, was short-listed for the Dartmouth Book Award at the 2010 Atlantic Book Festival. Anna has also facilitated a creative writing workshop for the Healthy Minds Cooperative.

Afton Doubleday: How did you get started writing?

Anna Quon: When I was a kid I liked to write poetry and short stories. But I didn't do it very often, just for school assignments. I just always wanted to be either an artist or a writer when I was growing up.

At one point I had been in a hospital for a fair amount of time and when I came out I was looking for volunteer work. Well, I was looking for employment actually, but it wasn't coming to me. Somebody told me about this magazine for the Ability Network, which was a locally published, national cross-disability magazine, which covers a range of disability groups. So I started volunteering there writing articles and I loved it. And that got me freelance writing for magazines and newspapers. And then I moved on to fiction when I burnt out from journals.

AD: Why did you decide to write a novel?

AQ: Growing up I mostly read novels, I didn't read short stories or anything. Novels were my first love. So I always wanted to write one. And one day I just said, "the heck with it, I might as well start."

I used to sit down every week day and spend an hour, an hour and half and write 500 words. And eventually I got to the end of my first draft.

AD: How long did it take?

AQ: I think it was eight or nine months.

AD: How did the experience of writing a novel compare to writing poetry and freelancing?

AQ: Writing a novel was a hard slog. It didn't come very naturally. A lot of the time I was completely demoralized with what I was writing. I wasn't very happy with it. Articles and pieces in magazines, I found it more immediately gratifying. It was a creative process as well, just a shorter one and more easily contained, and I was getting paid generally. It was definitely not as immediately gratifying as writing articles. And poetry also is a much more short-term commitment. And I do love writing poetry, I find it more fun than writing a novel.

Writing a novel was hard but for me it was an important thing to do, and I hope to write another one.

AD: Why was it important for you?

AQ: Just to show myself I can do it, I think. And to follow in the footsteps of people I really admire. I always admired novelists, I always thought, you know, what a big thing it is to write a novel. Writing a novel is a long-term commitment and I really wanted to push myself to do that. And I'm glad I did.

AD: The title of your novel is *Migration Songs*, and most of the important people in Joan, the main character's life are immigrants. How do their stories change her?

AQ: Well her parents' story was a really big feature in her consciousness, which was always over-shadowing her own life. Partly because it was the story of her origins; partly because I think she just saw her parents as characters in their own story. And it was the first story for her that was of any importance, that she embellished and she went over and over in her mind.

And Edna's story was important, the story that her mother told her after Edna died was important because it sort of woke her up to the fact that people around her had these secret lives, or these secret facets to their lives that she knew nothing about. And Edna had been a very key figure in her life. And when she found out the story that she didn't know about Edna, I think it made her re-examine her life and probably allowed her a certain freedom to change her life.

AD: I noticed a parallel in the end of the first chapter and the end of the last chapter with the sound of birds' wings. What is the meaning of the sound of birds' wings and "a song of remembering, pushing out feathers I never knew were mine?"

AQ: The song of remembering, I guess...I think of our memories as having a pattern and having repetition and having beauty. Our memories, we tend to remember the same things over and over. The things that are important to us when we're young, we keep that memory alive by thinking about it over and over. And like a song, or maybe like a video or the soundtrack of our lives, we visualize things over and over. The song of our memory can be something that holds us back or it can be something that propels us forward. I think in a way, you can become stuck in your memories, in the story that you tell yourself or the song you sing yourself. But you can also be propelled into places that you wouldn't have gone if you didn't have that particular memory song.

I have to say, when I was writing that I was remembering the sound of swans flying at night. I was in Czechoslovakia 20-some-odd years ago teaching English, and there were wild swans on the river in the town where I lived. I heard them flying and I described it in a poem, and maybe in the book as well, as a velvet accordion, which is a very strange, soft sound and it stuck with me all this time. I really wanted to use that to describe the sense of memory because it's an important memory of mine and it symbolizes beauty and strangeness.

AD: What influence did your experience teaching English have on *Migration Songs*?

AQ: It was definitely a turning point in my life. Not quite the turning point I thought it was going to be. But I went to Czechoslovakia to teach English, but also I went to shed my persona that I had developed in Canada. I went to become a different person, the person I thought I was meant to be. And to some extent I managed that. And then I ended up becoming very depressed and coming back to Canada. It was a turning point in positive and negative ways because it showed me it was possible to change who I was. But then at the bottom end of it, there were the things that held me back that came to the forefront again and ended up getting me depressed and ended up sending me to the mental hospital when I got back to Canada.

So in that sense, teaching English was a turning point in both negative and positives ways. And I wanted for Joan for that to be a turning point for her when she goes to Hungary to teach English. So I may have to write another novel as a sequel to *Migration Songs*.

AD: How much of Joan's story is shaped by your life?

AQ: A lot I think. The events that happen in her life are not the events from my life, but

definitely her inner life I feel is similar to mine. Her feeling displaced, or not belonging. There's sort of a fog that separates her from other people, and I sort of feel that a lot, myself.

AD: The book description talks about Joan's struggle growing up without "a tribe of one's own." Is that how you felt growing up?

AQ: Yeah, I did. I wasn't consciously looking for a tribe of my own. I had some best friends who were important in my life, but I never was looking for a community. But I realized in high school there was a bunch of girls I was sort of on the outskirts of. They were all first daughters of immigrant parents, and they did well in school and they hung out together. I was on the outskirts of that group. I never really belonged there, but I didn't belong anywhere else either. Looking back, I wasn't really part of anything. Now my tribe is people living with mental illness and my tribe is the Bahá'í community.

AD: Is that something that has been important to you, to have a tribe?

AQ: It has. It sort of broadens my identity a bit. I feel I have a group I can go to that will accept me for who I am. Especially in the mental health community. The Bahá'í community is wonderful, but the people haven't had the same challenges as me. They've often had other challenges, but the challenge of having a mental illness is something I share with the people in the mental health community and I really feel support from that community.

AD: Why is Joan addicted to cough drops?

AQ: She had to be addicted to something. For her, the cough drops helped her to numb out and get spaced out. The first time she experienced the addictive power of cough drops was the scene when she comes out of the hospital with her mom and mom is crying and she takes a cough drop and it sort of brings her, Joan, peace. I wanted something that would give her that feeling. Because I think, even if she isn't conscious of it, she has a lot of anxiety and a lot of feelings of being bereft or being lost and the cough drops help that go away.

AD: What gave you the idea of cough drops?

AQ: I remember this boy in one of my elementary school classes and I remember him sucking on cough drops. And I thought it was so weird because, if I got any money, I would buy candy or chips. But this boy would buy cough drops. And I also remember that he was always, I don't know, not quite part of the crowd. And I've experienced that when I've had a

cold and popped a lot of cough drops it numbs my mouth and it numbs my brain. I wanted Joan to have that.

AD: Why do you choose to write about people with mental illness and disabilities, both in your fiction and non-fiction?

AQ: Well, because I am one. And I got started with a disabilities magazine and it opened my eyes a lot to the challenges that people with other disabilities have just to get around, transportation, employment, all that stuff. And I consider that my wider community.

I've always found it interesting, too, to write about people who are marginalized in some way. And people with disabilities really have been, you know. It's getting better but it's still very much on the edges of society in a lot of ways. People with disabilities, their levels of employment are lesser, their levels of education are less than the mainstream population; so there's more poverty and lack of opportunity. That kind of moves me and interests me, and it's something I've been glad to be a part of trying to address or eliminate.

I had a pure heart once

Anna Quon

I had a pure heart once
Like the moon's silver disc
Floating among the trees
Like something I saw under a microscope
Once
Like the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

My heart dissolved like alka seltzer
In its place, old orange peel
hard, dry and hollow

I gave it away for real estate
An empty parking lot
And a comb harmonica

Now I sit and buzz
A melancholy tune
While a jet plane
Full of holy passengers
Floats by me.

I wave at them,
As they wink past,
Darkness sucking
at my eyelids.

Red shoes

Anna Quon

I'm a broken-headed person,
Broken-hearted. Broke
Dressed in holes,
Dressed in rain,
Feet sore and sorrowing
from standing
On street corners,
And walking for miles
In another girl's shoes.

Those shoes are real nice
But they don't fit worth a damn
That's what happens
When you steal another girl's shoes

When I go out
it's like the world's caved in
There's dark things scurrying
And scuttling away
Into the corners

When I go home
It's like a husk
Of corn
All gnawed away inside

When I go home
I take off those shoes
And put them under my bed
They're sparkly, for sure
They're pricey and a rare rare red
Like a ruby

But I can't walk for shit in them
Let alone dance

Let that girl
Give me my shoes back
Let her say
Sorry, honey, I made a mistake
I must have taken your shoes
Without thinking

I'll smile at her and say
That's ok
And hand back the red ones to her
These must be yours,
I'll say,
As if I hadn't taken them in both my hands
Like a pair of red apples
And run.

Corners

Anna Quon

I've been ill
And I know by your face you know
If you could peel the skin off me
Like a grape
You would see my blood is red
My flesh is raw
Just like everyone else.

So many hurts don't pierce the skin
But accumulate,
Like dust in our corners,
Those awkward places

In TQ, there are no corners.
The walls curve to meet the floor
I slide down them like paint
and every pain ricochets
Like a pin ball machine.

I'm human,
I remind myself
No matter how battered my brain
Becomes, how ragged
I cup it in my hands,
Like a grasshopper,
Long legs
Flickering,
Ready to leap.

This is the way

Anna Quon

This is the way
an elephant moves
through lotus—

a heavy bride
bound in gold anklets

pulling a train
of green water
behind her.

This is the way
a stork fishes,
on delicate legs
at the water's edge,

its bill sliding
in and out of
the water
like a sewing machine
needle

Blue Horse

Anna Quon

Blue horse, blue horse!
Leap the fence
Into the long grass
Legs churning
Flowers to foam,
Wind burning
Your fiery mane

A pale man in a tall hat
Tells me
There's no such thing
As a blue horse
He scans the horizon
With binoculars
But doesn't see you
Standing next to me
Quietly chewing
A dandelion.

A man who cannot see a blue horse
Has glass eyes
or a glass brain

Shattered by
The whinny of a blue horse
(a soprano fit for an opera house)
It leaves the air full of
Blue smoke
Like a good cigar

Nuzzle and stamp
And most of all, run
Cover the earth
with your blue hooves

One day I will ride you again
When I am stronger, when I am free
Instead of trying to tame you
I will be wild too,
like a kite in the wind.
Blue horse
Blue horse

FICTION



Fade Away

Shari Narine

Matt looks at his watch—again. It's been 45 minutes since the bell rang and the kid still wasn't home. If he didn't have a unit exam tomorrow, Matt would be waiting at the school door for Ben. But Matt spent too much time with Wanda this afternoon and now he's scrambling to make up for lost studying.

He's been with Wanda for two weeks now, a record for him in any school. Matt's the bang-'em-once-and-leave-'em-happy type. And while it's always been about sex with Wanda, Matt has to admit that lying in bed this afternoon after they'd done the deed, talking with Wanda and laughing, felt good. Sex is usually a quick romp: clothes off, hump, clothes back on, go. But today, because they're in grade twelve, and because high school ends at noon on Thursdays, and because Matt knew Dad wouldn't be home, he brought Wanda back to their apartment. And it was good. Very good. So now, instead of studying for his Chem test, Matt has two things on his brain: Where the hell is Benny and maybe tomorrow he can ask Wanda out on an actual date and it would be okay if it didn't end with sex. Matt knows he's not falling in love with Wanda, but it just might be nice to be someone's boyfriend. And where the hell is Benny?

Matt slams his Chem book shut. He can't focus on anything until Ben is home. Matt slips on his running shoes, grabs the apartment keys, and skips down the steps two at a time. It's a warm May afternoon and thoughts of having his first girlfriend are making him warmer. Matt picks up his pace. He'll head to the school. There's a basketball court just half a block off the path and Ben could be there. In the last year or so, the boy has started to hone his basketball skills and has become a decent player. Matt flies by the back alley turn-off before the sound of a ball rattling off a metal hoop registers. He puts on the brakes, backs up, and walks down the alley. And stops. There's a group of grade eight kids playing pick up. And there's Ben. Ben is lining up for a free throw. The kid is still gangly, but he's beginning to fill out. He bounces the ball low by his feet, his too long blond hair bouncing along with his body. Matt has no idea how the kid can see through those bangs, which are in desperate need of cutting. Ben sinks the ball smoothly, right down the centre. He turns to a group of girls and smiles, his blue eyes flashing, his dimples deep.

Jesus, Matt thinks. And he rubs his hand up his face and through his dark wavy hair. Matt and Ben are night and day. Matt's eyes are dark brown and his smile is slow and sexy. He's just over six feet tall, well built, exudes confidence. They are both good looking, head

turning boys. And Matt is praying right now that Ben is simply flirting with the girls, that there's nothing more to it than that. Because Matt really doesn't want to think about what he was doing in grade eight. And that he can keep any number of girls happy in grade twelve is because he's experienced. Yeah, a nice way of saying he's a slut.

Of the three girls sitting on the bleachers, Matt notices one focusing on Ben. She's attractive in a shy, geeky kind of way. Exactly his brother's type. Every muscle in Matt's body aches to stalk over there, tell the girl to keep her eyes off of his brother, then grab Ben by his collar and drag him home. Because Matt knows where innocent looks like that end up. And he doesn't want his brother going there, because once he's gone, there's no turning back.

But Matt stays where he is. His little brother has become somewhat of a mystery to him lately and now he's beginning to understand why. And if he drags Ben out of there, there's no way the kid will talk to him. Matt knows this is going to happen—Ben and girls—and he wants to be there for Ben in the way no one was there for him. And Matt has to admit, it's nice to see the boy smiling. Because the 13-year-old can be pretty damned pissy most of the time.

An errant pass causes Ben to turn in Matt's direction—and then stop. Matt grabs the ball, dribbles it a half-dozen steps closer, then lays out a three-pointer that swishes in impressively.

“Hey, Ben,” Matt says. Matt has decided to play this cool. He's not going to light into his brother for dragging his ass coming home and he's not going to rib him about the bespectacled geek girl who's been watching him.

“Hey, Matt,” Ben says.

“Grab your backpack. We need to head home,” Matt says.

Ben jogs over to where the three girls are sitting. His backpack is on the bench next to the girl that Matt has pegged as Ben's potential something-or-the-other. When Ben hangs a little too long talking to the girls, Matt takes a few quick strides and is over at his brother's side.

“Someone you want to introduce me to, Ben?” Matt asks, gently teasing his brother. When Ben only turns red and doesn't answer, Matt thinks, What the hell? “I'm Ben's big brother, Matt.”

The girls smile shyly at him. They all know who Matt is. They've seen Ben with him at school. And Matt is the drop dead gorgeous guy all the girls are talking about. And that he's talking to them has the girls' heads spinning. They can only wave in acknowledgement.

Ben lets out a sigh, says, “What the hell, Matt?” and pulls his brother away. Then Ben stomps on ahead. Matt turns back, graces the girls with his dazzling smile then takes off after Ben.

“How could you do that?” Ben asks. He’s angry and embarrassed and, yeah, a little jealous at the reaction Matt received.

“Dude, chill,” Matt says. He draws Ben down on to the steps of the United Church that marks the half way point between school and home. “What did I do?”

Ben ducks his head and blushes, confirming Matt’s suspicion.

“You like Geek Girl, Ben?” Matt asks.

Ben looks straight ahead and says, “I like her, Matt. But I don’t see any point in getting to know her better because we’re going to move soon.” They always move. They average three schools in one year.

“You think so, Dude?” Matt asks. And there’s a bit of panic in his voice, which Ben picks up on right away.

“Why? Is there something happening with you and Wanda? I mean other than sex?” Ben asks. He feels a bit hopeful. As far as Ben knows, his brother has never had a girlfriend.

“Well, yeah,” Matt says, shyly, rubbing his hands on his jeans. “I like her.”

“You like her?” Ben repeats.

“I mean, I’m not gonna marry her, Benny. But she makes me laugh. I was thinking I’d phone her tonight and see if she wanted to go with you and me to a movie tomorrow.”

“You want me to come to a movie with you and Wanda?” Ben asks, shocked.

“Yeah,” Matt says, still not looking at Ben. “You wanna ask Geek Girl to come with us?”

“First off,” Ben says, “Geek Girl has a name and it’s Lindy. And I don’t know her well enough to ask her out.”

“The way she was looking at you, Benny, there’s no way she’d say no to you for a movie and pizza. My treat,” Matt says. He’s been picking up a few shifts at the local video store.

“You think she likes me?” Ben asks. His eyes light up.

“No doubt, Dude. What’s not to like about you?” Matt laughs as Ben colours. But Matt is serious. Ben is smart, funny, nice, and good looking. “You know her last name? Her phone number?”

“I could get her phone number,” Ben says. He’s excited and that excitement rubs off on Matt.

“You can phone her up tonight—after I speak to Wanda—and ask her out. Then I’ll talk to her parents. You know, I’ll come across as the responsible, mature big brother,” Matt says and laughs.

“Do you think that would work?” Ben asks.

“Me pretending to be mature and responsible?” Matt asks. He’s passing the question off as

a joke, but there's hurt in his voice.

"No. I mean, you are mature and responsible," Ben says. It's Matt who makes their meals, helps Ben with his homework, does parent-teacher interviews. There's no doubt in Ben's mind that his brother is mature and responsible. "No, I mean, do you think Lindy's parents would be okay talking to you and not Dad?"

"Yeah, we'll say Dad's out of town tonight for business and won't be back until late tomorrow afternoon," Matt says. "That should cover it. And hey, if Lindy's parents don't hang out at the bar and Dad hasn't hit on Lindy's mom, we should be fine."

"Wow. That would be cool. A double date with you!" Ben says. The dimpled smile is out in full force and Matt reaches over and musses his kid brother's hair.

"Dude!" Ben protests.

"What?" Matt says, all innocent. He's as excited as Ben. He's a month and a half shy from graduating and he's never had a girlfriend. It's been his choice. He always finds it easier to move when there's no one to say goodbye to. But even considering Dad's track record, it should be safe for both him and Ben to do this, to have girlfriends. At least for a couple of months. Matt knows it will kill Ben to say goodbye to Lindy. His little brother is not wired like Matt. Nor would Matt ever want him to be. But he also knows that Ben has to start living for today and stop thinking about how limited their time is in each town their dad dumps them in.

"We'll need wheels, though, Matt, because I don't think Lindy lives very close to us," Ben says.

"Wanda has wheels, Dude. How do you think I get my action at noon hour?" Matt grins.

"Ugh! I really didn't need to know that," Ben says, backhanding his brother across his arm.

"Hey, Ben." There's a soft voice from the side of the steps.

Ben jumps up. "Hey, Lindy," he says, and almost stumbles in his excitement.

Matt grabs the back of Ben's shirt to steady him. But Matt turns away so Lindy can't see the smirk on his face. When he gets himself under control, he hauls Ben down and whispers, "Ask her now."

"No," Ben says, panic written on his face.

"Hey, Lindy," Matt says. "We haven't been formally introduced."

"I know who you are," Lindy says.

"And I know who you are," Matt says. And Ben delivers another backhand, this one harder. "So Lindy," Matt continues, when it doesn't look as if Ben's going to say anything. "Ben and I were talking about going to the movie tomorrow. I was going to ask Wanda to

come.” Matt knees Ben.

“Yeah, and I, we, I was wondering if you wanted to come with us? Matt said he’d treat us all to pizza after.” Ben’s face is red, but Matt can tell his little brother is proud he got the words out.

“I’d really like to,” Lindy says and her face is red now, too. Matt bites down hard on his bottom lip to stop from laughing at his geek brother and this geek girl. “I’ll have to talk to my mom, though.”

“Sure,” Ben says and then stops.

“Why don’t you give Ben your phone number and he can call you tonight once we’ve finalized movie, time, and stuff like that. And then I can talk to your mom and give her the details,” Matt adds.

Ben gives his brother a grateful smile. When Matt wants to, he can be sensitive. But most of the time, his fun comes at Ben’s expense.

“Sure,” Lindy says. Ben pulls notebook and pen from his backpack and passes them to her. She writes her name, phone number, and address and passes it back. And with that out of the way, Ben is more relaxed.

“If you’re not in a rush, why don’t you sit with us a minute?” Ben asks.

Lindy places her backpack behind Ben then sits down next to him. Matt tries to inch Ben over so he’s closer to Lindy, but Ben sits firm. Lindy notices and smiles shyly. Then the two start talking.

Matt leans back on his elbows, drinks in the warmth of the sun and the easy hum of the young voices. Lost in a comfortable buzz, Matt thinks about his plans. He hopes that in the next year or two, he can make enough money to leave their father. Then he and Ben can live together and Ben can do his high school in one town. He doesn’t tell Ben about his plans. Matt has learned that hope is a terrible, lonely thing, too easily abandoned.

A car screeches to a halt in front of the church. The boys and Lindy look up. It’s Jack Humphreys. His BMW is older than Matt but in good condition because it’s one of two things Jack Humphreys takes pride in.

“Get your asses in gear, boys. We got to go home and pack. We’re out of here tomorrow,” Dad says. And from the bruise he’s sporting just below his eye, Matt knows some irate husband caught Dad in the act. And that’s the second thing Jack Humphreys takes pride in: his ability to get in a married woman’s bed.

Matt stands up and Ben grabs his wrist. “We can’t keep doing this, Matt. We just can’t,” Ben says. His eyes fill with tears.

Matt sits back down, draws Ben into him, kisses the boy's head, and says, "This is what is, Dude. Let's go. Dad's in a pissy mood. Let's not make this worse than it has to be." He telegraphs Lindy an apology over Ben's bent head.

Matt hauls Ben off the steps and grabs his kid brother's backpack. They walk to the far side of the car. Matt opens the back door, throws in the backpack, and Ben slides in. The young boy does not look at Lindy. Matt gets into the front seat. In the side mirror, Matt can see Lindy standing on the sidewalk. Ben's first girlfriend fades away. And Matt hears Ben's muffled sobs in the backseat. And he thinks about what a bitch hope can be, even hope for something so small as a double date to happen the next day.

A Work In Progress

Terry Sanville

First Chapter

I met Sandra while studying architecture at Berkeley; the year of the People's Park riots. She was waitressing at a café on Telegraph Avenue that catered to hippies who argued politics all night and worried about the draft and Vietnam. I was slurping bitter coffee and staring at my bearded reflection in the Formica tabletop when she tapped my shoulder.

"You want a refill?" She had green eyes.

"Huh? Ah, no, I gotta split...catch some shuteye."

"I'll get your check."

She retreated behind the counter and scribbled on a ticket. Long strawberry blond hair cascaded down her bulging chest. Returning, she slumped onto a chair and pulled a pack of Winstons from her apron.

"Mind if I crash for a minute?"

"No problem. You look tired."

"I hate working graveyard, but Barb's sick and...."

She reached over a shoulder and rubbed her upper back, wincing.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"I hope not. Spent all morning in the city, getting a tattoo at one of those dives in the Tenderloin."

"My pop has tattoos from the Navy."

"Yeah, well this one's different."

"No kidding. I'd like to see it."

"I'll bet you would," she said, grinning. "I'd have to take my blouse off to show you."

"Some other time?"

"Yeah, maybe...when my boyfriend's not around."

"Oh."

She laughed, a throaty sound that echoed in the empty cafe. "I didn't mean to play you like that."

"Pretty women do it all the time. So why'd you get a tattoo?"

"I want to tell a story, ya know, got a whole lifetime to finish it."

"Huh."

I swiped at the smoke curling up from her cigarette and stared into her face. "Well, I'd still

like to see the first chapter.”

She studied me. “Okay, come on.”

I followed her down a hallway and through an “Employees Only” door. She unbuttoned her blouse, and pulled it off. Braless, her tits were magnificent.

“Far out,” was all I could manage.

She chuckled and turned her back, her skin the palest white, like a gessoed canvas awaiting the painter’s brush. The tattoo started just below her left shoulder—an exotic jungle scene...a naked girl with green-gold eyes, pursed lips, and pink-tipped breasts, extended a hand toward something, someone not yet painted. The artist had laid in lots of detail and color shades.

“Jeez, that’s...that’s beautiful.”

“You really like it?” She looked over her shoulder. Something in her eyes made me look away.

“Yeah, that’s gonna be great. But you better put something on it. The skin’s red right here.” I gently touched an inflamed patch and we both shivered.

“I will at home.”

“When do you get off?”

“Too late for you.”

She dressed quickly and left me in the supply room with the vision of her porcelain body stuck in my mind. When I came out, she was talking with some dude at the counter and didn’t even wave when I left.

I got buried with schoolwork and didn’t return to the café for almost a week. When I asked the day-shift waitress about Sandra, she said she’d quit and didn’t know where she went. I felt cheated, like starting a good novel then losing it...only with Sandra, it was the original manuscript.

Growling Leopards

I’d been back from Vietnam for more than a decade when I ran into her again. I worked in Los Angeles, designing tract homes for valley subdivisions. After bending over a drafting board all day, I’d hang out at the clubs. Disco had died, replaced by a new generation of hair bands. I was camped at the bar of some Sunset joint, tugging on my goatee, when she plopped down next to me.

“Hey, if it isn’t Che Guevara,” she said.

“Do I know you?” I recognized her immediately but decided to be cautious.

“No, not really. Once in Berkeley....”

“The tattoo lady...yeah, now I remember.”

“What happened to your full beard and that bush of hair?”

“I gotta work, ya know. Wear the uniform.”

“You definitely look more ironed and pressed.”

“Where’d you go from Berkeley? The girls at the café said you’d quit and...”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather not relive the bad old days, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Let me buy you a drink.”

Sandra looked well into her 40s: Deep-set eyes bounded by laugh lines, hair a shade darker, teeth somehow more...more carnivorous. But her figure was fantastic. She must have caught me staring.

“You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?”

“About what?”

“My tattoo.”

“Actually, I was appreciating all of you. But, yeah, have you changed it?”

She grinned. “What do you think? I got married, have two wonderful kids, got divorced.”

“That makes for one hell of a tattoo.”

“I go to a guy in Venice Beach, smoke some weed so it doesn’t hurt so much.”

“So, how are you...ah...”

“...making a living?” she finished. “I’m not hooking if that’s what you think. I work in a respectable office shuffling paper all day.”

“Sounds as exciting as my design job.”

“So, do you want to see it?”

“What? Here?” I glanced around, searching for some cubbyhole where we might find privacy. But the club was filling, the band tuning up.

“I live just down the freeway,” she said. “Why don’t you come over for a glass of wine?”

“But your children?”

“They’re at my sister’s on a sleepover. Tonight, I’m a free-love hippie chick again.”

“It was never really free, was it?”

“That’s a strange thing to say. Sounds like a man that’s been burnt a few times.”

I nodded. “I haven’t exactly been lucky in love. If I had a tattoo, my back would be right out of the *Twilight Zone*.”

“Well, maybe tonight your luck will change.” She grinned and gathered up her purse.

We cruised the 405 in her Volvo station wagon and pulled into the parking lot of a pink stucco apartment. She lived on the third floor. Inside, she opened a bottle of merlot, and we

sat on the lanai and watched the twinkling lights of distant jets taking off from LAX. The August winds blew off the Mojave, warming the night. We talked about her marriage, how much she loved Jennifer and Tom, the sleezeball men she knew; about my time with the Army in Vietnam, psych rehab, and work. We'd killed two bottles by the time she offered.

"So, ya ready to see it?"

"Yes...ah, sure."

She clicked on the bedroom light and moved to a mirrored dressing table. Sandra stared into my eyes as she undid her blouse and skirt, slipped off her panties and bra and stood naked before me.

"You still want to see it?"

I felt my face flush. "Yes, I...I want to see it, touch all of it."

She turned slowly. The tattoo was three times larger than before. Below the naked girl and across the left side of her back, two impish children peeked out from the jungle undergrowth...that dissolved into a cityscape of houses and cars and white, black and brown people in some kind of market scene. But below her right shoulder, the jungle still held sway. Two leopards stared out from a brown freckled pattern, their mouths open, fangs bared. Black natives ran from them down her right side, their silhouettes wrapping around her ribs and stopping at a hip. The space in the center of her back next to the naked girl remained blank. I stroked her shoulder, hoping to calm the big cats, and myself.

"So what do you think?" she asked, leaning into me.

"I'm not sure. On one side the children are charming...but those...leopards..."

"Yeah, I know. They're my protectors. You're not the only one that's been hurt."

"What about the blank spot? Saving it for your lover's portrait?"

"Maybe. Maybe for myself."

I kissed her neck and she turned and came into my arms. We fell onto the bed, her breath hot in my ear. When she got up to put out the light, I tore off my clothes. As we thrashed about, I swore I heard big cats muttering outside in the darkness. Gradually, the night's stillness calmed our lust and we drifted off. I awoke to gray light filtering through the bedroom window. Sandra slept on her stomach, her tattoo an assortment of mottled blotches, the leopards quiet. With trembling fingers, I traced the images of the nymph and the cats, then dressed, and called a cab. I left my card on her nightstand.

Moon Rising

I never got used to being alone. But as the decades rolled past, I became resigned to

it. I drank too much but figured, so fucking what? Half of L.A. should be in a twelve-step program. On the bright side, I started my own architecture firm and the work got interesting: a resort hotel in Marina Del Rey, renovation of the Chateau Marmont off Sunset. And then the job on Catalina Island, the expansion of an old estate formerly owned by the Wrigley family.

I took the jet boat from Long Beach to Avalon, bucking winter seas. The island town was deserted. After taking a room at the Hotel Metropole, I strolled Crescent Avenue. Shops facing the harbor were empty. Only Luau Larry's showed any life. Rough men sat at the bar, downing tequila shots with beer chasers. The jukebox played Crosby, Stills and Nash's "Southern Cross". I found a table near the window and drank the afternoon away.

Stumbling outside near sunset, the frigid sea air hit me, causing my hips and knees to ache. But I made it to the beach before vomiting. The moon had come up. Across the channel, San Pedro twinkled through a rainbow haze.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"What?" I twisted around.

The woman was slender, well built, wearing tight running sweats, her white hair whipping in the wind. She grasped a three-pronged cane.

I grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry for...for being so gross."

"You're kidding me. You should see this place during a storm, when the boat crews get hammered at Larry's."

"I think I know." I wiped my mouth and white goatee on a handkerchief.

She limped toward me. "You here alone?"

"Yes. I'm an architect, working on a mansion project."

"Yeah, you got to be rich to live long in Avalon."

I studied her seamed face. Head clearing, my meager social graces returned. "Care to join me for some tea?" I felt for the brandy flask in my sports coat.

"Yes, there's a place a block down that serves my favorite...and terrific cheesecake."

Offering her my arm, we made our way to the coffee bar and took an inside table. The place smelled of incense and mocha.

As we sipped spiked Lapsang Souchong, she stared at me. "You know, I saw your name on the construction sign. Figured you'd show up one of these days."

My stomach tightened. "Do I know you?"

"You really don't recognize me, do you?"

I shuddered. "Sorry, but..."

“Do growling leopards mean anything?” She smiled, showing brilliant dentures.

“No way...you can't be...”

“It's been thirty years. What did you think I'd look like?”

“Sandra, I've never forgotten...why didn't you ever call?”

“Lots of reasons, most of them stupid. Besides, you're the man, that's your job.”

“One I've never been good at.”

“You were plenty good at other things that night.” She jabbed me in the ribs and laughed.

“Well, you certainly look...look great.”

“Don't give me that. Women get old while men get distinguished. It's not fair.” She continued to stare, drinking her tea. “I came to Avalon two years ago. I have a tiny place up canyon, a converted chicken coop really.”

“Why...why here?”

“Something about the spirit of this island calms me, helps me cope.”

“Cope?”

“Yes, I'm... I'm dying. Bone cancer...nasty stuff.”

“Ah, Sandra, I'm so...”

“I know. It's a real buzz kill. But these past months have been great. My kids and their families visit a lot, and the hospital folks are...”

I reached across the table and took her fingers into my brown-spotted hands, her skin almost transparent, like Japanese rice paper.

“You're the only woman I've known this long.”

“You think you know me?” Her eyebrows rose but her smile remained.

“More than the other women in my life.”

“It must be my tattoo. Do you want to see it?”

I nodded, not letting go of her hands.

“It's finished, you know. I had a guy in Redondo Beach add the final pieces last month. Come on.”

We wandered inland, along narrow streets lined with little bungalows, past the golf course and its café, shuttered for the night. On a side street, a tiny stone house crouched against the hillside, its porch clanging with wind chimes. I helped her up the steps into the single room filled with musty furniture and a twin bed. She snapped on the heater and poured wine. We drank and listened to canyon winds blow through the chaparral. I shivered and she moved close to me. I encircled her in my arms. Her body tightened and I loosened my embrace.

“You know, this is our third date,” she said and chuckled. “By the third date most men

expect the full tour.”

“So I was jumping the gun the last time?”

“No. We just needed to go quicker than most.”

She laid her head on my chest. I felt my heart thumping against her. The room warmed. The wine disappeared. Finally, Sandra rose from the couch.

“Come over near the light.”

She moved to her bed, clicked on a floor lamp, and pulled off her sweats. Her skin glowed like pale parchment. A vertical scar ran down one thigh. Curves had flattened. She removed her panties and bra and once again turned. The tattoo covered her entire back and most of her butt and upper thighs. Below the market scene, children played in a wooded park, climbed an oak to a waiting tree house, their faces golden in an afternoon sun. That scene merged with one of Avalon Harbour lit by a full moon. A sailboat charged toward the mainland, its sheets billowing, storm pennants whipping in the wind.

I held my breath as I studied the naked girl. The blank space next to her was filled. I couldn't help grinning. The young nymph extended her hand to an old woman, gaunt by comparison, but magnificent. The woman leaned on a three-pronged cane.

“So what do you think?” Sandra murmured.

“I...I think you're beautiful...your life is beautiful...such a wonderful read.”

“Huh?”

“It's...it's your story, remember?”

I removed my clothes. Compared to her illustrated form, I felt blank, anonymous. We slid into bed and spooned. With my cheek pressed gently against the young nymph, I traced the image of the old woman and thought about where to find such an artist...to tell my own tale to Sandra. Was it ever too late to start telling?

Burying Hobie Cat

Trey Edgington

The day I buried Marilyn's cat, I came in hung over as hell. Not that being hung over makes the day stand out; I usually was. I had recently left my wife due to a lack of sex and other crap I don't want to talk about. Anyway, Marilyn's cat, Hobie, had died the day before, and she had been crying on and off ever since. I was a little more concerned with my own problems and didn't really give the slightest fuck about Hobie, though I knew it was a life-altering event for a fifty-year-old lady with no kids. I walked into my office about fifteen minutes late and found the post-it note stuck to the computer screen with a list of tasks written on it.

Take eBay to the post office
Oil change in the Escalade
Panties at Neiman's
Dig Hobie Cat grave

The whole list pissed me off, but I sure as hell was in no mood to dig a cat grave, especially since it was a hundred and ten degrees outside. I walked into her office to complain.

"Marilyn, are you serious about the panties?" I said, trying to be nice about the cat.

"Well, yes, Todd. I ordered them last week, and I'm running out," she said, grabbing a tissue to blow her pretty, fake nose.

"Okay, fine, but I got stuff to do after work, so I don't know if I'm going to be able to get to all that." I noticed that the new stuffed leopard she'd shot in Africa had come in, but decided against commenting. He was mounted next to an eighteenth century French armoire that was painted pink and gold.

"Hobie Cat's in the freezer." She started bawling. "So I guess he can wait."

"I'm sorry. I guess I can probably get it all done today." I felt bad for her, even though on most days I didn't like her too much, and I guess I sort of felt bad about Hobie Cat too. He was one of the cutest little bastards I've ever seen, doing back flips in the living room, catching imaginary birds. I stepped to the side of her desk and awkwardly put my hand on her shoulder, trying unsuccessfully to comfort her. She handed me the keys to the Caddy and her American Express card, and I went to pack up the eBay packages.

Like I said, Marilyn Huckleberry was fifty-years-old, divorced and had no children. What she did have was a salary of close to two hundred thousand dollars a year and a huge set

of fake knockers. She was a CPA by trade but spent most of her time at the office selling antiques on eBay. You name it: milk glass, early twentieth century porcelain mummies, Wedgewood plates, Murano glass, Lalique crystal, the original Fiestaware, and all sorts of other bullshit. She spent five hundred dollars a week on the lottery and thousands a year on various plastic surgeries. She bought hundred dollar panties, five hundred dollar shoes, and jeans that cost a grand. I was privy to all these things because I was her personal assistant and the one who actually purchased most of them.

I was sweating my nuts off standing in line at the post office and getting more pissed off with every dipshit move of the customers in front of me. That's when I saw this girl standing in the outer lobby looking through her mail. She was a brunette with hair commercial hair and a cheerleader smile. Her tits were class A stripper and so was her ass. Her thong straps were poking out of her low-rider jeans, as if to say, "Hi, Todd. Pull us down." She had a tiny curve to her stomach, making it all the more sexy. Her Playboy bunny bellybutton ring twinkled as the light through the blinds caught it in flashes. At first, seeing her made me excited in an animal sort of way, but then I realized that I probably wouldn't ever be getting a girl that looked like that. The realization pissed me off—also in an animal sort of way.

As the line moved slowly on, my thoughts went to Hobie Cat. He had been diagnosed with feline leukaemia a few months before, and Marilyn had taken him almost weekly down to the vet school at Texas A&M. I had no idea what they did there, but I knew it cost a shitload of money. Marilyn had cut her lottery spending to only two hundred a week. He was barely a year old, still mostly kitten, and I didn't really think it was fair. Then again, nothing was.

"Sir, you're next," the guy behind me said.

"Oh, shit. Sorry about that." By the time I got done at the counter, the girl I'd seen in the lobby was nowhere to be found, not that I would have done anything anyway.

I read an old issue of *Spa* magazine at the Sewell Cadillac dealership where I was getting the oil changed, and drank some burnt coffee. Right in the middle of reading an article about gem therapy, my stomach started churning. Seconds later, I knew that it wasn't a false alarm. I walked straight to the bathroom and almost knocked over an old man as he came out of the stall. From the smell of it, he wasn't feeling well either, but I didn't give a damn. I almost didn't get my boxers down before it gushed. It came in waves, never fully satisfying. When I was finally done, I had to wash my face and my hands. The car was done, and I was on my way to Neiman Marcus at Prestonwood.

I hated going to Neiman's for a few reasons. First, there was a bunch of shit there I couldn't

afford. What makes that even more troublesome is that I didn't even want most of it. I just wished I could afford it. Secondly, there are a bunch of snooty-ass salespeople looking at you like you can't afford it. I guess that sort of goes with the first one, but the fact is that they probably couldn't afford it either without their discount. Finally, there was the panty section. I don't know what it is about the panty section, but it drives me totally insane. I look at the panties and bras and wonder what they are going to look like on the women who eventually buy them. In my head, they always look good. Better than good. They look wet dream porno good. I start picturing all sorts of scenes in which I'm having a crazy affair with rich, North Dallas women in the houses their husbands are still paying for. The really sick part is that sometimes I do this at the grocery store in the tampon aisle. I start wondering what kind of vaginas all those things are going to be going into. In my head they are always super perfect pussies—the kind you picture before you've ever seen one. I've got some serious issues.

On the way up the escalator, I could smell the perfume and makeup from the counters below me and almost lost it. The generic woman smell was not what my over-active imagination needed. I got those thoughts out of my head and continued towards the panty section. Because I wasn't in the mood for any of the fantasies, I tried not to see the panties, keeping my eyes on the floor as I walked through the evil Neiman's panty section. Though this was unsuccessful for the most part, I got to the counter without flipping out, paid for her crap, and left.

When I got into my car, I had to see what she had bought this time. Usually, it was some crazy see-thru thongs, the piece of cloth being barely bigger than a quarter. This was always shocking because of her age and all, but I always had to look—just to see. Almost like a kid at Christmas, I opened the box and pulled back the tissue paper. My hands were shaking from both excitement and hangover. Finally, I saw the craziest shit to date. It was a set of thigh highs that attach to the waist thing with elastic straps. Who in the hell is she going to wear that for? I put the stuff back in the box and went to get lunch.

Back at the office, I ate lunch at my desk. When I finished, I went into Marilyn's office to see if she wanted to talk. We had a weird relationship. Sometimes, I couldn't stand her. She would make me copy a whole antiques price book so she wouldn't have to carry the original to estate sales. After I would get done, she would tell me what a great job I'd done, like I was some fucking retard who just learned how to run a copier instead of a grown man in college.

Other times we got along pretty good. She would buy me lunch at some really nice place and we would talk about nothing in particular. She gave me odd jobs when I needed the money and paid for my groceries when I went shopping for her. Sometimes she gave me odd

jobs at her house when I didn't need the money. I would file stuff and she would work on the computer and we'd watch *Wheel of Fortune* on the little TV in her office. After the first commercial break, she'd make Rotel cheese dip, which meant we didn't have to pretend to work anymore. Usually, after Wheel, I would go home, unless some particularly interesting movie was coming on. I guess she sort of paid me to hang out, but I was pretty lonely too and didn't mind. We were both divorced, so I guess I thought she understood, though we never talked about it. When I was going through tough times, she would send me on errands that lasted all day and amounted to almost nothing. One time she sent me to check every store in town for prices on this one Calphalon pot. I liked doing stuff like that most of the time because I could just drive around and not have to talk to anyone.

She was on the phone with the company's attorney when I went in there, so I headed over to her house to start digging. She told me to dig the grave between the two big crepe myrtles next to the fence. Though it was a good five feet from where I had dug Winnie's grave a few years before, I was still worried that my shovel would find her little doggie coffin.

She had two shovels and a pick by the garage door, and a pair of women's gardening gloves sitting on the counter. I thought about looking at Hobie in the freezer, but decided against it. I guess I kind of loved that little sucker too. He was a sweet little bastard, the kind of cat that rubs on your leg when you come home and doesn't need too much. He was tough, too. One time, when he was chasing a bug through her house, he slammed his little head into the wall when he couldn't stop fast enough on the slick, hardwood floor. He looked over at us, shook his head, licked himself, and walked into the kitchen as if nothing had happened. Sadly, he hadn't been as playful in the last few months, but I'm sure he fought as hard as anyone.

I thought I was sort of in the mood for digging when I got there. It would be nice to do something physical and get something done. I pictured the shovel going in easy, like in the movies, with barely any pressure from my foot. Maybe an hour's worth of work. That's what I was thinking when I took my shirt off and carried the stuff out back. Looking at the ground, I remembered that the soil was solid clay with some chunks of chalk mixed in.

I scraped off the top layer of St. Augustine and the soft soil an inch below that, making a neat rectangle that would fit the kitty casket. At that point the shovel became useless. I picked at the clay for about fifteen minutes, switching hands when one side of my back would start to hurt. It was hot as fuck, and I could smell beer in my sweat. Blisters were forming on my hands. I shoveled the chunks of clay and chalk out the best I could, making a pile next to Winnie's grave. I repeated this process for forty-five minutes or so.

I noticed myself in her window and wondered when my arms had become decent again.

I had been working out, but I was drinking every day and eating almost nothing. Of course they were a little pumped from the digging, but they were even more cut than I thought. I was thinking I was looking pretty sexy, all tan and buff in my wife beater with dirt smudges on my arms and shirt. Then the part of my brain that still worked said, “Stop looking at yourself, you egomaniac. You ain’t no goddamn Brad Pitt.” (That part of my brain apparently wasn’t paying attention in English class.)

Looking longingly at the pool, I adjusted my junk and told myself to work. I continued picking and digging for another hour until Marilyn came home. As I stood looking at the hole that was now two feet deep, she brought me a bottle of Evian.

“How’s it going?”

“I’m about half way there,” I said. “You wouldn’t happen to have any more gloves?” I showed her the bloody spots on my palms, hoping she would decide to give me a raise.

“I sure don’t,” she said, taking my hands. “I’m sorry.”

“How about tape?”

“Tape, I have,” she said as she rubbed a smudge of clay from my forehead.

I followed her inside, wondering why she was being so touchy with me. I noticed that her tits were looking particularly good and started wondering. Then, thankfully, the working part of my brain told me to stop it. She pulled out the first aid kit from under the kitchen sink and handed me the tape.

“Do you need any gauze?”

“No thanks.” I put the tape across the palms of both hands and rings of it around my thumbs.

As I started back outside, she said, “If you need anything, just let me know.” She was giving me this look that she’d only given me once before when I’d changed the battery on her Vette, like there was something she wanted to say, but had already decided not to. It was one of those looks you give a person to get them to ask you why you are looking at them like that. I wasn’t asking a damn thing.

The sun felt good after being in the house. I picked up the pick and continued busting up the clay. I looked up at the window again and noticed that Marilyn was watching me through the glass. I looked back down and kept digging. She was arranging small porcelain antique Santas in a display case. After a while, I got the idea that she was getting all hot looking at me through the window, but then the not-so-egomaniac part of my brain told me that she was probably just lonely or something. I still wondered though. What if?

I kept digging for another hour or so, trying not to look up at the window, except when I

had to adjust myself. I waited until she wasn't looking to do that. My arms and back weren't hurting anymore, and it felt good. Finally, the hole was deep enough and I went inside to tell her. This was the part that I wasn't looking forward to. I would rather dig a thousand cat graves than watch one lonely woman put her kitty in one.

I walked in the door leading to the kitchen, but before I could say anything, she called my name. I told her to hold on while I took my boots off. I walked into her sunken living room and she wasn't there.

"Marilyn, where are you?"

"I'm in here." The sound was coming from her bedroom.

I walked in and saw her in the bathroom. She had changed out of her blue silk tank top and dress slacks and was now wearing a t-shirt tied in the back and blue jean shorts. There were tiny blue veins near her ankles, but everything else looked okay. She smelled like baby powder. Things were about to happen, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

"Can you get that plant down?" she said, pointing to an ivy above her bathtub. "I can't reach it." I stepped into the tub and up onto the edge near the wall. As I reached up for the pot, I felt her hand on my back. "I don't want you to fall," she said. Then her other hand was on my stomach where my shirt had come up. I grabbed the small pot, and her hand went down the front of my pants. My stomach went with her hand like it does every time a new girl sticks her hand down there. I stepped down and put my head against the tile, letting her keep going as long as she wanted to. I looked into her closet and focused on pair of pink high-heeled shoes. She was kissing my back and still rubbing. The air conditioner was blowing on me, evaporating the sweat and giving me goosebumps. I was a little freaked out, but didn't know how to stop it, and it felt nice to be touched again.

"Lay down," she said. I think I said okay and lay down in the tub. She pulled my tank top off and then my pants. She put a condom on me and took the tape off my hands. She gently kissed my blisters, and put me inside her. That sounds dumb, but I don't want to say we started fucking or banging or she started to ride this dick. She simply put it in there and lay down on me. I rubbed her back as softly as I could. She was crying quietly and the tears tickled as they rolled down the side of my chest. I don't know why she was crying, but I don't really think it was all about Hobie.

The whole thing made me start thinking about my wife and all the mean shit she said. I knew it was bullshit, but for some reason, I held on to it. I guess I thought the pain made it real or worthwhile or something. I really just wanted to run—to go home and drink beer, watch MASH, and not think about any of it, though I knew I couldn't. I couldn't let her

finish burying him alone.

Finally, she got up and walked to the little toilet room next to her closet without saying anything. I didn't know what the hell to do at this point, so I put my clothes back on and the semi-used rubber into my pocket. I walked into the kitchen and got a beer out of the refrigerator.

I put my boots on sitting on the kitchen floor and wondered what the fuck would happen next. I decided to start the funeral by myself and walked out into the garage to grab Hobie out of the freezer. His fur felt crispy through the bag, like cold Christmas decorations. I carried him out to the gravesite and laid him down in the coffin still in the bag. His little head was poking out of the bag now, and the frost on his whiskers was melting fast. I smoked a cigarette, finished the beer and waited for Marilyn.

Finally, she came out, looking like nothing had happened.

"You got him ready?" she asked, putting her hair in a scrunchy.

"Yeah."

"I don't want to look at him anymore."

"Okay," I said and put the lid on the casket and the Velcro straps around it.

"Todd, can you say something?"

"Say something?" I asked.

"You know, like something to Jesus about Hobie going to heaven."

I couldn't remember a damn thing to say to Jesus about Hobie going to heaven. Not even that ashes to ashes stuff. Finally, I remembered my grandmother saying, "Just talk to him."

"Uh, Jesus," I said, grabbing Marilyn's hand. "We hope that you will see to it that little Hobie here has a good time in kitty heaven." I paused. "He was a good kitty, and he never crapped on the floor. He was more than just a kitty though. He was our friend. And, Jesus, can you please help us through this tough time? I know that you and your old man do stuff that we can't understand, like taking young Hobie, but please help us to work through whatever pain we have. We may not know why it hurts, but it sure as hell does. Thank you, Jesus. Amen."

I started to cover Hobie's casket with dirt, and Marilyn went in to make Rotel dip. I got as much dirt on top of him as I could, put her tools away and walked inside to say bye.

"Marilyn, I'm gonna head home. You need anything else?"

"No, thank you. I'll be fine," she said, dipping a plain Dorito into the cheese dip.

I was halfway out the door when she stopped me.

"Todd?"

“Yes?”

“None of this ever happened.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean none of it. None of it ever happened.”

“I hope not,” I said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I think she meant something about the nature of reality, like nothing ever really happens, but I’m not sure. Maybe that’s what gets her through. Pulling out of her driveway, I decided it was better not to start this bullshit philosophical discussion with myself. It was better just to get drunk and figure it out tomorrow.

Our Children

Maria McInnis

In the beginning, there was darkness. This is so, for that is where your people began: in darkness.

Once, long ago, long before you existed, we were here. This world belonged to us, and it was from us that you inherited it.

Who created us, we know not. It is possible that we were always here, chasing stars as the world we left behind turned ever so slowly, granting us time to let you grow and evolve.

We expected to return to beings like ourselves, ones who respected the delicate balance of the planet we left behind. Ones who felt the Spirit that bound us all together, and used it to create wonders.

Instead we returned to a dying planet, one whose spirit screamed to us for mercy. Fresh blood sang from the ground in anger and sorrow, and the heart song of our children wailed for salvation from this self-created nightmare.

Our children had created war.

From our essence were you created. Living Spirit that stared out into the vastness of the universe. You were created there, where nothing could harm you, but you had no flesh.

So we made it, taking the essence from the planet's life, and adding to it our own. We wanted you to be strong.

Of course, your Spirits were young at first; like children you knew only the things around you. Only when you began to watch us, to mimic us, to eat of that which opened your mind to the Spirit, did you become aware of yourself.

So you clothed yourself, and instead of embracing the connection, you fell back, doing that which we never did to each other: hid. You hid from us, your confusion palpable, your fear a wave that touched us all.

You had not been ready for this awakening, you were still so young, but here you were, afraid and confused, clothed in what you could find because you were suddenly aware.

Your childhood, so simple, was over. We wept for you, even as we sent you out to touch more, to learn more.

We taught you to hunt, gave you tools, showed you fire and the stones easiest to work into plows, knives, and ornament. We showed you what would nourish your flesh, how to create shelter, and what to do to clothe yourselves. We taught you from the planet so you could survive.

And you did.

Your awareness had its price however, and had been tainted by guilt and fear. So we watched you, hoping to ease your heavy hearts. You did not understand why we had you tilling the land and cultivating the animals of the planet. Anger and shame undeserved entered your life, but still we tried to speak to your hearts.

The first time death came unto you, the very planet screamed. So terrible it was to have Spirit ripped from flesh before true knowledge had been found. It was in that moment you realized you could die, and so death found you. Death found you all.

For the Spirit, there is nothing so terrifying as the unknown, and so you learned to create. In that state of infinite possibility you did, but still there was much to learn.

You needed to unlearn death, but the more you tried, the shorter your lives grew. True, some took our lessons, blossoming into the adulthood of the undying spirit, but most became obsessed with death. They actively sought it, and created it. Lessons were lost, and the cycle began.

Despite it all, we taught you what we could about the world, about love, about respect, and about beauty. What you create from the planet, we gave you, taking the precious few who conquered death.

And then we left you, leaving few to guide you. Hoping it would be enough, for all children must be allowed to grow.

Beyond you, stars, time moves differently. It has very little meaning there, but there is peace, and thus stillness.

We knew that when next we saw you, you would be changed. We hoped the examples of your undying brothers would inspire you.

They did, but with that inspiration you made war. You argued amongst yourselves about details around a core message which was simply love. Every story held it, but you overlooked it.

You let anger, pain, hate, and dreaded death rule you. And death had grown to encompass the very planet.

A noble thing was hobbled and dying. You had learned control, power, and submission. And so you created it.

Yet you wail for release, for the spirit to be free to love with harmony.

Be free from your constraints, our children, for you alone hold the key to the salvation you seek. The answer is in every great story. Never mind the details, they are useless things twisted by language and power. Remember what is important. Only then may you join us in

undying Spirit beyond the stars. Only then can we return to a world that lives, and breathes without looming shadows. Embrace beauty, creation, love, and life. Forget the rest.

You seek salvation. It is already yours. Touch it and you shall be free.

There is much to learn, much more than you know. We are waiting.

It's Only Human

Emily Graff

Connor comes down from the city on the weekends and sleeps on the floor of my bedroom. He used to live down the street until he moved away to school and now he only comes back for a couple of days, long enough to kill time on my parents' roof, smoking cigarettes and kissing me. In town, he can hear gunshots at night and people will break into your car to get at change on the seat, but he can't live here anymore. Molly, his mom, is an obsessive compulsive and she can't handle having him in the house. I watched her hit Connor once; clean across the face, because he wouldn't sweep up the Cheerios he had spilled. She geared up her hand behind her back and came around with it in full swing, so that when she hit him, his head snapped to one side and a bit of spit flew out of his mouth. She had to angle her hand up because Connor's so tall, but he wouldn't have fought back even if she was a bigger woman. He knows his mom's sick, everyone does.

"How're you doing?" he asks. He pulls a cigarette from the pack and lights it.

I shrug in response. My sneakers scrape the roof and I pause to listen. My parents know Connor and I come up here and get drunk and make out, our shins getting all scratched up on the rough shingles, but they just let it slide. When Mom first moved here from Brazil, she was a really strict Catholic and everything was a sin. Then she met my dad and got pregnant with me and stopped talking about God.

"How's the therapy going?" he says.

"It's going," I shrug.

I push some of his hair off his forehead and watch him inhale. He holds his cigarette close to the web of his hand, between his middle and ring finger, so it looks like he's cupping his chin. I lean down close enough so the smoke ghosts over my face and makes my eyes water.

He cuts his eyes away. "Come on, Trish, you've been doing this for eight months."

He means the therapy.

"What do you want me to do?" I ask, "Discover repressed memories? I remember I was fourteen. I remember." I pull my bare legs up to my chest and tug the bottom of my shirt over my knees. It's late September and the heat is just starting to die down, letting cool little exhales of wind sweep through the night.

Connor slips out of his coat and slides it around my shoulders. He's in a faded black T-shirt with the words "Get Blown" across the chest. Since he moved away last year, his

shoulders seemed to have squared off more, like they're getting ready to carry the world.

"I'm not cold," I mumble.

Connor ignores this. "Maybe you should just get out of here. Get away from this place and forget it."

"Forget it? He's my fucking uncle. What do I do? Look the other way at Thanksgiving?"

Connor holds up his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, I'm sorry."

"No, seriously, that's all I'm ever going to be remembered for."

Connor's forehead creases and he sucks his teeth in annoyance. "Oh come on, that's bullshit. Do you actually worry about that?"

Creeping over to the edge of the roof, I kneel down and roll over on my back, my head lolling off the edge. Below me are my mother's manicured flowerbeds and my dad's Lexus parked on the cobblestone driveway.

Connor's knees scrape the shingles as he stands up. The blood pulses through my temples in time to his footsteps. He stands above me, one foot on either side of my knees and a joint in between his fingers. From this angle, it looks like he could be ten feet tall.

"Oh please, don't jump," Connor says, his wry smile wrapped around the cigarette. "You really have to stop wearing my clothes."

I'm wearing one of his old T-shirts, stretched loose and thin with age. The fabric hangs away from my chest and skin, obscuring the swell and slope of my body with such thoroughness that I wouldn't even have to wear a bra if I didn't want to.

When I hit puberty, I started looking too old way too young. I bought tube tops and little platform heels and glitter makeup. I learned to giggle. Then seven years ago, I was spending the night at my Aunt Marian's house and I woke up with her new husband on top of me. After that, I stopped buying tank tops.

"Categorizing things helps people feel better about their own lives," I say, returning to the previous subject. "They just want everyone to fit in a little slot."

"No one thinks of you that way," Connor says, his voice tight as he tries to hold in the smoke. He holds out the joint to me.

"Everyone thinks of me that way. It's only human."

"Trish, stop."

I pluck the joint from his fingers and take a long pull.

After what happened to me got out, it stopped mattering if I was hot or bitchy or funny and the only thing that mattered was what he did to me. When the most remarkable thing about you is your pain, then you go into this whole other category based around what you've

felt. After all you did to try to overcome whatever shit's happened to you, someone's going to put you right back there just because that's the way they're going to remember your name. You become the sum of your injuries.

Tomorrow is Monday, and Connor will wake up and crawl out of my bed at six in the morning to make it to school on time. He'll kick the blankets around on the floor so they look slept in and then he'll drive back into town in his 1982 BMW that has no dashboard. But tonight, the sky is clear and you can see a few stars fighting their way through the glow of the streetlights. The air smells burnt and rich with warm earth and bonfires.

"Hey," he murmurs. "Gotta tell you something."

"Kay."

He keeps his lips against my ear. "Don't be mad but I'm short on cash and I took a modeling job."

When Connor was 17, everyone started to notice that he was beautiful. It seemed to creep up on me, but everyone else saw signs of it. It was there in his square jaw, in his long, lean body and in his intense, unwavering stare. Since he moved to university, modeling agencies have started sniffing around him. He doesn't talk about it much because he always said he'd never do it, that modeling is one step above public masturbation, but I know that a guy that looks like Connor isn't going to spend his life on rooftops in Podunk, Nowhere.

"Oh," I whisper. "I thought you said—"

"I know, I know. But I'm so fucking broke."

There's no real way to fight that, to throw a fit and yell that he can't become that person because then he'll leave. That when he goes, that hollow in my chest will collapse and eat up all the other stuff around it until I'm a papery husk that blows away one night while I sit on the roof waiting for him.

"Are they paying you a lot?" I ask.

He nods, hands me the joint. "Four grand, I couldn't believe it."

"What do you have to do?" I say. I want to know everything and nothing at the same time.

He runs his hand through his hair and his bangs stick straight up. "Dunno."

"How can you just not know? Don't they have to tell you?" I demand.

"No, I guess not." He laughs and it's so tight and awkward that it makes my bowels clench with shame.

I go quiet and pick at loose threads on the knee of my jeans. Once when I was visiting him at school, one of his girlfriends told me that I should model. She looked me up and down and quizzed me about my height and my weight until I had to excuse myself and go dry

heave in the bathroom. Connor waited ten minutes until he came to find me. He brought me a shiny flask full of spiced rum and pulled me into one of the shower stalls.

“They were all looking at me,” I whispered.

“Don’t worry about the girls, okay? They’re just trying to be nice,” he reassured.

We shared the rum on the floor of the shower, the tiles damp and cold beneath us, as he kissed my hairline and picked at the chipped paint on my toenails. Eventually, the feeling of the girl’s eyes faded as Connor undid his belt and I hiked up my shirt and he smiled at me in a crooked, gentle way that seemed to say “please.”

Inside, we undress in silence, my back to him. When I drop my loose jeans, he comes up behind me and hooks his fingers under the band of my shirt and helps it off. I reach up behind me to dig my fingers in his hair and he kisses my neck.

“I’m not going anywhere, okay?” he says. “The modeling doesn’t change anything. I won’t find anyone better than you.” He squeezes my hand, but I don’t respond. “Say that you know that.”

I turn and kiss him with enough force to bruise. We move to the bed, my head spinning from the dope, and Connor touches me with the tips of his fingers and never climbs on top of me. We have had sex four and a half times. The fifth time, he slid on top of me in the clumsy shuffle of our bodies and a wave of shame and nausea came spilling up from my thighs. I kicked and fought until Connor was standing beside my head, one hand cupping his bloody nose. When I started to cry, he whispered, “Everything’s all right, I got it. Everything’s okay.”

Last week, I cut out an ad in the paper asking for female models. I keep it in my back pocket all day and sometimes I tuck my fingers in there when I’m at work, putting through cereal and spinach and Pepsi at the convenience store. The whispery edge of the paper is a promise. It reassures that people won’t always be asking Connor, “Why her?”

I leave early on Wednesday because the trip into the city always takes three and a half hours as soon as you hit the traffic. The ad sits beside me on the passenger seat. When I put it there, I had to resist the urge to put the seatbelt around it.

Everything feels alien when I’m alone in the city. I don’t come in much and when I do, it’s always with Connor. We stay with his friends in bachelor apartments that have bathtubs in the kitchen and go out to underground blues clubs that don’t ask for my ID. Now, I stay with my cousin Angie and borrow a dress that looks like it was made out of leech skin.

“God, Trish, I would kill for your legs. You should wear heels,” Angie says.

The dress sucks at my flesh and sticks to my back and breasts.

“No, I’ll kill myself. My sneakers are fine.”

On the fifteenth floor of a downtown high-rise, a line of painfully skinny girls with nicotine stains on their fingers stretches to the elevator. My sneakers make my feet look like paddles and the girls in their needle stilettos smirk at me. When my number is called, I slip the shoes off before going through the door.

A tight-lipped woman with fake breasts sits in the middle of the table. She glances up at me and her eyes are bored and heavy with makeup.

“Height?” she asks.

“Uh, around 5’9,” I mumble.

A lithe man in a bright pink suit snorts. “Well, is it or isn’t it?”

“It’s 5’9.”

The questions are straightforward and edged in brutality, like quick paper cuts from all angles. The lithe man gets up at one point and shoves my dress up to wrap a tape measure around my thigh. He glares at me because my knees won’t stop shaking. His fingers are cockroaches skittering up my leg. Something surfaces in a swampy part of my mind; the whisper of bed sheets being pulled back and the pressure of fat, sausage-like fingers pressing down over my nose and mouth.

“Good legs,” the woman notes, ignoring me completely, “but her butt is a bit big.”

“She’d be hot in jeans,” the man adds.

“Yeah, but Jesus, look at the size of her feet,” she says and they both look down and nod somberly. My skin seems to catch fire from my chest up and my hands are cold and wet around my old sneakers. If Connor were here, he’d grab my hand and pull me out of this room, take me back home and skip the rest of his classes. He would stay in the shower with me and run a bar of soap down my back until I felt okay again.

“Patricia?” the man clips. They’ve continued talking without me. “You’re very lucky. You can come back next week.”

“Oh, thank you.”

They nod in unison and don’t look up again.

I am very lucky.

On the way out, I’m handed a slip of paper and told not to lose it. I clutch it until I reach my car, press it between the steering wheel and my palm as I turn onto the highway and head home. The dress is stripped off the second I get out of the city and I toss it into the backseat. I drive down the highway in my underwear listening to old BB King tapes and letting the wind snarl my hair. The leaves are just starting to get that dusty, thick look that they always

do in fall and the heat today is sweet and low. Connor keeps calling my cell phone, sending it skittering across the dashboard, but I can't answer yet. When I pick up, I'll tell him that he can love me now, it's okay. I have the paper that says it's all right for us to be together. I'll buy tank tops again and learn to stop crying. Our perfect love will be spelled out in the pages of magazines around the world. We will be forever connected through the perfume ads and fashion spreads, always as close as the next newsstand.

Mr. Freeze

Adrienne Mercer

She's never held such a pleasing armload of flowers. Maren is only eight and has no idea what sort of flower they are, but she likes the weight of the bouquet in the crook of her elbow. On the way home from school she discovered the bush in the vacant lot near her house, and as she picked, she began imagining the blooms in a tall, square vase in the bay window at home. Maren hopes the sight of the flowers will melt away the worry lines that crease her mother's forehead.

On her way out of the vacant lot, Maren passes her classmate Leah Guy. Leah smiles and remarks, "Pretty flowers! Those are lilacs."

Something about Leah's tone makes Maren uneasy. Who, exactly, is Lilac? Maren has never heard the name before. Leah continues across the vacant lot to her house, tap shoes softly clunking together as they dangle from her left hand. Leah is nine and has a long black ponytail and always wears pretty dresses to school. Her mom is a nurse at Royal Columbian, where Maren's grandmother works in the repair room sewing buttons and ties back onto hospital scrubs.

Maren wonders if Leah will tell on her. She watches the older girl walk away.

When Maren can't see Leah anymore she looks down at the flowers. They are vibrant next to her deep green t-shirt, but suddenly the bouquet doesn't seem so nice. She wonders who Lilac is and if he or she will phone over to the house later, during supper. Maren's mother might answer and then as she listens she will look over at the spray of stolen flowers and her eyes will shift slightly and she will be sad. Again. Still.

Maren drops to her knees and, grabbing a rock, begins to carve a hole in the earth. Flowers scatter around her and bits of dirt fall on the petals. As soon as there is enough space she dumps the blooms in. She works quickly filling in the hole, wondering about Leah Guy. She wishes she'd never picked the flowers because maybe now she is in a lot of trouble. Maybe at Maren's house the phone is ringing and her mother or grandmother is crossing the front room to answer it.

The dirt under her bitten-down fingernails stings, but Maren keeps scooping dirt over the depression until all of the star-shaped flowers are covered up. She stomps the ground down, trying to get it even. When she is finished, the flattened dirt looks like the tomcat grave in her cousin's back yard.

She measures her steps all the way to the curb. A terrible feeling is rising in the pit of her stomach.

A long thin wrapper catches her eye. It is shoved against the curb and still has a bit of purple juice in it. The label reads Mr. Freeze. Maren mouths the words a few times, staring, and then she bends to pick up the wrapper. The purple juice inside makes her think of teenagers in the summertime and suddenly she wonders what it would be like to be in grade seven, to have a boyfriend, to wear lip smackers. She wonders what unpleasant things will happen to her when she is a teenager and whether she will ever think back to this afternoon in the vacant lot, to the cold purple flowers under the earth and the long narrow strip of plastic in her hand.

Two years ago, she thinks, I was only in grade one. The immensity of the thought bothers her, but she wouldn't have known how to explain it to anybody.

Maren sucks and sucks and sucks the juice out of the Mr. Freeze wrapper. If only she hadn't buried those purple flowers. That is something that can't be undone, and now that she's done it, things don't feel right on the inside of her mind. She wouldn't have known how to explain that, either.

The Hunt

Adrienne Mercer

She told herself it was a social experiment as she dialled the final digits from the ad. Just a social experiment and this was the last time she was going to do it.

A somehow scratchy digital recording clicked on. With generic rock music in the background, a young, sleazy female voice spoke, breathy in her ear.

“Welcome to the party line,” the vixen said, “It’s \$3.99 a minute, the best deal for meeting new friends...or more.”

The rock music swelled into a porno-esque bar or two. She squirmed, this part always made her want to laugh, but she just didn’t want to laugh in public. Not sitting alone at the table, even with a cell phone to her ear. Might look like a weirdo.

“So lick your lips and warm up that tongue,” the sultry-toned mistress instructed, “You’re about to be connected to the hottest party in town. Please hold.”

There was dead air, a click, then some more rock music. Finally another click and she was connected. She felt the familiar rush as now the hunt was really on. Time to cast the net.

“Hey!” she began with a smile, “Who’s looking for a party tonight?”

“Finally, a lady enters,” a deep voice said.

“That’s right. I’m here, who are you?”

“I’m Darren. And who are you?”

“I’m Angela. Are we alone here?” Usually there were more people on the line. She listened hard for any extra breathing.

“There was another guy here...Artie?”

Dead air.

“I guess he’s gone,” Darren said, “we’re all alone.”

She giggled, “Ooh...how intimate.”

Darren laughed. His laugh sounded good. Smooth, deep. She was excited; he might actually be good looking. She didn’t want to fool around anymore, she pounced.

“Whatta ya doing tonight? Wanna hook up?” she asked.

“Uh...” Darren sounded caught off guard, perhaps amazed at his luck, “I think that can be arranged.”

“You know the coffee shop on Main?”

“The one with the big muffin guy in the window?”

She laughed, looking at Mr. Muffin in his top hat and cane painted on the shop front window. “Yeah, that one. I’m working here right now. I get off in an hour. Can you pop on by?”

“Uh...sure. How will I know you?”

“The nametag.”

They laughed.

“How will I know you?” she asked, hoping to sound coy.

“I’ll be wearing my eight-ball jacket.”

“Can you bring me a flower,” she asked, “so I’ll be sure it’s you?”

“Uh...sure. See you in an hour. Angela, right?”

“Right. Angela. See you soon, Darren.”

The thrill of winning surged through her and the seeds of anticipation bloomed within her like fireworks. For the next hour, every time that a person walked through the door, her eyes snapped up and her heart leapt.

Finally, a few minutes before the appointed time, a man came in wearing an ugly, outdated jacket and holding a droopy daisy in his hand. He was average looking at best, but it didn’t matter really. He’d do.

He was bad at hiding his excitement as he shyly looked over the staff behind the counter, scanning their nametags.

Connie. Laura. Angela! Angela was a fat and pockmarked female of indeterminate age.

She tried not to laugh from her vantage point at the table as she watched Darren’s face fall as he crushed the flower in his hand, quickly stuffing it into his pocket. He turtled his head into the collar of his coat and slunk out of the store.

She shook her head. She’d seen worse reactions. It was just a social experiment, and that was the last time she’d do it.

Bios

Lynn Atkinson started writing poetry two years ago after a 20-year career in journalism. She has been published in the University of Toronto Hart House Review.

Anne Baldo lives in Windsor, Ontario. She has previously been published in *All Rights Reserved*, *Lichen*, *Wicked Alice*, and *The Minnesota Review*.

Jean Braithwaite writes and teaches non-fiction at the University of Texas-Pan American, where she was the first director of the MFA Program. Previous stories and creative essays have appeared in *The Sun*, *The Republic of Letters*, the *New York Times*, *Bayou*, and elsewhere.

Tyler Clancy graduated with a BA in English from Bridgewater State College and currently teaches English as a Second Language. He has been writing poetry for a few years.

Trey Edgington was chosen to read another story from his MA thesis at the Arts and Letters Literary Café sponsored by the Dallas Museum of Art in April of 2004. He was a reading editor at the *American Literary Review* from 2002 to 2004. He has had stories published in *Yellow Mama*, *The Porch*, *The Sheridan Edwards Review*, *The Augusta Bellringer*, and *Entropy*. Trey recently graduated with an MA in Creative Writing from the University of North Texas. He is currently an unemployed, alcoholic writer, living in Dallas, TX.

yaqoob ghaznavi got bitten by the twin passions of writing poetry and running long-distance after the age of sixty. Among others, yaqoob has been published or forthcoming in *Big Pond Rumours*, *Street #6*, *Tower Poetry*, *Carousel*, *Garden Variety Anthology*, *Renaissance Reloaded Anthology*, *Al Purdy Anthology*, *Book of Thighs*, *carte blanche*, *The Frequent & Vigorous*, *The Toronto Quarterly*, and a number of publications by The Ontario Poetry Society. yaqoob is the recipient of 2008 Ted Plantos Memorial Award.

Emily Graff is a student at the University of King's College. This is her first publication.

Adrienne Mercer's work has appeared in the magazines *Monday*, *Lost*, and *Ascent Aspirations*, as well as in the anthologies *Sincerely Elvis* (Hot Biscuit Productions, 2005), *Body Breakdowns* (Anvil, 2007), and *She's Shameless: Women Write About Growing Up, Rocking Out and Fighting Back* (Tightrope, 2009). Adrienne is also the author of a young adult novel, *Rebound* (Lorimer, 2002).

Maria McInnis is 23 years old and lives in a small community in rural Nova Scotia with her husband and cat. She has a love for gardening, hiking and, of course, writing.

Vincent McGillivray spends considerable time in a cubicle, coaxing the city's phones to ring and modems to transmit. His poems have appeared in *Grain*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Misunderstandings Magazine*, and *Juked*.

Kimberley-Blue Muncey is a poet from Montreal, QC who is looking to find her way and place in Canadian poetry. She has completed a Master of Arts in English and Creative Writing at Concordia University. Kimberley-Blue also does some freelance writing and teaches a creative writing course. She has been writing poetry for years, and has been published in a few journals.

Shari Narine is an award-winning freelance journalist. She began her career 25 years ago as editor of a small town newspaper and since then has had her work published in provincial and national daily newspapers, magazines, and used as classroom study material. She now splits her time between journalism writing and fiction writing. She lives in Edmonton with her family, cheers for the Eskimos, likes to take her dog for long walks, and enjoys traveling abroad.

Melissa Plourde hails from the port city of Saint John, NB. Melissa is a writer and editor.

Simon Anthony Prunty is an Arts graduate from Ireland who has recently begun writing fiction and non-fiction in the vein of social satire and commentary. His short story, *Rumours of Paradise*, was just recently published by *Children, Churches and Daddies* magazine (Scars Publications).

Robin Richardson is an emerging writer and illustrator currently living in downtown Toronto. Robin has been featured in the 2009 Winter issue of *Filling Station* and has poems published in *The Toronto Quarterly*, *CV2*, and *Misunderstandings Magazine*. Robin will also be a featured reader at Plasticine, Livewords, and the Broken Pencil Fantasy Party, which are popular reading events in Toronto. With the help of the Toronto Arts Council, Robin is currently near completion on a fictional novel about an illiterate typographer.

Mark Sampson has published one novel, entitled *Off Book* (Norwood Publishing, Halifax NS, 2007), and a number of short stories and poems in literary journals across Canada, including *Pottersfield Portfolio*, *paperplates*, and *Inscribed* magazine. Born and raised on Prince Edward Island, Mark holds a master's degree in English (creative writing) from the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg as well as a journalism degree from the University of King's College in Halifax. He currently lives and writes in Toronto.

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and one skinny cat (his in-house critic). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, poems, an occasional play, and novels. Since 2005, his short stories have been accepted by more than 100 literary and commercial journals, magazines, and anthologies including the *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, and *Boston Literary Magazine*. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for his story *The Sweeper*. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist—who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

Edith Speers, although born in BC and educated in Vancouver (BSc, Simon Fraser), has developed her literary career in Australia since moving there over thirty years ago. Her poetry has been published widely in all the major Australian journals (*Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Quadrant*, *Island*, *Southerly*, *Westerly*, etc.), most of the major Australian anthologies, and in a few international journals (*Antipodes*, *Kunnapipi*); and she has had two collections of verse published.

J. J. Steinfeld is a fiction writer, poet, and playwright who lives in Charlottetown, PEI. He has published two novels, *Our Hero in the Cradle of Confederation* (Pottersfield Press) and *Word Burials* (Crossing Chaos Enigmatic Ink), nine short story collections, the previous three by Gaspereau Press—*Should the Word Hell Be Capitalized?*, *Anton Chekhov Was Never in Charlottetown*, and *Would You Hide Me?*—and two poetry collections, *An Affection for Precipices* (Serengeti Press) and *Misshapeness* (Ekstasis Editions). His short stories and poems have appeared in numerous anthologies and periodicals internationally, including in earlier issues of *All Rights Reserved*, and over forty of his one-act and full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

Qiana Towns received a MFA from Bowling Green State University in 2008 and is a Cave Canem fellow. She holds a MA from Central Michigan University where she served as poetry editor for the online literary journal *Temenos*. Her work has appeared in *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Mochila Review*, and *Pindeldyboz*.

Davide Trame is an Italian teacher of English. He has been writing exclusively in English since 1993. Davide's poems have appeared in magazines since 1999. His poetry collection *Re-emerging* was published by www.gattopublishing.com in 2006.

Yi-Mei Tsiang has a book, *Flock of Shoes*, forthcoming with Annick Press, and another book, *The Mermaid and Other Fairy Tales*, forthcoming with Leaf Press. She has also published creative writing in a number of journals. Yi-Mei lives in Kingston where she teaches Creative Writing and Journalism. She is currently completing UBC's MFA program and has graduated from the Humber School of Writing, and has a BA in English from the University of Waterloo.

Yassen Vassilev is a young Bulgarian poet who has been published in Bulgarian literature magazines and newspapers. Yassen has won six national awards for both poetry and prose—including the Hermes Books award for first manuscript—which ensured the publication of his first poetry collection in May 2009. He is currently studying Dramaturgy in NATFA, Sofia.

Paul Vreeland's writing has appeared in *CV2*, *Grain*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Orison*, and *The Toronto Quarterly*. His long poem *Hydrostone Quartet* was published in 2005. A world traveller and freelance editor, he writes from a home-base in Prince Edward Island.

Darryl Whetter is the author of two books of fiction. His collection of stories, *A Sharp Tooth in the Fur*, was named to *The Globe and Mail's* Top 100 Books of 2003. His debut novel, *The Push & the Pull*, was released in April 2008. He has published stories in journals and anthologies, including *Best Canadian Stories*, *PRISM*, *Prairie Fire*, *The New Quarterly*, and *Coming Attractions*. Poems are out or forthcoming in *The Fiddlehead*, *The Antigonish Review*, and *Kiss Machine*. Darryl holds a PhD in Canadian Literature and has published or presented papers on contemporary literature around the world. His commissioned book reviews have appeared in *The Toronto Star*, *The National Post*, *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Montreal Gazette*, *The Globe and Mail*, Detroit's *Metro Times*, and *Amazon.ca*. Darryl Whetter has been a professor of English and Creative Writing at various universities in Canada. He contributes regularly to CBC Radio's *Talking Books* and has a piece forthcoming in the McSweeney's magazine *The Believer*.



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