

# TRANSITION

WINTER 2015



## INSIDE:

New to TRANSITION, Julie Guirgis gives us  
Confessions of a caregiver - page 5  
Kay Parley returns with The Witness - page 12  
An excellent poetry section begins on page 26 . . . and more!



# TRANSITION

## PUBLISHER:

David Nelson, Associate Executive Director  
Canadian Mental Health Association  
(Saskatchewan Division) Inc.

EDITOR: Ted Dyck

MANAGING EDITOR: Lynn Hill

### *Our Mission:*

*Founded in 1950, The Canadian Mental Health Association (Saskatchewan Division) Inc. is a volunteer-based organization which supports and promotes the rights of persons with mental illness to maximize their full potential; and promotes and enhances the mental health and well-being of all members of the community.*

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1. Send original and unpublished articles, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and visual art that represent current mental health issues and reflect on their impact on individuals.
2. Maximum manuscript lengths: articles – 15 pages; all other prose – 10 pages; poetry – 10 poems or 10 pages, whichever is less; visual art – 10 pieces.
3. Reprints and simultaneous submissions (to several magazines) are not considered.
4. Turnaround time is normally one issue or 6 months: do not send a second submission before the first has been reviewed.
5. Payment is \$50.00 per printed page; \$40.00 per published visual art work; and \$200.00 for cover art.
6. Electronic submissions with full contact information and a brief bio are preferred. Submit manuscripts in Word or WordPerfect format (12-point Times New Roman, double-spaced, 2.5 cm margins) as e-mail attachment to: the Editor at [tdyck@sasktel.net](mailto:tdyck@sasktel.net) or to TRANSITION at [contactus@cmhask.com](mailto:contactus@cmhask.com)
7. Or send hardcopy manuscripts (typed, one-sided, 12-point, double-spaced, 2.5 cm margins), together with self-addressed, stamped return envelope with sufficient postage, to:

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*The Bowler by Henry Peters*

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# And the Editor apologizes . . .

Is it weird that the editor always apologizes, publishers seldom do, writers never do, and of course readers never, ever do?

Why is that?

It must be because the obviously overpaid editor is an insensitive brute without any feelings for the plight of the underpaid writer, the cash-strapped publisher, or the always ready-to-be-insulted reader.



TED DYCK

Look at the facts:

1. A typical issue of TRANS has about 30,000 words; it pays the editor \$1500; that comes to about 5 cents a word, an extravagant amount of money for sure to be messing up other people's hard work. (Editors have trouble with numbers, as you may have noticed.)
2. The poor writer, on the other hand, is paid \$50 for a page of about 700 words, or only 7 cents a word, a pittance considering the pain the s/he goes through as s/he endures the agony of creation, not to mention the frigidity of the garret, the arrogance of the editor, and the true cost of digital communication.
3. And pity the poor publisher, who has to factor in rising costs of paper, falling readership, tanking oil prices, disgruntled editors, overworked staff, and a critical reading public. His bottom line is never black, always red, and about as firm as a line drawn on the dunes of the Great Sand Hills.

4. But it's the reader who really gets it in the neck: not only does s/he pay for all of the above, one way or another, but s/he has to read the things the writer writes, the editor edits, and the publisher publishes. How there can be any good left in the mangled signifiers that make it past all of these gatekeepers is beyond my addled brains. Provided the mangled signs are even mentionable in polite company.

So why do we – all of us – do it?

It can't be for the money, that's for sure. The few shekels that these drudges – writers, editors, publishers – earn through their attempts to wrestle meaning – any meaning – to the ground in words doesn't pay for even their internet connection, which, btw, is, increasingly, the arena for all their fixed matches. And the readers? They don't get paid even one red cent to read.

As to pleasure, well, I ask you – what pleasure can arrogance, financial risk, fear and loathing, and above all the absence of meaning ultimately yield? The ancients held that pleasure was the proper end of all discourse, persuasion second best, and teaching last; but that was long before there were editors, when publishing was the same as writing it down, and writing was second to speaking – which is where discourse is purest and truest.

There is an answer, of course – rhetorical questions always have rhetorical answers, everybody knows that's how it goes. Thank you, Leonard.

We do it, because if we don't, we die.

It's as simple – or profound – as that.

We edit, we write, we publish, we read for our very lives.

Of course editors are merciless louts, publishers are financial losers, writers are frightened confessors, and readers are long-suffering martyrs. They're human.

*But when the black dogs, always just barely hidden, creep slowly out of the shadows, when we begin to hear their dark snarls through the white noise of daily life, that's when we reach for the one weapon which, we have learned, can drive them off, if anything can.*

*The fragile pen will kennel the black dogs of mental illness.*

And so the editor apologizes for:

- Not fulfilling his intention to change “my husband Jack's watering schedule“ to “your husband's watering schedule” in “How is the weather?” (TRANSITION Summer 2015, 5, bottom)

- Separating “Ode to the mosquito” from its “envoi” (TRANSITION Summer 2015, 30-31), reprinted together in this issue

- Omitting a biographical note in “Notes on contributors” (TRANSITION Summer 2015), printed belatedly in this issue

But the editor never apologizes for selecting an honest work that is a good example of its kind, submitted in good faith, and powered by a search for healing.





# Remembrance

BY CLARA CHANDLER

When my mother-in-law pulled me into the peach orchard to duck behind a tree laden with overripe fruit, I hid with her gladly. I thought, I am being welcomed. She held my hand tight in her little sparrow fingers and told me to *shhh. They are coming. They know we took the peaches.* The two of us huddled together, hugging baskets of juicy, dented peaches, waving fruit flies and wasps away as we waited for the farm truck to pass us. I led her back through the dusty rows of fruit trees and into the car, where her husband and son were waiting, and sat in silence for the drive home.

The way she dashed through the orchard, ripping each peach off the tree, tossing good and bad into her basket before leaping off to the next tree, the bandit of the you-pick orchard. The way she told the same story to us over and over, her newfound interest in chatting with any stranger we passed. It was coming clear, final as a sinking stone, but we didn't want to see.

That was the last summer we had with my father-in-law, Peter, before he passed away from prostate cancer. He tried to tell us what was happening to his wife, Anne, but it was hard to focus on her past the impending loss of Peter. Nor was it easy to sort out the truth of his concerns from his flair for the

dramatic. I never saw him not feeling an emotion. Laughing and joking, quizzing anyone on the street who looked interesting to him about the details of their lives. Incoherent middle of the night emails as he drank and philosophized in the basement.

Anne was often a support character in Peter's life, cheerfully bobbing along in his wake. Peter brought the wit, but Anne brought an endless supply of unflappable cheer. He chose many of her clothes for her, wrote the grocery lists, and filled their social calendar with people he found interesting. She enjoyed being in company but was naturally introverted, eschewing making her own friends to focus all her attention on her husband and son. Anne was content going with the flow, caught up in the world of her dynamic and charismatic husband. When he died, she was suddenly adrift. His absence was a presence in itself.

Peter and Anne were never apart for more than a week in forty-five years until the night he died. As Matthew took a more active role taking care of his mother that next year, his father's warnings rang true. Her doctors attributed the gaps in memory and irrational mood swings to grief. For Matthew, whose mother was the most upbeat and optimistic person he'd ever known, the pieces weren't fitting together.

*Continued next page . . .*

## ACTING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

# As another year draws to a close . . .

BY PHYLLIS O'CONNOR

Another year has almost passed and 2015 has proven to be an exciting time for the Canadian Mental Health Association (Saskatchewan Division) Inc.

CMHA Saskatchewan Division has been working in partnership with our National Office and CMHA Ontario Division to advocate for a national mental health transition/innovation fund. The result of research carried out was a document entitled "More for the Mind – A Mental Health Innovation and Transition Fund." A presentation was given at the recent CMHA National Symposium in St. John's, Newfoundland and many of the delegates attending were excited by the possibility of using the materials developed to continue the advocacy efforts in their own provincial jurisdictions. A related document with a focus on Saskatchewan will be uti-



PHYLLIS O'CONNOR

lized as we move closer to our provincial election.

Dave Nelson has moved into the position of Associate Executive Director and will assume responsibility primarily for public policy development and branch development activities. I have taken on the position of Acting Executive Director, responsible for the day-to-day operations of CMHA Sask. Division office.

Our Justice Community Support program continues to evolve and good results are being seen from the work carried out. The Gambling Awareness Program also continues to grow and change as needs require. CMHA Branches in Saskatchewan are also working hard to carry out much needed programs to support the needs of our clients.

We look forward to continuing to work collaboratively with government and our many partners and stakeholders to do all we can to ensure that we keep moving toward an adequate mental health system in Saskatchewan.

The Board and staff of CMHA Saskatchewan Division wish you all the best in the upcoming holiday season and the best of mental health in 2016.



. . . *continued from previous page*

My husband is tired. He just came back from his mother's house, where he spent the last six hours resetting all of the PIN codes and passwords that she's forgotten, a knot he has to untangle once a week or so.

"I found twelve," he scowls. Twelve pieces of paper, each in a different hiding place, each with a different PIN she had written carefully on it. "I didn't hold back this time. I just went through the house and ripped them all up – and I wrote a new paper and taped it beside the computer that says *Call Matthew if you forget PINs!*"

I sit down on one edge of the bed and watch him take off his socks, hang his suit, change into sweats. I've said the wrong thing many times so I just wait.

"I think she's going to remember this time," he says from the bathroom.

Three days later we stop by the house to pick her up for brunch. Passing through the kitchen I stop to glance at the paper taped by the computer. *DON'T Call Matthew if you forget PINs!* it says, her *DON'T* scrawled wispily above the emphatically typed instructions.

Last year, after the doctors confirmed the diagnosis, after Matthew and I fought about her right to be informed, and after I learned to back out of a man's relationship with the slow loss of his mother, we decided to go on a family vacation to Hawaii. "This will probably be my mother's last trip," Matthew said as we searched for hotels online. "Let's do it up big." I put my hand on his shoulder as he white-knuckled the mouse.

Anne and Peter were flight attendants in the heyday of flying, a glamorous and envied position in the 1960s. Airlines in those days stationed their employees at bases around the world, so Matthew and his family lived in Honolulu and then Sidney until they moved back to Canada when he was thirteen. Hawaii has always been a special place for them and they went back to Honolulu often, each street holding a memory of the days their only son was growing up. This time, the first trip back since Peter's death, we decide to visit Kauai, an island we've never visited, in the hopes of avoiding memories that could make Anne sad.

A month later, after we got Anne settled into her room, Matthew and I were walking through our own gorgeous room at the resort we had chosen in Poipu Bay. The phone on the coffee table rang. It was the front desk clerk.

I could hear crying in the background. "Your mother-in-law is at the front desk, ma'am. I think your husband had better come to the lobby."

I had everything unpacked and was sitting outside on the patio when Matthew walked in an hour later with Anne trailing behind him. Her face was red with crying but she was smiling again.

"I put my foot down, Clara!"

I looked at Matthew but he just shrugged. "Let's get you

settled in Ma," he said, pushing her gently towards the door.

Later, I learned that she went to the lobby to demand a smaller room because hers was "too nice." When they couldn't accommodate her she burst into tears and insisted that the lobby clerk move her to another hotel.

The rest of the trip was weighed down by her new peculiarities. "I've always been a good person," she insisted angrily when I admonished her for asking the same overweight woman if she was pregnant for the third time in one hour. The woman packed up her lounge chair and left the beach, her sarong wrapped tightly around her. "That woman is so fat! I wonder if she's pregnant."

On the way back to Vancouver, we stopped for dinner at the airport restaurant, which was playing a basketball game on TV. "Isn't it wonderful that they can be American citizens too?" she said between mouthfuls of salad.

"Ma! That's so racist! You can't say things like that," Matthew said in a hushed voice.

"I've always been a good person, Matthew. Do you want some of my fries?"

It's hard not to take it personally. The woman who once regularly made Matthew chicken soup using her secret two-day process isn't being rude when she doesn't invite us to dinner anymore. There's a new person there instead, who compliments "the Mexicans" on their work ethic in restaurants, and insists she looks good in a string bikini, and cries when we don't call her for two days. It's easier to get angry with her every time she forgets a PIN.

We watch her closely these days and notice each slip. Then we take a step back, and an avalanche of change washes over us, and we realize, everything has already changed. We try to summon the same level of patience for each repeated conversation, arranging our faces in expressions of love and interest. We try to detangle her mess of unhappiness when it strikes, searching for that one piece that can bring her back, and sometimes it works. We talk her gently back towards her forgotten modesty, her forgotten kindness, and her forgotten sympathy. We push against the tides of the disease and try to guide her back to herself. And we try not to forget her.



*Sunset by Cecile George*

# Confessions of a caregiver

BY JULIE GUIRGIS

**April 2010:** When Dad was diagnosed with dementia a few months ago I shrugged it off as mild. The hints were subtle at first. He would occasionally say strange things and ask repetitive questions, but nothing serious enough to cause concern.

**July 2010:** The progression is slowly downhill. Dad can no longer cook, handle money or shower himself. He is displaying signs of aggression and his behaviour can be unpredictable. Dementia is more than memory loss. It's changing Dad's personality, the essence of who he is.

**August 2010:** I'm noticing Dad's anxiety levels are increasing, especially when he is on his own. When this happens he screams all through the house searching for Mum or me. Mum and I share the caregiving role within the home, so a familiar face brings him comfort. The doctor has prescribed an antidepressant and anti-psychotic medication to curb his aggressive behavior.

**September 2010:** It's nearly 6 pm on a damp morning; I'm winding down from a day's work and thinking about preparing dinner. Then Dad appears in the kitchen doorway and asks "Am I going out today?" He can no longer tell the time and is even losing the ability to sense which part of the day it is. For him, six in the evening could easily be six in the morning. "The day is over, it's night time," I say. "Look outside." I don't shout but there's an edge to my voice that could cut steel. As soon as I've spoken sharply, I regret it. Sometimes I wipe away a tear and vow to do better tomorrow. And then, five minutes later, when Dad asks me again, "Am I going out today?" I know that I'm probably not going to succeed.

**October 2010:** Sundown is often the worst part of the day for Dad. He can become restless and difficult. It's also a bad time for me. I'm running on an empty tank and easily irritated by trivial things. This afternoon in my room, like bullets from a gun Dad fired constant questions at me. Sitting on the edge of the bed I feel like I'm on the edge of my tether. I let out an unfamiliar scream before I burst into tears. The belief that someone is trying to kill and harm his family is beginning. He becomes overprotective to the point of paranoia, insisting that all doors be closed. He even mistakes the fridge door as a point of entry for these imaginary predators. No matter how much we try to convince him, he believes these delusions fanatically.

**November 2010:** For the past week I have lost my temper nearly every day. Dad insists on urinating in the shower which I am forever cleaning. He bangs on the door demanding to get out, screams at the top of his lungs. Dementia can be a spiteful and cruel disease, traveling with its hideous companion's delusions, aggression. Agitation, selfishness, coupled with constant demands. It is an impostor trying to steal Dad away, trying to

cast shadows between us. When I am feeling strong I can push it out of the way, to find remnants of Dad. But on other days I can succumb to its menacing power. These are the days I would gladly hand him over to someone else. Even for a few hours.

**December 2010:** Another restless night. Dad woke up at 4 am saying that he was hungry so I made him a couple of toasted sandwiches and stayed up with him till he dozed off back to sleep. The constant vigilance, broken sleep, despair and frustration has taken its toll. I have to deal with the constant arguing; pleading, guiding and daily grind all the while ignoring the knot in my stomach.

**January 2011:** Screaming matches between Dad and me are not uncommon. Dad was always a loud extrovert, yet dementia has somehow increased his decibels to maximum. My vocal range has also advanced. When I'm having a bad day the ferocity of my temper shocks me. Shouting has replaced talking, fueled by impatience, anxiety and frustration. No matter how hard I try to keep my cool, there's a point at which I crack, despite always being told to think positively and concentrate on good thoughts.

**February 2011:** Everyone wants a piece of me – I'm being pulled in a million directions. There's nothing of myself left for me. I feel like a robot some days, just going on automatic. I think it's time we get outside help. I have rung several respite agencies in the community and have put Dad's name down on the waiting list. It's just a matter of time when there's a vacancy. I have also arranged for him to go to a day group one day a week, which will provide some relief.

**March 2011:** The medication isn't helping. He doesn't need antidepressants because he doesn't suffer from the depression. The doctor has taken him off the antidepressant and changed his anti-psychotic medication. I hope this will help. Sometimes he can be physically abusive as well as verbally.

**June 2011:** When Dad insists that he wants to go home, even though he's already home we take him for a drive telling him he's 'going home' then bring him back home. He never knows the difference.

**July 2011:** I was dreading taking Dad to the doctor today because he usually causes a scene. We've had to be escorted to another waiting room so people wouldn't be irritated by his yelling. Today he was especially agitated because of the long wait and volume of people. He flared up more than usual, insisting we go home right away. Without giving me a chance to pay the bill, he grabbed me from behind. I froze feeling heat rise into my cheeks and forehead. A captive audience fixed their eyes on me with what felt like judgment, rather than compassion. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, but kept my decorum, dying a little inside. I was aware if I lost it Dad would



## WRITING THE LIFE - NON-FICTION

as well. I quickly paid the bill, leaving a trail of stares and whispers behind me.

**September 2011:** When I arrived home today from work my instincts told me there was something wrong. The front door was open and Dad was nowhere in sight. My emotions were running high, filled with anger and fear. Crazy thoughts started to run through my mind like “Has he wandered into a stranger’s house? Has he hopped on a train?” Or worse still, “Is he dead on the side of the road?” Finally, after what felt like the longest hour a car pulled into the driveway. A big strong man and his elderly father got out of the car with Dad in the back-seat. They had seen Dad wandering the streets, calling out for Mum. I called them angels, thanked them then embraced Dad tightly. Watching Dad casually walk into the house as if nothing had happened made me realize how far the dementia has progressed. We had a digital lock installed on the front door and locks put on the side and back gate. I felt like a prisoner in my own home.

**November 2011:** The day group said they can no longer provide care for Dad because his needs are getting to high and his anxiety is disturbing the group. An alternative is Dad stays in a nursing home for a week. Even though I’m reluctant to do this Mum and I are desperate.

**January 2012:** The nursing home looked like the house of hor-

rors. The residents were slumped over on chairs, lifeless. Dad got aggressive, so they dosed him up without our permission. When I went to visit him he looked like a zombie. It broke my heart to see him so lifeless in that tiny beat-up room. So the following day I brought him home.

**April 2012:** I received a call from the respite agency today. They said they can provide one-on-one respite for Dad 5 days a week. I am so relieved because that’s exactly the type of care he needs. They will take him for a drive and walk each day for a couple of hours. This will give Mum and me a well-deserved break.

**July 2012:** Dad’s new medication is helping, and his moods are more balanced. Although he still has the occasional temper tantrum he is much more manageable.

**October 2012:** Dad is settled at home more than anywhere else. Mum and I are in it for the long haul. There’s no place like home.

**December 2012:** This year has been better than last year. I feel like I’m adapting to Dad’s illness a lot more and have more outside support. I’m learning how to provide a safe and placid environment for Dad. The way I speak to him, including tone and words spoken make a huge difference to his reactions and emotions. Our relationship is getting stronger and I feel closer



*Man in a canoe by Cole Hansen*



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*. . . I reflect on the man  
before dementia, it helps me  
separate the man from the disease.*

to Dad now the wedge of resentment has dissolved. His child-like innocence is disarming. His fragility and vulnerability makes me want to nurture and care for him. There is no higher honor than to serve him in this time of great need. He did it for me as a child. It is my privilege to return the favor.

**January 2013:** Some day's Dad has perfect manners, on other days he hurls abuse. It's like he is two people in one, the real Dad and the dementia Dad. Learning to detach and not take his insults personally is what helps me cope

**February 2013:** Dad is enjoying respite and has a routine each day that provides structure. When he gets anxious after his afternoon nap we take him for another drive which usually settles him.

**April 2013:** There are days that I become frustrated- when his clothes are dirty or his Depends need changing, yet he remains unaware of my plight. When I look over at the photographs resting on the mantelpiece, my impatience softens. I see a jovial man with a warm smile, who loves his family more than life itself. On good days I still see him. When I'm drained and exhausted I can see Dad as a needy, angry, forgetful and combative old man. So I reflect on the man before dementia, it helps me separate the man from the disease.

**July 2013:** I now have the opportunity to return to my first love – writing. I set aside time each day to pursue my writing career. It stimulates my mind and unleashes creative juices. When my identity becomes wrapped up in being a caregiver, writing helps me find myself again.

**August 2013:** This journey is long, hard, emotional, and exhausting, so I find quiet moments to rest and retreat. To wind down I watch T.V., read, listen to music, and pamper myself. I love getting my nails done and getting massages. These things restore inner balance and help me tackle the challenges ahead.

**November 2013:** Dementia causes ambiguous loss. The loss is unclear, has no resolution, no closure. It causes our loved one

to become someone we don't know anymore; they are gone – but still there. This leads to complicated grief. Sometimes Dad isn't there, not in the way I want him to be. I search for Dad's familiar face, but even that has changed. His eyes that once shone brightly are glazed with confusion and fear. I speak about him in the past tense. I grieve for the man I knew and loved before dementia.

**January 2014:** For more than three and a half years dementia has stalked Dad, ripping away memory and severing logic, leaving confusion and fear in its wake. During this time, Dad has become the child. I have mothered him through bouts of panic, when he couldn't remember where he lived, or when he wanted to be tucked into bed. I held his hand when he was lonely or afraid and cared for his daily needs. It has taken some time to accept this role reversal.

**February 2014:** After Dad gets home from respite and has lunch he spends most of the day sleeping. He's been sick lately which I thought was just a cold. Then a few days ago I saw him struggle to walk. I thought he either had a bed leg from all the time he has spent in bed, or even worse the dementia has progressed causing him to forget how to walk. I took him to the medical center and they took a chest x-ray, which revealed that he has pneumonia. This explains the delirium caused by his inability to walk. I'm relieved that it's a temporary symptom of pneumonia.

**March 2014:** Dad's health is improving because of the strong antibiotics he's on. Although the cough is present, he is improving remarkably. Rest has been the best medicine.

**May 2014:** I never envisaged I would be a full-time caregiver for my Dad at the age of 32. I guess life isn't always predictable. Nevertheless I've had to take over the reins, even when they were shaking in my hands. Despite the sadness and difficulties that go with dementia, I see the paradox. I'm able to experience all the different parts of Dad; the vulnerable side, the childlike side and the fighter in him. I have learned to go into his world instead of expecting him to come into mine.

## Meeting fear and courage

BY DONNA MAE JOHNSON

**I**n my life I have known courage. We met when I was afraid of the dark. I was afraid of night time. I was afraid to breathe, let alone move. Sometimes my fear of the dark got pretty bad, especially when I was alone. I needed to be able to see around me all of the time. When I couldn't, that is what I feared most. I didn't want anyone to know. Even today, my fear

of the dark requires me to have courage.

In my life I have known fear. We met when I had to look after my little sister and my three little brothers. I was always afraid that something would happen to them while they were in my care. I was very much afraid.

When courage tells me I can do something I can be quite firm and listen to it. When fear tells me I can't do something I listen to courage first. It's always been that way.



# Paper dolls

BY MELANIE MCFARLANE

I remember the first set of paper dolls my mother gave me. Their faces were plastered with never-ending happiness on top of perfectly poised outlines of longer-than-life extremities. Their clothes were so dainty, never to wrinkle or soil.

My eight year old hands would fumble with the folds, sometimes tearing them, sometimes bending them into the right places, and sometimes I would find my mother amidst coffee and gossip to help remove new ones from their delicate pages, her fingers more fine-tuned than my own.

"Oh, Melanie," she'd say looking at the paper. "Look at these creases. Be more careful with your things. You have such clumsy fingers."

When I was ten I had forgotten about my paper dolls, casting them aside for the dollhouse my father made me the Christmas before. That was also when I first saw the dissention between my parents. For most children, ten years of family bliss would be a dream come true. For me it was evidence of a cover up of what was hidden behind their false smiles and closed-door arguments. And like my dolls, life started to become more three-dimensional.

That night we were sitting at the supper table in our tiny trailer at the edge of Moose Jaw. The dining room table was squeezed into the galley kitchen in an attempt at a normal family dinner and our family of five stuffed in between melamine

and paneling.

"I got a call from your teacher today," my mother said to me. I noticed my father give her a look across the table.

"You don't qualify for the accelerated learning program," she said. Her movements were stiff and her eyes avoided mine. "Your test marks weren't high enough."

My breath caught in my throat. It wasn't a program I wanted to enter in the first place. It was one of those things that adults choose because they think they know what's best. After three hours of multiple-choice testing, I knew the program wasn't for me, but the feeling of failure was uncomfortable. It didn't fit.

I tried to swallow the lump that had formed in my throat as I turned my head away, fighting back the tears that filled my eyes, threatening to burst like a dam. But I pushed them back, not allowing any to escape.

"Why would you say that to her?" my father asked.

"She has a right to know."

I retreated to my room where I lay on the floor. There, under my bed, I saw my box of paper dolls, silently waiting. I opened the case. The dolls were still happily poised staring back at me from underneath their creased clothing inside their coffin. I slammed the lid shut and pushed the box back under.

When I was twelve we moved houses and I changed schools, entering junior high. That was also the year I was accepted into the accelerated learning program with a persistent teacher who insisted something must have been wrong with their testing. That was me, the girl who didn't fit into the norm. The program turned out to be nothing more than group discussions, extra book reports, and the odd field trip; I couldn't wait to get out of it. Their attempts to open our minds to higher learning seemed like a waste of time to me; I preferred books.

All the students in the program came from a more prestigious part of the city, where I myself was from the wrong side of the tracks, South Hill. My parents were a cook and a maintenance man for a local college. Theirs were doctors and bank managers and they all lived up on the North side. They reminded me of the paper dolls in the box under my bed, perfectly poised fitting in their specifically designated outfits. I was a doll from another book, trying to fit into their patterns.

In a class brainstorm on what things we could recycle in our daily lives I came up with scrap paper; reuse it for lists, crafts, and notes. Good idea, I was told. The boy across from me was applauded for coming up with disposable razors. It solidified my mother's words from the prior year around the supper table: you don't qualify. I was twelve and didn't even know what disposable razors were. I ended the program with a big S for satisfactory. I guess the test matched the program after all. I was the crease in their perfection of learning.

I spent the remainder of my elementary years unremarkably participating on the honour roll and in basketball games. We were poised, a picture perfect family on the surface; rigid, fixed, and suffocating underneath. No amount of gold medals or awards could change that.



*Seated dialogue*  
by Henry Peters

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*Truths can't hide forever and when they've been stuffed down so long they come out nasty and angry and just slap you in the face.*

From there I moved into high school. Here, three elementary schools came together for the four years of our final education before becoming adults. I forged friendships that would carry on into my adult years. I also met my first serious boyfriend, Kevin.

I met him through a friend and became one of those teenagers whose hormones take over all of their common sense. I found myself absorbed by Kevin, and the rest of my world seemed to melt away. He centered all of his attention on me, I was important. Three months in, I found myself separated from my friends and family as Kevin took up all of my spare time.

That's when things began to change. Truths can't hide forever and when they've been stuffed down so long they come out nasty and angry and just slap you in the face. And that's exactly what happened: the slapping part. As I reeled from the fact that Kevin had physically done it to me, I heard those old

words yet again: you do not qualify. It was just a fancy way of saying, you aren't good enough.

When I was fifteen I got my first job and Kevin went away that summer. A relief settled into my life and I felt something new. I was free to bend in any direction I pleased. My new job gave me responsibility, and I was good at it. When Kevin returned, he visited one night as I closed up at work. He noticed something different in me and grabbed my throat, squeezing it so tight that it pushed those old doubts to the surface, but this time I fought them off; I knew I was good enough.

I broke free from Kevin that day and ran away from him, towards a future of my choosing. One where I would accomplish things for myself, because I was the only one who decided my worth; not my parents, not my spouse, and not the rest of the world. I was not a poised and rigid paper doll who would break if bent. I was flexible. I was real. I was able to find a place where I fit in the world.

## I am not my diagnosis

BY STEPHANIE A. MAYBERRY

“**W**e always knew something was wrong with you; I guess now we know what it is.” My mother's words sounded in my ear and something within me whispered, “This should hurt your feelings.” Yet I searched myself and found I really didn't care. After all, she was right.

She was responding to my latest news, that I had been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. Well, that and the rather lengthy explanation of Asperger's, that it is on the autism scale and whatnot. I was 42 and had lived my entire life believing I was defective, a mess up, a mistake. School was a nightmare, I was bullied incessantly. It didn't help that I was extremely tall (5 feet 8 inches when I was 10) and impossibly skinny.

I was a social mess, not only the last kid to get picked for team sports, but the kid both teams would fight over to avoid choosing for their side. I did not get invited to many parties but that suited me just fine. I was a loner anyway and preferred to be alone with my books on philosophy and neurology, passions that began before I was out of elementary school and still fascinate me today. Most of all, though, I loved to write.

I was alone a lot. Grownups did not know what to do with me and the kids didn't know what to think of me. I was different, very different, and labeled as weird (except for the kinder ones who called me eccentric). Needless to say, I did not fit in – anywhere. I had a view of the world that was so very different I believe it frightened the adults but it intrigued the young people – the handful who bothered to get to know me, that is. By the time I got to high school people were saying that I was so smart it had made me strange. Whatever. I have always had

an intelligence that was well above the norm, but that is not why I was the way I was.

As I grew I only became stranger. I picked up some survival skills that at least allowed me to interact with humans. Alcohol and drugs helped greatly with this. It never lasted, though, and eventually they just drifted away. Everyone leaves eventually – for me anyway.

I had romantic relationships, marriages even. They did not turn out so well though. I have been beaten, kicked, berated, and threatened. I lived with physical, mental, sexual, and emotional abuse for years at the hands of several men. I just went from one to the next. Oh, and I've been cheated on as well. Looking back now, I believe they were frustrated because of the way I am. That doesn't mean it was OK to hit me, but it does offer an explanation. There was one man who would get more upset when we were arguing because I did not cry or show emotion. He said I was cold and clinical. He would get in my face and yell, “Would you please just cry!” But I did not feel like crying so I just sat there. He's the one who cheated on me.

It can't be easy being a human and trying to live with me. I know it definitely is not easy being me and trying to live with a human.

I did find a man who accepts me for me. He has taken the time to educate himself on my Asperger's and he helps me. I love him but not the way that humans love each other. I am sure of that. He does not abuse me, though. He protects me. He is kind and funny. He gives me my space when I need it and he doesn't care that I can go hours without talking (days if I did not have to ask him about dinner or household/wife things). I try to be a good wife; he says I am. He also says I am the best cook he has ever known. He says I am a good girl, that I am



## WRITING THE LIFE - NON-FICTION

sweet. No one has ever said those things about me before. I don't know what to say back.

The first 40 or so years of my life were not easy. I felt like a train wreck and had no idea why. My anxiety kept me from doing many things and I avoided social situations as much as I could. I have been diagnosed as having a social phobia, but I like to believe I am rising above that.

I am not my anxiety. I am not my phobia. I am not my Asperger's.

I am a writer, a wife, a mother, a photographer. I am so many things and my Asperger's, anxiety, and phobia are just a tiny sliver of that. Aspies don't usually do well holding down jobs and I have certainly had my fair share. The longest job I had ended because my boss had a problem with my Asperger's. After months of discrimination based on my Asperger's and years of bullying from several supervisors, I was moved along. See ya. Buh bye.

My husband lost his job two weeks later. Within a month we were homeless. We never went on public assistance. We lived in our van and looked for a job. The job market is a tough place for an Aspie. My resume got me several interviews but after that, nothing. I am terrible in interviews. The jobs I have gotten were very rarely the result of an interview but instead of a demonstration of what I could do, or a conversation about what I could do – but rarely a formal interview.

I had never stopped writing. I had written several books at this point including one about being a Christian with Asperger's. That didn't pay the bills, though, so I decided to start a freelance career. I had been told most of my life that I was not responsible enough to work as a freelancer – and I

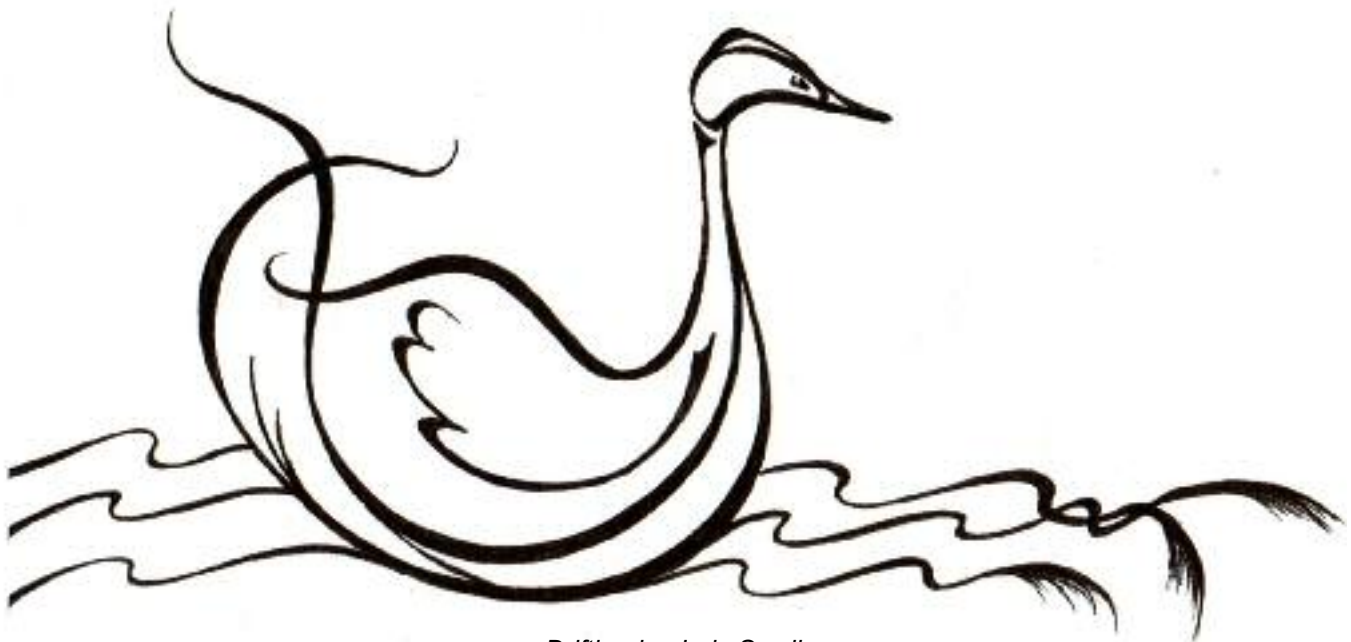
believed them. Nonetheless, I sat down and got to work. It was amazing. My freelancing career took off. Apparently, people like me much better when they just have to communicate with me via email or chat as opposed to talking in person. I have some very good clients who really like my work.

My husband found a job, but I make enough to help out with the bills and buy groceries. I don't work full time and that is on purpose. I want this marriage to work so I am trying to do the homemaker, wife things like cook and clean. I have a routine. Routines are good for Aspies.

I've written and published 15 books on several different topics. I don't market them because I just don't feel like doing it. Maybe one day I will, but right now it does not fit into my routine. I have gotten better at talking with people but I still like to be alone. My husband respects that.

I am not my Asperger's, but my Asperger's is a part of me. It gives me certain unique gifts that help me survive in a world that is often excessively hostile and unwelcoming. I feel like an alien in a strange land. Emotion is foreign to me, at least being driven by it. I believe I do feel sometimes. I have no concept of time; I have no idea what time feels like. This is a blessing and a curse.

And everyone in my life has abandoned me at least once. Sometimes they come back; sometimes they don't. I keep moving forward, though, because through it all I have learned that my Asperger's does not define me. Some call it an ability but really it is my superpower. And when everyone is gone and no one is coming back, I will still have my Asperger's and the wonderful gifts it offers, gifts most others don't have – and I will survive.



*Drifting by Judy Swallow*

# Dancing girl

BY HARMONY NEAL

I forget what I was thinking. Where'd that thought go, and the one before it? The cuff of my left sleeve is unraveling. I appear to be MIA.

I remember this much, the recycled feeling that never goes for good. The confused rage that's always on the periphery, easy to ignore, until it lumbers center stage, raises its trunk, then blasts away my other thoughts. He's usually so docile, cute even, off stage, munching leaves in a fog, content and slowly swishing his crinkled ears and bristled tail. I never know what might set him off – when he might trample me or toss me broken on someone I think I love.

I stopped giving him peanuts a year ago, hoping he'd find a new home, realize I don't want him stomping around, roughing up the terrain. When something angers him, he bites into my haunches, dragging me backwards, gnawing out bits, trunking me towards the sky, keeping me airborne on tusks and gnarled knees, a game of pissed off hacky sack.

*Goddamn elephant, leave already, go home. You have sucked all my peanuts and I have no more for you, ever.*

I was thinking about contradictions. I was thinking about love, what it is, what it's not, what I pretend to feel, the selfishness of it all.

Damaged goods, not the marrying type, pipe organs on Xs, the unwanted babies screaming for milk or touch or something else in the blue 1 a.m. shadows.

I become expansive, gigantic, my core sucking in on itself, knotting up and folding over while my brain rolls out, unstoppable, a cold front, or maybe warm, I can't tell, and it keeps spreading out over the sky and there are no edges to it, no center, and that little part of me that is my body recoils and implodes but that mind part keeps expanding and growing, and I don't know where it comes from or how this happens or when it will end, and it scares me.

I try to grab the thoughts, unseen flies in a brown fog, but my hands grasp nothing again and again, and I cry some, giving up, but not enough, the control is gone, and I think – *not cut out to be one of the living* – and those thoughts scare me, or I think they should scare me, but they don't, they calm me, the idea that there is always death behind the elephant, who could sweep onstage and destroy the elephant and suck down my expanding mind and pinprick it to nothing.

I was thinking about love. I was thinking of telling you I love you, but I don't know what it means, only that I feel like saying it, only that I feel compelled and muzzled. It would be the wrong thing or the right and I never know, and some would say I'm selfish if I don't, and if I don't, I don't, and I think I don't care if I do or not: I just like the words.

I was smelling your shirt and thinking it's not creepy or I don't care if it is or not. That boy I almost married keeps coming to mind. I try to shut him out while trying to remember when I was happy with him, and we could sit on the musty carpet in the hallway, my head propped on his shoulder, while he

pointed with long fingers along the walls, where a 7-inch, 7-year-old version of him was running around, flying kites and skipping stones, and I could see the playful mischief in that little boy's smile, see every pebble.

I try to envision the end of us and whether it will hurt and how you don't know the end is the end and that is all there ever is, but I don't want to tell you that now because it will ruin the present and that boy is in my brain, and I hurt for him because I hurt him – those nights my drunk rage raised the temperature in the apartment, me ripping pictures from the walls, scrawling I HATE YOU in red lipstick over a locked white door, then kicking the door in, breaking the lock for good, the lock that's still broken that I will probably have to pay for when I finally leave this place.

I didn't want to be cruel, but I couldn't look at him without hate, hate for not hating me and the lipstick and vile slurs and my hands slapping till he pinned me to the floor, desperate for the rage to subside, and me to be me again, sobbing and small.

It wasn't fair. I can handle Misery, but she's a stranger to him, and it makes him so uncomfortable to see me having coffee and cigarettes with a stranger, so I unbit my tongue and spread out more than I knew I could, and I blew around, grasping at tree limbs and traffic signs. I tumbled and fell and somehow ended up here, when I wanted to be somewhere else entirely, somewhere quiet and warm where I am and am not but there is no one there to know the difference. But that isn't where I am at all, and sometimes I think I am happy.

But I don't know how to be happy, and that boy, he accused me of finding something, anything to feel bad about: the butterfly caught in the wiper blade, me insisting he pull over the car, but it was too late, and I cried for four hours, smearing my cheek on the passenger window, refusing to speak. He's a little right, but mostly wrong. I'm not trying, it's trying for me. I have this whole box of fear and memories that I threw out the window somewhere in Ohio, but like Fido in Edwardsville, it found its way home, so I had to take it back and give it some milk and tell it I loved it and missed it and was so scared I'd never see it again. I was lying, and it knew, but didn't care. It owns me: I'm the pet.

I think I could be happy alone, and I think I could be happy in love, until I remember that I don't know what love is, and that valve is broken anyway, and the surgery costs too much, so it's been broken for awhile and probably won't ever be fixed.

Whom have I loved that is dead and gone or not even dead, but I think of them that way? Sometimes I think I should get out while the getting is good and I still think nice thoughts about you, but I already don't. I sit in the yard eating dirt and grubs with twigs in my hair, crying over every mean thing you ever said, the time you told me to tell my friends you're good in bed, that cute girl you mentioned you'd danced with the year before at the party where you wouldn't dance with me, things you don't even remember because it was that easy for you. And



it's never easy for me, and you don't understand, and I don't think you should anyway, because if you did, you'd be more like me and less like you, and I'm walking your way.

That elephant won't let me work, but he'll shake me till I ramble and stutter. And me and my moods and not caring then fiercely wanting then falling over and expanding out and shrinking down. I've found my place, and it's comfortable enough, except I can't keep up, no matter how many pellets they stick in my cage. I dance for the men and they clap and

hoot, but I fall over too fast, then they kick me in my kidneys and call me a whore, and I cry, because I did my best.

I'm not what anyone really wanted.

I am bits and pieces and unfortunately shaped like peanuts. That elephant keeps running center stage and blowing his nose and doing the two-step then the shimmy. He's got a cane and straw hat with red white and blue band and I say, *Go away, elephant, I don't have any more peanuts for you, ever.*

But he only goes when he wants to.

# The witness

BY KAY PARLEY

The mental hospital grounds were still June-fresh, though a dry summer had caused the grass to yellow in places and grow crisp. The willow wands parted gently, as if by automatic switch, at my approach. They were used to my threading the narrow path to my favorite spot by the river. I loved to sit under the willow tree by the water, the tree with twelve trunks each a foot in diameter. It was a tree with limbs to lean on, with sloping trunks to rest against, and happy boughs or laughing leaves dancing and whispering against the sky. It was a tree that knew, and matched its mood to mine.

The grass below was wearing thin in places, for how many of our staff and patients knew the tree and stopped to rest there, to read or talk or meditate. A natural step was cut into the bank, edged by a half-buried root. It made a comfortable chair. At my feet the knife-sharp blades of rushes stood alert, guards with bayonets separating the water world from the land. It was necessary they should be there, reminding me that water was different in substance from the earth, less welcoming, less restful, filled with menace. The Souris held mud and itch, scum and snails, water-snakes and fish and the monster of the river, the sharp-toothed muskrat. Funny to compare this prairie river with one where lurks the crocodile, or a river where otters frisk or where alligators snap at victims on the shore. Yet the quietest river has about it the mystery of the unknown, a source of lurking fears and strange unease.

Out of the water, a bend or two of twig hung with weed were making patterns in space as if brushed in ink by a Buddhist artist. On the opposite bank, a dead skeleton tree spaced itself in lacy patterns against a grey cloud, and the thin leaves of my willow were black against them. Down by the railroad bridge, grass and trees were green as Erin and the piles stood in hazy light, reflections of sunlight filtering down between the ties. It reminded me of pictures of English bridges and I wondered for a moment why we want to roam. There is always something to see at home. Then again, why not roam?

For everywhere is something familiar and loved. Perhaps there is nothing so new it must be feared.

Drawn by the water once more, I stared until the silver blinded me. It was only some reflecting sunlight, yet it became a sheet of silver brighter than the purest fabric spun of silver thread. Against it the bayonets of the guardsmen glinted like the strongest steel. A frond of brome grass, feathery-fine, could have bent those blades, yet against the silver light they were a blaze.

*It's all one.* I thought, with deep satisfaction, *and I'm part of it. There is nothing else – just life and the spirit in everything, and I am part of that spirit.*

It gave me a warm feeling of belonging, of caring nothing for time or food or rooftops – not even caring for my fellow men. I accepted the cool dampness of the earth beneath me. I accepted the buzzing insects and the ants that crept. I accepted the scum on the river, scintillating in the sun, the bark on the willow trunks, the dead boughs and tiny leaves, the blossoming clover filling the air with sickening perfume, the sunlight, the clouds, the day. When I had accepted all that, I opened my book and dug into my paper bag for a Bing cherry. It was my reward for understanding – luscious cherries and a book.

A ripple of happy laughter, drifting slowly down the scale, interrupted my reverie. Was I to be invaded, then, by the land of humans, by people who wouldn't be content to drift, to accept Nature, to belong? They emerged from the trees and descended the slope where an old concrete spillway once emptied a hospital sewer into the river. Because of the dry year, the river was low and the concrete structure was dry and clean, inviting them to sit and enjoy the scene I had been enjoying.

Francis Huxley was in the group and Jerry, our handsome young intern. With them were the two University girls Francis had intended to give LSD that afternoon. It looked as if I was to be privileged. I was going to see how the two girls would react to the drug. To witness an LSD experience was a rare treat, always the cause of much speculation around the hospital. The drug had weird and varied effects on those who took it.

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*There were instances when  
subjects found new insight into their personal  
problems and even into the behaviour of other people.*

For some, it opened vast doors of perception, as Francis' uncle had reported in his book about the drug. To some it meant empathy and an awareness of the distorted perceptual worlds where our patients lived. To some, LSD was a deep religious experience. Another time, it might lead to a terrifying psychotic episode. There were instances when subjects found new insight into their personal problems and even into the behaviour of other people. Always an LSD experience was dramatic, thrilling, different.

It was obvious that Francis and Jerry were the "sitters" that day. That the girls were the guinea-pigs could be seen by their flushed cheeks and the brightness of their eyes, quite visible at 30 yards. It could also be heard in the strange quality of their laughter. Things that to the normal person seem dull and humdrum sometimes brought gales of laughter to a subject under LSD. They saw me looking at them and they pointed, laughing and feigning shock.

"Somebody saw us!"

Perhaps they felt silly because they were being so young and uninhibited, so delightfully foolish. The boys nodded to me, smiling. I thought of joining them, offering them cherries. Round bits of fruit would probably make someone under LSD laugh uproariously. But I didn't go. Francis sent me a subtle signal that it was best to keep my distance. They still weren't sure how much stimulation a subject under LSD should have.

One of the girls was throwing aside her shoes and wading into the river. I expected the sight to repulse me, but it really didn't. I knew the water was muddy, scummy, possibly full of itch, but the girl was obviously unconcerned about that. She didn't scream with cold or go in wincing, taking care where she stepped. She seemed to understand the oneness of Nature and, because she understood, no rushes with raised bayonets stood guarding the shore. The river would not harm her because she understood the river, its oneness with the land, its oneness with people. She stood there in the water, legs apart, lithe and healthy and laughing. She was a big girl with hair cut in a boyish bob, and I could feel the life in her exchanging some kind of vitality with the life in the river.

That such a solid girl should suddenly turn so fey wasn't surprising. There was something so sincere about the activities of a subject under LSD that nothing seemed unusual. Nothing was unexpected. Nothing was bizarre. Sitters said they could predict what a subject would do next but they could not and would not try to prevent it. They were surprised when it happened. They weren't surprised. LSD created a world of perfect paradox where both this and that are so, opposites meeting in a world of complete spontaneity. Purity and freedom, where there was no harm, no danger, no evil.

All this was fascinating, like watching an actor whose concentration is complete, drawing his audience into a different world of thought and action. I didn't care to look away. I chose

to follow, to experience, to suffer, to exult. Jerry was smiling. The other girl, hugging her blue dress around her knees, sat on the concrete looking self-conscious. I felt that my attention bothered her, but I couldn't look away. Francis was smiling, encouraging the girl in the water, letting her know she was free to do as she liked, enjoy herself to the full. She was learning much the ordinary human being never learns.

I sensed she would sit before she did, and I'm sure she did too, but when it came it was completely spontaneous. Without a thought for bright skirts and crinolines, she just sat, straight down as if bouncing on a bed. The river took her in, flowing about her with scarcely a splash, and her mood changed instantaneously from gaiety to appreciation. She fondled the water, making it play about her hands and arms. She studied its surface for a long time, just enjoying. She brought great hunks of mud from the bottom and her arms were buttered with it to the elbows. It seemed so soft to her, so natural and lovely. Her companions tossed her a willow wand and she waved it rhythmically through the air, talking to them. Then she touched the water with it, thoughtfully, letting drops fall from the tip like silver rain. This took her attention for a long

time, and mine too. So with the rest of her group. It was hypnotic.

When she began to talk to them again she was so relaxed she went down on one elbow in the river, only her shoulder and face in the air. It didn't matter. It was all one. Once or twice I thought of the filth in the water, of the fish, of the mysteries, and I shuddered, but concentrating on the girl took the shudder away. There was nothing to fear. She had seen things we do not see. I climbed into the giant willow to get a better view and several times they looked up at me, perhaps wondering why I stayed apart.

Finally they seemed to suggest to the girl that she might come out. I see Jerry extend his hand to help her rise. She took it, and came out of the water like a cork being released, laughing again.

I heard Francis' clear English voice, "... better get . . . of those things." And I knew were going to try, very gently, to persuade her to return to the residence and change into something clean and dry. We can't force the LSD subject to do something against their will. We can suggest.

They went away quietly, without a backward glance.

The incident had taken away my incentive to read, and I found I had finished the cherries without realizing I was eating them and without savouring their flavour. Yet I had enjoyed them. They were part of this whole magic oneness. But was it oneness? Suddenly I felt the difference in me. I had *pretended* to accept Nature that day. This girl had been part of it. Realizing that, I felt like a thing apart, a living being out of harmony, a missing link. Slowly I followed the path to the concrete spillway where they had been. I wanted to see how the



Souris looked from their angle, to discover what had enticed the girl to submerge herself there.

There was no silver sheen. It was dirty, strewn with bits of twigs, dead flowers, weeds and scum. I shuddered again. No bet could have persuaded me to take off my shoes and wade into that. To the girl, it had apparently been a place of welcome, perhaps of comfort and beauty. As I watched, a patterned water snake shot out from beneath the concrete and did a sweeping circle right where the girl had been sitting. He put his head about two inches out of the water and executed a ballet. Then he stuck his pointed tongue out at me and seemed to spit. I developed an instant spontaneous distaste for the snake and spit back at him. He swam away up river, his reptilian head proudly aloft, cutting through the waves like the prow of a boat.

The sun was no longer directly across from me and, from this angle, the scum was just scum. The rich shimmering silver had vanished.

“Just illusion,” I said to myself. “That’s all she saw – illusion.”

But then, I’d been seeing illusion too, when I was appreci-

ating the bright silver surface. Now I was seeing the river as it really was, the stark grim reality. The shutter on our individual psychological cameras is so small. We haven’t time to see the whole scene, hear the music of the universe, smell the whole smell. If we opened that lens, there would be no time left to *do*. We couldn’t work. We couldn’t exist. It is that very opening of the shutter which puts so many thousands of schizophrenic people apart from that normal round. It’s so necessary, that reducing valve in the mind. But how ugly the world we see. How small. How smelly. How full of snakes.

I went home another way, without returning to my willow tree. I knew that from the willow the scum on the river was still a bright mirror, studded with diamonds, thrilling with light. And I knew that between the land and the water the rushes still stood guard, their stiff bayonets glinting green. The willow leaves were still black against the cloud and the clover still gave the same overwhelming scent to the June-fresh air. I knew that, out in the water, a bend or two of twig, hung with weed, still made patterns in space, as if brushed in ink by a Buddhist artist.

## Living with panic attacks

BY LU RITZA

I started getting panic attacks when I was five years old. Back in the 1970’s it wasn’t much recognized that children could suffer panic attacks. They would just say we had a “behavioral problem” and let parents deal with it the best way they could. Having panic attacks at such an early age was very terrifying. I didn’t really know what was going on inside me. I felt my body stiffen and I would start to tremble and cry, my heart would beat very fast and hard and sometimes I even wet my pants. Later in years school was very hard for me. I wouldn’t play with the other children at recess. I would sit on a swing all alone until the bell would ring to go back to class. I was called a loner. Once, when I was in high school, I had a very big panic attack. I phoned my mom and told her I had to come home. I was crying. She didn’t know what was going on with me. She didn’t realize I was having panic attacks, neither did the doctors that I saw for years. When I reached thirty, a doctor finally recognized I was suffering from severe panic attacks. I explained to him the way I had been for the past many years and he said he felt I had this condition since I was five years old. I still have panic attacks as of this day. The doctor put me on Ativan for whenever I get upset and feel a panic attack coming on. What people don’t realize, even today, is that small children can suffer panic attacks.



*Lonely heart by Irene Demas*





# Destination zero

BY MARGARET ALALA

He's convinced he has a pain in his right leg. Says it runs down from the top of his thigh and hits him hard in the knee. Just last week, he had a pain in his chest.

Too much smoking, he said.

They called him in for surgery and removed a polyp from his colon. Yes, that was the only thing they found wrong with him. A polyp.

But there had to be something else, he knew there just had to be. He mentioned the pain in his chest and they did the x-rays that showed he was just fine. But he didn't feel fine.

"I feel like I'm going to die soon, sweetie," he tells me as we walk. Of what, they're yet to find out, of course. But this is "Billy-talk" and I listen to him as I'll listen to only Billy talking like this.

He sees the metal railings that cover the subway and side-steps them as we walk, bumping clumsily into pedestrian traffic.

"Sorry, sorry . . . er excuse me . . . sorry," he stutters to the bump victims impatient with his haphazard maneuverings.

But these 'sorrlys' mean nothing to him; they are just a life-long reflex. A polite-at-all-costs upbringing does that to you. Makes for good first impressions - which is all that matters anyway since he'll never see these people again. Besides, copious 'sorrlys' excuse him from bad behavior - at crucial times like now when the metal grill must be avoided at all costs. For what's an impersonal bump here and there when the alternative is a heavy fatal thud on the subway tracks below where that big-bellied rat lies in waiting to nibble a bite and more from his sparse, not-quite-deceased, body?

He smokes more when he becomes like this. Smokes too much to make sure that the worst does happen. But sometimes, he forgets and sometimes he wants to be normal like today when he told me a secret - about going nowhere on the subway.

We board the train, and he sits there fidgeting as we wait for it to go . . . looking around several times making sure that no one he knows is on the train. It won't move... forcing him to fold his arms, cross and uncross his legs, then scan the faces coming in through the open door.

He fingers the worn, soft wallet in his pocket, takes it out, flips nervously through its compartments as if emptiness needed confirmation - as if something lost from his life when he got laid off would by some miracle have found its way back. Nothingness confirmed, he puts his wallet back, crosses his legs, folds his arms so tight his back arches and his neck leans forward while he scours the faces again. But, still, no one looks at us and no one knows.

The train moves . . . stopping too many times. I'm aware of every stop when I'm with him. I'm even more aware of how 'normal' everyone looks. They have no secrets, I think, or do they too have ulterior reasons for being on this train? I look everyone . . . how they're in their own small worlds . . . not see-

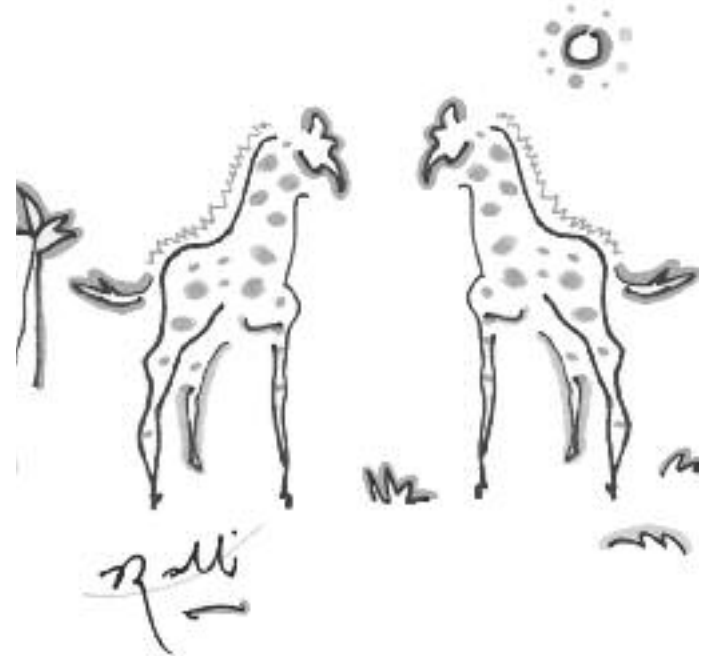
ing anybody. I see the blond skinny girl . . . appealing in her no-slave-to-fashion colorfulness . . . hungrily eating her fries. I see the man in the season's clothing . . . denim, black leather jacket and heavy black boots . . . staring straight ahead until he realizes I'm looking at him and diverts quick eyes to the ground. I see the round-faced woman lost in her trance as if nothing I could say or do would make her blink to attention and see me. I usually ride with faceless people, but today I'm looking at them to see if they know what we know or if anyone else feels what he feels. I keep looking...searching face to face...and he's looking too as he clutches my hand.

We're nearing the end - our end. I would call it our destination, but we're really going nowhere though the train is moving fast. I look at him . . . too weary to look at me as the folds on his face sag deeper from the strain. I'm reminding myself that fat once lived there, when I see him get more fidgety as a crowd rushes in at the next stop.

"Let's get out," I say. "We can walk the extra distance. It's OK really."

"No!" he snaps. "I've got to win this thing over."

Doors clang shut and we're trapped again with more potential witnesses to an attack - witnesses who by their sheer numbers can cause the attack. Yet the train has no choice but to move on to a place where it finally stops. Our stop. He walks out like everyone else, but with a tired smile because he's not "everyone else." Somewhere along the way on that ride, there should have been sweating and panting and yelling out in fear at being locked in a train. But there wasn't, and he'd taken his first subway ride in three years.



*"We're just too different."*



# Bringing dessert

BY LIZ BETZ

I am to bring a dessert to the family Easter meal. I choose a favourite. I adapt it to the number of servings required. I check my cupboards and then add things to my shopping list. It's a decision that seems to be made and yet I return to it several times. Perhaps I should make a second dish. Perhaps I should choose something else. Why had I offered to do a dessert at all? No one needs all that sugar. But it is expected.

When the family gathers, we bring family history. It stuffs the turkey. When we gather, we bring unresolved tensions. It flavours the salad. When we gather, we bring cross purposes along with the hot cross buns. It is the buffet of the day.

I think of my recipe and I think of the years of my life. Regret is a seasoning that can spoil the dish.

Do I know this, on this fine pre-Easter morning? Did I know that regret would flavour the next few weeks? No. I did not. And yet, I knew of the possibility.

I fuss over my dessert. If asked I would hold this domestic decision as the reason for my unease but the base of my discomfort is something else.

I am estranged from my son. It has been eight years I was amputated from his life. Estrangement. Sometimes I boil the bitterness. Sometimes I leave it on the shelf. But it always gets looked at when there is a family gathering. For me it is the plate on which I eat.

Would the family enjoy the caramel and nutmeg flavour combination? If surveyed would they choose something more elaborate? Pies are favoured, but I am not that ambitious this year. Was I being selfish by choosing something that was so simple? I don't know.

No more than I knew that my son would choose estrangement over a relationship. Choose bitterness over forgiveness. Choose distance over problem solving.

There have been a few glimmers of civility between us. And perhaps he would be there this Easter. This gathering is in the city where he lives, and on occasion he has been compelled to attend. His grandmother wants to see him, is the pressure



Art by James Skelton

used to gain his attendance. He wouldn't come to see me. And if he did, he wouldn't say. And I am rendered silent by the complexity of this.

Generally, I detach from this hurt. But the possibility of seeing him, of his being in the same household, where I will be conscious of his every move, the very possibility of the estrangement being resolved has brought me to this dither over the dessert.

It's the day. I put the pan with all the raw ingredients in the stove. I have recalculated the recipe. Double this. Double that, then realize there isn't enough room for all the boiling water. But since I know this recipe by heart, I am sure that it won't matter. Maybe a little less sauce will appear at the bottom of the pudding but it will still be fine. A portion of the cooking time goes by and I check that the dough hasn't climbed the walls of the pan. And spilt over and is burning on the bottom of the oven. It hasn't.

I don't have my son's phone number. I don't know his address. I count on his sister for any news of his life. I guard my heart from too much feeling. It is too easy to weep. I am sure now that the pudding will not boil over. I am less sure of myself. I prepare to transport the hot dish.

Quit whining, I tell myself, it could be so much worse. He has no wife or child, so I am not missing out on those special relationships. I think of the dead. I think of the jailed. I think of the parent who is threatened by their child. I think of the child caught in a cult, or insane, or doing bad in this world. Our son has drifted away from us – it's sad but it's not as tragic as it could be. A bitter dish but not poisoned. Not lethal.

I set the dessert on the counter. We all exchange greetings and do a little catching up. The potatoes arrive from another family. Someone has brought devilled eggs. There are never enough of those. Our son is not present, a quick look around tells me that. I busy myself with smiles and hugs for others. I've determined to enjoy myself and it's not hard really. I do enjoy our get-togethers. And before long his name is mentioned. Is he going to be here? One of his cousins asks. I wait as his sister answers. She repeats his excuse for being absent. She tells of his job which is based on a skill that he learnt from us, his parents, whom he has distain for. I wonder if he realizes that we've given him some of his strengths. His sister continues as she tells of his roommate and in doing so, labels the both of them. I lap up the evidence – my son is an atheist? I hone in on the details, half of his living room is set up as a gym, I learn. Then because suddenly I feel my actions are pathetic, I leave that little conversation group. This is not what I feared. I thought his presence would be too much, but it is his absence that wounds.

I place a spoon in the dessert so people can serve themselves. It is time to eat. We bless this food to our use, and let us be truly thankful. The aromas waft over us. The flavours combine and satisfy. And in the end there are no empty seats at the table. But one more could have squeezed in. I brought dessert.

# Ruth

BY SHIRLEY CALLAGHAN

In Biblical times the name Ruth conjured up a model of loving kindness, a woman of noble character who acted in ways that promoted the well-being of others.

Then there was the Ruth I knew, who was a woman of physical beauty and intelligence, yet encompassing destructive tendencies. She came into my life fifty years ago, leaving scars that pervade my memory to this day.

At eighteen, I was in my third year of an Arts program in a small-town university: the months were going well, regarding both studies and socialization. My marks in sociology and psychology supported my choice to establish a career in these areas. I was happy and my contribution in classes improved with earlier experiences in privately arranged small group tutorials with various professors. Visits in the homes of some faculty for study and tea were helpful in establishing a sense of relevance and community. The library was a second home, and the presence of a supportive and appreciative boyfriend studying with me was advantageous: all in all it was my best university school year experience to date.

After my trembling first year of studies, with all its adaptations and homesickness, I learned to cope by making friends, some of whom were foreign students. There were also proms and parties to lighten up the weeks and I attended football games I never understood. Studies were challenging, but I passed.

In second year my roommate was a dependent and neurotic freshette who became my albatross. She was wealthy but insecure and followed me everywhere, leaving me frustrated and worn. I needed help with her, and this is when Ruth came into our lives.

Ruth was in my English class and won the heart of an outlandish professor who had an eagle beak and a smug, seemingly toothless grin. Ruth charmed him. She had a commanding appearance with dark curly hair, flawless skin and pursed ruby lips. Her figure was full and she walked with an assured gait, her knee length cotton dresses blowing in the breeze. I was taken by her air of confidence and approached her to help me in a debate between our university and a nearby institution on the merit of women versus men. She did so; it was fun to do, but became a comedy of errors.

I saw more of Ruth the next year since she roomed with my former, troubled roommate who had become attached to her, and I had a requested single room which happened to be across the hall. My accommodation was small. It was painted taupe with flowered curtains and had a single bed on the right, a worn closet on the left and beside it a scarred desk with a goose-necked lamp. It overlooked a plush green lawn and pine trees in the middle of campus, and by a street light at night, a mystical, comfortable play of light and shadow.

The slop-pit, where I scraped dirty dishes, brought me in some funds for amenities, but it did not raise my status on campus. I became soiled as a result, and would rush up the back stairs to shower before I met anyone. Ruth would glance at me and say a muffled "Hello." I wondered how she was doing with her roommate who hadn't gained any more independence since

the previous year. She didn't have much attention since Ruth was studying religion and spending time with her associates and professors, and I was at the library most of the evenings. As far as I could tell, it was the men who favoured Ruth.

Two happy events for me were my election to Women's Council and being chosen to represent the university at a conference on "Technology and Man" in Guelph. I was thrilled and shared the news with my fellow floor-mates. Most were happy for me, but not Ruth who avoided me and headed down the hall with her roommate in tow. There was a fellow in her class who told me he adored her: she did not reciprocate his affection. She seemed cold and distant to me and in her relating to others on the floor.

The library was closing and I was tired. After saying goodbye to my boyfriend, I cut across the lawn to the back entrance of my residence. It was damp and there was a slight mist in the air. My step quickened. I hoped that the back door was still open and it was. I hurried up the shellacked rough stairs and the scent was nauseating. I wanted to get to my room.

As I felt for the doorknob, I saw that the door was ajar. It was dark when I entered the room but there were shadows from the lighted window—horrible shadows dancing on the floor—shadows from a figure hanging in the window. Dark strands touched the shoulders of the shape of a woman—dressed in a light cotton dress. The configuration seemed to move in the draught from the window. I stared at it. Was it Ruth hanging there? Everything in the shadowy light said the figure was this woman. Was this the aftermath of Ruth forewarning of a dire event to punish me for casting off my old roommate on her? Was this horrific act a manifestation of a vindictive woman with a troubled mind? It all was a blur.

I vaguely saw her then in the hall—alive—smug—enjoying the moment. I screamed louder—then louder—I grew hoarse with the yelling. Women from three floors came running as did the matron. I sat huddled and mute on the bed. Someone cut the effigy down. I sobbed. Why had Ruth done this to me?

The perpetrator was nowhere to be found, but with this act she earned the reputation of being cruel and degenerate. I had lots of support, but could have used counseling. I finished the year successfully, but still laboured with the recollection of the incident and the reason why Ruth orchestrated such an act. I don't even know if she was ever reprimanded.

I never saw my classmates after that year because I did not return until two years later to finish my degree, for after that year I suffered a nervous breakdown. All the achievements I had gained that year never came to fruition. It took months of hospitalization and therapy to regain my mental health. I didn't blame Ruth for my upset, as genetics played the major role in my illness. But in the shadows of the night I would see a form in the window and awake in terror.

I was never to see Ruth again, but I heard that she had gone on to great heights in the area of religion. I will never know why she victimized me, or if her horrific act ever crossed her mind as she stood in the pulpit.



# Death of a friend

BY ANNE MARIE CARLSON

I thought I had “gotten over it.” Of course one never does. A death of a parent, a sibling, a friend, or God forbid, the death of a child. Death is so final, and finality is not one of the human’s strong suits.

Recently a friend passed away. She called me from the hospice to say good bye. She beseeched me to come down and join the party. The attendees were her sex-changed godson, woman to man, whom I like, and her neighbour whom I met once and had an argument about some theological issue but who still I think is ok. I am not sure how they felt but I declined.

I had known my friend for decades. We worked for the same educational institution, she in overseas programs and I in professional development. We were drawn to each other over a love for art. We both had earned a degree in Fine Art before our other professional degrees. She needed a friend at that time too because she had just been publically shamed by being left standing at the altar. She was about 50 pounds overweight at the time so I encouraged her to come on lunchtime walks with me, but she was somewhat more successful with her enticements of German baking and a glass of wine after work.

I committed professional suicide by quitting a union job with benefits to work for non-profits that could barely pay my salary and in fact often didn’t. She got an even better job with a federal government department and moved from Vancouver into her own little home on Vancouver Island. We were already worlds apart in that I was raising a mob of teen agers and she was a single woman and I could not go out for long philosophic dinners in expensive restaurants. But we did remain friends. I took her over to the island to help look for apartments. I cleaned a filthy basement to help make a painting studio for her. She continued to cook fantastic meals and poured copious glasses of wine.

She retired and planned to paint full time and look for representation. When my father passed away I stayed at his home on Vancouver Island for several months to prepare the home for sale. She entertained me, cooked for me, and listened to me talk about Dad.

Another decade passed. I decided to quit non-profit work and retire to the island, but my husband lost his job. Two salaries turned to one, and we had to stop the expensive lifestyle of Vancouver. My friend met me for lunch, after which she drove me around to look at homes. I bought a small house and moved all our things from Vancouver into our new home on the island. I still worked in Vancouver. We began renovations with the plan to build an addition and live happily ever after. I stopped commuting to work because I was getting tired easily. Pulling my suitcase from friend’s couch to friend’s couch during the week was a strain. I found a job on the island. Even though the job was similar and in many ways less stressful than working in Vancouver, I still felt it was difficult to drag myself out of bed but I had no choice. I had a constant stom-

ach ache. I stopped going to the gym because the treadmill footfall caused a pain in my belly. No amount of rowing on the machine helped my growing waistline. It hurt during sex. I went to the doctor. He said it was probably “women’s problems.” I went back several months later. He said “It’s probably just a cyst let’s wait to see if it goes away.” Months later, “Maybe we should have an ultrasound. It looks like a cyst. Perhaps you should see a gynecologist. I could do surgery as an elective item if the cyst bothers you that much.” We were now into year two of complaining about a sore tummy. Elective surgery was another wait of half a year. No surgery in the summer. No surgery available in early autumn. Finally I had the surgery. It was an ovarian cancer tumour and it was broken during surgery. Immediate crisis.

The whole time, my friend met me for lunch, came over for dinner, chatted about her own mortality and the importance of wills. She called one morning and asked me to take her to emergency. She had pains in her belly. I sat with her even though I was on chemo by now and the hospital waiting room was not germ free! The doctor sent her for an ultrasound. It showed fibrosis in her womb. She had had it before, and they were removed that day and she was sent on her way. Shortly after, it was one of those moments you remember forever, she called while we were driving to chemo and said, “I have cancer.” “No! What kind?” Ovarian, of course.

My world sank. Not the same! How could that be? She asked me to come over and help her get ready to go to Vancouver for chemotherapy. I did, I brought all my contact numbers, all the best information sheets I had been given, gave her phone numbers, and we went over the process so she would not be afraid.

My husband was dubious about the reality of the situation. To him it didn’t seem right. Upon her urging I shaved her head so when her hair fell out it looked neat and was not as itchy. She left for Vancouver after much ado and preparation. She even made herself a new coat for the time in the city.

She called from Vancouver, but not from the cancer clinic shelter that she said she was staying at. She called from a friend’s home and said that they had fought and she didn’t know where to stay. Again I gave her the cancer clinic contacts, but later she called from another friend’s to tell me that she was there. I asked about how the treatments were going and her answers were very vague and often odd. I thought she was confused and in shock. When she returned I noticed that her hair was longer. She asked me to shave it off again, but I said no, if it was growing back she should let it! She did not have any names of doctors nor did she have bruises on her arms from the needles. She was not up on the procedures and often stated things that I noticed were being done in USA but not here. I was confused by the difference between how I had been treated and what she described. I was jealous that the medical community seemed to be taking her case more seriously than mine and she was offered more proactive treatments than I was. She seemed a bit too energetic for someone on chemo, but I accept-

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*I was quite sick, yet I dragged myself over to help my friend with her illness because somehow she seemed not to be handling it well.*

ed her story and brought her cooked meals and did laundry and carried groceries and washed her car. I even bought her favorite perfume as a pick-me-up gift.

By now my cancer had metastasised, and I had to have a section of colon taken out. I was in the hospital for 20 days. On the day of discharge my husband drove me straight to work, which I finally quit. I was quite sick, yet I dragged myself over to help my friend with her illness because somehow she seemed not to be handling it well. I was in the practise of doing her laundry and washing her car and unloading her groceries, but now she needed help with even the dishes and cleaning herself and the bathroom. One day she asked my husband to help her move some things around in the garage and to take some bottles to the recycle. He gladly agreed and found out he had to make two trips to the recycle with the bottles, hundreds of Jack Daniels bottles, all apparently recently consumed, they were not dusty. I asked her about it and she said she had had lots of company which I knew was not true. I told her that drinking while on chemotherapy was probably not productive, and I thought not to mention that she had gained a 100 pounds in the last few years.

One afternoon she called, inviting us over for dinner. Upon asking more, such as "Are you sure you don't want me to bring something over," I was told no, she had a special reason

to invite us. I was to come an hour early, and then my husband later, so we had "girl time." That was inconvenient for him but he agreed as he liked her cooking. He dropped me off an hour early and she greeted me at the door, showered and dressed in a bathrobe. "Dress me," she asked. Okay, but why. "I can't decide and I want to look my best because – surprise – John is coming over too!" John was the new next door neighbour. He occasionally brought her garbage can in from the street, asked if he could get her anything from Superstore, weeded under their adjoining fence, and seemed to be a good neighbour and a polite fellow. I told her I thought that was a nice way of repaying him and promised to be good company. She pulled me into her bedroom. "What should I wear?" I laid out some outfits and she giggled like a girl. When she was dressed she said, "Do you think he will want to kiss me?" "Sure" I replied. No, I thought. Oh dear. John was more than half her age. She was 73 and he was 34. "You don't have a crush on him?" "No, not a crush, I am in love." A knock on the door. She ordered me to get it. My husband arrived shortly after and we had a good dinner party with interesting conversation. That is when I had the philosophical argument about the existence of God with the neighbour. We had to leave because of my med schedule, and John got up to go too. She begged him stay but he left with us.

Next day the phone rang and she was full of analyzing the evening and projecting into the future. Personally, I thought that he was just being a well brought up young chap, helping the old lady next door, but I dared not tell her. However, I did tell her that I felt uncomfortable talking this way about a man younger than my stepson.

My cancer symptoms slowly abated and I began to garden and look for ways I could earn money, as I had been the only wage earner and the drugs that go along with chemo were adding up. I had to put a second mortgage on the house and took a paper route and other small jobs I could do from home. She made me commit to a call a week because she "didn't have much time left." I still helped her with her heavy work, while she sat back and chatted about John. She now called him her boyfriend. Her Jack Daniels bottles began to accumulate again. I asked John one day if he drank, to which I received a resounding no. He was a teetotaller and health freak. She had her grey hair, which had completely grown in, dyed red.

One afternoon I got a call from the hospital. I assumed it was regarding an appointment or blood work, as I was on a different chemotherapy which was particularly brutal on red blood cells. It was my friend. She said she was in an isolation ward. I asked why and she was unsure why. I asked her if she had gotten an infection and again she was unsure. She said she had been vomiting blood in the night and an ambulance came and took her to the emergency ward. She begged me to come and help her. I hurried to the hospital against my husband's warning and wishes, went to the front desk, and enquired where she was. In the psychiatric emergency intake. I rushed through the long halls, was stopped by the social worker who knew me because I had seen her regarding financial stress. Was



*Another ex nihilo by Henry Peters*



I OK? I told her my concerns about my friend. She said that my friend was being observed for psychosis brought on by alcoholism. I brought her a get-well card, chatted about John, and encouraged her to listen to the doctors. My husband was full of “I told you so,” but I was still not able to process the issue. Not able to neatly put things together.

She was released in a day, and I recommended that she contact home care nurses to help her since her cancer was a good reason to seek help with daily tasks. I was getting too weak to do all her work as well as my own, and we were not eating because of poverty. She resisted, but I was not sure why.

She called, elated because John was going to take her on a holiday camping to Tofino. When I questioned her, she admitted that she was going to stay in a hotel and John was camping. That was going to happen in 3 months’ time. She asked me lots of questions about Tofino and what to wear. I told her warm, comfortable clothes and walking shoes and to bring camera and art supplies. She was also wanting to meet my friend who ran a well-known gallery in Vancouver to show him her work. When I asked him and he said no, I told her he was not accepting art at this time.

# MS Lord Selkirk

BY CARRIE HATLAND

The old man stood before the mired ship, pondering its fall from grace. Once illustrious, the MS Lord Selkirk had hosted Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip on a royal visit to Canada forty years prior.

Sinking up to his ankles in the slough, he had no choice but to continue walking, his rubber shoes making sucking noises in the wet mud. He remembered the royal visit extremely well. He had been in the crowd during the royal procession onto the ship, had stood beside Marian as she jumped up and down, waving to the Queen of England.

“My Darling,” he whispered as a tear coursed down his weathered cheek.

His mind’s eye washed away the rust and painted the massive ship’s hull into the gleaming colors he remembered. He could hear the squawking of the circling gulls and the lapping of the water as it hit the marina. He closed his eyes and could feel Marian’s warm hand in the crook of his arm.

They had returned that evening, when the moon reflected on the water and the lights from the boats sparkled in the dark. Music had wafted along the shore and he had asked her to dance.

His eyes still closed, his heart reached out for her once more. For a dizzying moment he was twenty years old again and swung her around in his powerful arms. Jubilation made him laugh out loud and he raised his arms to the sky, strength

and love flowing through his veins. Closer to the departure day, I went over, again, to do laundry, and she began speaking about my friend the art dealer as if he were her friend. I asked if he had contacted her, and she said he had come to her studio. I thought that was strange that he didn’t drop by, but she said he was a busy man and didn’t have time to see me. I called him, but he had no knowledge of what she was saying. This worried me more than the strange illness that had no symptoms and the boyfriend who didn’t seem to be anything but a neighbour.

I was given a few months to live. I refused to accept it. I was doing everything I could to fight my cancer. My friend and I discussed it. She told me I didn’t look sick so I must not be, whereas she looked sick so she must be sicker than I. I told her I do not like comparisons as we are all different, in fact that was something I heard a lot – “you look good” – and I was beginning to resent it. We had that conversation in a local tea shop, by which time I was pushing all 200 pounds of her in a wheelchair. That was the last time we went out together.

The next call was the one I opened this story with, from the hospice. She said “I beat you!” and she did, she died that day.

and love flowing through his veins.

“Mr. Carlson!” Brandy ran towards him from the gravel road. “What are you doing out here? It’s freezing and you have no jacket on!”

Stopping with his hands still up in the air, confusion made his mouth hang open and his bushy eyebrows furrow.

“What? Who are you?”

“It’s me, your nurse. Mr. Carlson, you need to come back. You wandered away without telling anyone.”

“Come back?” His eyes brightened, the vagueness fading. “You are going to take me back? To Marian?”

“No, Mr. Carlson. To the Selkirk Mental Health Institute. Your wife and son want us to assess you, remember?”

“My son?” His voice cracked. “I don’t have a son. Marian lost the baby.”

Leading him by the arm, Brandy coaxed him towards the waiting car.

“You do have a son.” She searched his face for any flicker of memory. “With your wife, Teresa.”

“Teresa?” He stopped and shook off her hand. “I don’t know any Teresa! You must have me mistaken for somebody else.”

He turned back to the boat, memories niggling at the edge of his consciousness. He wanted to stay. Marian had said they’d always be together. It was right here, standing in front of the ship that she had said she would marry him.

Where was she?

# What I see

BY KYRA MCCUBBIN

It's raining. Heavy, cold drops falling from the sky, striking the pavement and shining like quarters. I hold my jacket over my head and run down the steps of the porch, across the lawn, and into the cabin of the truck.

The door shuts with a heavy thud. My wet skin sticks against the polyester seating. I turn the ignition and flip on the lights. The clock on the dashboard reads 8:53 p.m. Water beads drip down into my eyes, but I brush them away with the back of my hand. I pull out of the driveway, turning left. Heading towards the highway.

I keep thinking how surprised he will be to see me. So surprised, so happy.

Storm clouds have marked the sky a strange purple colour. A bolt of lightning flashes in the corner of my eye, off in the east. I merge into the highway lane, behind a hatchback. Adrenaline is pumping through my blood. I grip the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white.

8:58 p.m.

I'm imagining his face as I meet him at the airport. How it will feel to embrace him and press my nose into the skin of his throat. To breathe his scent. This time, I won't nag him to mow the lawn or do the laundry. I won't screen his calls if he forgets to meet me for dinner. This time will be different.

9:00 p.m.

I turn on the radio. There's a crack of static, then a cheery male voice. A broadcaster is giving the weather forecast for the next five days. I have to turn the volume dial up high to hear it over the rain. *Sun, sun, and more sun ahead, folks. Hang in there.*

The rain starts coming down in sheets. It becomes difficult to see the road. I lean close to the windshield, my shoulders hunched over the wheel. I pretend that sitting this way helps me to see out onto the road.

9:01 p.m.

I feel it before I know what's happening: the dread that starts in my stomach and spreads through my body like iron. The front wheels spinning uselessly, sliding along the pavement. The truck drifts into the oncoming lane. Then there's a flash of light. Then there's the fantastic sound of metal crashing into metal. Then everything falls to black.

The next thing I remember is the light tapping sound of a cooling engine. Something sticky is plastering my hair to my forehead. I open my eyes. Beyond the webbed pattern of the windshield glass, I can see the custom-made briefcase that I got him for his forty-fifth birthday.

"I can take whoever's next in line."

The next person in line is a girl no older than fifteen. She has long red hair that falls all the way down to her waist. She gives me an absent sort of smile and slides a cotton t-shirt across the counter. I pick it up and shake it out to fold it.

"Did anyone help you out today?" I ask.

The girl on the other side of the counter nods her head. "Yeah. The lady with the blue hair."

She's talking about Stacy. Stacy always makes good commission. Stacy could sell a pair of hosiery to a fifty-year-old single man.

I scan the barcode. "Alright. You're total comes to nineteen dollars and forty cents."

"I have a gift card," she says. She holds up a violently pink card.

I take it from her, running it through the machine. Then I ring up the new total. I notice that I've accidentally run it through twice. It comes up to \$8.53.

I'm pulling out of the lot and heading towards the highway, thinking how surprised he will be to see me.

The storm has coloured the sky a strange purple colour. Lightning crashes in my ears and illuminates the clouds in the east. I merge into the highway lane.

This time, I won't nag him to mow the lawn or do the laundry. I won't screen his calls if he forgets to meet me for dinner.

Minutes later, clock on the dashboard reads 9:00 p.m. A crackle of static cuts out on the radio. The broadcaster booms from the speakers. *We're in for sun, sun, and more sun ahead, folks.*

9:01 p.m.

My stomach fills with something heavy, like iron. It carries through my blood and seeps into my whole body. The truck careens into the opposite lane. There's a flash of light, a sound louder than any thunderclap I could imagine.

The next thing I remember is the light tapping sound of a cooling engine. Something sticky is plastering my hair to my forehead. I open my eyes. Beyond the webbed pattern of the windshield glass, I can see the silvery scar on his ankle. The one he got from scaling a barbed wire fence.

Monica plants a kiss on either side of my face. Her lips are stained with the blood-red colour of wine.

"We really need to get together more often," she says.

"Absolutely," I agree, although both of us know that our next get together will be a year from now, if not longer.

"Have a good night, darling."

She closes the door behind her. I'm left alone again, with only the sound of the kitchen clock ticking away to keep me company.

As much as I like Monica, her visit has exhausted me. Her visits always exhaust me.

I decide to have a shower. I strip my clothes piece by piece and step into the tub. Beneath the shower head, steam begins to cloud around me. I shampoo, lather, rinse, and repeat. I stare down at the drain between my feet. Water beads drip down into my eyes.

Lightning crashes off to the right. I grip the steering wheel so tightly that my knuckles turn white.



## WRITING THE LIFE - FICTION

I'm imagining how it will feel to embrace him and press my nose into the skin of his throat. To breathe his scent.

9:00 p.m., and I turn on the radio. *Sun, sun, and more sun ahead, folks. Hang in there.* Then the rain starts coming down in sheets.

I feel it before I know what's happening: the front wheels spinning uselessly, sliding along the pavement.

The next thing I remember is the light tapping sound of a cooling engine. Something sticky is plastering my hair to my forehead. I open my eyes. Beyond the webbed pattern of the windshield glass, I can see the silver band of our wedding ring on his mangled left hand.

The television casts the den in a faint blue glow. I stretch my legs out on the ottoman. I'm watching the ten o'clock news, as per my weekday routine. The mute function is turned on. I prefer watching television when it's silent.

My phone rings. I answer it without checking the number first.

A male voice fills the receiver. "Hello, is Ms. Domasin there?"

"Speaking."

"Hi, Ms. Domasin. I'm conducting a survey on the quality of our cellular customer service. I understand you switched to our company three months ago?"

"Yes, well..."

"This survey should take no more than ten minutes of your time, ma'am."

"I'm sorry, I can't."

I hang up then, feeling agitated that a pointless phone call has disrupted my news routine.

I suppose the network is between segments. There's a commercial for women's shampoo. I flip to the previous channel.

The weather forecast is on. The five day forecast pops up on the screen. The next three days are predicted to be filled with warm temperatures and sunshine.

*Sun, sun, and more sun, folks. Hang in there.*

The rain starts coming down in sheets. I lean close to the windshield, my shoulders hunched over the wheel. I pretend that sitting this way helps me to see out onto the road.

9:01 p.m.

I feel it before I know what's happening. The truck drifts into the opposite lane. A sudden streak of blinding light. A metallic sound ringing on and on in my ears.

The next thing I remember is the light tapping sound of a cooling engine. Something sticky is plastering my hair to my forehead. I open my eyes. Beyond the webbed pattern of the windshield glass, I can see the briefcase I gave him for his forty-fifth birthday. I can see the scar that he got on his ankle from scaling a barbed-wire fence. I can see the silver band of our wedding ring on his mangled left hand.

I can see my husband's face in the yellow glow of a busted taxi headlight. The mop of his dark curly hair, starting to turn grey in some places. The slight protrusion of his straight jaw. His eyes are closed.

I close my own then, to shut it all out.



Image by Amanda Weckworth



# My name is Claude Jutra

BY ADAM KELLY MORTON

The first moving image I ever saw: a white-sailed boat, was it?

An old villager finds my body in April, floating on the north shore of the Saint Lawrence. He tells the police and reporters that he saw my winter boots sticking above the surface of the water. When they pull me ashore and search me, they locate the piece of paper I've sealed in a plastic case.

I will try to remember how I got here: on the outskirts of Cap Santé (Cape of Good Health – I could have used your epithet earlier, my friend. Much earlier!) “Poor Claude and his failing memory,” I imagine they said – friends, colleagues, and family.

Maybe it's the cold of the river, or its black depths – all these months, being pulled by the current ... and now, a rising ... a freedom in light – but now, I am able to float above it all, and go where I like. What day is it today? April 25th, 1986. How do I know that. To have known so little before, and now to know so much ... like growing up from childhood, only in reverse. It's strange.

Then again, so much of my life was *outré*, wasn't it? Ha! A life of cinema! How could it be otherwise?

As my body floated past Portneuf – the irony of names ... Newport ... only an artist would notice these things, I suppose – my thoughts were of childhood. How appropriate that the last part of my long journey should be taken up with memories of Rivière Beaudette, itself along this great seaway? (Then again, I was born with this artistic sensibility, unlike my father, or my mother – who could have been a great artist, Mimi and I always agreed. Mimi is my sister. I'm glad I remember!)

Every summer we stayed at our cottage in Rivière Beaudette, and there we explored the outdoors, put on plays, and learned what the world was about. Maman wanted Mimi to be an actress, but it was never in her blood – as my great friend Michel (Brault, Ha!) said at my funeral: "Claude's blood pumped at twenty-four frames per second." Sweet Michel. Now, he was a handsome man.

There was an abandoned farmhouse beside our cottage, and we made it home to our pantomimes, recitals, and even our films (when you have an imagination, you don't need a camera; production costs run much higher when you are older – and a *cinéaste* – just imagine trying to find producers by telling them, "Not to worry about money, I've got my imagination.") Though even through our filmmaking difficulties, Michel was there, all the way – vvvsuch beauty, even when his dark hair receded ... mine never did, he was so envious of my curly mane – if only he knew ... perhaps this was all for him; I always obsessed over ... like in my first feature, which he shot, of course ... I'll remember its name in a moment ... there was a black woman, and I played Claude ... something happens ... it will come back to me. Easy does it.

Funny that childhood memories are so strong, in spite of everything; I distinctly remember as I made my way in late

March past Deschambault (always hugging the north shore) where that impressive, new filmmaker comes from ... Now what is his name? Denis ... something. It's as though I've seen every film ever made.

What was I saying? I'm sorry. I just get lost. Sometimes I can't stand myself.

Our townhouse on Sainte-Famille was always full of artists, because my parents were of the Montreal *bourgeoisie* ... Jutras! That was my name. I took away the 's'. Papa didn't mind ("There is only one Claude Jutra," I told the press) he forced me to complete my medical studies. I always found them remarkably dull. There were many times where I would be sitting in the laboratory and would think to myself, 'What fools these colleagues of mine are – to be so interested in something as dry and artless as science.' But as I put it to Papa after I had won my first film prize (I'm not sure which one), "Of course, we all know who the fool was, Papa." And he replied, "Yes. It was me – for paying your way through school." And we laughed.

But they were supportive. How could they not be, with the regular parade of sculptors, dancers, writers, musicians, and painters who visited us on Sainte-Famille? My father was a doctor, I recall, and privileged – but he loved culture. I was destined for greatness.

So then ... how did I end up here? Wasn't I cared for? Looked after by loved ones? There must have been an event of some sort.

Perhaps I was murdered ... by radical Canadian federalists – or by even more radical Quebec nationalists. I don't think I was that interesting a target. Then again, artists often are. Politics, then?

No. It must have been an accident.

Distinctly, I remember passing Grondines, full of sunshine bouncing off the surface above, heralding spring. The glints of light made me think of my first film – not the one with the scouts I did with Michel when we were young, or the one about skateboards. No ... something else. A man, myself (the character's name was Claude.) Did I already speak of this? Am I repeating myself? There was a black woman, very lovely, and a love affair, and a revelation that he is gay (hardly autobiographical), but especially a scene at the end, with a pier, wide shot, sun on the waves, a man, leaping in.

There was an accident I had on my Vespa, on a bridge (there is a correlation here, I'm sure of it), a truck was driving in front of me, carrying a great many stones, and one fell off. I swerved to avoid it. When I woke up in Hôtel Dieu hospital (very close to where I grew up), there was the same feeling I had when floating: the world above moving on without me.

Still, I was young then, thirty-something, not this fifty ... something, old cadaver with the mind of a child.

In a way, everything I have done in film has been to recapture my youth. I did one about wrestling and another about the young generation of Quebecers in the 1960s. Skateboards?

As I drifted by, children were out to play in the February day snows of Batiscan and Gentilly (where more impassioned



filmmakers named Denis-something will spring from, surely).

My masterpiece (so they say: the greatest film in Quebec and in Canada) was about a boy child (myself?); set in winter, there was a sled, and a corpse, and an asbestos mine. Why this film should have been honoured above my later works has always baffled me. Perhaps it was because of the times we lived in. The politicians wanted my work to be more overtly political – more nationalist, for the sovereignty of Quebec. Happily I would have done so, but the artist's inspiration is all. And the artist's work, like a good Montrachet, gets better with age.

I stopped drinking, and smoking, to try and root out probable causes for my affliction. What affliction? Was it cancer? A tumour pressing against some part of my brain? There was a corpse in my masterpiece, and he probably succumbed from cancer because of the asbestos mine.

Why was I sick?

Patience, Claude. It will come back to you. Remember instead the glory of Trois-Rivières – that great hub of activity (but no Montreal), where my next film was so well greeted, with a standing ovation in my presence. Perhaps I shot it there? A period piece. Children, of course. Why did the rest of Quebec turn away from it? Not political enough. My, those were turbulent times: the 60s and 70s. That balding fellow who smoked all the time ... Lévesque! What a great orator. Should have been an actor. How sad we all were after the referendum. Now, if we had our own country, everything would have been different. Culture would have been respected, and preserved, and language too. And we wouldn't lose so many to Ontario and the United States. The critics and pundits, rather than seek a political theme, would have been content to look at my work for what it is: a penetrating look into human emotion – an attempt to understand, through cinema, why we cannot remain innocent. Perhaps my work made the spectators lose their innocence; that would be a good thing.

Yes, around Trois-Rivières I felt a strong counter-current from the Saint-Maurice. That was my life, I suppose: against the current, always in opposition, and, ultimately, powerless.

Could it have been an aggravated infection from my Vespa accident? Recurring concussion?

Drifting by Nicolet (where they train the police, I recall. Was I ever arrested? Such a craving for drama!), there was an awfully cold undercurrent, maybe from the narrowing of Lac Saint Pierre. Such dread and fear in the depths of January. I needed a change when I fled from Montreal to Toronto. But I believe it was more of a running-to. "*Travailler en anglais? Jamais!*" I remember saying. Now, there's a film title that I can remember: *Surfacing*. Atwood. (Like driftwood? I've seen plenty of that. English names are so strange.) The Anglophones didn't like that film either. It's true what they say: that you can give an artist a thousand compliments; all we remember is the one critique. When I was in Paris (with Truffaut), in Africa (with Jean Rouch), they said I was brilliant. So did Cassavetes and even Renoir. I remember those.

I'm not sure what happened with Montreal. At least Mimi was there for me, at the end. Wasn't she? "You're going to be fine, Claude," she always said. "It will come back to you." But I could read the truth in her; poor Mimi, with our mother's eyes, who always could look straight at me.

I've got to stop trying too hard to recall. Let the current do the work.

Toronto brought me an income, at least, and I could still make a living as a filmmaker; for me: that is the only thing that mattered. Though I think it was in Toronto where I experienced my first loss for words: I simply couldn't remember the word 'screenplay' in English, or (scénario) in French. And when I did remember, or thought I had, I simply couldn't put the word onto my lips. It was a rare enough occurrence – vtrying to form the word in my mind, and in my mouth, but failing – so I forgot all about it.

At Sorel-Tracy, I began to enter the lake. The waters warmed, a touch. It felt like coming home.

After heading back along the 401 to Montreal, I dove right back into film work. Nothing was ever as well received as my earlier films (like the short, with Norman, about me and the chair, or the one about the girl Anna, written by Cocteau), but it was a steady stream of work – another metaphor. Ha!

It was around then (1980?) that I started to forget. There had always been little moments of forgetfulness (Where are my car keys? Why didn't I pack a bathing suit?). But then there were bigger blunders, like parking my car at the NFB and completely forgetting where; my co-workers regularly had to help



Art by James Skelton

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*The turmoil of my illness had been considerable, so Mimi moved into our duplex on Laval Street to take care of me.*

find it. Or when I forgot it was my birthday (which I still can't remember, I'll confess – spring, I think). The essentials weren't a problem: bathing, feeding myself, feeding my three cats (each with different types of food), and writing and creating every day. Though remembering certain words began to fail me with greater regularity. I would chastise myself: "Claude, how can you forget UCLA? You taught film there." I felt stupid, but knew that I wasn't.

Christmas was always a happy time, though it was hard not to feel gloomy as the river pulled me past Lanoraie; I knew people were celebrating above, with all the wondrous childhood joys and predicaments so conducive to a ... screenplay, like in my masterpiece. Mimi and ... my brother and I couldn't wait for Christmas Eve: a night of goodies and gifts, and in the morning, the new-fallen snow over the tranquil city streets of Montreal, with Mount Royal itself looking like an enormous snow fort, and tobogganing down its treacherous slopes for hours.

So much cinema; like the first moving image I ever saw: my aunt's film of her travels. There was a white sailboat out on the water... and when it moved! *Un coup de foudre!* I was hooked: a simple fish. Jim Morrison said something of the sort to me when I was with him in Los Angeles. How his music and words have traveled with me. Perhaps this is the end, my beautiful friend. I wish ... it doesn't matter. Let it roll.

Moving backwards (it's a retrograde journey, is remembrance), I reached Lavaltrie in early December, where the push from the Lachine rapids finally let up.

The turmoil of my illness had been considerable, so Mimi moved into our duplex on Laval Street to take care of me. Little did she know that I had been journaling my mind's progressive decay. Little did anyone know! Hopefully they will say that Claude's final film – that of his life – is a work of genius – his best since ...

Saul came in from Toronto to visit me. Lovely Saul. How we rejoiced in watching films together. Especially comedies. Chaplin was our favourite, *The Great Dictator* —when he would curse in German while frantically trying to pull a pen out of a ... what do you call it? Superb. Saul said I should see a brain specialist, and Mimi agreed. If only they knew how much I knew. You can't have a medical degree without having some understanding of ...

Early-onset Alzheimer's! That's what it was.

Then that was the reason. My reason ... for ...?

Oh, Mimi. How many times a day did I call you? Wherever you were. Wherever I was. Whenever I got lost – in our own neighbourhood, around Carré Saint-Louis. Always so understanding. Even when Papa forced me into science and Maman put you up on stage; I was so envious, and told you so, and yet you never showed me anything but compassion – especially as my mind went black. It was too easy for me to be terrified. It made me hate myself even more. Once, I was a brave artist.

Who was that actress who also cared for me, even moving

into the upstairs apartment on Laval? Did I make a movie with her? I feel it was my last. It was something about children escaping an institution, and creating an imaginary world for themselves. I was to play their adult confidant, a child at heart.

I could not remember my lines. It was humiliating. The tears flowed like torrents.

The waters sped by so quickly through late November. I passed Saint-Sulpice, and before that Repentigny, and before that Charlemagne, where my course turned due-north, a last turn away from my island home in the rushing night. My final moments with Montreal were along the Port: all the immense tanker ships sitting high above me, and the hum of cars racing home through the Lafontaine tunnel below. It was cold, and dark, though I had already lost consciousness ... on impact.

'Make a splash!' as the English say. All I ever wanted: to have an impact on the audience – to make them think, to make a little difference in their lives, through film.

Will my story be lost? My greatest fear.

My daily terrors had grown unbearable: I could barely recognize anything or anyone anymore. Which is why I collected all my materials for archives ... in the months leading up to?

With the help of Saul and Mimi, and I left notes behind, with instructions on feeding the cats, but also so as to unburden my family and friends – I know I have been difficult to care for. I have wept in the dark, and have wanted to escape from family functions and award ceremonies, since anyone asking me a question was a threat, and every place became unfamiliar and horrific. In early November, I stopped eating. I was like an abandoned child, always wanting to go home, even when I was home.

My Vespa accident was on the Jacques Cartier Bridge. I remember.

Then that must have been the reason: to unburden those whom I love.

Yes. I had loved before. And my greatest love of all: the cinema.

That night I left the apartment on Laval. It was cold. I walked through Carré Saint-Louis over to Saint-Denis (the street my father grew up on), then down the hill to Ontario, left turn, and east to Papineau. The bridge was just a short walk from there.

I walked with the flow of traffic, and made my way across, facing west – facing this great city of mine that I love, but — like a lover – brought as much pain as joy.

I reached the middle of the span, and looked down at the swirling, black waters.

I took out the little, plastic case I had secured to my belt. By the streetlight of the bridge, I could read what I had written on the slip of paper: 'Je m'appelle Claude Jutra.'

No, Montreal hadn't betrayed me. And life hadn't turned away from me either.

Simply this: my only purpose, in love, and in life – lost to me – was the moving image; the white sail, flickering above the waves.



# I pray

BY KATHRYN BEAULIEU

My eyes are sore from crying,  
My sorrow fills my heart with pain,  
My sadness leaves a bitter after taste,  
I pray Creator keeps me sane.

My arms are sore from fighting,  
My legs ache from the path I'm walking,  
I want to run away,  
I pray Creator gives me strength to stay.

My head is sore from thinking,  
My thoughts are over whelming,  
My emotions are confusing,  
I pray Creator heals my wounds.

# Bipolar

BY APRIL BULMER

I invented a way of the cross, for I was a lost soul.  
Christ nailed there for me. But in dreams the wooden  
thing sank like a leaky boat.

My mind rose and fell like the sea. Jesus could not  
balance, though his toenails were pale as pearls, his laurel  
softened like seaweed Thoughts were schools of fish  
caught and turning in nets. I heard the silent pull of  
death. And there was no health in me.

And so I travelled the prairie beneath Sun to reach a  
stand of totem poles in British Columbia. Their spines  
straight as Native women.

I prayed there to an eagle and a face painted like a  
clown. I traced its mouth black as Coyote's, touched its  
feet planted in the Mother like roots in the ground. I  
thanked Sun despite the shadows of the poles and of the  
mountains and my old car parked like a turtle in the heat.

Sun also sank his energy into the hip of a tree. Moon  
rose from a branch like a pale fruit. Night was dim,  
though spirits of red crones gathered beneath the poles  
with torches and rattles and gourds. I heard a new song  
and rhythm.

We rested then by a still ocean. My mind a steady  
canoe, lined in soft skins cured by the hands of the risen  
women, their herbal lotion.

# Pebble songs

BY SHARON BIRD

I didn't know then  
as I walked down winding paths in Paris  
I would find this tiny pebble  
lodged secretly in the tread of my shoe  
invisible

like a child who waits in corners  
for the right moment  
that magic time when a friend appears  
and life unfolds in adventure  
each day a story you don't want to end

I didn't know then  
as I lost myself in jazz tunes on a Berlin night  
that I would find this same pebble coated with song  
hidden in my heart  
like the first time I fell in love  
hoping to find myself in another  
instantly knowing  
in the words of a different song  
about memories that couldn't be

I found out then  
as we drank in stars above Prague  
and a second glass of wine  
you carry your hurts too  
each of us so different, yet so alike  
giving only fragments of ourselves  
while storing broken pieces in tiny boxes  
piled beneath the parts we show  
hiding our real treasures  
like the pebble  
in the tread of my shoe



*Leon by Rolli*

# Holes

BY VIRGINIA BOUDREAU

A gull's cry, adrift on the wind  
whipping hair into memories:  
my mother's kerchief streaming  
as she pinned pristine sheets on a line.

Holes in elbows of the sweater, misty blue  
my grandmother knit for me when I was eleven,  
on the cusp of pearl buttons. All those stitches  
unspooled on the bramble while gathering

blackberries one Tusket summer, sweetness  
dripping purple at the top of stairs  
leading to the whale's belly of grandpa's attic  
where I was Jonah, lost among the ribs my lantern

opening portals to more darkness. And holes  
in all those words scratched from the page,  
they'd told too much, in the end were blind.  
A lullaby wavering on stillness

echoing in a father's whispers through all  
we couldn't say, rocking back and forth  
in an empty cradle, a silk tie dangling  
in a corner of the bedroom. And, holes in

pockets holding keys to rooms hoarding  
light of longer days, and in the deep quiet places  
that remember without faltering all those telephone  
numbers of childhood that don't dial anywhere, anymore.

Clots of sound echoing bedside in hospital pumps  
then in essence funneling smaller tighter rounder  
'til swallowed by holes of mouths orphaning faces,  
opening drains slack-jawed and waiting.

Finally, it's holes in the earth filled with petals  
from tulip fields and rose gardens scarlet,  
crimson, red-heart petals overflowing  
holes...always holes.

# Wishes for today

BY GORD BRAUN

Let's curl up  
on the warm sunny ground,  
shed our lies,  
be the kids we were.

It's so warm...  
this patch of place ...  
we don't have to be \*anything\*, here,  
just take in the heat, and doze off...

if only no one were looking,  
if only we could be left alone...  
maybe we could go home,  
be called in to supper.

# As the pile grows (extremes)

BY GORD BRAUN

1.

You hoard. Your things are gas, expanding to fill every available space. You say you might need something from your junkpile, something that might make you money with your writing. It's in there, somewhere, among decades of strata. You just have to find it.

As the pile grows, you talk of renting office space, a place to store more of your leavings. And you will leave a great mound to the world, for them to clean up. I know this, you did it once before, when you moved away.

2.

I am purging everything: paper, books (some yours), people (you in there). My cupboards are getting quite bare. They'll call me Old Father Hubbard, if they think of it, if they see what I've done.

I get a brief sense of relief, of catharsis, when I wing-fling things away, out my door, out of my life, something for future archeologists to piece back together, if they find it, think it worthy.

I don't want to be weighed down by things, in case I have to move--though you never let that stop you.

I am wondering what I'll have, to look fondly over, when I'm older. I start to daydream of digging through your things, all those layers, those story-worlds of ghosts, the company I'd have. O the sweet remembering, just the thought of it, thoughts from a poor man, over your riches



# The Healing Tree

BY MIRANDA CONLEY

Come and sit beside me  
Share your story or a cup of tea  
We will bond, just you and me  
Underneath my Healing Tree

We can dance, or laugh, or sing  
Or sit in silence, breathing in  
The peace and joy, both hovering  
Around my Healing Tree

If a hug is what you need  
Come along, your heart is freed  
And we'll feel safe and strong indeed  
Beneath my Healing Tree

You needn't even say a word  
And yet your needs are always heard

Cherished, as a humming bird  
By my Healing Tree

You're never very far away  
Just close your eyes, it's all okay  
Your soul can always find a way  
To see my Healing Tree

Embracing you, it's plain to see  
The love this tree has for you and me  
We're better off when we can be  
Ourselves beneath my Healing Tree

So blow away all fear and doubt  
And let your soul fly all about  
I'll meet you there and walk about  
In the shade of my Healing Tree



*Shell by Cole Hansen*

# White

BY KELDA CRICH

this is my unborn daughter's house.

trance doll.  
stitched blank face  
heart squeezed dry  
black hair tied with unknot ribbons

cold loss house  
windows broken, re-broken

many times

wind sad surging through shattered glass  
stirring the ingressing white willow weeds

tomorrow will be the same as today



*Fanny by Rolli*

# Rise cold to the surface

BY KELDA CRICH

winter writes the need in you,  
with a cold flensing blade,  
with a caress so unyielding  
your breath turns to smoke.  
winter strips summer lies to the bone.

she lies  
underneath,  
a sliver of ice  
remember what she told you

a white world wrapped in:  
you don't belong  
melt like hoar in the glazy sun

you are nothing that you wanted to be.  
nothing that you can understand.  
a shadow lengthening under the low-slung sky.

while remnants of the year's promise  
freeze like seeds sealed in brittle shells.  
trees, meat fallen as naked arteries  
chartering the mortuary.

rotten candle ice chimes  
an invocation  
written along the lake's glass.  
bidden, a long limbed nymphs moves.  
fins unfleshed, skeletal as frozen  
sycamore leaves.

winter writes the need in you  
to walk on skin thin ice.  
wait until the surface  
fluxes your deliquescing memory.

she'll pull you under.



## And now there are five

BY BEVERLEY CUMMINGS

You said my poems make you  
less afraid of death. What higher praise?

Blue blush hills. Landscape— dream green.  
Summer amber shadows spread up and across the pavement.

Sometimes challenge is exciting.  
This is a turnabout.

Sex— a song of experience.  
Something to become adept at.

I miss my older mentor who treated me  
like a two-sided coin but still whole.

Feel like a quenched torch  
still held high.

Am an offshoot of a brother or sister  
or mother. Why not myself?

And now there are five  
to fight through life.

## Anchorite

BY BEVERLEY CUMMINGS

Things from old loves  
that I still find blameless.

It has been decades; I would just  
like to talk to you.

Perhaps meet your wives and children  
review the old days.

You may be deceased though  
and all this ruminating for nought.

Seeing you on the bus, going the other way.  
Heartsick. Anguish beyond grief.

## Never again

BY KEITH FOSTER

Last winter I washed my car,  
then couldn't open the doors.  
The locks were frozen.

I waited five hours  
for the motor club guy  
to show up.

He said I could have  
thawed out the locks myself  
with a hair dryer.

This winter I'm prepared.  
I've packed a hair dryer  
in my trunk.

## Dangerous days

BY KEITH FOSTER

Used to love campfires.  
Now on oxygen 24/7.  
Bad combination.



## Flashback

BY KEITH FOSTER

High school reunion.  
Band plays our favourite songs.  
We know all the words.



# Gramps' one hundredth birthday

BY KEITH FOSTER

We wanted to do something special  
for Gramps' one hundredth birthday,  
but he would have none of it.

"It's just another day," he said.  
"No different than any other."  
But he allowed us to bring him a cake  
with ten candles, one for each decade.

A reporter from the local paper  
dropped by, just to say hi, he said.  
But his true purpose became clear  
when he asked the traditional question.  
"Ollie, how do you account  
for your long life?"

Gramps thought for a long time,  
then clucked his tongue,  
and slowly spoke.

"Well," he said with a drawl,  
"it helps if you were born  
a long time ago."

# Parsley

BY IRENE GROBOWSKY

Curly-leaved sprig,  
Flat-leaf spray,  
Parsley twins  
Jostling for pride of place  
On the gourmand plate.

# Peas

BY IRENE GROBOWSKY

Plucked firm and full from vines  
Pod piles await a first breach:  
And the bowl-pinging fall of green orbs.

# Rhubarb

BY IRENE GROBOWSKY

Juicy red stems  
A summer treat  
Delicious to eat -  
As jam, sauce, cake or pie  
Filling a crave for the sweet.  
But beware the leaf  
Richly green and lush  
Serving as fan in the heat  
But ever nibbled  
Whether by man or beast  
Will attempt life to defeat.

With a split personality rhubarb offers  
Succulent stems with goodness to savour  
While its leaves provide only toxic flavour.

# Tomato

BY IRENE GROBOWSKY

Once deemed deadly  
Regarded as mere ornamental.  
Now declared to be edible  
Which is it - Fruit or vegetable?

# Zucchini and Cucumber

BY IRENE GROBOWSKY

Battling to be top banana  
Zucchini and cucumber  
Bathed in sun and rain grow apace  
And flamboyantly fill garden space.

Zucchini sulks beneath an array of leaves  
While outsize cucumber, gloatingly golden,  
Takes first place.



## Lear in the park

BY ATAR HADARI

An old man reading, book held out  
As if it would speak, far enough  
And in his ice white curls a light  
As if the sun were in his brains

And in his eyes a look quite blank  
As if life had, finally, washed his mind  
And in the fields where lovers lay  
Now only flowers and the day, the sun blached blind-

Where nobody said no and left  
No children argued and no artery failed  
And only flowers in the ground  
Planted like soldiers round and round

Saluted while the king turned down  
Another white world's ear  
And the affairs of her who left him here  
Went on without his tears.



*Art by Christy Hansen*

## The Hills are home

BY CHRISTY HANSEN

I miss the South  
Where driving is a confession  
Where you can see  
Your dog  
Coming home  
Three days away.  
And when you look  
Even at your feet  
There are stars all around.  
When you're on the Hills

## Humpty Dumpty

BY CHRISTY HANSEN

This time I saw  
It coming.  
Less talk  
Less going out.  
Flat, empty mode.  
I knew it and  
Was prepared as could be.

But still I had to say  
Ooops there I go again.  
Off the wall  
Smashed into a  
Thousand pieces  
From the fall.  
Good thing there is a King  
And his Men  
To help pick me  
Back up  
Again





# Conversation in the dark

BY CATHERINE KATT

Sitting in the dark, that's what depression is like. Sometimes I can feel the switch go off in my brain. The light goes out. Presto change-o. It's dark. At other times, there's this slow creeping process in play, where my heart and head feel heavier and heavier. *My bed calls to me.*

Every autumn, there in the midst of my favorite season, this urge to flee is overwhelming. Move on, move on, go, go, go somewhere! Do something! The urge, the fear, overwhelms the motivation to do anything. *Don't fold in on yourself.*

The leaves, a riot of color, chase across the street whirling dervishes as they escape, the darkness of winter to come. The wind lifts and dances across the lakes before the ice seals water into solid frozen dark depths. *Be a fish still swimming underneath.*

The weather changes the signal and as the air cools – my step quickens. The shifting of the sunlight makes long-fingered shadows caught in photographs. Crisp days, cold nights, warm blankets. Look to the light for solace. *Be alive in your world.*

Wake up to the everyday my heart demands. Clear away the uncertainty. Fear is removed like the dust motes hanging around in the dark places. Wipe away the grimy longings of desires for elsewhere. Bake something for someone. Love yourself. *Live. Be imperfect.*



Lewis by Rolli

# Not holding my breath

BY CATHERINE KATT

Keeping Faith is like an old piece of jewelry  
Sitting in a drawer forgotten, in a nice box  
Hidden among the existential mire  
Of being tossed over again and again into  
A dark sea  
Oh desire.

Swimming, take in a deep breath  
Before you dive first look up toward the sky  
Arms outstretched, then poised to plunge  
Into the depths of confusion in  
A dark sea  
Oh wishes.

Losing Faith is looking into the eyes  
Of a love at the door  
Who looks deeply back with expectation  
At once welcomed across the threshold  
Who turns away, when love is there, into  
A dark sea  
Oh breathe.

## Words

BY PATTI KOIVISTO

Sorrow  
Sits on my tongue  
Like an angry sparrow.

I spit it out  
On the dry  
crusted earth.

No words  
Only harsh  
Raspy breaths.

# Being normal

BY KIM KUZAK

1

placid face  
skin stretched expertly  
over heaps of bones  
and lumpy flesh

just below the surface, fear  
is a blind lizard  
slithering insidiously  
whispering with forked tongue

2

tinny clicking inside inner  
ear signals the coming cyclone

fuck - forgot to build a shelter  
Dorothy traded hers for dreams  
I did too but Oz is out of bounds  
instead I land in Kansas – shades of grey

3

and then the story explodes in all directions plot's off the  
page characters merge into monsters setting lost in time and  
place changes too fast to be caught climax happens again and  
again and again spinning the story back to Sisyphean start

4

just be yourself  
they say  
(as if it were possible to be otherwise)  
just try be more  
pleasant more fun  
just try too hard  
just dangle pink  
flesh impaled on a hook  
wiggle a trick  
they'll see a catch and swallow  
it whole the hole inside  
and all

be neurotic, petrified, narcissistic, a lie,  
be broken bits stuffed into a sac  
be an oversized baby  
(everyone loves a baby)  
be ravenous be the spot of needle-sucking flesh,  
drinking sharp relief  
be in the danger zone on the social meter of normal

5.

just be yourself

6.

to be human is  
to carry a soul that stretches  
from heaven to hell

to see the light of the whole universe  
shine down from an eye  
to see that light extinguished behind a salt waterfall  
to implode with the ringing of a thousand bells  
to listen to the steady scream each one becomes

7.

jealousy is a shriveled dragon  
choking on chunks after swallowing  
you whole

the smallness  
of my heart not the hugeness of yours  
is what terrifies



*Early morning fishing by Cecile George*



# How crazy feels

BY KIM KUZAK

1 I eat my feelings

I eat my feelings  
for breakfast, lunch and supper  
for midnight snacks I gulp guilt without  
removing its burnt edges, just mash  
it 'round my mouth, let it sink  
into my guts, where it swirls  
like a lump  
in a toilet

I sip fear slowly  
through the day  
starts right away  
even before my eyelids open  
still tucked in the safety of black  
taste its tinny liquid  
cold encroachment  
'cross my chest

as I work the world  
I suck it  
swish it round my teeth  
while slippery words  
disguise its scent

2 fake up

I search for reasons  
look for words to  
fill in blanks  
that blotch the brain  
like cumulous clouds

learned long ago  
to fake up smart  
through fuzz-like mould  
to force up light  
through smoky pits  
yank up edges  
look alive

at parties learned to disappear  
wash dishes  
step out back  
smoke a joint  
find the comfort of  
coats piled deep  
in the corner of an empty  
room let the music boom  
vibrate my innards  
loud enough to silence  
the roar of vacancy

## The fly

BY ALISON LOHANS

A house fly pirouettes in sun-warm  
air, thuds against the window glass.

In this cloistered moment the panic  
ebbs; our hearts resume a normal  
beat to pace their measured tread.

The fly buzzes across the room, finds  
the honey jar on the table, where it  
traverses the yawning sticky rim, then alights  
on the spout of my brown betty teapot  
where it pauses to groom its feet.

You of course don't notice, and instead mutter  
about the envelope, the yellowed one  
we cannot find amidst the clutter. That faded  
receipt tells the whole story, you repeat.

On this bright day I recall other  
dark times, and that ambivalence which stabs  
the space between us, fractures the link  
of our eyes.

You steer us to safer topics, those small  
daily sequences that define our lives,  
our hesitations in this dance some call love.

You try to nourish this dangling  
moment, risk a smile as your fingers trace  
the edge of a knife smeared  
with peanut butter. With no hope  
of compromise, I envy the house fly.

On transparent wings it blunders about  
then basks in blue-checked warmth  
the cotton weave of your shirtsleeve.

You slap it away  
I recoil.

# This bird is called a tit

BY IAN MACINTYRE

Don't take this fowl for something that it's not  
A strange name but works all the same  
Don't laugh it's just the way I am  
So then look at this under a different light  
I'm not perfect but I strive for the best  
Growing older, growing wiser  
Every second knowledge courses through my veins  
In the most unusual state that I remain to this day  
All and all the rocks you throw  
Throw them all until there is nothing left to throw  
And then and only then can the world change for the better  
It's going to take every piece of my valued time  
Catch you again when the hour hones in



# Sisyphus

BY MAREIKE NEUHAUS

She had a dream last night:  
Her mom had another child;  
Sisyphus let the rock crash down on himself;  
And she played ball at a tournament.  
She looked grotesque, grey hair and big bell;  
The rock felt warm when it hit him;  
They spent the day putting on make-up.  
The child was silent when it came out;  
There was no blood on the hill;  
The games got cancelled.  
If Sisyphus is happy, we are all masochistic dreamers;  
If Sisyphus is not happy, someone played a big sadistic  
joke on us.

# The things you did

BY REBEKAH REMPEL

You'd been gone for three days  
when an unfamiliar car left you in the driveway.  
I ran to the front door to greet you—

but you walked past me to the fridge,  
rummaged for food, mumbled a few words,  
then wandered to the bedroom  
you sometimes still shared with my father  
and closed the door. My relief turned  
painful, like pressure on a bruise.

I remember lying down in the hallway  
just to be near you. You didn't understand  
that when you disappeared, my world  
was draped in grey. I moved through my days slowly  
or not at all, like treading water in a dark pond.

But Mother, I am older now. I am ready to see  
the things you graciously hid from me  
back then, the things you did to escape  
that darkness tangled within you. Show me

the dirty apartment you went to, cigarette smoke  
gathered in the air like weather, lamp light  
bland as a coffee stain, spoons and syringes  
on a table, faces around it charred with shadow.

Let me be with you  
as the world goes quiet, euphoria  
like a child's balloon rising in your body.

When it's time to sleep, rest your head  
in my lap, your forehead dewy with sweat.  
I will run my fingers through your hair  
and sing the songs you used to sing to me  
as you dream or don't dream.

Let me see everything.



## Subway anxieties

BY TERRY TROWBRIDGE

Between the subway stations you can see me  
fretfully coil my fingers around each other.  
You can listen to the echoing railway clacks that  
bounce off the walls and off the other clacks,  
echo engines, echo the hum of artificial lights,  
echo the subtle breathing noises of other riders  
and the sounds of their clothes sliding  
when they shift against fabric seats.  
You might see me react to how even  
in that echoing speed siphon my own breathing is loudest,  
mundane, buried deeper than graves, carrying the molecules  
of sewage and radon into my body's core.  
You can see me counting the breaths, making fractions  
out of the numbers of breaths per station,  
fractions out of the clacking, counting, fretting,  
my fidgeting marking the continuity of my life.

You can see me curl one finger to my mouth and  
dig my front teeth into a hangnail, peel it skillfully  
away from the nail, and see my satisfaction in the moment  
of the hangnail's elastic snap.  
Then I am aware of you watching, whoever you are,  
you who are the anxiety in my bored anxiety.

On account of you, I look suddenly up, to divert you from my hand,  
while a palm my peeled flake, no bigger than an orange's cell.  
I do something with my eyes and feet to distract you  
from the moment I stealthily drop the hangnail under the seats  
and I hope you never think, when I die, to ask if the gods will weigh  
my finger slivers against my corpse. And if the slivers weigh more  
the gods could proclaim that I commit suicide already, therefore my soul  
may not enter heaven. I gave them my body, or its equivalent,  
ahead of my time, in the nervous minutes on the TTC's schedule.  
I could remain for eternity, embarrassed and counting stations  
under so many earthworks, echoes, and bored commuters.  
You may be watching me when that happens, and how can I know?



*Jazzy by  
Judy Swallow*

## Study in white

BY DENISE WILKINSON

White like the margins  
of this page, words unwritten  
cannot be erased.  
No mark to mar; no hope to  
ignite: a simple nothing.

White lie, don't want to  
hurt. Lie like truth and pretend  
I am fine, as if  
I could make it real. Empty  
shell, my smile a shimmer-sham.

White water rasping  
froth frenzy and foam fury  
sharp sting on lips mute  
breath shallow, rapids dark as  
the fear I bury inside.

White flag surrender.  
Give up. Back down. Roll over.  
Relinquish control  
I never had; trade for peace  
or quiet acceptance. Hold  
out my hand to the black dog.

## Alzheimer's

BY JACKIE WOROBEZ

Somewhere inside those eyes  
are words she can't let out  
her smile though  
has meaning

Something familiar in it  
all the memories  
from the past dozen years  
I've been her daughter-in-law  
There is likely one  
that still lingers for her  
though she doesn't say my name  
just stares and smiles  
As if she might remember  
we were like best friends  
before





# Disconnect

BY CAITLIN ARNAL

Baggott, Kate. *Dry Stories*. Morning Ram Publishing, 2014. 96pp. \$12.99. 978-1-928133-18-6

**D**ry Stories' first person narrator and central character is a typical overworked wife with high expectations from her husband who has to deal with cultural differences as she is living abroad in Germany. Disconnect is spun into Baggott's short tales which are merged together to create this short novella. The character is trying to answer the timeless question of "who am I?" She becomes disconnected as she faces trauma and spends most of her time trying to find connection and stability once again.

Throughout the novella the main character is helping a friend who has a serious alcoholic problem. She helps comb out the nits in his hair and put down the rubber sheets. She easily gets lost in every chapter: English is no longer the first language spoken at her house, she misses home, and she has an unhealthy and unfulfilled relationship with her husband. The fulfillment she finds in calling her friend to help him on his path to sobriety is one of the most rewarding relationships in her life. She feels guilty she "does not cook or clean" and "dishes went unwashed, laundry unfolded, healthy meals uncooked" (63). She worries she attaches too much importance to "family ties and friendships" and that they are "more shallow than [she] thought and held meaning only for [her]" (10). "There is no place [she] can go and be certain of seeing a familiar face" (43).

The theme of disconnect is further supported by the protagonist's references to orphans. The shopkeeper she visits in the chapter "Multiplication" was a gynecologist in his home country. He says: "It wasn't easy being a woman's doctor in my country . . . we were always at war and pregnant women carried more fear than hope. There were already so many



orphans" (57). The Tough Tara character, who is dating the main character's muse, in the chapter called "Relation" asks if the main character and the alcoholic "were . . . adopted, by any chance?" (52). The most bizarre examples of disconnect in the novella are the two instances where women are pregnant without knowing it.

Despite the theme of disconnect, Baggott's short stories are very personable. In the end, the book deals with the universal problems of disconnect and trauma by using the French verb *faire* as a metaphor. You will have to read *Dry Stories* to find out Baggott's answer to "Who am I?"



Art by James Skelton



# The sweet spot of WFYL

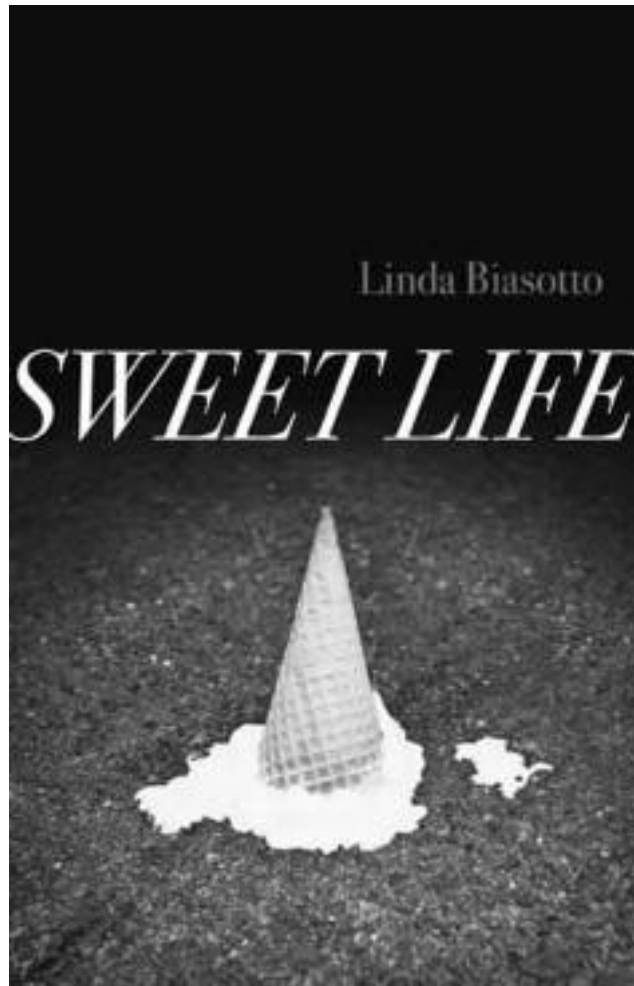
BY TED DYCK

Biasotto, Linda. *Sweet Life*. Coteau, 2014. 160 pp. \$18.95. Paperback.

[Full disclosure: I was involved editorially in early stages of writing the manuscript that eventually became the book.]

One of the attractions of Linda Biasotto's collection of stories for me is its origin in an early version of the project that we now call Writing For Your Life (WFYL). Linda is a longstanding member of The Bees, a Regina writing group mentored by Byrna Barclay, the founding editor of TRANSITION. One of the stories in *Sweet Life* is "The Madwoman Upstairs," which we published in TRANSITION. Which is to say that this author and her book are models of the ends that WFYL aspires to – to help writers enhance their mental health through writing and to return that health through their published work to the larger communities of which they are part. Biasotto and *Sweet Life*, in other words, are among the sweet spots of the work that CMHA(SK) has been doing for over a quarter-century.

And so the title story seems a good place for me to enter into a discussion of the book. The narrator of this piece, a teenager named Jude who comes from a dysfunctional family, lives the sweet (suite!) life of sharing a basement flat with friend Greg, drinking all day and sleeping all night (4). But Greg "sees angels" one night, is rushed to the hospital, and Jude is asked to fetch Greg's missing health card. Greg's girlfriend Kayla helps Jude find the missing card back in the boys' suite, and the story ends. So it's not the plot that gives this story its jump – it's Jude's reaction to Kayla, "her fat ass swinging like two pups under a blanket" when she walks (6). Ironically, Jude's awareness of Kayla's sexuality triggers a fuller recognition of his own isolation. He erupts into tears and, when Kayla reaches out to him, lets her touch his hair. His "sweet" life, it seems, is really about as sweet as the smashed cone on the book's cover.



The sweet life has also by-passed the middle-aged protagonist of "The Virgin in the Grotto" (85-97). This story is set in a town in Italy, where the bells of San Martino "could be announcing the end for a woman dying ... upstairs" or "a beginning for the woman's daughter ... [bringing her] ... a supper tray" (85). A daughter is trapped, caring for a mother who mysteriously cannot recover her speech after a stroke. Cristina yearns for everything represented by a new black silk slip that she puts on at night to admire herself in the mirror of her sleeping mother's bedroom. That twice-widowed woman stands between the daughter and her own life; while the daughter collects black belladonna berries as she arranges for her mother's accidental death. Thus the narrator brutally, delicately reveals both mother and daughter to the reader whose vision slowly "adjusts to the dark and to the indistinct shapes within it" (97).

A thread in these two stories, each central to the themes of the sections in which they are located, links them to the concluding story in the third and last section of the book. The two protagonists mentioned above are, in one sense of the term or another, instances of the "madness and folly" signalled in the collection's epigraph. But the protagonist of "The Madwoman Upstairs" (151-160) is gloriously and irrepressibly mad – and therefore perhaps the sanest of the lot. Marie's story consists of her journal entries while she is confined to the "upstairs" ward of a psychiatric hospital during three weeks following electroconvulsive therapy. These entries seem stunningly lucid: Marie seems openly generous with her feelings; she apparently recognizes her own problem(s); and she even thinks she's found their solution(s). If her words reveal that she is mad about love – the love of the other, the freedom to be and to belong, they also attest to her deeper sanity.

This is the sweet life right side up, then. To love one another. To be as open as Biasotto herself has been about her own experience of mental illness. To share that experience by writing oneself out of its isolation and stigma into a larger communality.

# Defying the absurd: a review

BY MAREIKE NEUHAUS

Monahan, Lynda. *Verge*. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2015. 119 pages. \$20.00

Why does a child grow up losing her mother, then her brother, and eventually her father? Why does that same child, now a young adult, give up to adoption her first daughter? Why does her marriage fail? What's the point in all these losses? Readers looking for answers to these questions in Lynda Monahan's third collection of poetry, *Verge*, won't find any. Instead they encounter the story of a woman who continues in spite of loss, pain, and grief. As such, *Verge* is a poetic journey into defying the absurdity of human experience through writing.

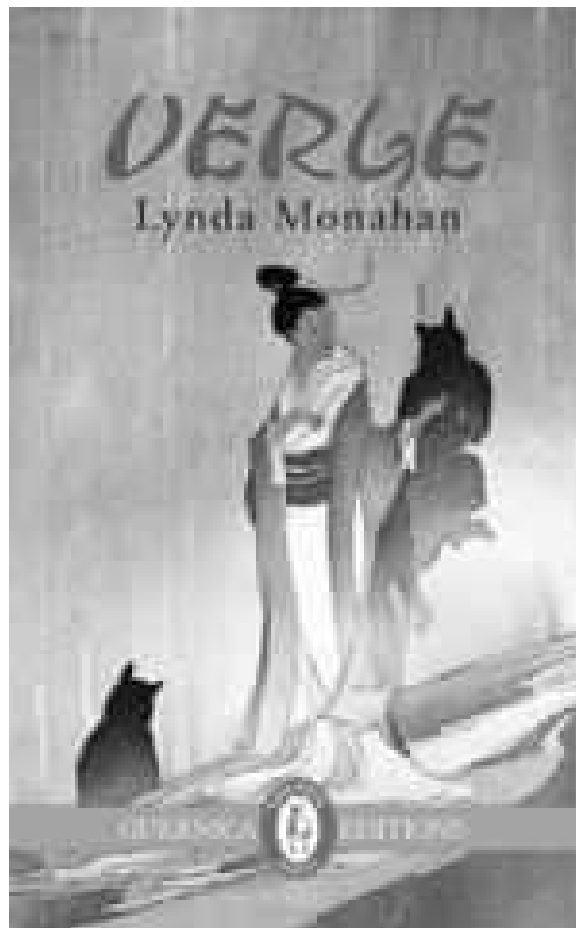
According to French philosopher Albert Camus, we seek for the grand truths underlying our existence, and yet we live in a universe devoid of any meaning, leaving us with three options: one, suicide; two, religion, the belief in some higher being or idea; and three, recognition and acceptance of the absurd. Suicide only perpetuates the absurd, Camus argues, and religion amounts to philosophical suicide, which leaves but the latter as the only defensible option, in his opinion. Once we embrace the absurd and live our lives searching for meaning in spite of it, we become free; the search for meaning becomes our meaning. Likewise, Monahan's first-person narrator creates meaning through composing a series of poems that happen to become *Verge*—and she does so in spite of the lack of purpose in her life, which haunts much of the collection. Making the poem produces meaning, and arguably so does reading the poem.

"I said to the wanting-creature inside myself / what is this river you wish to cross" (5), the narrator asks herself in the opening lines of her narrative in which she meets a small fox "by the old road" who will speak to her in a series of poems entitled "*Verge*" that give the collection its title and backbone. The river of the collection's first poem "holds the past / the sweep of its long sadness" (11), deep and burning even after all these years, ripping the narrator apart so it's no longer her

"who writes these poems / not I ... it's the fire woman" (62). The heat imagery is ambiguous here, implying both dryness and passion, both loss of joy and the search for joy. Eventually, the small fox will guide the narrator across the river to the other side. The other side, here, is that place of being "on the verge / of some understanding / some thing I am meant to know" (102): never fully grasping and yet realizing that being in that very spot is where the narrator needs to be, the point where the past ends and the future begins, where old losses are left behind and new losses incurred. It is in this spot that the narrator is her most free: "tonight / little truth teller / you wait until your

thoughts / take shape / ... / I look at you / and see freedom / I listen / and yours are the best words / the heart can speak" (107). The narrator's struggle doesn't offer any hope but it does show perseverance in spite of loss. When her sister, the closest family member she has left, suffers a stroke, the narrator nurses her back to life, teaching her what she has forgotten, her language, her sense of self: "this slow unwinding / that re-forms re-makes / in the dark water of her reflection / a new moon rises / and in the morning / rinsed with light / she shines" (101). The woman in these lines is the narrator's sister as she is reclaiming her life but these lines could just as well be taken to describe the narrator herself who, as she witnesses her sister's rebirth, is re-making herself. As she traces her losses, weaves her story, watches her sister mend, the narrator realizes she wants to be, she needs to be, she has no other choice than to be "like [the fox] unhurried and graceful / accepting of what comes next" (118). The small fox is both alter ego and animal helper, and the narrator both is and is not the fox; they are one and the same yet different. Above all,

the fox is the narrator's inner voice telling her to write, making her revisit her past, thus putting her past to rest and finding peace. That the collection's most prominent symbol is an animal creature, found in the forest, hidden from much of contemporary life, is no coincidence: writing is a solitary act but it may provide clarity, closure, an inner sense of peace. The narrator's is a quiet rebellion: she perseveres, one word at a time. With *Verge* Lynda Monahan has given us a beautifully crafted reminder that writing, and arguably reading, for our lives is the closest we may ever come to defying the absurd.



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See Author notes

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### ROLLI

Prolific writer, cartoonist, and illustrator Regina SK. Long listed for Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Regular contributor to TRANSITION. Website <<http://rollistuff.com/>>.

### SKELTON, JAMES

Saskatoon SK artist and poet. Member of CMHA Saskatoon.

### SWALLOW, JUDY

Artist and illustrator from Alameda SK. Online at <[www.swallowsartnest.com/](http://www.swallowsartnest.com/)>.

## AUTHORS

### ALALA, MARGARET

Unpublished writer, mental health worker, and MSW graduate (U-Vic). Website <<https://sites.google.com/site/margaretswriting/home>>.

### ARNAL, CAITLIN

Ravenscar SK writer and reviewer. Facilitator Eastend WFYL group.

### BEAULIEU, KATHRYN

Proud Saskatchewan-born (grand)daughter, sister, niece, friend, and mother of three boys and two girls.

### BETZ, LIZ

Writes from her heart, her imagination, and rural AB. Follow her on <<http://lizbetz.blogspot.ca>> and <<http://sixtyplusbylizbetz.blogspot.ca>>.

### BIRD, SHARON

Teacher who lives in the forest near Christopher Lake SK. Member two writing groups. Avid reader. "There is no finer thing than to capture a thought, idea or experience in words."

### BOUDREAU, VIRGINIA

Longstanding member Writer's Federation NS. Widely published in NA literary mags. Other life as a Learning Disabilities Specialist.

### BRAUN, GORD

Yorkton wit and regular contributor to TRANSITION.

### BULMER, APRIL

Well-educated and award-winning Ontario poet, columnist, and freelancer. Widely published: most recent book Women of the Cloth (Black Moss Press, 2013)

### CALLAGHAN, SHIRLEY

Faithful contributor from PEI. Writes fiction and non-fiction.

### CARLSON, ANNE MARIE

Vancouver-based writer (BFA, B. Ed, and creative writing), editor (B.C. Teachers Federation), arts manager, and 5-year ovarian cancer survivor. Now retired, writes every day for health.

### CHANDLER, CLARA

Currently student creative writing (UBC). Published Globe and Mail. Winner second place Kay Snow Writing Contest (2015).

### CONLEY, MIRANDA

Child/Youth Worker in ON. Facilitates and manages Facebook page of Dissociative Alliance, peer support group. Enjoys reading, writing, and creating.

### CRICH, KELDA

Prolific UK writer (poetry, sci-fi, fantasy, horror and blogger). <<http://keldacrichblog.blogspot.co.uk/>>.

### CUMMINGS, BEVERLY

Widely published Ottawa ON writer: little mags, self-published chapbooks, and trade books. Frequent contributor to Open Minds Quarterly and near-winner in Brainstorming Poetry Contest.

### FOSTER, KEITH

Award-winning articles, "Thunder on the Prairie" and "Grit and Gumption," in Canada's History Magazine. One-act plays – "Domestic Bliss" and "The Gazebo" – produced by Regina Little Theatre.

### GROBOWSKY, IRENE

Moose Jaw bibliophile, reviewer for TRANSITION, employee and supporter Saskatchewan Festival of Words, player in language, and poet.

**GUIRGIS, JULIE**

Freelance writer in Sydney, Australia, widely published internationally.

**HADARI, ATAR**

Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of H. N. Bialik (Syracuse UP) finalist for American Literary Translators' Association Award. Lives of the Dead: Poems of Hanoach Levin forthcoming (Arc Publications, 2016).

**HANSEN, CHRISTY**

Saskatoon-born field biologist. Spends her time writing casually and painting. Loves nature and the great outdoors.

**HARDING-RUSSELL, JILLIAN** [Editor's apology: Ms harding-russell's "ode to the mosquito" was separated from its "envoi" when both were published in TRANSITION Summer 2015 (30-31). They are printed together in this issue.]



*Tangled contour profile by Henry Peters*

**HATLAND, CARRIE**

Winnipeg writer runs a specialized treatment home for high needs youth. Accepted into Yale Writers Conference (2015). Attended Writers Digest conference New York City (2015)

**JOHNSON, DONNA MAE**

Member of the Prince Albert Writing For Your life group and visual artist. Poetry and prose published in TRANSITION; WFYL Newsletter; With Just One Reach of Hands. Author Learning As I Go (chapbook).

**KATT, CATHERINE**

Studies, writes, and paints from life in Minneapolis Minnesota. Avid photographer inspired by the beauty of nature.

**KOIVISTO, PATTI**

Prince Albert writer and artist-in-residence (Bison Cafe's Red Door Gallery). Began painting and writing about her life following a stroke.

**KUZAK, KIM**

Member Sans Nom Poets and English Language Arts instructor Sask Polytech, both of Prince Albert. Her poetry "a reflection of [her] sometimes difficult inner world."

**LOHANS, ALISON**

Member Saskatchewan's writing community for 35 years. Primarily known for books for young people. Previous TRANSITION credits in poetry and creative nonfiction.

**MACINTYRE, IAN**

Regular member of the Prince Albert Writing For Your Life group and prolific poet. Published in TRANSITION; WFYL Newsletter; With Just One Reach of Hands. Author Primary Colours (chapbook).

**MAYBERRY, STEPHANIE A.**

Charleston SC writer, photographer, Aspie, and RVer (with husband). Author of books on Asperger's Syndrome and creator/administrator "The Christian Aspie" (Facebook). <stephaniemayberry.com>.

**MCCUBBIN, KYRA**

Winnipeg occupational therapist integrates knowledge of mental health and passion for writing in stories on the experience of living with a mental illness (e.g., PTSD).

**MCFARLANE, MELANIE**

Fiction writer, blogger, organizer, and workshopper living "in Moose Jaw with my two little girls and husband where we pop popcorn, roast hotdogs, and wait for the super moon to show its face."

**MORTON, ADAM KELLY**

Montreal-based writer, teacher, actor, filmmaker, husband, and father of two. Publications include Mulberry Fork Review, Menda City Review, (Cult)ure Magazine, Rover Arts, and Concordia Now.

# Notes on contributors

## **NEAL, HARMONY**

Minnesota-based widely published writer born with a plastic spork in mouth. The 2011-2013 Fiction Fellow at Emory University. Plays with her dog, Milkshake, and grows poets in her home.

## **NEUHAUS, MAREIKE**

Shaunavon-based writer, reviewer, and scholar. Author of *The Decolonizing Poetics of Indigenous Literatures* (Univ. Regina Press, 2015).

## **PARLEY, KAY**

Well-known Saskatchewan writer and worker in former Saskatchewan Hospital (Weyburn). Regular contributor *TRANSITION*. Memoirs forthcoming (Univ. Regina Press).

## **REMPEL, REBEKAH**

Studied creative writing at the U-Vic (BC). Published in two BC anthologies and many journals. Contributor to *Written in Stone Project* (Dawson Creek, BC). Poems forthcoming in *Prairie Fire*.

## **RITZA, LU**

Member of the Prince Albert Writing For Your Life group and visual artist. Published in *TRANSITION*; *WFYL Newsletter*; *With Just One Reach of Hands*. Author *Like It Was Yesterday* (chapbook).

## **THOMPSON, CHRISTINE WESSEL**

Ontario mother, teacher, and writer, published in *The Fieldstone Review*, *The Steel Chisel*, etc. [Editor's apology: Christine's poem, "Cognitive Behavioural Therapy," appeared in *TRANSITION* Summer 2015 (34). Her bio was inadvertently omitted from that issue's "Notes on contributors."]

## **WILKINSON, DENISE**

Lives in Prince Albert with her husband and two busy and wonderful sons. MFA in Creative Writing at Ashland University (2015).

## **TROWBRIDGE, TERRY**

Recently published in *subTerrain*, *The Dalhousie Review*, etc. PhD student in Socio-Legal Studies York University.

## **WOROBETZ, JACKIE**

Member *Sans Nom Poets*, Prince Albert, writing poetry since the age of 13. Published occasionally in lit mag, including *Room*, and in anthology *Skating in The Exit Light*.



*Lonesome tree by Cecile George*



# FRIENDS FOR LIFE

## PRESENTATIONS and WORKSHOPS

### Suicide

- u **Speaking of Suicide** - an introduction to the topic of suicide awareness
- u **safeTALK** - Suicide Alertness for Everyone  
A half-day (3.5 hour) workshop
- u **ASIST** - Applied Suicide Intervention Skills - 2-day skills-building training to provide suicide first aid interventions
- u **Empowering Teens** to prevent suicide
- u **Tattered Teddies** - a workshop about suicide in children

### Mental Health

Balancing Work and Family  
Seniors and Mental Health  
Mental Illness (General Overview)  
Depression \* Depression and Physical Health  
Depression in the Workplace \* Work Life Conflict  
Schizophrenia \* Bi-polar \* Anxiety  
Borderline Personality Disorders  
Seasonal Affective Disorder \* Grief and Grieving  
Laughter in Healing \* Loneliness and Isolation  
Stress Can be Fun \* and many more . . .



## RESOURCE CENTRE *available on-line*

Hundreds of books, articles, videos, games and programs are available for loan from the Friends for Life Resource Centre. Topics range from Anger Management to Suicide Prevention

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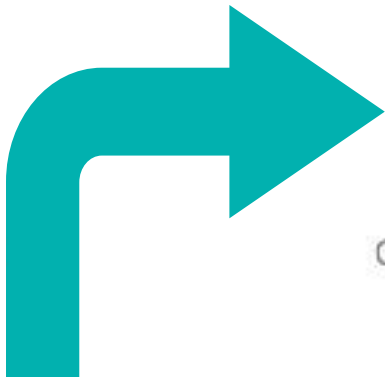
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