

TRANSITION

SUMMER 2016

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**Canadian Mental
Health Association**
Saskatchewan
Mental health for all

TRANSITION

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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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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 or to TRANSITION at 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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Eye's storm by William Coombes

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Writing for therapy is not self-help

If the self-help industry after the first decade of the 21st C was worth about \$10B annually in the USA alone (Wikipedia), it's a good bet that it's worth about a billion annually in Canada (or more, given the depressed loonie).

And there, dear reader, you have an indication that, whatever it is, writing for your life [WFYL] is not part of the self-help industry – writing-for-therapy is definitely not-for-profit.

Of course the distinction between the two has an overlap, but there are also differences between them which the above indicator is too blunt to reveal. At the risk of being reductive, and because I personally find Don Miguel Ruiz's *The Four Agreements* (Amber Allen, 1997) less prescriptive than most self-help books I know about, I'll use it as my example. It has sold millions, been featured on Oprah, and is almost universally praised. In other words, it's the iconic self-help text. Not only that, I used it – on a colleague's recommendation – as one of my texts in a life-writing course I taught to a Dene First Nation outside Yellowknife NWT in 2006.

I can think of four differences between self-help and writing-for-therapy.

1. Ideas of self

The self in self-help is pretty much fixed. This fixity is suggested by the near-complete absence of any discussion of what the self might be. It is underlined by the language typically used: the subtitle of Ruiz's book, e.g., is *A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*. What constitutes the *person* (the self) is a given.

The self in writing-for-therapy is somewhat more plastic. It is the self presumed in the "talking cure" of psychoanalysis (Freud, Jung, and so on). It is the self studied in contemporary neuroscience, a self which demonstrably changes as it examines itself. See Daniela Schiller's work in Hall's article, below. It is the self writers reinvent through writing.

2. Role of formulas

The formula in self-help is Do A, achieve B. Ruiz, e.g., presents four rules (called "agreements") which will guide the



TED DYCK

practitioner to "personal freedom": (1) "Be impeccable with your word"; (2) "Don't take anything personally"; (3) "Don't make assumptions"; (4) "Always do your best."

The formula in writing-for-therapy tends toward the open-ended: write. Evidence – medical, psychological, anecdotal, experiential, etc. – overwhelmingly shows that mental well-being may be enhanced by writing in a supportive environment, hence the shorthand, "Writing makes you better." But better – mental well-being – is necessarily undefined.

3. Measures of success

Success in self-help means improvement, usually in specific ways: more of this, and less of that. Naturally, success is linked to the view of the self: if the self is fixed, then it cannot be changed, it can only be improved. A tree is a tree is a tree – though it may be pruned, watered, and so on.

Success in writing-for-therapy is undefined. The self may be plastic, but its change through writing is entirely individual. More freedom, for example, might enhance one person's mental health; but accepting restrictions on one's freedom, e.g., in relations to an Other, might enhance another's.

4. Costs

The cost of self-help is high, materially and spiritually. Ruiz's book is inexpensive, but workshops associated with his ideas are not – Google, e.g., the *Toltec Spirit* workshops based on the four agreements. Even more costly is the addiction to more and more such "self-helps" that may result. See David Foster Wallace.

The cost of writing-for-therapy is practically free, in every sense. Pencil and paper. The worst addiction that can happen is that you may become a writer.

To return to the overlap of self-help and writing-for-therapy: self-help, as has been pointed out, is not "self help" if you get the help from someone else; writing-for-therapy, being almost entirely self-directed, is actually closer to the idea of "self help" than is the industry called self-help. Ah, irony.

Unfortunately, writing-for-therapy, too, risks becoming an industry, a brand. Double irony.

And what did my Dene life-writing students think of Ruiz? As I recall it, they felt that Ruiz's "agreements" mostly aligned with their elders' teachings, but that what they learned from their elders resulted in more group communality not more personal freedom.

SOURCES

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Ruiz, Don Miguel. *The Four Agreements*. Amber Allen, 1997.
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Art by Lucy May
Tataryn
(A photo stat of an
india ink drawing
done by the artist in
1987)



CMHA forms partnership with Legion

This has been a very busy year indeed with changes in leadership at CMHA and a provincial election all within one year.

September 1, 2015 Dave Nelson assumed the position of Associate Executive Director as he transitions into retirement. Dave is now responsible for the advocacy, public policy and branch development activities at Saskatchewan (SK) Division. I assumed the role of Acting Executive Director, responsible for the administration and operations of CMHA SK Division.

CMHA SK Division continues to take a leadership role in the development of the SAID program, which now supports over 5,000 individuals with significant mental health issues. Working closely with the Disability Income Support Coalition (DISC), we participated in election forums with key candidates both in Saskatoon and Regina prior to the election.

Participation on the Mental Health & Addictions Action Plan Reference Committee has allowed us to give community input into this important, multi-ministerial project. We continue to push for adequate funding as priorities are developed around the many areas for improvement recommended by the Fern Stockdale-Winder report.

We continue to work very closely with our National CMHA office, the Ontario and British Columbia Divisions, and the CMHA Toronto Branch to develop and advocate for federal monies to be distributed across Canada in a Federal Mental Health Transfer Fund. Recent meetings held with the



PHYLLIS
O'CONNOR

new Federal Ministers of Health and Finance have received a positive welcome and good discussions on how this may proceed.

We continue to be part of the Interagency and Ministry Steering Committee for the Justice Community Support Program. This relatively new program is now becoming well established and an integral partner with Corrections, Policing and Probation services.

CMHA SK Division continues to sponsor and support the Mental Health Coalition and it provides a valuable, broader input group than is typically seen in smaller committees.

One of the exciting new initiatives at SK Division is the establishment of a partnership with the Royal Canadian Legion Saskatchewan Command to create OSI-CAN, a peer support based project aimed at assisting veterans, police, fire and first responders who are suffering from an occupational stress injury (PTSD). Through a very generous donation from an anonymous donor we have been able to hire a full time Project Coordinator, Chris Siddons, who is establishing support groups around the province and making connections to various service providers to help meet the needs of this target group.

April 29, 2016 was the date for the first Wade Moffatt Memorial Gala. Two hundred sixty-eight people attended this masquerade gala at the Conexus Art Centre and raised over \$25,000 to support the public education and advocacy work of CMHA SK Division. Everyone had a wonderful time while supporting a worthy cause.

Overall, 2015-2016 has been a time of change, but also a time for exciting new opportunities. We look forward to seeing what 2016-2017 brings.



LIVING THE LIFE

P.A. WFYL Group publishes work

LYNDA MONAHAN, FACILITATOR, PA WFYL GROUP

The Prince Albert Writing For Your Life group is one of several creative writing groups across the province initiated by Ted Dyck, editor of Transition and the Writing For Your Life newsletter. The Prince Albert group has been meeting every second Wednesday for the past three years at The Nest, the local CMHA drop-in center. We write about all kinds of things – about something that happened recently, about the seasons, about life and love and memories, and so much more.

In 2013 the Prince Albert Writing For Your Life group published a collection of poems and stories titled *With Just One Reach of Hands*. The collection went into a second printing and our group had a public book launch and gave a number of read-

ings at the library, Christmas events, and a CMHA convention in Regina, which had a Writing For Your Life group component.

Since that time, everyone has been working very hard on their writing. A number of writers in the group had written enough to put together their own small individual collections, and there was a high degree of interest in having these collections published in book form. We also have in our group, a songwriter, Holly Knife, who very much wanted to see her original songs recorded. We were fortunate to obtain a Saskatchewan Lotteries grant of \$1300 through Common Weal Community Arts in the spring of 2015 which allowed our project to go ahead: printing fifty copies each of eight chapbooks at \$3.25 apiece.

Then the work started! The writers were involved in the



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process every step of the way, from writing and compiling the work they wanted in their book, to choosing cover images and titles, and writing their acknowledgements. As group facilitator, I took on the role of editor, working with eight individual writers. I typed up the manuscripts, scanned artwork and photos for cover images and got the material print-ready. As I typed and edited, I was struck again and again by the simple honesty of each person's story, the way they spoke from the heart about their struggles with mental illness and difficulties in life, the way they looked to small things to bring them joy.

By July 2015 the material was ready. I sent the file to Pasquia Publishing in Tisdale to be printed up in eight small books, forty pages in length, with a print run of fifty copies each. A talented local musician, Lilian Donahue, set two of Holly's original song lyrics to music and recorded them on a beautiful YouTube video. As well, we had the two songs burned to CDs with the help of Shawn Monahan, an audio/visual specialist, and we released one hundred copies of Holly's songs titled "To The End and Back."

We scheduled a gala book and CD launch at the Grace Campbell Gallery in Prince Albert for September 9, 2015 and invited friends and family and advertised to the general public. The evening was a great success! We had a full house. The writers read short selections from their books, we played Holly's CD, and Common Weal graciously supplied goodies for the evening.

We have other members of the Writing For Your Life group who are still working their way toward their own collections and we will be making those books a reality in the near future, too. Everyone gets the opportunity and no one will be left out. All members of the Writing For Your life group were an important part of the evening's celebrations and read from

their work.

Everyone had the opportunity to sell books, which we priced at ten dollars apiece, as was the CD. Each person is able to keep the money from their book sales for themselves and sales have been so brisk we ordered a second print run.

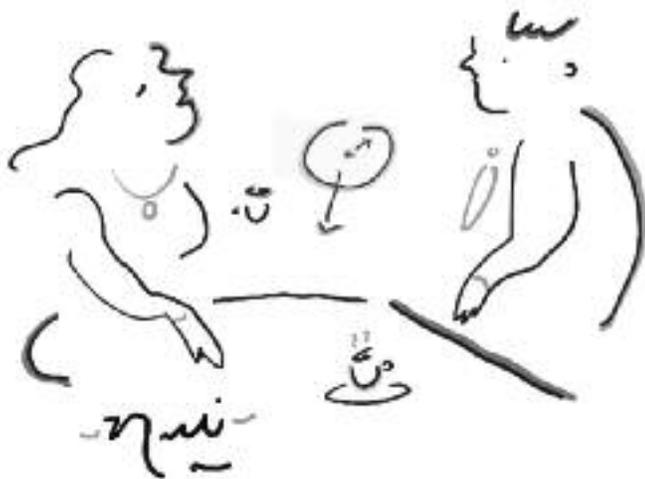
Some people have been real entrepreneurs. Ian McIntyre has occasionally had a table set up outside of Coles bookstore on Saturdays where he has his books for sale. Randy Cochrane has sold many copies, as has Dot Settee who was invited to read at the Indian Metis Friendship Centre. Others have chosen to give most of their books away to family and friends. The books are theirs to do with as they please, as Holly's CD is for her.

The opportunity to write and publish their own books has been an enormously positive experience, which has encouraged the writers, built confidence and a sense of pride in their accomplishment. Those working toward their own collections are excited and enthusiastic. Watch for a whole new collection of small books by these writers later in the coming year.

A project like this takes a village and we are very fortunate to have that village! Thanks to Doug Kinar and Anna Marie Huybrecht with the Prince Albert branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association for their constant support and encouragement, to Gordon Anderson of Pasquia Publishing in Tisdale, for the fine job he did on the books. Thanks, also, to Lilian Donahue for loaning her beautiful voice and music to create Holly's CD and to Shawn Monahan for his technical expertise in creating the CDs and filming the Writing For Your Life group working on the books and at the launch. Thanks, always, to Ted Dyck for consistently publishing the work of the various Writing For Your Life groups and for all he has done and still does to keep the concept of Writing For Your Life alive and growing. It has been a labor of love and I am happy to have had the opportunity to help share the poems and stories of the Prince Albert Writing For Your Life group in these small collections.

This project would not have happened were it not for the support of Common Weal Community Arts Inc. and the Saskatchewan Lotteries Community Grant Program. We are very grateful to Common Weal and the northern director, Judy McNaughton, for always being willing to help find a way to bring the arts into the lives of those who otherwise might never have the opportunity. We wish to say a most heartfelt thank you.

NOTE: The individual books are titled *Out on a Limb* by Ayami Greenwood; *Climb* by Randy Cochrane; *Where I'm From* by Debbie Cochrane; *Primary Colors* by Ian McIntyre; *Snow Bird* by Dot Settee; *Darkness to Light* by Holly Spratt; *Like It Was Yesterday* by Lu Ritza; and *Learning As I Go* by Donna Mae Johnson. Books are available from the authors, as is the CD, by contacting me, Lynda Monahan, at lmonahan@sasktel.net.



"You remember Donna - she's that poet who isn't lonely."



Test your water

BY REESA BROTHERTON

This morning I rehearsed the words I needed to tell her, so I wouldn't forget. I don't remember if I had lunch today, probably not.

Riding downtown on the C-Train I repeated them over and over again in my mind. Dead, dull, depressed, tired, and failing memory. I should have written them down.

My visits with her usually lasted less than ten minutes; a short chat, and then a prescription refill would be handed to me. A quick in and out.

Today I opened the conversation before she could ask me anything. I had asked her before, today I'm bringing it up again.

"I want to stop taking clonazepam."

Now the words.

"I feel dead, dull, depressed, tired, and my memory and lack of concentration is getting worse."

Dr. Right put her glasses on, pulled her chair closer to her desk and looked at my file.

"We went through this at our last visit three months ago!"

"Yes, and I'm asking you again. You don't understand, I can't write!"

"You can journal can't you? Journaling is writing."

"There's a big difference Dr. Right; I want to work on my novel and I can't concentrate or hold ideas in my brain."

"Ms. Wrong, I could increase your antidepressant, but that's all."

Before we had entered her office a few minutes earlier, I overheard her say to another staff member that "they" should put Prozac in the drinking water. I was still feeling quite prickly at that remark...

"No, I don't want more medication, I want to come off the clonazepam!"

"Ms. Wrong, if you insist on this, you will have to find another doctor. I won't have your children knocking on my door in ten years wanting to know why I allowed you to do this."

Trying to uptake this statement about my kids left me totally confused, but she wasn't talking any more, or listening either. She handed me my three month prescription, asking, "Will you be needing another appointment?"

I took the small rx paper and said, "No thank you."

I picked up my purse, turned and walked out thinking, *you're not the only doctor in this city of 1.4 million people, and not all of them think resorting to putting Prozac in the drinking water is the answer to mental illness.*

On the Train home, I thought, maybe today I will write the story about a man in boxer shorts moving from lawn chair to tree stump to steps in his front yard writing poetry on toilet tissue. He's friendly, harmless, and comical to observe. I hope Dr. Right never gets a hold of him ... he looks happy.

Eye's storm

BY WILLIAM COOMBES

When I was born there was no celebration. There was I imagine, only tears and sorrow. It grieves me when I think of the joy I experienced at the birth of my children and grandchildren, and consider that there was no joy in the delivery room on the day I was born.¹

Like being alone on a stormy ocean, the atmosphere at home and at school was insecurity all the time. *Eye* existed in a leaking lifeboat taking on water faster than he could bail it out. *Eye's* guardians and teachers didn't seem to care what was happening to him. Perhaps they couldn't see because they were busy keeping their own boats afloat.

Eye was a bright boy, failing grades at school. His life overshadowed by physical and emotional dominance, neglect and abuse, attending the same country school as genetic siblings that he was ordered to stay away from. They viewing life through the binoculars of one surname and *Eye* through another. *Eye* was told repeatedly they were bad people, "stupid Newfies," who would cause him nothing but trouble. And *Eye* stood, forced to listen, with the blood of the "bad people" flow-

ing through his veins.

The 1950s and 60s, a boom time in southern Ontario where factories were opening and workers were in high demand. Jobs were available everywhere as families relocated from all parts of Canada, the United States, Europe, and other places. Employment is why *Eye's* adopted and genetic parents moved to southern Ontario from more impoverished areas of the country. *Eye* used to memorize the names of foreign automobile license plates that travelled up and down the streets of a nearby town, fast becoming a city.

Eye often felt like he was an alien dropped from outer space into the madness of an unrecognizable cluster of people called family, and onto a beautiful planet populated by strange and stranger creatures that were still adjusting to the changes of WW II. Everyone wanted the good life after years of what *Eye* heard were peculiar deprivations. Social psychology where *Eye* lived was still a small seedling sprouting out of the earth. 'Psychology of being' was a steadily manipulated commodity, the citizenry heavily encouraged to keep up the appearance of success and to cover up their lies.

People generally didn't talk about feelings, and if they did they became the recipient of harsh criticism. Anger, bravado,



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and machismo were acceptable, but pain was denied and swept under the rug. Some people carried remnants of fighting and war in their minds.

What some call PTSD today, was often referred to as 'shell shock' then.

Major materialistic propaganda was being systematically showered into the minds of the unsuspecting. Coloured televisions were becoming popular and no one wanted to be known as not owning one. Smoking tobacco products was advertised everywhere, while Frank Sinatra, James Dean, Elvis Presley, and the Marlborough Man, among others, were labelled messengers of Satan. The religiously fanatic church *Eye* was taken to preached the end of the world was near and everyone needed to be ready; everyone should feel obliged to plant seeds of faith by donating to *God's work*. Flamboyant evangelists put on guilt inducing magical thinking shows and collected money from the already overburdened and overtaxed in tent meetings planted on farmers' fields, shouting that Jesus was coming again soon, that sin was taking over, and that progress was ruining everything. *Eye* watched houses and churches and shopping malls sprout up out of those same farmers' fields like monuments to the wealthy and desperate, and wasn't surprised to find out some of those evangelists became land owners and real estate developers. Was *Eye* the only one asking where they got the money to build their empires? Was *Eye* the only one who could see how people were being manipulated? And when *Eye* spoke up in his youthful voice he was condemned. Branded evil.

Even though *Eye* tried to play the part, he had no sense of the self they wanted him to be, according to the teachings of their religion and their egos. "You are just like the rest of them!" itinerant parents exclaimed in a derogatory tone (a reference to *Eye's* family of origin). *Eye* was misunderstood and labelled rebellious when really, he was frantically trying to find acceptance anywhere. There was something peculiar about *Eye*, thus, he was never good enough, and had no way of measuring up to their bizarre expectations. It was the way of life there, then. *Eye* was consistently told children were to be seen and not heard.

Eye was treated like he was an irritant, a pest. He felt like he was in the way, at home, at school, and at church, everywhere among the hordes of blurry grey people around him. Told he was always asking too many silly questions. "Quit being so foolish! What is the matter with your head? You should pray asking God for a healing of your mind." Violence became the norm as response. "There is no way I am going to allow you to grow up to become like the rest of them!"

And day after day *Eye* was at war with bully right fighters. They called it discipline. Black and blue love, yes. But black is still black, and blue is still blue, and on *Eye's* body and mind, black and blue were related and lived together. "This hurts me more than it is going to hurt you," they said. "You need to be guided back onto the straight and narrow path," the preacher exclaimed.

And now during *Eye's* senior years, he asks if their black was actually black, and their white was truly white, if they had any idea how grey they had become. *Eye* looks around at what he can see happening on Planet Earth from this advanced season of his life, yes, during this so-called information age of the 21st Century, asking if there is truth anywhere, if it ever actually existed beyond the propaganda wars of a few bullies being more convincing than others. Are humans responsible for global warming or it is merely a cyclical thing that happens naturally every 1,000 years or so? Is Jesus going to return and save selected people one day or night, or is that just another story told like a fairy tale since before the Bible was written? Does science have all the answers making religion nothing more than a sedative for the masses? Do the financially wealthy control the world and we are the puppets in their game? People are told they have rights and freedoms but do they really? Hangman's noose choices blow in philosophical winds like yesterdays-coming-unglued wallpaper signage, peeling off cheap plywood billboards here, there, and everywhere. Right fighters with clenched fists on every street corner. Everyone believing they are right and those who don't think like them labelled wrong. Is there any collective agreement on how truth can be defined? Is the definition of *truth* similar to *normal*, in that it changes via speculative theories of social philosophy, education, geographical location and degree of financial wealth?

Eye now reads articles informing him memories are inaccurate. This idea is not new to him. He has always been told that. Those who conditioned his mind during those formative years deny everything *Eye* remembers. Denial is a form of



Simulated statue by Henry Peters

*The greatest challenge Eye has faced is
getting the words out of his mind
and down on paper.*

avoiding accountability and responsibility. Denial is another style-choice of bullying. Is *Eye's* mind merely silly putty reshaping itself with the press of every thought? If so, why isn't the forget button working? Why is the questioning button so easily available? Why is *Eye* unable to just pretend he is someone else? Someone better, smarter. Why? Because pain is still present, and as everyone knows, nothing is over until the hurting stops. *Eye* would never dare suggest memories are unreliable to a holocaust survivor, a rape victim or children of residential schools. Yes, some details of memories may fade through time but the memory of being hurt does not.

Maybe you grew up in a healthy environment where you could rely on being told the truth so you didn't grow up confused about damned near everything. Maybe you were encouraged to be the best you could be through positive reinforcement and guidance. Perhaps you were never deliberately hurt, bruised, or shamed into battle weariness by 12 years of age to start writing suicide notes, thinking everyone would be better off without you.

This *is* writing from a dangerous place, yes, dangerous because of underlying questions. This *is* writing, looking back with tear-filled eyes at the environment of childhood where there were so few happy faces. Yes, this *is* writing attempting to comfort and heal the child within, to give him a voice from the perspective of senior years. This child, *Mini-Eye*, who cries out to the older *Eye*, wanting validation, wanting his story told.

All these years, while *Eye* has been chasing money and knowledge and marriages trying to fill the void, *Mini-Eye* has been longing for protection, nourishment, acceptance and love. This child, *Mini-Eye* yes, the one with rotting teeth who smelled and was not washed or bathed properly, who grew up in an environment of mind games, strife and scowls and scorn and criticism and neglect and abuse and pain, internally and externally, with the occasional pair of new shoes, or pants or sweater or suit thrown onto his body to cover up the damage and neglect to make him look good for church.

Imagine day after day breathing in these corrupted fumes trying to gasp oxygen of truth, week after week, month after month, year after long tormenting year! What do you think should grow upward toward the sun from the floor of this oxygen deprived oceanic mind? Do you think *Eye* should take *Mini-Eye* into therapy? Do you think it would work? What is therapy based on, other than what *Eye* is doing here, exploring, re-examining, plunging to the bottom of this oceanic dream, seeking restitution? Maybe you think *Eye* should tell *Mini-Eye* to just casually forgive and forget the past entirely. Do you think that would work? People who deny their past have no map of where they want to go. The past has made *Eye* the man he has become. It is his identity. Would you really want *Eye* to deny who he is?

Forgiveness is a two way street. First there needs to be an acknowledgement of inappropriate behaviour, then an apology. It is after an apology that forgiveness can be a choice.

Otherwise, to *Eye*, the entire idea of forgiveness becomes a charade of pretending to forgive those who caused pain, by labelling them ignorant in merely hypnotically repeating what was done to them. It doesn't work for *Eye*. *Mini-Eye* saw too much. Besides, all the major players in *Eye's* growing up are going underground one by one, and the few who remain, avoid or manage him. They really do know better. The problem is, they simply do not really care about *Eye*. They choose to act like they did nothing wrong. *Eye* is the scapegoat.

This, what *Eye* has been doing on the page, is a process of breathing life-sustaining oxygen by filtering out life threatening toxins. Those who think composing this brand of "writing for your life" words an easy task are dead wrong. When it comes to the depth of *Eye's* soul, where *Mini-Eye* holds memories of truth and lies, hope, anger and frustration, writing can feel like sliding down a razor blade banister. This kind of work is dangerous, and is for the courageous not the weak. Like Plato said many years ago, *Writing is the geometry of the soul.*²

The greatest challenge *Eye* has faced is getting the words out of his mind and down on paper. The clock is ticking on this author/artist. *Eye* is sitting on death row and this awareness makes him one of the lucky ones. [*Eye*] *will not go gently into [his] dark night!*³ *Eye* will rage, rage against the dying of [his] light. These word-photographs are his obsessions and possessions shared. The sound of this oxygen pencil is still keeping *Eye* alive and until the end, "[*Eye*] *will sound [his] barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.*"⁴ And after *Eye* is gone, and you are reading this, he will have achieved at least two of his goals.

*When you are born a light is switched on, a light which shines up through your life. As you get older the light still reaches you, sparkling as it comes up through your memories. And if you're lucky as you travel forward through time, you'll bring the whole of yourself along with you, gathering your skirts and leaving nothing behind, nothing to obscure the light. But if a Bad Thing happens, a part of you is seared into place, and trapped forever at that time. The rest of you moves onward, dealing with all the todays and tomorrows, but something, a part of you, is left behind. That part blocks the light, colors the rest of your life, but worse than that, it's alive. Trapped forever in that moment, and alone in the dark, that part of you is still alive.*⁵

NOTES

¹ Linda Hoye, *A Slice of Life*.

<<http://lindahoye.com/adoptee-birthdays/>>.

² Plato.

<www.goodreads.com/Plato/writing-is-the-geometry-of-the-soul/>.

³ Paraphrasing Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." <www.poets.org/DylanThomas/do-not-go-gentle-good-night/>.

⁴ Paraphrasing Walt Whitman, "Leaves of Grass."

<www.goodreads.com/WaltWhitman/I-sound-my-barbaric-yawp-over-the-rooftops-of-the-world/>.

⁵ Michael Marshall Smith, *Only Forward*.

<www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/123899-only-forward/>.



European venture

BY SHIRLEY CALLAGHAN

It was 1968 and Dawn had just landed her first permanent job as a health worker at the local mental institution, Downsville. The job paid very little, but it was a start. Her supervisor was a gentle, bearded man twice her age. He knew that Dawn had spent months as a patient in Downsville a year ago when she was twenty, but quelled the debate as to whether she was appropriate to be on staff. He knew that she had performed well on the intelligence tests at the time, and she got along well with staff and other patients. She would do well, but would bear watching for signs of a recurring break.

Wanting to travel, Dawn had put her name on a list for a three week tour to Europe, never imagining that she had a chance. A month later she received a call from Mrs. Tuplin, the tour guide. A vacancy now gave Dawn a chance to come—could she be ready in two days? YES!

Preparations were hectic. Dawn spoke to her supervisor who arranged for a leave of absence, despite her brief contribution at the hospital. Her father loaned her money, and by some stroke of fate, she was able to have her passport flown in by the local MP who was coming home from Ottawa for the weekend. She had no time to speak to her two apartment mates before she departed, but left her TV for their remaining month

there and asked a friend to transport her luggage to her parent's home forty miles away. She was ready!

When she arrived at the airport, her boyfriend Todd was absent. Furious at her for going without him, he refused to look at her, let alone send her off. She was happy to be rid of him and his controlling ways. She looked around at the twenty odd people on the tour.

She could see no one she knew, but she was free and on her own for the first time in months. She owned a hair piece and wore it, twisting it into a sophisticated French-roll.

In the seat next to her was Joey, a pretty but mannish twenty year old from a local village. She was nice enough, but had little in common with Dawn. As it happened her trip was a gift from an older couple on the tour—yes—Dawn recognized her benefactor as a nurse from the hospital. Most of the vacationing folk were rich, much older than the girls, and kept to themselves. Dawn was still glad she had come and was able to assert her independence in spite of her history of emotional concerns.

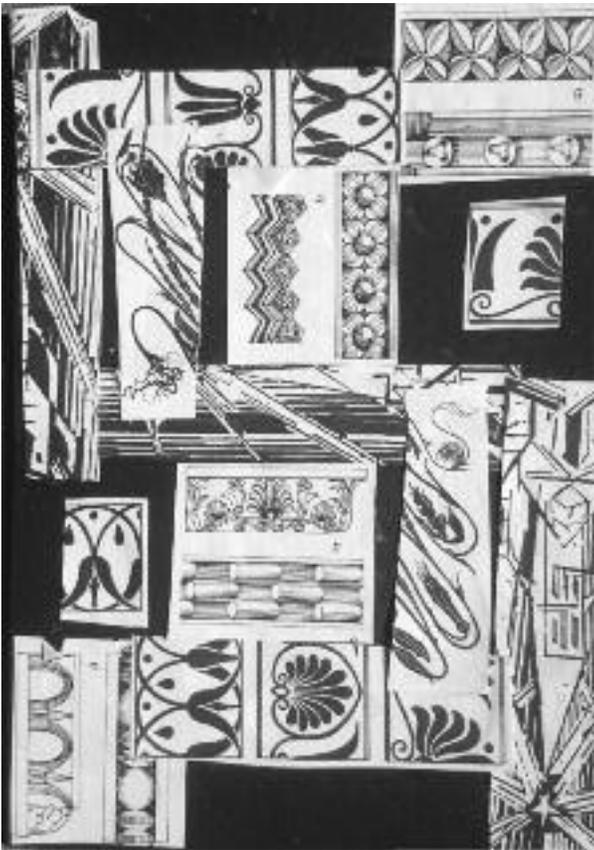
When the plane landed in London, Dawn was startled at the size of Heathcliff Airport, and for a moment feared getting separated from her group since she had problems with orientation and was always getting lost. To everyone's relief there stood the courier, Constantine, a tall handsome Greek in his early forties. He and the bus driver Carl would be their constant companions for the three week tour. They headed to the first stop, a fine hotel in mid city. Dawn was excited as was Joey even though she was on a tight rope with her sponsor- couple. Dawn and Joey were to share rooms for the rest of the trip and cope with their different appreciations.

Dawn wore her hairpiece daily, notwithstanding a heavy head of auburn hair of her own. Wearing the piece was almost like travelling incognito—even if she were virtually unknown by most of the group. For some reason Dawn wanted to be someone else—someone alluring and mysterious and exuberant, especially here in Europe. Certainly, she had none of these characteristics at home.

Constantine saw that Dawn stood alone. She was attractive, but oh so young and innocent. He doubted that she had ever been far away from her home. He would keep an eye on her. She, on the other hand, found herself attracted to her courier with his tailored clothing and charming accent. He was not supposed to fraternize with any single guest, but Dawn asked to dine with him and Carl and she dressed up every night to join them. Getting too close to a client was taboo and the others watched Constantine, but he could not turn the young woman away—she was so alone, and he liked her.

As the tour progressed, Dawn was getting little sleep, becoming overactive and driven. Being up until after midnight and rising at 6:00 A.M. to eat and begin the tour was taking its toll on everyone, but especially Dawn. Her behavior showed the effects of her fragile mental health and poor judgment

While in Rome, she was out walking with Constantine into the early hours. When she returned to her room one night, she found herself locked out, and Joey did not respond to her



Collage by James Skelton

knocking at the door. Looking about, Dawn saw that the tall window at the end of the hall was open. Peering out into the dim street-lit sky, she determined where her room should be located. Removing her shoes, she gingerly stepped on the broken shingles on the roof and edged her way on the steep incline until she reached the balcony outside what she believed to be Joey's and her room. Climbing on the balcony she tapped again and again, hoping against hope Joey would look out. She bravely did, without calling security or the police. Dawn said her thanks to Joey and a Higher Being. Nothing was mentioned of the escapade which could have cost her life.

There were cathedrals, cathedrals and cathedrals—how to remember them all? The poppy fields and the crosses caught Dawn's breath. She felt sad and thankful and glad her father was not lying there. She thought of the poem, "In Flanders Fields," and gave thanks for lives given and lives preserved.

In Athens, Dawn tried to find a psychiatrist. She knew her medication was not strong enough to hold her—she needed professional help—but could she find such a specialist within the hour before the bus left? She climbed a hill where a sign said "Medical Offices," hoping to find such intervention, but Joey found her and announced that the bus was pulling out and they ran downhill to climb on board. Constantine might have helped her, but she did not want him to know about her mental illness. Later, she wondered if she had contacted such a doctor in Athens, he might have hospitalized her—frightening!

The situation with Dawn and Constantine was getting out of hand: he was taken by Dawn's attention and sought out places to be alone with her early in the morning and late at night. This behavior, ignoring rules and regulation, showed judgment that was as poor as Dawn's in her present state. One rainy night they ended up in his private room. His desire was

strong and he took off her jacket and blouse, but he stopped, he could not touch her despite her provocation. She was too vulnerable and too young. Intuition also told him that all was not right with her. He walked her to her bedroom and held her closely—she was crying.

When the tour neared completion, Mrs. Tuplin found Dawn wandering around the hotel lobby and took her to her own suite where she spent the night. She knew that she should have stepped in earlier since she knew Dawn's family and felt responsible for her. Too spent, Dawn sank under the covers and slept while Constantine frantically sought her.

When they were in Switzerland, Constantine bought Dawn a gift, an alarm clock in the form of a gold-plated chalet that chimed. At the airport, Dawn sought out this treasured piece in the small suitcase. It was nowhere to be found—stolen! In it were also timepieces for her family, new clothes, all her films and her precious hairpiece—all never to be redeemed.

She was sick! And where was Constantine? He didn't even come to say goodbye!

Home, at the airport, her boyfriend, Todd made a showing. She handed him her expensive umbrella and said good bye, happy to finally see the end of him. She had learned in Europe, among other things, that they would never be a match. The ending of an unsuitable relationship was a relief. She was free to meet someone new.

It took a month with rest and heavy medication for Dawn to recover. Her family and CEO were understanding. It was good to be on her feet again and she had her job.

The trip was over, but there was a cherished gift in the mail which came while she was in hospital—a postcard from Constantine that he had sought her unsuccessfully at the hotel, and would always think of her as his darling.

Rinse, wash, repeat

BY VINCE MASSON

I had a lot of time to think in the lobby of the psychiatrist's office. A lot.

I had employed my regular routine of arriving 30 minutes early to every appointment in order to give myself some time to get lost on the way there. It was a regular routine for me - my whole life I had been directionally challenged, and, given the unpredictability of my navigational skills, had to leave early, even if I knew precisely where I was going. My friends never let me hear the end of it. They'd ask why I needed to show up thirty minutes early to a movie, and they all believed me when I said it was because I wanted a good seat.

The idea of showing up late to any appointment was unthinkable. I used to ponder scenarios where I'd be in a posi-

tion of authority, firing anyone that arrived to work late. It was just one of many inexplicable behaviours I'd adopted over the past few months.

Back at the doctor's office, I rifled through the small stack of magazines on the table beside me, and, finding nothing of interest, turned my attention to a children's doll house in the corner of the waiting room. I wondered how many kids played with it. How many kids, I wondered, fit dolls through the tiny rooms of the house while their parents try to save their marriage in the next room.

There was a makeshift bathroom in the house, and I compulsively rearranged the tiny, plastic sink, bathtub, and toilet to my liking.

After several minutes, a woman emerged from the psychiatrist's office I was waiting to enter, and I immediately won-



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dered what she was here for. I realized that everyone coming and going had an issue like mine - one that couldn't be resolved through "normal" means. It couldn't be resolved with a vacation, yoga, or a casual night out on the town. Every patient in this building had to actively pick up the phone and call for professional help, and they not only needed to disclose personal information, but reflect, ponder, and meditate on it with a total stranger.

It wasn't as appealing as it sounds, mind you. I had sternly refused to see anyone, insisting that whatever bizarre rituals I had weren't life threatening, and could easily be suppressed with drugs or alcohol.

. . . But they couldn't, as I soon discovered. They consumed my life, and nearly drove me insane every single day. At a local grocery store where I worked, I was being repeatedly berated by my manager for taking too long to clean up at the end of my shift. Something that should be taking thirty minutes was taking over an hour, and it was clear that it wasn't going to fly for much longer.

Anxiety such as this had plagued my life for the past several months. I had adopted some strange rituals, and my drinking had progressed beyond my usual bottle of wine a day, which, of course, wasn't consumed around a table of colleagues, but in the bathroom of my work, ten minutes before my shift started.

I told the psychiatrist this, and more. I told him about my nearly lifelong habit of eating with plastic cutlery, and how torturous small decisions were for me. The other day I had taken more than ten minutes to pick out a bag of chips, and needless to say, I felt something was wrong.

He agreed.

Mostly, I was unhappy. Life was becoming frustrating, and I felt different, weird, and goofy. I had gone on a date last week with a woman I had met at a bar the evening before, and had shown up ten minutes late - drunk out of my mind, fearing I wouldn't be able to sustain a normal conversation with her. I was right. I never heard from her again.

People were making less and less sense, and I told the doctor that I wasn't sure I was on board for a lifetime of this. I had already called a suicide hotline weeks before, but the static ridden phone call with the social worker on the other end had just left me more depressed.

After a brief discussion about my family, the doctor proceeded to tell me that I had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and prescribed me medication, which, over the ensuing months, I would abuse repeatedly, eventually landing me in the hospital. I waited for my doctor to reprimand me for this. To tell me, with the aggressive tone I had heard so often from my parents, that I had a serious illness, and that I should pull my head out of my ass.

He never did. Ever.

He never did anything that even remotely suggested he was disappointed, or that he didn't take his job seriously. Even when our meetings consisted of nothing more than small talk

about things that he was being paid far too much to be concerning himself with, he simply sat there, notebook on his lap as always, listening intently.

I had a lot of time to think on the subway ride home about our first meeting, specifically something the doctor told me - "When you leave this office, you're not the same person."

I also wondered if he knew how much his profession was mocked in the movies. I wonder what he thought of the countless films that depicted his profession as a boring, trivial meeting with pathetic losers, and how much that must piss him off. I decided that it probably doesn't.

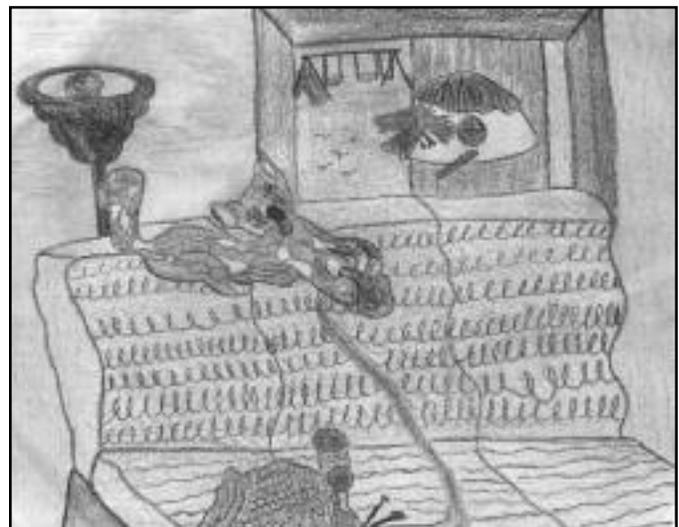
Eventually, my meetings with the doctor became less and less frequent, until I revealed to him that I didn't think we needed to see each other at all. My medication was, at last, starting to take effect, and despite being fired from two jobs, I was starting to settle into a somewhat regular routine.

I don't want to think about what my life would have been had I not decided to take that twenty minute train ride to that doctor's office. I doubt I'd still be alive. Even now, there are days when it's unbearable - when I'm washing my hands for the eighth time in a day, and feel so far removed from the rest of the population that it feels futile to even continue.

. . . But I do, because . . . why the hell not? There were days when I'd look at my doctor during one of our many lulls in conversation, and I'd realize he's heard it all - there isn't a single thing I've said that would make him recoil in shock and make him scribble furiously in his notebook about what a deranged human being I was.

One particular meeting, I made the mistake of asking him an impossible question - "Why me?"

He'd make the joke that he'd be in Geneva, receiving a Nobel Prize if he had the answer to that, and actually, I discovered, the answer doesn't matter. The better question was "What do I do?", which, he assured me, I had already found the answer to.



Art by Melody Crick

First person plural

BY MERLIN MATHEWS

The DSM-V diagnostic criteria for Dissociative Identity Disorder are as follows:

1. *Disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession.*
2. *Recurrent gaps in the recall of everyday events, important personal information, and/or traumatic events that are inconsistent with ordinary forgetting.*
3. *An individual must be distressed by the disorder or have an impaired ability to function in a major area of life as a result.*
4. *The disturbance is not a normal part of a broadly accepted cultural or religious practice.*
5. *The symptoms are not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance.*

1. *Disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession.*

Possession is a noun with both legal and supernatural meanings. It is the state of having, owning, or controlling something. It is also the state of being controlled by a demon or spirit. If a demon or spirit claimed ownership of another person's body and then began to control it, they would be possessing their possession.

A spirit is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the nonphysical part of a person that is the seat of emotions and character; the soul; the personality.

There are over twenty of us, and we all play the same person. This kind of thing can easily establish a "we," a shared voice if not a shared viewpoint. We call ourselves "the Orion system." System because we are a group of alters working together and inhabiting the same body; Orion because it's one of the two constellations we can all readily identify.

"The Big Dipper system" didn't have the same ring to it.

We used to lose ourselves because we tried to form a single self and a single personality. We weren't very good at it, and it's not surprising. A personality is made up of behavior, response, and thought patterns, both conscious and unconscious, that are relatively stable. When you have twenty-plus different people all trying to play the same part without being aware that they're acting, or that they're not a single individual, things get messy. We made a bad "self" because we were actually selves, plural, and because we weren't self-aware. We refused to accept that we might not be alone in the body. We refused to consciously contemplate being and having alters.

In the *cogito, ergo sum* argument popularized by Descartes, the existence of a self is proven through the fact that a self must exist in some capacity in order to contemplate whether or not it is real.

Julius hates the rain. Aside from a few comments of "but I thought you loved rain," no one remarks upon this aversion. He

hates the way it works cold into his clothes, hates the way it clings to him and drips down his skin before catching in his joints. It doesn't help that he often forgets to carry an umbrella.

When you put a bunch of people together, there are bound to be some similarities between them. How different must personalities be in order to be distinct?

Who is the final judge of whether they are distinct?

In what ways must they be distinct?

Psychology Today's page on dissociative identity disorder says that "certain circumstances or stressors can cause a particular alter to emerge." Sunshine always emerges for cats. Cats almost always emerge for Sunshine. He's like catnip.

Cats always seem to know the difference between Sunshine and the rest of us.

Although therapy for dissociative systems involves introducing alters to each other and effectively mapping and understanding the system, a former diagnostic criterion mandated that no alter could be aware of the others prior to therapy. Some mental health professionals get very upset when their patients can do and realize things on their own.

We're kind of surprised that no one said anything during a family dinner when Cy managed to emerge and started stabbing around his fingers with a chopstick, face set in a hysterical rictus. But then, family dinners are pretty awkward anyway. You're never sure when our brother's hyperactivity is going to reach critical mass, or when the monster's going to start yelling. There's no room between the two of them for any worry about what we're doing. At least we weren't trying to stab anyone else with chopsticks.

2. *Recurrent gaps in the recall of everyday events, important personal information, and/or traumatic events that are inconsistent with ordinary forgetting.*

One time we forgot an entire half-semester. We lost track of who was going to which classes, and the memories were so scattered they dissolved. Someone had to relearn everything and finish our classes, and we elected Ty. He did well, but he did not appreciate the responsibility.

Ty is the one who can most consistently remember the body's age.

The second subheading on the WebMD page for dissociative identity disorder reads "Is dissociative identity disorder real?" This question of realness does not appear on the pages for dissociative amnesia, borderline personality disorder, or sexual relationships. The question of realness does not come up when someone says they are the only person in their body.

Abbie and Sunshine are together. It is not a sexual relationship.

Aaron has been terrified of thunder since he went to a camp in Pennsylvania during the summer storm season and was caught outside when the weather got worse. There was no space between the lightning and the thunder, and for an instant,



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the whole world was the white heart of a grenade going off. He screamed. He couldn't hear himself.

The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy says that "dissociation is a common, naturally occurring defense against childhood trauma. When faced with overwhelming abuse, children can dissociate from full awareness of a traumatic experience. Dissociation may become a defensive pattern that persists into adulthood and can result in a full-fledged dissociative disorder" (Pais).

When our mom calls us, after our therapist tells her what we've been wondering about lately, she opens the conversation with "your dad doesn't like little girls." We do not mention the fact that she is 5'1 and almost childlike in appearance. We do not talk about what we nearly remember.

Abbie likes to sit close to windows and watch the lightning streak by.

We forget, therefore we aren't.

Unless the rain is less a rain and more a torrential down-pour, Sunshine likes to walk outside without an umbrella, feeling the water trail down his face, tangle in his hair, soak into his clothes. When he comes inside half-frozen, he stands under the stream of hot water from the shower with the same enthusiasm -- eyes half-closed, lips barely parted, head tilted back.

Thunder, and the assurance that he was just checking on us, might have made his entry to our bedroom easy. So we wonder: did the monster ever come into our room on a night when it was raining?

3. An individual must be distressed by the disorder or have an impaired ability to function in a major area of life as a result.

John Macmurray, a Scottish philosopher, proposed that "I do" replace "I think" in the *cogito, ergo sum* argument. If something is being done, his reasoning goes, someone must be doing it.

Sunshine is afraid of dogs. Sunshine likes raisins. Sunshine is the kind of person you'd ask to be your best man, back when best men were expected to protect the groom should any duels erupt.

Jay is the kind of person you'd invite to your wedding for fear that if you didn't, he'd curse your firstborn.

Are we distressed by our disorder? We are distressed by the difficulty of finding our wallet when everyone seems to have a different idea of where it should go, but as distress goes, that's minor.

Julius wasn't distressed when he could feel Sunshine at his shoulders, whispering soothing nonsense as he dry heaved and choked on the memory of the monster. Sunshine wasn't distressed when Abbie reminded him to take cough drops and stay hydrated. Dissociation occurs, professionals agree, as a defense mechanism. We protect each other, yet we're meant to be distressed by being surrounded by people we can rely on.

Technically, everyone is possessed. Technically, everyone is a spirit driving a body.

This way of thinking does not distress us.

Julius is distressed by spiders. Julius is also the one who deals with spiders when we're alone, simply because he cannot risk any possible delay in getting the spider away from us.

There's an ad series requesting that the viewer "take time to be a dad today." We hope the monster doesn't see them, doesn't try to take their advice. We've had enough of his fatherhood.

Thinking about seeing or speaking to, the monster distresses us.

The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy would like to remind you that while childhood abuse is a significant factor in the formation of dissociative identity disorder, you cannot assume that a family member was involved in the abuse (Pais).

Define "impaired."

Define "major."

The *cogito, ergo sum* argument relies heavily upon doubt. Descartes says that "we cannot doubt ourselves while we doubt." He doesn't say what happens to us when we stop doubting.

4. The disturbance is not a normal part of a broadly accepted cultural or religious practice.

The disturbance of a child streaked with salt water, burst capillaries, and snot, of a mother who has to go to therapy in secret because she fears what the monster will do if he finds out, of a beloved father and upright citizen who so terrifies his secretary that she requests reassignment, are parts of the broadly accepted cultural practice of not questioning charismatic white men.

Possessions can be a broadly accepted cultural or religious practice. In some séances, the medium allows itself to be taken over by the spirits of the dead. In some families, the male head of household owns everyone so completely that when they try to speak, it's his words that come out.

Jay likes to dance outside before it storms, ozone thick on his tongue, in order to encourage the rain to fall. Jay refuses to talk about magic as if it's not real. Jay believes that his authority is second only to one.

A monster in the night is too commonplace to be anything but normal. A monster in the night believes himself justified, believes that he has a right to be where he is, doing what he's doing.

That's what we read, anyway.

Ty wants to understand everything. He loves mysteries because he loves to solve mysteries. He wants to explore the edges of old maps, the ones filled with dark clouds and rolling fog and ominous warnings of *here there be monsters*.

The maps were inaccurate. The monsters are everywhere.

Despite the proliferation of questions and doubts about the existence of dissociative identity disorder, there is extensive evidence that indicates its reality. Descartes might say that the doubts are part of the evidence, as something must exist in

*He might have told us it was a secret, or he
might not have, but our lips were sealed
tight when we came back upstairs.*

order to be doubted.

Childhood abuse that causes dissociative identity disorder is often not only overwhelming, it is repetitive.

Our mother says that when we were younger, our father was happier and less stressed. His tension, his rages, became more common after we hit puberty.

5. The symptoms are not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance.

He invited us into the basement, baited us with candy and the promise of his uncommon attention. We sat frozen beside him as incandescent vulvas rotated on the screen, laugh track shrieking the way we could not. He might have told us it was a secret, or he might not have, but our lips were sealed tight when we came back upstairs.

"Findings show that in families where parents are frightening and unpredictable, the children may become dissociative," WebMD says.

Jay breathes in the storm and feels himself expand beyond his skin.

At camp, Aaron stepped outside, pulled the storm into himself and sent it down into the ground. The clouds receded. The air was the same staticy-clean as when laundry first comes out of the dryer.

The night Cy emerged at dinner, Ty had taken a pain pill that also works as an anti-anxiety pill. We don't remember what the yelling was about, that time, but it was enough to send him to our room, hands arcing like lightning as he dug through

the prescription bottles, trying to outrace the panic attack. The pill relaxed him enough that Cy was able to push him aside and emerge.

To take possession.

Julius is an alcoholic. This is why none of us will drink. When he falls off the wagon, he becomes belligerent, defensive. He feels all the fear and aggression we have learned to hide.

The monster cannot reach us here. He will not try. We are too old to be worth it.

We think.

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Art by Jeff Mitchell



The bygone years

BY ALLAN NOULLET

It seems that 20 years have come and gone. I seem to think this way, every once in a while. I guess during that 20 years I've done a lot of drinking, and while I drank the time went by – days, then months, then years.

I found out I never put much thought into anything other than working and drinking at the time.

My day would start in the mornings. I would fool the caregiver that I was going to work, then I would sneak off for my morning cup of coffee. Then I would sit in the restaurant till about 9:30 or 10:00, then I would go to the bar, and have a couple of drinks till the liquor store would open.

I knew a man, and he knew a friend, and we would all gather at his house, after picking up a bottle of wine. This cost \$7.30; the cost today is \$11.25, and the bottle is a lot smaller, and it's also made of plastic.

Nowadays when I go to work, we find hairspray bottles and wine bottles lying outside our place of employment; these people even use the water faucet on the side of the building for free water to mix with hairspray or wine when it's hot to have a drink.

Anyways, I've found out what it means when they say, You've wasted 20 years of your life drinking. I was more into drinking than living.

I'm 56 years old and now that I've quit drinking, I can see more clearly, I can reflect a lot better.

I didn't have a real job like everyone else. The one I had paid only \$100 a month. Lots of those time, too, my wages weren't \$100. They were much less, from my skipping work.

I thought I had friends when I was drinking. All of them are either dead or off destroying their lives with somebody else. Some of those people I can hardly remember didn't take the time to think.

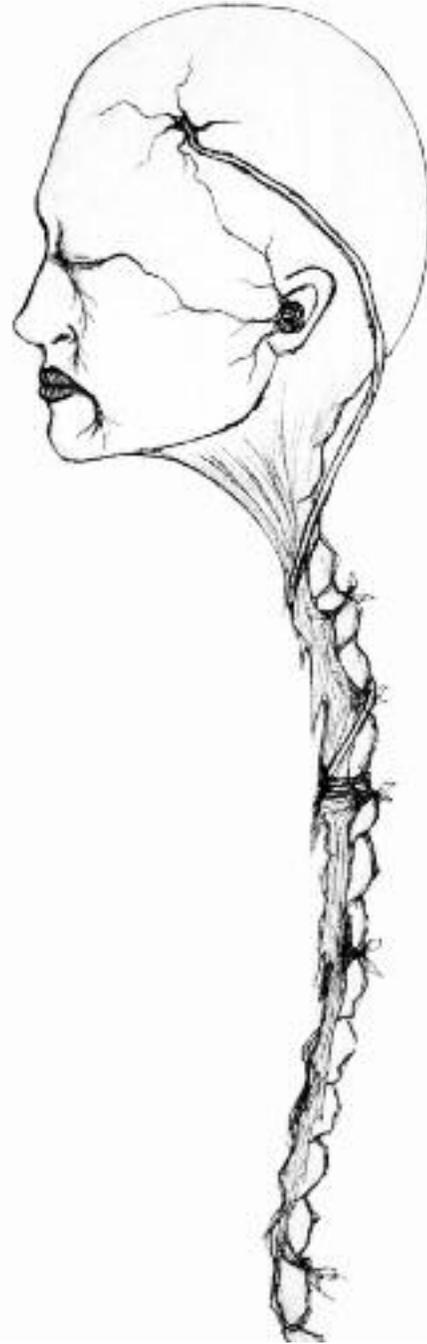
The important part of this is the women – was I really in love, or was it just a one-night stand?

Today I'm no more in love with a woman that I thought I was, it's like a joke. The important thing about this is that I could never handle a relationship or even live with a woman. I can't even live by myself without being my own worst enemy. Nowadays I'm not allowed to live on my own, because it's either I tried to kill myself, or I can't afford it. After spending 25 years in different Care Homes, I've thought of the reasons for a long time, and eventually I've given up even considering being on my own again.

But I'm happy for everybody else; they've found their own place in this world. I have time limits and rules in my life now, but I've gotten used to it. I see the local natives once in a while, and I help them out with change or talk to them. These people are hard-core street people, but I don't want to say too much about them.

Anyways, 20 years of drinking, and the scariest part is waking up in the drunk tank not knowing where you are, or getting beat up by people when you black out. It was an up and

down life back then, but the more and harder I think about the bad times, it seems to be a warning from inside, telling me not to get drunk.



Snakey Thoughts by Sarah Varnam

A childish love

BY SHELLY SINGH

My grandmother is one of the great loves of my life. It's a child-like love that is reckless and without boundary.

As a kid, I always knew that my grandmother – Nani - loved me. While I offered cuddles, Nani offered chores. I think of it as army-style affection. You know... The cold and commanding drill sergeants that scream at soldiers? All that, “Sir, yes sir”, “Sir, no sir” or “Sir, how many push-ups sir?” They're rude and boorish, but provide the troops with the survival skills they need to stay alive. It may not be love with the army guys, but you see the caring in their actions, right? Despite her rigid rules, Nani always injected frequent doses of a special something that reassured me of her love.

I know this seems like a strange comparison, but it is accurate with respect to my Nani. Let me illustrate her toughness a little better. I refused to use public restrooms and was cripplingly shy as a kid. One day, these two social anxieties joined forces in the worst possible way. Unable to control my functions, I released a stinky brown load in my pants while seated in my classroom (don't judge, I was four years old). It was the end of the school day, so I was met by my Nani who walked me home each day. On this day, she sensed (sniffed?) something awry. It was not long before she dragged me home and had me standing in the bathtub, while she scrubbed and scolded me for my act of disobedience.

What a dirty thing to do?

Wait until I tell your mother!

Is this how you behave at school?

Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

Trust me, her barrage of insults were like the greatest hits of “How not to raise a child”. But you know what? She was cleaning poop off my bum. Poop. Off. My. Bum. So if she had a few harsh words, so be it. That night she held me tight and stroked the hair on my head until I fell asleep, that night like every night. She didn't say it, but that was love. And even as a kid, I felt it.

Tough as nails with visible traces of affection? I guess that was my Nani. Flash forward to present day and it's Nani whose bottom needs tending. She has dementia, an insidious mental illness has robbed her of many memories. However, the condition has given rise to a softer, almost child-like affection in her. Love spills from Nani's words, warm embrace and innocent stares. Funny how it took an illness to expose her heart. Or maybe it was her illness that exposed mine? Sometimes when I change her diapers I think about how angry she was when I lost control of my bodily functions. Other times, the sight and smell of poop makes me just as angry (and just as vocal) as she was that day. It's easy to lose your temper. Her repetitive questions are maddening. The noisy, sleepless nights will make anyone cranky. And the shit. It is everywhere. It's a problem when it doesn't happen. It's a problem when it does happen. It's in her fingers, caked into diapers and even escaping into the

air to plug up my nose. Poop is permanently etched into the mind. Funny how our roles have reversed.

One night, while I manicured Nani's nails, I considered Nani's condition. Yes, it poses many challenges, but it has ushered in a return to child-like affection. Love is no longer an abstract idea in her presence. It is honest, endless and unspoiled, just as we see it in children. As I placed her hands flat on a white terry towel and cleaned up after my Nani I felt privileged. Privileged to show her the same affection that I received from her as a child. I stroked her hands gently and felt the softness of her increasingly delicate skin. I watched her wrinkled wrists squirm around as I soaked her hands in warm water. I started to sing a familiar tune to draw her attention away from her fidgeting. Nani filled in the blanks and hummed along. With her cuticles cleaned, I wiped away the hardened poop lining the cracks and edges of her fingers. She smiled at me gently – pleased by my services, but probably not fully aware that it was a task she could no longer complete on her own. Filled with childish play, but without a child in sight, it was a good moment.



Art by Kim Trautman



Breaking up with Owen

BY LEE TARANTO

Before reading any further, you should know that Owen hasn't moved out yet. He probably never will. At least, that's what countless therapists and the fifth version of the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders* have predicted. As you've guessed by now, Owen isn't your average guy. Owen, full name Owen C. Dickface, also goes by the more common name Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

He first took up residence in the penthouse loft of my brain's central real estate when I was twelve and transitioning into puberty. I lost what little social graces and confidence I had when rumours began to circulate that I'd slept with my teacher to get good grades. Anxiety, along with a primal urge to control my environment so it couldn't hurt me, became as natural as breathing. But Owen had the answers, he told me exactly what I needed to do to make my paralyzing anxiety go away. His requests were strange, doing 333 sit-ups three times a day, flicking the light switches on and off nine times before bed, holding my breath for over sixty seconds at a time and so on. But they worked. Whenever I listened to him I *knew* -- *knew* with every synapse firing certainty through to every nerve in my body -- that everything was going to be alright. As long as I did exactly what Owen told me. We've been with each other ever since.

Just like every relationship, ours is a complicated one. Owen and I have endured 12 years and eight clinical inpatient programs. I have lived long enough with Owen, and discussed him with enough mental health professionals, to know the nature of our relationship. First there are *obsessions*. Mine manifest as constant anxiety and fear that God wants to punish me for sins in a past life. The obsessions cause me to perform endless repetitive tasks called *compulsions* or *rituals*. Although doing rituals helps stave off the obsessions and the anxiety they produce for a little while, they always come back stronger. Like hitting the snooze button on an alarm clock, it buys me time, but not much. A pattern became engrained in my brain: anxiety, obsessions, anxiety, compulsions, relief. Repeat.

Early on, I was encouraged to try something called externalizing the OCD, a technique meant to help children disassociate themselves from their obsessive urges. Externalizing is a more creative way of enforcing the common OCD mantra: *It's not me it's the OCD*, by literally making the OCD a separate entity from one's self. My psychiatrists had me picture my OCD as something or someone else forcing obsessive thoughts and behaviour upon me. They didn't know that I'd already come to this step on my own. Or, that as a lonely teenage girl, I'd fallen in love with him, rituals and all.

Some of these rituals stayed the same throughout the years; but many evolved, becoming more complicated and dangerous. I banged my head at various intervals during the day, I held my breath whenever I walked from one door to another, and I jumped up and down whenever I heard loud

noises. At my worst, my forehead had gone from being swollen like a beluga's melon to an open wound that needed constant dressing.

It was in April 2007 at the Maples Adolescent Treatment Centre (the only long term treatment facility in the province) that my therapist Dr. Mat finally helped me see Owen for what he really was. This was after watching me reopen the wound on my forehead as I smashed it, smearing blood on his office wall. He had just used one of the words that triggered my OCD.

"You know Léa, your OCD is kind of like an abusive spouse."

"Yeah, I see where you're coming from." I said to Dr. Mat, wincing as I thought about how when I first started banging my head, the bruising had blackened my eyes.

"Would you stay with a boyfriend who beat you up?" He asked.

I shot him a look, "No way, duh."

"So then why do you protect your OCD?"

Like most people in an abusive relationship, I had my responses both for and against staying with Owen. It was always easier to think of the ways that Owen helped me and how I needed him than to admit that instead of saving my life, he was ruining it. Part of the reason I became so attached to Owen was because of how empowering having OCD was at first, back when it made my crippling anxiety disappear. Together, Dr. Mat and I worked on a list of pros and cons, one that I've kept and expanded on ever since.

Reasons to Stay

#1 He Makes Me Feel Special:

The whole reason for my "Psych. Ward Tour de Force" was because my parents wanted their old daughter back. The one who got straight A's and whose only weird quirk was a freakish love of books. But that girl was gone. After turning 13, I'd realized that it was better to not try at all, than to do well and have everyone hate you. There would always be somebody smarter or kinder or better than me. Shortly before I met Owen, I'd realized that I was mediocre at best, and mediocre was only a half step above sub-par. But with his help, it didn't matter. He gave me invincibility and a resolve I'd never had before because he gave me a purpose. Now I could stand up to a host of seventh grade bullies, all I had to do was be good enough for him. I might have been Bruce Banner the rest of the day, but not during my rituals. During my rituals I was The Hulk. Performing them gave me a secret power, a kind of 'turn off' button. At those times, nothing else mattered, just me, Owen's orders and the surge of relief I felt when I completed my rituals.

#2 He will always be there for me:

I spent the formative years of my adolescence drifting from psych ward to psych ward both in the province and in the United States. The only constant I had was Owen. Especially

Normal people in normal situations thought I was strange at best, jumping up and down whenever they closed doors.

as he was, literally part of me. As much as I valued friendships with certain staff members or patients, one of us always moved away. Owen was the sole entity who was always there for me. The trauma of leaving home overwhelmed me and led me to feeling resentful of my parents. Even though I knew it hurt them deeply to send me away, I still couldn't help feeling somewhat abandoned. Something Owen would never do.

#3 He made me feel happy and that was what mattered:

Sure psychiatrists and psychologists, like Dr. Mat, were experts in their field, some even specialized in OCD, but none of them knew more about my relationship with Owen than me. They kept on treating Owen like some scary bad guy, when he was actually a welcome guest. If I really wanted to, I could break up with him. But why? I liked my life the way it was. I was passionately in love with the sense of control he provided. Besides, it wasn't like I was Howard Hughes, wasting away in a mansion unable to eat or even cut my fingernails because of my terrifying paranoia of germs. We'd been together for such a long time, 12 years steady. At this point Owen had merged into my being and became a crucial part of my identity.

#4 Even Being Unhappy with Him is Better than Being Alone:

Change is scary. Hell, even normal life is scary and Owen's directions were the lifeline that made me feel safe. We all have worries that gnaw away at our peace of mind: *did I turn the stove off, what if I didn't and there's a fire? I just shook that lady's hand and she was sniffing, I should wash my hands.* My worries were just a bit more eccentric. Instead of restraining them to nagging whispers, Owen's screams reverberated around the inside of my skull. When I took a step back and thought about my obsessions logically, I knew they were absurd. Why would God kill my mom unless I banged my head 99 times in the morning? There was no scientific evidence to back up my fear. Only a feeling, a feeling that so far, had never been wrong. Along with the fact that under no circumstances would I bet on my mother's life.

#5 He's a part of me:

Right before dropping me off, or during the aftermath of a particularly nasty anxiety attack, my parents and I would have the same conversation.

"Why can't you just love me the way I am?" I asked them.

"We do love you, Léa, just not the OCD." The chambers, the rubbery muscle tissue of my heart tore as it gushed. "But we're the same thing." I cried. Owen was just part of me, the way my hair was curly and my eyes were brown. No amount of straightening or coloured contacts would change the genetics under the cosmetic alterations. Yes, Owen was a darker part of me, but definitely not my darkest. It was because of Owen that I was atoning, punishing and therefore bettering myself for being so selfish in my past life. If my parents couldn't accept him, how could I expect them to accept the mishmash of failures and wasted years I was without him?

However, as everyone kept telling me, there were so many reasons to just kick Owen out.

Reasons to Break up with Owen

#1 He hurts me:

Owen's presence, and his powers came with a price. I tried to make the best out of our situation. Learning to cherish the pain as I quickly removed pieces of stucko that got caught in my forehead, equating the fire of alcohol seeping into my raw wound as a release, the sign of a job well done. But I missed having a normal forehead. Showers were agony and on any given day I could be paralyzed for hours cradling an icepack to my skull as I felt brain cells dying. More importantly, I missed my family, I even missed old Léa. Weak, awkward subpar Léa, had never felt subpar until Owen told her she was.

Owen had a friend called ED (eating disorder), one of those severe fitness types, and they both told me I was getting fat. Fat meant lazy and lazy meant worthless. Owen was patient, when Ed asked me to do 10 hours of cardio Owen explained how taking a break or falling down meant I had to start all over again. It didn't make sense, but I never questioned him. We'd been so happy before, if he was dissatisfied it was obviously my fault.

#2 He's Embarrassing:

My rituals made sense to me but that's where their logic ended. Even fellow patients found it hard not to laugh at my rituals or blackmail me into doing favours for them by threatening to say my trigger words. Normal people in normal situations thought I was strange at best, jumping up and down whenever they closed doors. At the worst of times, I was dangerous, being violent towards myself and to those who tried to prevent me from completing my rituals. Even when I wasn't doing rituals I waited for something to trigger them. When I did hang out with people I was hyper aware of the words they used, the noises they made, anticipating disaster instead of enjoying their company. The less compassionate staff went straight from "You need to take a PRN" (an oral anti-anxiety medication) to "We're going to restrain you and give you a needle." There is nothing more humiliating to a body conscious sixteen year old than being pinned down, a staff member on each limb, with her right butt-cheek exposed as some fed-up nurse jabs a needle into it.

#3 He Isolates Me:

The more I committed to Owen, the more I checked-out of reality. I couldn't cope with even the smallest of anxiety provoking situations without somehow turning to him for a magic cure. The sense of relief I felt was a drug, school was a small price to pay for that kind of high. After school was gone it was day treatment, but my parents didn't know how to handle my escalating rituals so I was admitted to an inpatient unit. Away from home, withdrawal kicked in, a sticky coating of rituals settled over every activity I did. I couldn't even put on my



shoes without holding my breath. But that high, the Hulk-like power I'd felt before dissipated with time. Only taking over me during extreme moments of anxiety. The dread remained, it followed me from Burnaby to Vancouver, to Arizona, to Los Angeles and back again.

#4: He wants me to choose between him and the people I love:

The most important part of my life was and always will be my family. My mom and I are particularly close as she raised me alone until marrying my step-dad. It was easy for Owen to build a wedge between my friends and I. After getting kicked out of school in grade eight I was too busy doing rituals to invite anyone over. Meanwhile, the patients and staff who reached out to me always ended up triggering a compulsion of mine. Either saying one of my trigger words or taking away precious time I could have spent with Owen. The boys I dated were forced into an awkward threesome situation, they knew about Owen but couldn't do anything to stop him and if they did I accused them of trying to "therapize" me.

I always put Owen's needs before my own, but then I start-

ed putting his needs before my family's. My stepdad, Peter, had no tolerance for Owen, so I became hyper-vigilant and protective of him. Owen and I called dibs on all active chores: setting the table, putting away dishes, unloading groceries, carrying furniture, even getting guests water. If my mom or Peter forgot to let me do these things, I cursed at them and cried. Because part of my obsessions were linked to my Mom's wellbeing, I included her in certain rituals, threatening to harm myself if she didn't participate. Something I will forever be ashamed of.

#5 He's turning me into a nastier person:

In a vicious, self-perpetuating prophecy, I was becoming the "bad person" my rituals were meant as atonement for. Old Léa, weak and lazy as she was, would never become bitter or furious at anybody who made her feel anxious. Instead of communicating my anxiety, I demanded obedience, assuming that everybody went out of their way to trigger my OCD. I was losing myself, turning hateful. I drowned out the pain of my self-harm rituals, by generating hate and rage on a daily basis. It was the only way I could function without collapsing in tears every few hours, or refusing to get out of bed (two things I still do at times.) I couldn't blame every spiteful thing I did on Owen. Like the way I'd gone from being caring and sensitive of other people's needs to suspecting the worst out of everyone. It was Owen, who I chose to listen to, who I chose to put above the people I claimed to care about the most, my family.

Turning Point:

If this is where I tell you what did it, how I hit rock bottom and now I'm never letting Owen into my life again, then I can't help you. There are too many rock bottom moments I can think of. Then again, none that immediately gave me an epiphany of 'this needs to end now.' Owen and I are not in love, but we are room-mates. Learning to ignore him will be a lifelong process. Today I sat in my new therapist's office writing the word home, home, home. Bawling and explaining, between great gulps of air and sniffles why the word triggers me so much. How I've never felt safe enough anywhere to just belong, to put down roots, and grow close to people because God knows when a new bed will open up at treatment centre X.

I'm working on something called exposure therapy. Where I do things that make me anxious on purpose. Kind of like drinking a little bit of snake venom every day until you build up a tolerance to it. Except my snake venom is listening to "Sweet Home Alabama." I'm often ambivalent about treatment. Doing things to intentionally feel distress is pretty much against humanity's evolutionary instincts, so that's never fun. On an even deeper level, ignoring my rituals feels like I'm scraping away the layers of who I am. During these times I remind myself that OCD is as integral to my identity as having a perpetual cold. Hopefully, I will be remembered in life as being more than congested and full of phlegm. Owen is not and will not be the legacy I leave behind.



Running penguin by Henry Peters

Hunkering

BY TITAN AMY

Hunkering. I'm hunkering down like a soldier too loyal to go AWOL though she questions the judgment of her shell-shocked commander. I hunker like a soldier at a bunker. Yes, I bunker. I'm bunkering in the front bedroom of a little bungalow owned by a woman whose only son moved out last week to go to junior college across town. Within moments of moving my stuff in this afternoon, I thought I smelled cigarette smoke, and I said to Lucy, my new housemate and landlady, "Do you smell that?" I say that a lot, and most of the time, the person to whom I address the question gets a confused look on their face and shakes their head. No, it's only me. Me and my over-sensitive sense of smell. Lucy assured me there was no smoke in the house. "The downstairs tenant," she said, "has lived here for years, but he smokes only outside."

Outside not in. No smoke inside.

But I detect it. Stale cigarette smoke. In my closet. On the walls. For hours the pungent odor has been scratching at this point high inside my right nostril.

Inside, not out.

I didn't unpack. But I didn't cut and run either. I can't keep running. This is not the first time, and I need a home.

So I made my bed, with my soft flannel sheet and my fluffy white comforter, and the buckwheat pillow my dear friend gave me when I left her apartment this morning. She said, "Trust yourself," and saw me off. She knows me better than most but even she cannot understand that trusting myself has become the hardest thing for me to do. I climbed into my new bed, pulled the clean unscented comforter over my head, pressed my cheek against the pillow, and hunkered down. That was hours ago.

I'm still hunkering now.

The walls are paper-thin in this little house, the house that I found charming when I first came to view it, with its real oak floors and old-style central heating. The house I wanted to make my home for several months or years, until my brain reset itself, I regained my energy and could rebuild my life. I can hear Lucy in the front room. She's on the phone, speaking Chinese—Mandarin or Cantonese, I'm not sure. When I viewed the house, I asked her if she'd teach me her native language and she said yes. I was looking forward to that. I thought we would become friends. I was looking forward—

No past tense. I mustn't think in past tense like that. No giving up. I pull the comforter tighter around my nose and try to distract my mind from the smoke. The smoke I smell that Lucy doesn't. The smoke that cannot be here, that my mind believes is. The smoke that I sense weaving its way, cobwebby fog-finger-like, through the folds of the comforter, into the pocket of air around my head. It fills that space with its bitter, sharp tang and stings my eyes until they produce water—

I'm bunkering.

"No smoke," I whisper to my brain, "You smell nothing, *absolutely nothing*." I say it like I'm Sargent Shultz from that

old television show, Hogan's Heroes, rejecting what I perceive so that I can survive.

Every fight or flight molecule in my body has been urging me to run out the door, for hours now, since I first smelled the smoke, but I deny them all. This isn't going to be like last time. There's no threat here. That place had mildew. Only I could smell it. I lasted three days, then returned to the doorstep of my friend, buckwheat pillow in hand, with swollen lungs and throat, full of tears and unbelonging. The place before that had fresh paint. The one before that started a balcony restoration with no notice. Prior places had contained laundry room exhaust that bled into the building's main ventilation system, melamine shelving or laminate flooring off-gassing formaldehyde, PVC in-floor heating pipes, or damp parkades. Today's was my eighth move in three years. It couldn't happen again. I would fight for my place in the world, even if it meant betraying my brain.

"You won't smell anything when you wake up," I whisper. "You just need rest." It's 2 a.m. Only five hours to go until morning. I smooch my nose into the buckwheat pillow and repeat the words again and again. The smoke smells so real that to deny it feels like lying to my brain. But my brain's been lying to me for three years now, so can't I lie to it? Fair is fair, right?

No, none of this is fair.

Three years ago I was a professional singer, emerging writer, and marathon runner in training. Then I lost my income and savings, my home, my health, and my voice to three central sensitivity disorders: multiple chemical sensitivities, chronic fatigue syndrome, and irritable larynx syndrome. Some say brain disorders differ from mental illness, but I don't see how. Any condition in which the brain becomes unreliable and out of balance, anytime the braintrust between self and the mind is breached, that's mental illness. And, although I dislike the label, because it is like a bad tattoo that can never be removed, I have come to accept that it accurately labels me, me and my mind.

Not only did I acquire hyper-finicky lungs and a sense of smell that can outsniff a bloodhound, but my brain overreacts to every odor it perceives with its new souped-up olfactory system, and takes action by tightening the muscles around the larynx to protect my lungs, effectively choking me. For the first year and a half, there were countless coughing fits, unconscious spells, puking sessions, you name it. I had to avoid public places, new materials, and chemical fumes well into the second year before I could manage the larynx issue, so that my airway no longer went from open to closed faster than a Lamborghini goes from zero to sixty mph. My sensitivity to some trigger scents has decreased somewhat the past few months, and I have fewer severe larynxial episodes now. But I still can't do mildew, and I can't do cigarette smoke, fabric softeners, paints, formaldehyde products, or perfumes.

I checked this house out before committing. It smelled like boiled cabbage when I viewed it, a strong aroma but not offensive. I went through the list of things my lungs and mind could-



n't tolerate and Lucy nodded and smiled and said she understood, no problem, welcome. So why hadn't she told me about the smoker downstairs? Did she really not smell it?

The worst part about mental illness is feeling like I can't trust myself, my instincts, or my experience. Everything is seen through a veil of survivalism, reptile brain, and desperation. Do I trust a brain that resists rational thought and perceives mortal dangers where there are in fact very few? Or do I trust my sane-looking new landlady? Siding with her feels like the worst kind of betrayal of self, but where do you go when you have a Maslow-nian deficit, when you can't find a safe or secure shelter anywhere, because you have no money left, because a giant corporation screwed you and Workers Compensation turned out to be an insurance company with no legislative imperative to compensate workers? What do you do when you simply cannot breathe in a chemically-saturated world?

You hunker. In your bunker. And you lie to your brain all night. You wait until the landlady leaves for work in the morning and you get up. You have a steaming shower and tell yourself the water is a purification ritual. It will cleanse your sense of smell, it will reset your brain's alarm system, and wash this whole terrible night away. And you will begin again, in this sweet little house with the nice landlady and the primroses along the front walk. You will set up your desk by the window that looks out on the quiet street with cherry trees already budding in February. You will hang your clothes in the closet, and you will remember what Lucy said when you first asked her about the smoke and she swore there was none.

"This is your home now," she said. "If there are any problems, you tell me, and we will fix them."

You repeat this to yourself as you step out of the shower and dry your skin. You love the sound of the words and say them again out loud as you enter your little room and unzip your big blue suitcase in search of clean clothes. And you start to cry as you dress, because you want more than anything to believe that someone could make it all better the way Lucy thinks she can. But you see, beyond your blue suitcase on the floor, you see cigarette smoke puffing out of the heating vent like malicious grey clouds. And you know she can't fix that. Even if she kicked out the downstairs dweller, even if she scrubbed the walls with bleach and then repainted her home to cover the odor stuck in the walls—the odor you detected all night, the odor you lied to yourself about all those hours while you hunkered and bunkered—you still couldn't stay because of the bleach, and then because of the paint fumes and then, the outgassing. For months, maybe a year, the paint would trigger your brain, which would trigger your lungs and larynx.

Now you have visual proof. This mission is officially a bust. As you tug on the same clothes you wore yesterday, sobs lurch out of you. They form in your core like bald baby gerbils and grow into ferocious rats that can chew their way out of

anything. They run up your centre, claws in your belly and throat, and thrust their way out of you, heaving like throw-up, wracking your entire form. Suddenly the stress you've carried during three years of losing feels unbearably heavy—

And you don't think.

Not at all.

You haul box after box at a half-run out the front door of the little house and dump each one into your car. Breathless, snorting, crying, coughing, shuddering, you carry it all, every last bit that you lugged in the day before. Your throat constricts each time you enter the increasingly smoky house, and then loosens a smidge with each emergence into the fresh air outside. And when everything is in the car, you stand in Lucy's yard, teeth chattering, limbs quaking, breath huffing in and out as if you've run farther and faster than a body could be expected to. Any body. Anyone.

With shaking fingers, you hit the speed dial on your phone and when your dear friend answers, you sputter and slur as though speaking a tiny language with a mouth made for bigger words, "It's starting to feel like there is no place for me in the world...I don't know what to do."

"Come back and sleep on my couch," she says, though her apartment is so small it seems like it will burst with another's presence. "You will find a better place."

Like a good soldier, you march to the car without thinking. You pour into the seat, and your little Toyota Echo feels like a tank around you, solid and powerful. You sit with your hands on wheel, feet on pedals, until the tremors cease and your breath deepens again. This takes several minutes. Moisture from your breath creeps up the side windows. You turn on the engine and crank up the defogger.

In the rear-view mirror, you glimpse "traitor" stamped on your forehead. You want to apologize for the overnight deception session, for your illness, for not being stronger emotionally, physically, mentally—but it would change nothing. The part of you that betrayed another part of you last night served as a whip-cracking, drill sergeant hero during this morning's evacuation. It's as if your mental regime hit a minefield three years ago and you've been patching up the survivors and winging it since then. Every part of you knows this, yet you still yearn for resolution, coherence, and certainty.

Who doesn't? You laugh, knowing you will be eating uncertainty again for dinner tonight, and for many nights to come. You should develop a taste for it, you tell yourself. Then your brain could rest. Then you could rest.

Then rest.

Then breathe.

"Hunker down," you say, wiping your face with your sleeve. "Retreat is not defeat." You speak the words to yourself, and to your mind, and in this moment you detect no breach, and no resistance.

*The worst part
about mental
illness is
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Finnegan reflects

BY KATE BAGGOTT

“Your mother and I don’t want to encourage adolescent laziness...”

The old man begins his monologue. I don’t have to listen, or even read his lips to know where he is in the flow. My father has no intention of retiring even though he’s been working at the same job for almost 50 years. By the time he was my age, he was in the cow barns by 4:30 every morning to help with the milking and making what would become his professional passion: yogurt.

More specifically, Organic Yogurt, which should be considered another product altogether given the current practices involving gelatine and evil chemical emulsifiers. That, thank God, is a topic even my mother will interrupt once my old man gets started.

“Our concern, Finnegan,” my mother says, “is that you aren’t exploring your options. There are so many options for young people today. Too many for you to explore while sleeping until noon and then lying on the couch until dinnertime. That is no way to spend an entire summer vacation.”

“How is engaging in reflection a sign of laziness?” I ask them. “Any child and adolescent psychologist would recommend that I lie on the couch until dinnertime, probably while having really intense therapy. Do you realise how difficult it is for me to make sense of the world, of our family, given my up-bringing?”

“Do you want me to make you an appointment with a child and adolescent psychologist?” my mother asks. She thinks she’s trapped me. She thinks she has won the point.

“Why not, all of my friends have one?” I reply, “But all they’ve found out is that everything is their parents’ fault.”

“Isn’t it always? Isn’t it always?” my old man asks the air.

My father sits down in his arm chair across from me and my mother retreats to her garden.

“It’s not your fault in my case,” I tell my father. “I don’t blame you. My problems are all Louise’s fault. You probably just got it all wrong with her.”

“Thank you Finnegan, I appreciate your sensitivity,” my father says and closes his eyes.

Now we’ll all be reflecting until dinnertime.

It has emerged that my sister Louise has secrets. This has changed the known universe of our family. When the parental attention shifts to me, I only have to remind my parents of our worst worry – my sister – and they leave me alone.

Lou has never had a secret before. She was being one hundred percent herself when she came back to Toronto from South Africa two years ago and announced she was a lesbian. It was only the next day, when she told us she was a pregnant lesbian with a pregnant African girlfriend to marry that we started to get confused.

Uncle Reeve said it was a privilege to attend the only same-sex shot gun wedding in history.

“There are no shot guns involved,” my father objected. He

and his brother have some issues. Those issues were probably my grandparents’ fault.

“No shot guns, but lots of questions we’re not allowed to ask,” I told my father and uncle.

“It’s like this Fin,” Uncle Reeve explained, “when women live together they all go off at the same time every month. If your sister and her wife got a two for one deal at the sperm bank, they’d both have the best chance of conception at the same time. You have to take advantage of deals like that. They have excellent and affordable private medical services in South Africa.”

Dad and I just looked at Uncle Reeve. We doubted his information.

“I read about it in the magazines my ex-wife left in the bathroom,” he said.

My mother says Uncle Reeve is sterile and he keeps marrying, divorcing and making money so no one will ever get the chance to mention his zero sperm count. My mother and Uncle Reeve also have issues. Mom deals with her issues by repeating gossip from Uncle Reeve’s youth.

Uncle Reeve got kicked by a cow. He and his friends wanted to see if cow tipping was for real or just a myth. The truth is that cows get pissed off when people start trying to push them over. Uncle Reeve passed out from the pain. It was so dark and his buddies were so drunk that they didn’t see him hit the ground and went home without him. When he woke up his balls were bruised to the point he couldn’t get up or walk.

We are a family formed by revelations like these.

I was glad I hadn’t brought a date to Louise’s wedding. I had thought about asking Sarah Cheng. All girls named Sarah are pretty cute, which is great because it’s a really popular name. Sarah Cheng is the cutest Sarah in my biology class. She wears glasses. She is also the smartest person I have ever met. I like that.

Sarah is planning to do a life sciences degree before she applies to medical school which means she has to actually take high school seriously. It’s kind of nice to hang out with someone who doesn’t believe everything that happens in class is a huge waste of time. I may have to tag along when Sarah goes to university.

With Sarah’s knowledge of life sciences, I wouldn’t have had to be embarrassed for her to see that my sister and sister-in-law were obviously pregnant at their wedding. She may even have understood the whole lesbian thing from a genetic perspective. In that way, it would have been nice to have her at the wedding, but having to explain my family’s verbal diarrhoea would have killed the romance.

It took me months longer than it should have, but when Stevie and Julie, my niece and nephew were born, I had a burst of happiness. It made me more confident. Finnegan is just a little boy with a funny name. Uncle Finnegan, though, is a title for a man. So one day after biology class, I followed Sarah Cheng back to her locker and told her about the babies, the wedding, and I explained my whole embarrassing family.



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Eventually, I even asked her to hang out. We went to eat at her house and did biology homework while Grandfather Cheng gave me dirty looks over the rice cooker.

Sarah Cheng told me the piece of information that first suggested the existence of Lou's secret.

While mothers and sisters living in the same house, or even roommates in a college dorm, might have what are called harmonized menstrual cycles, it doesn't happen with lesbians. Biologists think the phenomenon has something to do with exposure to men's hormones in the immediate environs. Sarah Cheng's superior grasp of life sciences proved that Uncle Reeve's theory was full of holes.

"You might want to consider," Sarah told me, "that your sister might not be being completely honest with your family about her sexuality. She might be bi-sexual, or even straight."

The life sciences reveal secrets. We don't really know what my sister-in-law Constance does for a living, but she spends a lot of nights out of the house "working." When Louise has to go out in the evening she has started asking me to babysit.

My mother said she'd be worried if her spouse spent night after night out of the house and she didn't understand how Louise could live with it. My mother actually took to wringing her hands every time the topic of Constance going to work came up. It is obviously a huge issue.

"Don't worry," Uncle Reeve told her. "Co-habiting women are so secure in their relationships that all lesbians couples do in their spare time is sit around, eat Chinese food, and talk about being together."

After that, the next time Louise asked me to babysit, I sat on their couch. It was softer than I had remembered. The springs were tired from overuse. The cushions had acquired a mild slope toward the back rest. What had been a perfect piece of furniture for quiet reflection had been worn down by other purposes.

It was now a couch for sleeping on.

Assessing the collapsing sponginess of the cushions, I had to conclude it was now a couch for sleeping on nightly.

My expertise in this area is useful, even if my gift brings troubling information.

The next night, Louise stayed home with the children when Constance left for work. I told my parents I was going to study with Sarah Cheng. Instead, we held hands in the back seat of Grandfather Cheng's sedan and he followed Constance. That is, Grandfather Cheng followed Constance until she pulled into the driveway of Uncle Reeve's house.

This issue requires serious reflection. Before I speak to a child and adolescent psychologist, I may have to remain on the couch for some time.



Image by Amanda Weckworth

No place for neurotics

BY MERVYN LEBOR

The Pre-Hysteric Period

The room's sweltering hot; it's crowded with leering faces. The heat is melting Ivor's bones.

"Get off me!" he shouts.

"Are you going to convert or not?"

"This is my house!" cries Ivor.

"Not any more it ain't, slap-head!" says St. James.

They've got the central heating on at tropical levels. Weak neon strips fizz. Silk cushions are perfect for punching as therapy. Sash windows are stuffed rigid with net curtains; there is the rank smell of drains: London dank. They've got him down on the floor now. He's being suffocated. Convert or we'll kill you is the message. His ex-wife Connie is part of the plot.

"Please Connie!" he begs, but she seems indifferent.

Ivor is a musician. *My Way* is playing through the speakers. He doesn't react. Connie yells, "Get him down, you guys!" This advice is not necessary, his shoulders are pinned to the carpet. It's prickly. His lip is split.

"Connie, I love you!"

"Convert and you won't come to harm."

They're still pounding him. He can see their tattooed, muscular legs: guys in white satin. They're now singing *My Way* and slugging Ivor extra hard every time they come to the refrain of "I did it my way." It's heart-wrenching!

"Connie!"

Ivor's mouth is on the down-turn. He's depressed. Connie grins. She's ecstatic. She is now part of ANGST. Does Ivor really still love her? Can love survive this treatment? Will this event destroy Ivor's feelings for Connie? Unfortunately, it's having the opposite effect. He glimpses her profile through the miasma of joss-stick smog. She's still perfect: the wild child. He's still in love

"Can't we talk?" asks Ivor. "Please!"

The smell of cheese meals clings to their clothes. The guru, St. James, smirks benignly.

"Please, Connie!" Ivor begs. But Connie just lights a cig. "Remember the past...!" Ivor pleads. But what's past?

"I love you, Connie!"

She doesn't reply. The guru now sits on top of Ivor. It's "therapy," he says. Heaveee man! Connie gazes out the window. She has the glazed look of the brainwashed.

"Beware, we 'ave you by your 'air!" says the guru. At least Ivor still has hair. Ivor's now looking up at the Buddha of Belsize Park. James has stuffed his belly full of peseta-pizzas that evening. There's definitely a cheesy smell. Tomato is still smeared on the saint's lips like blood. The enlightened one's eyes are empty of mercy. He's now standing over Ivor.

"Yahoo!" he cries, but then burps rather badly. Will the sickly mess stay in the guru's stomach? They've renamed the

house *The Festering Wound*. The tapes smooch "My way."

They're stomping on his feet. It's reflexology.

"Connie, please!"

Ivor knows he can't resist. His only prospect is to look up at St James, Saviour of the psychologically-challenged. Ivor still loves Connie, but he definitely needs some spiritual guidance. But does ANGST offer the right sort of enlightenment?

"Connieeeeeee!"

It's all highly charged; especially in the financial sense He'll have to speak to Borkavits. He's desperate. He needs help. He's losing consciousness.

The rest, as they say, is hysteria.

Ivor's First Therapy Session

When I first come to see her, I'm scared. I sweat heavily. As I enter her house, she says, "Expressing fear through sweat is good." Does this mean I'm getting better just by coming into the therapy cell?

"So sweat is an outlet for what's wrong?" I ask.

"It's called 'getting the muck out of you,' old chap," she says.

And that conversation takes place as we walk down a wooden corridor with pictures of medieval figurines and candles, a trelis of gargoyles, carvings of many idols gleaming through the woodwork and shapes of angels fluted into the banisters. She calls this corridor the re-birthing canal. There's a sign up: If you didn't do so well the first time round, this is your last chance....

I'm getting scared.

Her therapy-cell is full of book-cases, filing cabinets, bundles of paper or journals of *Therapy*. The walls have photos. I recognise Jung, Freud, and the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, amongst other semi-demi-gods. They're all sainted holy men. This is the world of famous psycho-pathologists, gurus, and counsellors, peering down on all who lay claim to insanity or its possible solutions. But then there are also images of goddesses: mothers with child; virgins, primitive sculptures intertwined with branches and leaves. Scarves hang from the doors; candles are twisted with waxy figures crying out in ecstasy or pain. Crystal stones representing primitive sprites and earth mothers decorate walls. There are bones and sacred hags. What's going on here? I feel uncomfortable. I'm definitely out of my depth.

I notice labels identify clients' files bearing the captions 'Deranged' or 'Neuros.' There's a digital recorder, a padded couch, images of the tree of life sprouting from embroidered patchworks on the curtains. The theme is jungle life. In the midst is Dr. Bryony Borkavits, who takes copious notes and swings her legs towards me with gleaming eyes when some new depth of my illness is revealed.

I feel flattered that I'm at least the centre of her universe for 50 minutes. If only it were 50 years! She seems fascinated by



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everything I say. Her chair swivels and a new insight into my *new-roses*, as she calls them, is exposed. It's working. I must be getting better!!! There's a glimmer of hope. My problems will all be solved pretty quickly, I think.

However, this was all a year ago. But once I ask Borkavits for more detail of my treatment, I realise there are several stages. I say, by way of an opening gambit, "I'm having a bad case of the jitters. It happens whenever I think about ANGST!!"

"Just stay with it, there, old chap," she says. "I've cured a lot of guys like you before, but I believe you are deeply sick; you have deep disturbance..."

"What do you suggest?"

"I suggest you become part of the process."

"But what's 'the process'?"

Her use of language is disconcerting. A tinge of psycho-babble and hidden meanings lurk beneath the surface. Is it supposed to baffle me? I am a lecturer in avant-garde music at a prestigious college; I have credibility ... don't I? I want to contradict what she says, but this is apparently part of 'the process'. There are some bells that tinkle. It's to relax the client.

"I'm on the edge; twisting in bed at night. It feels like my body and soul are being torn apart and my neck is holding them together, about to burst like a water pipe."

"Who are you?" she says, quite abruptly.

"I don't know."

"So what is this anxiety you have?"

"I feel anxious, it's this James Monsion. He's always on me, like violence without violence."

"So when did all your problems start?"

"She threw me out a few weeks ago."

"Who?"

"Connie, my wife."

"Did you call the police?"

"No, the house is in her name."

"Good."

"What do you mean?"

"We need to look into the depths of your being, not what you own."

"But Monsion? His power?"

"James Monsion is the revered leader of ANGST therapy."

"I know!"

She's silent for a few moments, but then speaks.

"You have severe problems. I'm booking you in for another session next week. In the meantime, you'll read this leaflet about controlling negative feelings? My clients find it useful, when I'm not with them. It has a picture of me on the front cover and you can buy the re-lax-a-tion tape."

"You say in your adverts that you can cure the most fear-filled clients. I don't want to be fobbed off with a leaflet. I'm fear-filled. I'm often suicidal. I'm falling through an abyss. This is when there's no way out ... no peace possible!"

"So nothing I can deal with then...?" she questions.

"What do you mean?"

"It appears you need some sort of 'blanket' treatment," she coos. This turns out to be twice weekly sessions, tapes, phone calls and internet access, plus a deep breathing plan. The price is £300 per week, but at least she seems to know what she's talking about. Maybe it's her tone of voice.

I say, "Yay", write out a cheque, sign an agreement and then am finally on the road to recovery. She's going to kill off all negative feelings in me. It'll take time. It'll cost money. But at last someone understands. As I leave the room, I ask: "Will my inner life improve?"

"What's inner?" she questions.

Great News from the ANGST Club

Dear Ivor,

In these difficult times of stock-markets crashing, unemployment and inflation, there's one shining light at the end of a dark tunnel that might mean more to you than any other.

And guess what? That shining light is now beaming on you. Yes, our beloved ANGST Company is the only organisation that offers to get rid of all your worries. Where your church, synagogue or mosque offer woe, we bring you hope. Where others offer problems, we bring you the inner peace you always craved, available through a very simple purchase.

Lost faith in life? Someone run off with your spouse? This is happening to many of us, every day. Don't worry. When they say, "There is nowhere you can go," you reply, "Nowhere, until now!"

ANGST is here to give you ideas, inspiration, hope, and most importantly, a new direction in life. Yes, for only £30 a month, you can attend one of our individual bonding sessions. Just contact us and you'll find out about opportunities you never even dreamed of, fantasies you thought could never come true.

Facing a personal crisis? Don't know where to turn? Well, the ANGST Company is here to help you with real solutions. Get your support 24/7 from qualified professionals to help you deal with any spiritual crises or lifestyle choices. Just get in touch with the number above.

Do you want to get rid of your ANGST for just £30 a month? Subscribe now!

All best wishes for the development of your soul,

James Monsion

Chairman of ANGST (Against the Current System)

Can Anyone Escape From Their Past?

Connie's Therapy Diary

Dearest Diary,

I love this house, *The Festering Wound*, now Ivor has left. My life with him was pretty bad. He was always so neurotic.

Her use of language is disconcerting. A tinge of psycho-babble and hidden meanings lurk beneath the surface. Is it supposed to baffle me?

Anyway, he got me away from my daddy, Poppy Hurtshamer and his gang of Ulterior Agers as they call themselves. Anyway, I've got some news!!

News from the Gutter website:

Cult leader in New York, Emile Hurtshamer predicts a break-through in the end of all psychoses.

This evening Hurtshamer, leader of the Ulterior Age of Psychosis, predicted that there is going to be a major shift in attitudes towards mental health issues after his movement has put an end to Psychosis. He said that, under his guidance, "Psychosis is in retreat. The rise in religious faith means more people are becoming enlightened and will soon come round to my way of thinking."

I'm actually deeply suspicious. What's the old buzzard after? I think my dad's trying to push himself as a beacon of rational thinking. That's not how I remembered him as a child. In fact, I found him pretty abusive. In my youth the Ulterior Age of

Psychosis was a total nightmare. I can't believe he's resurfacing or that they're allowing him to say anything in public.

Since I've come to England I've believed in James Monsion and ANGST. He seems more reasonable. I took some speed he offered and I've just felt differently ever since, like for once in my life, I'm happy ... especially delving into childhood with the ANGST-trained therapist, Dr. Bryony Borkavits.

At the end of the last session she asked me to fill in a questionnaire.

Your current partner, JAMES MONSION, reminds you of your father:

- a) 100% of the time
- b) 50%
- c) From certain angles
- d) Not at all

I ticked d). Dr Borkavits gave me a most radiant smile.



Art by Melody Crick



Remember I love you

BY DJANGO MATHIJSEN

I remember how we played together. Not that often. She wasn't in my class, wasn't a best friend, and never became my girlfriend or anything. She didn't live in a house, but in a hole in the wall in one of those way too high, way too ugly, way too dreary boxes of bricks, designed by some concentration camp architect.

Some say that children don't know ranks and classes, discrimination and war. Those people don't know what they're talking about.

House toddlers and apartment toddlers don't play with each other where I come from. Apartment toddlers look up to house toddlers, or they're jealous of them. House toddlers feel sorry for apartment toddlers, or they look down on them. It's not a conscious thing: an invisible border makes sure you don't associate with each other.

But sometimes you did meet... walking back from the playground, riding your scooter or go-cart. Then she would lick an ice-cream cone she got from her mother and your mum joked about it. And like things go with toddlers: you look at each other, smile and before you know it you're in the bushes or the sandbox together. Your mum thought she was a cute kid, a pretty kid, pity though about those bad teeth. But then the kid always had those nice cheerful, naughty little lights shining in her brown eyes.

And so she came to play in my backyard sometimes. Once in a while she even came to my birthday party. But as you get older, you played with each other less often. Until you didn't play at all anymore.

You went from the "low" school to the "higher" and the "even higher" school. She went to a "not so high" school. And now the line was drawn. She associated with her clique and you with yours. Playing with each other? Forget it. If you even tried, the cliques prevented it.

Two times I met her on the street alone. She came toward me, one time in that alley and one time in that abandoned shopping street. Both times she smiled and said: "Hello". In spite of her bad teeth... her mouth, her eyes and the highlights in her long black, dead straight hair were radiant. Jeans and a black silk blouse accentuated her curves and her slim waist. I smiled back and said "Hello" but didn't make small talk, didn't ask if I could buy her ice-cream, if she wanted to dive into the bushes or the sandbox with me. I continued my way and lost sight of her.

Twenty years later I suddenly heard that voice behind me. "Hello." I recognized her right away, although I'd forgotten her name. She asked how I was doing. Good, of course. And she?

"Bad," she said with a sob. Her radiant light had been replaced by worry, fear, zits and greasy hair.

I stood still and asked her what's wrong. She didn't know.

A few years earlier she'd had a holiday from work. And suddenly she hadn't been able to get out of bed anymore. Suddenly life was terrifying and tough, every decision difficult: should she wash her hair now or tonight? The indecision was so paralyzing she didn't wash her hair at all. If she ran out of food, she went without for days because she didn't have the courage to go shopping, afraid to burst into tears in the shop among all those people.

Psychiatrists, pills and institutions came into her life. Tablets to suppress the fear, tablets to sleep. A sea of tablets. She chewed her bottom lip as she said it; she wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her upper arms. Her eyes shot in all directions like a chased animal. She told about that time she'd swallowed too many sleeping pills, about that time the police had pulled her off the railroad crossing.

We exchanged phone numbers. She gave me a quick hug; I felt her body shaking.

She started calling, day and night. I talked to her for hours; it seemed to calm her down. Still, she filled up my answering machine: dozens of messages a day. That she didn't have the strength to brush her teeth, that her mother wouldn't talk to her, that she wasn't allowed to see her son anymore, that they called her a lunatic. "If something happens to me, remember I love you."

She said it to everyone who lifted a finger to help her.

According to her psychiatrist I had to act directly. So I told her to brush her teeth now, to take a shower now, to go outside now, to go shopping now, to treat herself to some makeup now, to have herself committed by the psychologists, who were really meaning well. She even listened, up to a point. She didn't commit herself. And she started to lean on me more and more.

You can't help her. You have to protect yourself from her. A depressive person is an energy vampire: she'll claim you, suck you dry and pull you down with her. So many people told me. I knew they were right, but couldn't just let her down.

Until that night my doorbell rang. Could she sleep at my place? She didn't want to be alone anymore.

I walked her back to her apartment and tucked her in. When I got home, she was already on my answering machine again.

It took a few talks, but in the end she realized she couldn't lean on me anymore.

A month later I got her last call. If I could write a note to her mother that she had to call her? No, I couldn't. "Remember I love you," she said.

A year later I happened by her apartment and saw a different name on the letterbox. At home I googled her name. She'd died six months earlier.

And now I have to ask myself: what if I'd bought her that ice-cream, all those years ago?

*But as you get
older, you played
with each other less
often. Until you
didn't play at all
anymore.*

Cleanliness

BY N.T. MCQUEEN

Carrol Pribble always kept pride in the knowledge that his patrol car reflected the sunlight with an almost devastating brilliance. He would arrive early for his shift and scrub with long, deliberate strokes across the hood and sides until the black and white reflected his image back at him. The tips of his fingers pruned to the texture of gelatin. Even the Chief joked with the other officers that Carrol changed the bulbs on his squad car's lights every week so his would glow brightest. Regardless of their laughter, he continued to scrub away the dirt and imperfections nestled in the cracks of his patrol car.

A tall, broad shouldered man, he harbored a deep animosity toward the color of his teeth. When he laughed, he curled his top lip downward, creating a strange expression that unsettled others. His concern resulted in a rigorous routine before bed involving several experimental pastes and washes, some of which he drove seventy miles south to Santa Rosa to obtain. After forty five minutes, he spread his lips only to reveal the same discolored hue and his fist and mirrors bore the scars of his rancor. Despite the warnings from the dentists he visited, he brushed six times a day and resolved that the pain deep in his teeth was a good omen.

His mustache always exhibited crisp edges and he had developed an obsessive habit of flattening the bristly hair with the pads of his fingers. He knew his mother frowned upon those sort of habits and thought of her each time he felt his skin meet the hairs. The thought was not rebellious, but regretful; yet, when faced with conversation, he would stroke his mustache, fighting his hand until his mind could not allow it and the old sting of her frequent slaps on his knuckles resonated once the skin touched his facial hair.

The Chief, a long faced man who never washed his hands after using the restroom, had held rank over Carrol's father and, desiring to maintain tradition, assigned Carrol the same beat his father worked for twenty seven years. Carrol nodded with a smile and, several years later after his marriage and subsequent divorce, he again smiled when his request for reassignment was denied. His patrol consisted of the north end of Port Lake, from the train tracks south along Gerard Way, past Safeway, until houses cluttered the blocks named after fish. He knew this beat from the past fifteen years since he had started fresh from the academy. Each home and the records of those who lived there still were fresh in his mind. An almost uncanny recognition of detail.

He recalled the several times his father had brought him for ride-alongs as a boy and the stench of the rotten-mouthed addicts he cuffed and slung into the backseat. The attention to procedure soaking into his impressionable mind. It was these few outings that gave him an upper hand his first few years on the force. Though their sons and daughters had taken over, the same houses had moved to newer products, labs ready to burst at the slightest error. He had but to knock on the door to find

lines and razors on tables or chemicals cooking in the kitchen sink. He would drive slow up Perch Way after dark, pass the derelict homes surrounded by chain-link fences, pitbulls and dying palms, and watch his old classmates as they loitered shirtless around their dead front lawns, smoking and clutching the neck of a bottle. Cheap tattoos and scars to show for their accomplishments.

A block away, the hostile banter from the Peppers's rental meshed with the rattle of bass and shatter of glass. Sometimes he would even park the squad car and marvel as if his past had been a fallacy, a dream, and what he saw before him was someone else's present. When his stomach roiled inside, he continued his patrol, returning to Gerard Way, past the First Baptist Church and the drunks who sought solace with one another at the local AA meetings. He had seen each through his rear view mirror, behind the grate that separated the backseat, faces forever destined to linger between his windshields.

He preferred to be referred to as Officer Pribble. He hated the name Carrol and had been told frequently by his father that it was a name for queers. His mother's desire for a girl shadowed the reality of her only progeny. In an attempt to maintain her desires and stave off reality, she had inserted an extra R to add a more masculine tone. This effect was lost through middle and high school and urged Carrol to participate in wrestling. He quickly excelled but his skin burned after each practice and every match with such an intensity, he sprinted to the showers and let the boiling water pour over him for thirty



"I have a bad feeling about this."



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minutes. Though his father never mentioned it, Carrol sensed his disapproval. After the second match, he quit the team.

His focus extended toward other sports such as football, basketball, and baseball. After his father had slept off the night's shift, he would grab his faded mitt and toss fastballs, curves, and change-ups to Carroll until the boy shook his hand after catching a pitch. Once, when Carroll missed a curveball and it caromed off the tip of his glove and into his left eye, his father shook his head and waited for Carroll to stop crying. Through his blurry eye, he watched his father detail what he had done wrong and instruct him to follow procedure. This aided his competency as a catcher and shifted his status higher on the hierarchal scale of adolescent admiration. The underclassmen followed him at break, giggling around corners and behind their hall locker doors and writing their love in lipstick on his locker. The sound carried into him and swelled within his chest, carrying him from party to party. This elation that sustained his libido waned as graduation neared with a mailbox bereft of college letterhead and a silent phone. His pitcher and short stop brought their recruitment letters to class and waved the white sheets with blazing emblems like a banner of victory. When the August after graduation arrived, he noticed a discoloration of his teeth and a sour disapproval in the silence of his parents.

He vowed, despite his failure, to never follow the course set by his father. He inquired at Dave's Auto Repair but was turned down by Coleman Bevel in favor of Larry Holiday Jr. His litany of rejections ended when he was given the duty of dishwasher at Winkie's Lounge where he worked for Vlado Brinkerhoff. Carroll huddled around his sink as Vlado and his cousins slid empty mugs, plates, and cutlery across the slathered counter toward him, cursing guttural in their heavy Russian. His first week, they lingered around his sink, smoke fuming from their grotesque features, and mocked his namesake. Carroll washed more fervently and ground his aged-looking teeth flat. When he arrived home, his mother, noticing the tension in his jaw, exhorted Carroll to join the Academy and follow a proud line in his family where, as was custom every week, she told stories of his grandfather's role in the California Highway Patrol. Each night, he shook his head and made his steps exude his malice until he reached his room and slammed the door.

After the third week at Winkie's Lounge, the Brinkerhoffs' mockery had added to his mother's advice and he stormed off, pitching his crumpled apron into the soapy water and kicking a metal bowl into the brick siding. The drunk Russians only laughed at his outburst. By Monday the following week, Carroll Pribble enrolled in the local police academy and, after three months in Sacramento, was sworn in to the Port Lake Police Department two weeks before his father's final day on the force. During the retirement party at the station, The Chief made a speech that he was losing one Pribble for another and, though the department laughed, Carroll saw the hard line along his father's jaw.

A year after he replaced his father on patrol, he dated his realtor and, after six months waiting on the short sale, married her, moving into the home she helped find and finance. Carroll and Paula Pribble kept their contentious relationship behind their doors. On Sunday mornings at the First Baptist Church, others regarded only the Pribbles' smiles and garb, rumors of envy circulating once Mr. Pastor the Pastor held his final solemn blessing at precisely eleven forty five. This façade began to dissolve until the voracity of their argument echoed behind the garage door. The marriage had failed before the wedding, but, out of their own respective prides, they married as if to accept the challenge of fate. They bickered, passive yet blatant, and Carroll often wondered if this was how they loved and the image of Jerome Peppers and the countless arguments on Gerard Way surfaced in his mind.

The Pribbles spoke a language sparked by violence. They bickered about meals, furniture, television programs, whole or fat-free milk, even in the bedroom. Paula's raspy aggression settled in Carroll's muscles and sparked in him the need to clean. By their one year anniversary, his compulsion to clean kept him up during the day, dusting shelves, wiping base-



Spirals by Judy Swallow

Two days after, he drove them home, helped Paula and his daughter to the door, then drove to the station to request overtime.

boards, scrubbing grout and vacuuming the rugs before and after his shift. Though Paula screamed and spit profanities at him, he buried his face into the fight before him, though he did not know the enemy he was facing.

Paula gave him the news as he vacuumed the master bedroom shortly after their volatile anniversary. The news, like her voice, settled into his shoulders and chest, and after a week of frenzied cleaning, he was forced to purchase a new vacuum. Carrol wanted to find out the sex but Paula demanded they wait. During the birth, Paula's spiteful words angered Carrol and they argued through the stages of labor. They still argued when the doctors busied themselves with the new child, whispering among each other at what was discovered. When Carrol heard the doctor inform him that his new daughter was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, he slipped to the hospital bathroom and brushed his teeth with his finger. The vigor of his motion squeaked in the empty stall and his nails caught on his gums, drawing blood. Two days after, he drove them home, helped Paula and his daughter to the door, then drove to the station to request overtime. He resumed his father's patrol for six nights a week for seven months. Not even amongst the divorce and custody hearings did he request less. Out of sympathy, she let him have the house.

The time between shifts he spent cleaning different objects in his home. Lamp shades. Fan blades. Light sockets. Behind light switches. The tracking on the windows. He tried reading John Grisham novels or watching syndicated sitcoms but his legs danced against the couch until the urge overtook him and he cleaned the buttons on the remote control. The emptiness haunted him so he played classical music and imagined the instruments following the charts in syncopated order, never a detour from the intended notes. He mustered sleep wherever his consciousness ended and would wake in different rooms, muscles stiffened from standing, crouched, curled, or slanted positions. The alarm signaled his shift's imminence and his gut sank. He moved as if weighed by chains, slow, lugubrious tasks he struggled to find purpose in. This apathy stayed with him until he pulled the squad car into the station. Then he approached his duty with the diligence he exhibited at his home. But, after his twelve hours, the chains pulled at him again and he lessened their tautness in the same manner. While using a toothbrush to clean the inside of the tub drain, he paused a moment, hands and knees against the hard floor, and called for Paula. His voice answered him again and again. He stared at the brush in his hand and pressed his strength into the plastic, a fervent desire to break the brush. But he continued scrubbing until the bristles bent backward.

One of the nights after Paula left with his daughter, he drove his usual beat with a rookie who, only two months before, had graduated from the academy. His narrow, close eyes and small lips gave Carrol the impression he had cheated his way through the program and Carrol's subconscious nagged animosity toward the new recruit. His rancor only grew when he saw the poppy seeds wedged between his partner's

teeth when he smiled. The few moments where words led to emotion, those white teeth became cancerous before him, pocked with in-between caverns that bespoke horrors unimaginable, entryways toward a spiritual contamination he knew he could not combat. Carrol missed his normal routes, misread stop signs, and lost his radio codes with dispatch, each error forced his eyes toward the crumbs in the grooves of the seats underneath his partner. They pulled over a haggard Pontiac Sunfire outside Winkie's that drove a crooked path near midnight. When the car stopped on the muddy shoulder, Carrol and the rookie both emerged from the vehicle with Carrol approaching the driver's side. Before the window had been opened, he knew the young man driving was drunk and told the girl he rode with to find alternate transportation. The man's license read as Larry Holiday Jr. and Carrol, remembering Larry Sr. and the frequent stops at the Tower Mart, asked him to step from the vehicle. Larry staggered from the cab, giggling. He failed the sobriety test and Carrol asked the rookie to read Larry his rights and place him in the squad car. The rookie's stammer as he read him his rights first unsettled Carrol to the point of nausea. The ride to Little View Correctional Facility intake buzzed in his ears and by shift's end, his temples ached. The next day, he requested the new recruit be transferred to another officer once back at the station. By his next shift, he found a photograph of Tony Shaloub in a brown suit taped to his locker. He folded the photo even and symmetric then threw it into the trash.

Since the divorce had been finalized, Carrol would not return his mother's calls and debated changing his number. But he could not. On his daughter's birthday, he drove two hours north to Mendocino to see her. Even at one year old, he could not control her and she squirmed according to the disease's will and he trembled watching her. After 20 minutes, he returned home and promptly washed the walls into the early morning.

His voracious compulsion had worsened and he began sleeping in the cumbersome backseat of his squad car. His mornings plagued by contusions and groans acquired in his restlessness. The standards of his life made him homeless and he seldom entered the pristine house he once shared with his wife. The ammonia lingered in the air when he showered, the chemical steam absorbed into his lungs, and he wondered if the smell seeped from his pores and if others close to him could smell the sting. After his showers, he failed to resist the compulsion to check the messages on his phone. He rubbed his mustache as he watched the red light blink at him from the counter but he could not press play. But her lilting, unintelligible voice still haunted him, static and robotic as if she pleaded from that tiny box on his counter for freedom. For normalcy. The same voice echoed from the depths of his consciousness in the fitful hours of the afternoon.

Though he worked longer and cleaned harder, he was followed by a stalking inevitability he would not name. The hours spent driving around the Bends in the black lost their anesthetic and his periphery found no solace. His eyes strained from



WRITING THE LIFE - FICTION

side to side. The creases in his hands crumbled dry and ashy, breaking without blood and dissolving fingertips as if each swipe of his perfect mustache left bits of himself within the hairs. The black leather glossed thick in his squad car, slick with the layers of cleaner, cracking in the weak spots. He lost track of the days. Of time. Every day he wondered if he had missed her birthday and scrolled his cellphone to Paula's number, but resolved to call the next day. He was too tired. Too busy. The house needed cleaning. He often snapped the phone onto his belt then wept as he cleaned the grooves of his brake pedal, singing below a whisper the song that marked their first dance.

He awoke from a troubled sleep and noticed smoke mixed with Armor-All. He sat up, the tension punched at his body and a haze filled the cul-de-sac. He wiped the sweat from the side of his head and pulled and fluttered the damp shirt from his back. Through the seat guard, the afternoon sky glowed orange and grey. After his shower, he drove the squad car to the station in his uniform. In the rear-view mirror, he noticed the blackish bruises under his tired eyes and felt the weight they carried. He turned the CB and heard Doris's voice report a disturbance on Main Street, possible 5150. He flipped his lights and pulled the wheel sharp, swerving in a way reserved for the drunken. Down Main, parallel to the courthouse, he spied a startled crowd across the street. White haired women clutched the leashes of their cocker spaniels and pointed gaudy fingers toward the far sidewalk. Carrol screeched the lone squad car straddling both lanes and mimicked the romantic movements he witnessed as a youth nightly on any number of police shows. He raised his gun and rested the handle atop the door, his vision tunneled and reverberating with his pulse. But as his sights focused, he recognized the derelict figure that saluted him each Wednesday in front of the First Baptist Church.

Raised and cocked, Oney's gun rattled against his palm.



Life in a fish bowl by Amanda Weckworth

The fragile image of broken terror at the end of Carrol's barrel burned at him and, in an instant faster than he knew it had come, he pondered if he should pull the trigger and release his mercy. But Oney dropped his gun and crumpled into his fatigues and the sobs floated through that paralyzed street and those paralyzed people like a slow, violent wind. Carrol lowered his gun, as the reality of the heat and choking smoke caught up to him. Three other squad cars arrived, sirens and lights announced their presence. But Carrol holstered his gun and walked as if each step sank him further into the asphalt. When he reached Oney, he knelt beside him and wrapped his chapped hands around the malodorous and crusty filth of the man's fatigues. They rose from the ground together and Carrol could not discern who ushered whom back toward the squad car.

Carrol spoke with the other officers and his superiors about the incident before reprimanding Oney to the back seat in handcuffs. He flashed his lights and headed north along Main Street toward the highway, a steadfast nonchalance or rather vicarious stupor escorted him toward the facility perched among the dead, yellow grass along the highway. His stinging eyes failed in their professionalism and he glanced like a cat at a small light behind him. Oney's matted hair cast across his grey eyes, small tears mingled with his perspiration. Carrol stared silent to that scene, haunted by a sense of familiarity he did not understand. As the squad car ascended the on-ramp, Oney's whimpers caused his cracking hands to bleed around the wheel and he drove faster.

Carrol pulled through a barbed and towering gate and stopped in the drop-off outside of intake. He hooked his arms under Oney and lifted him from his repose. The two shuffled through the cold doors and the sterile smell struck him as Carrol stood at the desk. The intake officers spoke but their words drowned within the broken man's ears. The foyer and all its clamor sparked a bedlam within Carrol and the tightness in his chest he gathered during his childhood, his marriage, his isolation, roiled like billows of smoke in his skull. He signed forms without reading them and walked headlong toward the loading dock. The smoke blackened around him, the sky's blue a reddish-orange palette. Distant flecks of fire danced around the horizon from all sides. The sirens wailed lamentable as if in mockery of his daughter's involuntary cries he would never control. He rubbed his eyes then stomped to his squad car, flinging himself into the driver's seat, but the residue and stench of Oney still lingered and he mumbled to himself to not clean it up, not clean it up. He wiped his eyes and drove straight and steady to the station, determined to pick up the phone and call Paula. He arrived at the station and sat in the idling car, frozen in an unfamiliar moment. His mind darting under the driver seat toward the spray bottle. As he told himself to not clean it up, not clean it up, he reached under the seat and held the spray bottle in his hand, turning it over and over again as he felt the residue of Oney on his skin and clothes and breath.

Scotch tape and blood

BY CHELSI ROBICHAUD

All I could think about was blood. It shattered my grip on reality into tiny glass pieces. My shaky hands dropped a razor onto the ground. I watched as blood began to ooze from a cut on my leg.

“Do you have any pads?” I called to Catherine, my partner, from inside the bathroom.

“Yeah, just above the Band-Aids. Why? What's up?”

“Nothing!” I said, but she still tried to barge in. Thankfully, the door was locked.

I rushed to the cabinet, pulled out a pad, and pressed it onto my wound.

Catherine knocked on the door. “What's going on in there?”

I dropped the box. “One sec!” My fingers were still trembling from the rush.

Fuck. I would need stitches. But I couldn't go to the hospital, could I? I looked at myself in the mirror. Strands of long brown hair fell free from its bun onto my shoulders. There were cuts on my neck, my arms, and my legs. If I went to the hospital they would keep me there for God knows how long.

Tears streamed down my face. Catherine had stopped knocking. She was probably on the phone with her friend Alicia, the nurse. Asking her what to do with my cuts.

I reached for the scotch tape and taped the pad onto my leg.

My mother caught my empty gaze at the kitchen table. “Jen, are you there?”

I tried to smile. “Yes.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I swear, some times you disappear into your own world...”

And so what, if I do? Maybe that's my way of coping.

My hand fluttered down to the place where I had cut my leg, at Catherine's place when I was in Ottawa. Now I was back in Montreal, and things weren't any calmer in my mind.

It felt like there was constant noise in my head, and the only way to silence it was through pain.

The way I explained it to my therapists was that it was as if I was falling on ice, and the world came into focus. That is what pain did for me. It brought everything into focus.

That's why I did it. And yet that wasn't a good enough reason. So what was?

I wanted to push my limits. I wanted to see how much I could take. Shamefully, I wanted to prove that I really was mentally ill, not faking it.

I had certainly proved that when I had slit open part of my leg. But what happened next?

Catherine smoothed her hand over my leg, up to my hips. She paused over my ugly red scar and tutted.

Her vibrant blue eyes met mine, and I sighed. “I'm sorry.”

She shook her head. “I still can't believe you did this here. In my house.”

“I said I'm sorry.”

She wasn't listening. “If I had known what you were doing in there, I would have stopped you.”

I placed a hand on her shoulder. “You had no way of knowing.”

She pouted and traced the shape of the scar. “I still feel responsible. What if you had taken it one step farther?”

I took my hand off of her shoulder and grasped her hand in mine. “I wouldn't.”

She narrowed her eyes. “But you could. Accidentally.”

We stayed like that for several moments, our hands joined, tension vibrating through us. Finally I released her.

“I'm careful.”

Catherine sat up. “You say that like you still do it. Do you, babe? Have you relapsed?”

My eyes trailed over Catherine's bare shoulders to her chest, hidden by the white sheets. We hadn't built a life together, not yet, but we were on our way. Our cats were snuggling at the end of the bed. We had spent the morning together embracing. Why would I tarnish it with bad news?

But I couldn't lie to her.

“Yes.”

Her face crumpled. “Oh.”

Tears welled in my eyes. Shit. I didn't mean to cry. “I'm sorry. I didn't want to ruin...”

She shook her head, black strands of hair sticking to her face. “No. Just be honest with me. Just be honest.”

I nodded, but felt worry expand in my chest. Could I do that?

I lay in my bed with the lights off. The moon shone in through my window.

I had the urge to cut.

I stood and reached for my razor. It sat on my desk, crusted with blood. I would need to clean it if I decided to cut again.

Decided. That's right. It's a decision.

I sat down and threw my head into my hands. It certainly didn't feel like one. It filled my thoughts, my senses, and I craved to feel the warmth of blood escaping me.

Instead, I looked at my phone. I wouldn't stop cutting, not right away, but I could make a choice.

I called Catherine.

“Hey babe,” I said. “I'm calling to be honest with you.”



Loaded email by Henry Peters



Dr. Hollowood

BY ROLLI

Dad filled a bowl with raisins and put his face in it. When he got back from the hospital, he had a shopping bag. He reached into it. Out came a tin truck for my brother Al. He'd always wanted a truck.

Out came a sawdust rabbit, for Alice. Dad looked at me. I looked at the bag. "I got you a doll," he said.

I felt sick. He pulled it out.

A doll has a solid head and body, and arms and legs that you can move.

This was *not* a doll. It was a *composite* doll. The whole body was soft and one piece. Only the face was hard.

"Say thank-you," said Mom. I looked at my dad. He looked terrified. "Thank-you," I said.

*

Al and Alice played on the floor all day.

Dad lay on the floor but didn't say anything. Mom didn't say anything. I tried playing with the composite doll, but...

I didn't want to look at the composite doll. I put it in a drawer. Under clothes.

I sat against the wall and watched Alice and Al. I felt sick.

*

I dug a hole in the backyard and dropped the composite doll into it and covered it.

Walking back to the house, I looked up. My dad's face was in the window. He looked terrified.

*

"It's a doll," Mom said, as she washed it. "It's as good as a doll. Do you know how much... Do you realize... It's pretty, just look at it. Just play with it, OK? *Take it.*"

I took the composite doll. I played with it for a bit. I squeezed its soft body. I put it in a drawer. Under some clothes.

*

One night when my dad came home drunk—this was a year before—he woke Al and Alice and I up and got down on all fours. He got us to sit on his back. Then he crawled around the kitchen.

He got sick on the floor. Mom cleaned it up. "Again?" he said. Alice and Al went again. I went back to bed.

*

Mom looked terrified.

I looked out the window, too.

Dad was digging a hole in the back yard. You could only see his head sticking out.

Al put down his truck. Alice held onto her rabbit. They both came to the window.

Mom picked up the phone.

*

Dad died in '77.

*

I didn't get a real doll till I had Annette. I was twenty-five.

I've had four more dolls since then.

Annette's expecting. Katherine, if it's a girl, after her grandmother. If it's a boy, Raymond. Or Al. Her favorite uncle.

WRITING THE LIFE - POETRY

Ward paint

BY APRIL BULMER

In the tug and blood
of spring
doctor said I was high.
My mind, a moon blooming
above the river. The water below
medicinal and green, a tonic.

Nurse rooted through
my sack. Locked jars and creams
tooth floss and powders
in a metal cupboard.
I was bare-faced as a child
my eyes pale fish.

Jessica cried at night.
I brought her tea
and a telephone
the cord long as a root.

I ate my meals in bed:
a tuna sandwich
and a piece of soft cake.
Spirit Dog rested at my feet.

Nurse was Native.
She brought medicine
in a paper cup. I told her,
"I want to paint my face."



WRITING THE LIFE - POETRY

Spaghetti

BY JAQUELYN BURT

The first time I had spaghetti,
I remember I pulled noodles one by one up into the air,
As high as they would reach – right until they
Lifted off the plate. I was mesmerized by the length of them.
Then, with my arm stretched up above my head, I
Lowered that single noodle, tail first, into my waiting kindergarten mouth –
Delicious.
My father was the one who taught me how to gather a whole
Family of noodles together
Into a nest, twirled expertly against the safe
Curve of a spoon.
But my favorite part of eating spaghetti was always the
Untangling –
Seeing a hopeless pile of knots and swirl and then
Carefully and satisfyingly untangling them,
Single noodle by single noodle.
It was compulsively comforting.
My brain feels like that more often than it doesn't:
A hopeless pile of knots and swirls, noodles
Slipping against each other in a muck of red sauce.
Sometimes, living in my brain makes me picture a big, tangled pile of spaghetti
Getting plopped on one of those playground carousels,
The one where if you're afraid, you sit closest to the center and
If you're brave, you run along the ground on the edges, your hands
Pulling the rails so that it spins faster
As it follows your feet.
I think about so many different things all the time
And they overlap like patches over a torn hole
In your oldest pair of genes: the ones your grandparents and great-grandparents passed down to you -
The same thoughts and fears and doubts, over and over until
You can't even hear yourself.
The world is telling us to move faster
And to eat less spaghetti, because Being Fat is Bad.
But the thing is
I love spaghetti, and I've always hated moving fast.
When the noodles get tangled, they tell me,
Nothing you'll ever do will make the impact you want;
There are a stupid number of reasons to be afraid;
You don't have any real talents, at least not unique ones;
Your body feels like an ugly cage, and you don't belong here.
I spend a lot of energy writing and speaking and coaching
About the danger of negative self-talk
But my pile-of-spaghetti brain likes to slide and wiggle toward the edges of the
Carousel of the world, and when it spins too fast, I swear
It's like noodles are just flying everywhere,
Sauce splattered,
Gobs of meatball smushed under the trampling feet of
Others.
I am painfully curious, my father says.
And the thing is
When you're curious, you're always
Strangely compelled
To try to untangle your spaghetti noodles
So that you can live
In your own brain.



Flames

BY DANIEL ROY CONNELLY

Your black dog and my black dog
sitting by the fire.

Your black dog to my black dog,
Let's build a funeral pyre.

My black dog hunts wood and leaves,
stacks them in a V.

Your black dog lays planks on top,
on two legs raises me.

Side by side we lift our heads
waiting for a sign.

My black dog to your black dog,
He's never been that kind.

Your black dog pours kerosene,
howls out both our names.

My black dog puts match to box,
black dogs up in flames.

Lullaby

BY JOAN CRATE

Why can't you sleep?

The sky is a marquee
lighting up your greatest hits.
A blog review gives it 2 thumbs up.
You visualize *success*.
You *believe*.

There's no need to count sheep
or ticket stubs all night long.
In the morning you'll be sleepwalking
down the centre aisle of your life
trying to get your hands on a dream.

Unwrap it from festive paper
and sniff its contents.
Chances are it's already going bad.
Don't you wish you could
sink under the wings of a dark bird
that can't sing or fly or fall?

If only

BY JOAN CRATE

Days stack up against each other—thin as cards
marked with black knights and escape routes
south to a searing white sun you can't penetrate.

We carry on, circling a tree, a hearth, clawing
at heat, and overhead, a wandering V of birds
returns to the far side of the sun. Joy

is a precious thing we know, even when
distilled from gifts and booze, dug from ash—
a glowing coal kidnapped from a past written

in perspiration and electrocution—
you and your lover on the cusp of a moon,
or maybe a supermarket aisle, change

in your pockets and no realization
of the worth of the moment, precious
precious time. It's that lack of realization

you crave— shrug of shoulders that prop up
a head stuffed with ego and id. Maybe
you brushed his cheek. He pinched your ass.

You were silly in an everyday way, repeating
pointless patterns you both took for granted.
But now you're reduced to rations, you smell

the faint aroma of last minute dinners that won't
wash off your fingers. Perched in a dark house
stuffed with high-end furniture and shocked lamps,

you yearn for the mundane Through days of silence
and strychnine with the cold coming on, you are nothing
but want. He was with you in your dream last night,

his smile close enough to wet your lips, his beautiful
teeth disintegrating in the dull thud of mourning.
He was far enough away you could not touch his laughter.

If you had it to do over, you'd squeeze each degree
of his body temperature, every syllable of useless
chatter, seize the rope of your entwined lives,

become its anchor and hang on, no matter
the scrape and burn, palms and eyes weeping.
If only you could pull him to you,

you'd play your old tune,
holding each note.
You'd never look back.

Six poems

BY KEITH FOSTER

Hard to swallow

Pill swirls around
in my mouth.
Won't go down.

Too bad the Titanic
couldn't float
like this.

Why?

BY MADELIENE FARROW

Why did you leave me?
Were my pleas not enough?
Couldn't you hear me?
You're just like my dad, not caring to hear me
as I begged him not to leave.
Or just like my grandpa, when I begged him to stop.
Or just like my sister, when I asked her
to cook or clean.
Or just like my mom, when I needed her
to give me a hug.
Or just like my brother, when I pleaded with him
to not hit me again.
None of them listened.
Why should you?
You say you created me, I guess I wasn't what you wanted.
If you can't love me,
why should they?
If you couldn't take a minute to hear my pleas and cries,
why should they?
If I wasn't what you wanted,
why did you make me?
You can write a book about love, yet you can't love me.
You give me the bad, but never the good.
What did I do to you?
You give it then take it away, never giving me more than a glimpse.
What could I have done to make you love me?
I guess, you being God, gives you that right.
Doesn't make me understand
why I wasn't good enough for you.
You're the creator though.
So you need no reason.

The big itch

They say if you have itchy palms,
you're going to come into money.

My palms are itching like crazy.
Must be coming into a lot of money.

I do the logical thing.
Buy two dozen lotto tickets.

Turns out I've got poison ivy.

Life saver

I could float
before I could swim.

I guess all this blubber
is good for something.

Prognosis

I'm not saying the ship is sinking,
but the steering wheel is broken,
the rudder is stuck,
and sharks are circling.

On the bright side,
the rats have left the ship.

Seasonal adjustment

First fly of season
buzzes around house.
Spring officially here.

Summer service sign

Gas
Food
Lodging
Dry Goods
Camping Equipment
Motor Vehicle Supplies
Closed Weekends



Foreshortened

BY Gillian Harding-Russell

When you come back

to the place you left
thirty years ago
your friends who
remained have stayed
the same but changed
and you may find time

foreshortened. He who
strides forward to greet
you at the reading
his hair grey-sleeted and
brushed smooth in bad
weather, face more wooden
than you remember (tales of
alcohol in ruddiness
of cheeks and coming

to terms?) but there's kindness
preserved in the blue chips of eyes
quite small behind ice-thick lenses
as he lets you know the news
about a mutual friend you'd
both lost contact with until
recently returned to his home
town after life went

wrong – he the unsentimental one
among us with the amused brown eyes
full of wit, worldly and quick to get it, whatever
the joke, broken by ugliness
and divorce (why had you then
not noticed the waywardness
a dark uncertainty caught
off guard uncontrolled?)

How we sat on the radiator in the hallway
in front of the cafeteria in the Arts Tower
drinking coffee out of cardboard cups, a reliable
bitter daily-ness out of that awful urn
ready to talk about Eliot or Yeats
Nietzsche or Heidegger

our friend the comic philosopher
able to reduce everyone's problems
to their daylight proportions

How he stood as a witness
at your civic wedding (to please
a mother-in-law upset with
'our too free living')

and called himself the 'bridesmaid'
– but he could appreciate the irony
dressing up in black three-piece suit to
your green December wedding
dress substitution–

Now you are told of his own
heart fracture, first with
divorce, then diagnosed
with cancer to mirror the psychic
canker, you have the feeling

as you become aware of the weight
of your own negligence around
the elbow of time's foreshortened

perspective and this other
friend, alive and lively well
with the ice pond eyes
kindly

waiting for you
to skate over the present
with a reply to his question,
'How are you these days?'





Roots by Sarah Varnum

The right to be forgotten

BY JEN KARETNICK

But is that really the question?
Or is it about the right to be deleted?
In Europe, the judges say yes: Request
your own kind death, manage your legacy,
negotiate terms foreign to perception, that larger

court of public opinion. But strained through
the grill of Google like plankton, digested
in the stomach of an indifferent Internet,
won't even a sense memory be left, an identifying
brand in the top of the palate, residue lodged

like nut particles between the cracks
of the teeth, criticism like indigestion surfacing
without warning from the esophagus
of hardware? You may choose not to look
but the family Bible has become public,

every deed on display, missteps and triumphs
captured alike in bytes. This is where you can
create yourself but also can't erase yourself,
and where you will live on, image orbiting out
of control long after your accounts have been closed.

I want my mother

BY KAREN KLASSEN

I want to watch my mom
bake Zwieback, squash little pillows of dough
between her index finger and thumb
set them to rise on baking sheets
blackened with age.

I want her to hang the washing
on tip toe, gather in towels crusted
by the sun. I want her to layer
underpants frozen stiff
in her basket like Blattertorte.

I want her up while it is yet dark, to pull the sheets
out from under my body while I sleep,
leave me on a bare mattress
while the Haven of Rest sings praises
to Jesus over the static AM radio.

I want her to can pears, beets and crab apples
that burst their skins in the blistering sugar
bath. I want her fingers to cram pickles
into mason jars so tight they squeak.
I want her to be too busy,
too busy canning peaches
to bake me a birthday cake
again.

I want her to tell me my shorts are too short
that my knees are knotted and ugly. I want
her to lick a balled up tissue and smear
the dirt from my face.

I want her to sew all of my clothes,
feed fortrel to the jagged teeth
of the orange Singer sewing machine.
I want her head to shake
while I cartwheel in dresses
dizzy with rick rack.

I want to pop into her bedroom in the evening
see her perched in threadbare gown,
her lips moving to the rhythm of the words
that rise up from the translucent pages
of the Bible.

I want to sit beside her
hear her sing with the terrible
trilling of r's, shrill and confident
hover above voices in the pews.

Most of all I want her to come back
like she promised she would.
Tell me the story of the time
she had to pee into Uncle Korny's
potted tomato plant. I want my mother
to make me laugh and laugh
until I begin to cry
again.



The skin of my tongue

BY KAREN KLASSEN

Father drives to the Suburban Market
to buy mangoes from the Chinese.
We drive through the black night
to the lonely sound of the wipers
sloshing raindrops back and forth.
Not yet seven, and already I know
I've been brought along for company
not chatter.

He stops. Tells me stay, like a dog.
But I'd like to walk in with him, hold
his hand while he visits with Mr. Wong
who might just offer me a stick of gum.

I nudge open the heavy door
pop my head out to ask....can I?
Father doesn't look back
kicks the door shut, crushing
my fingers between metal.

My yowls turn his shaking head
his eyebrows furrow, thick
as his black leather belt.
I wait in the front seat, fingers throbbing
to the beat of my heart, suppress sobs
so he'll think I'm brave.

He returns with an orange
popsicle. A blast of summer,
bright as a handful of Mother's marigolds,
in early December. My pulsing fingers
peel off the paper layer while father drives.

The popsicle is perfect, glossy
yet speckled with frost. I lay my tongue
full length along its neon surface
and it sticks to my tongue
like Velcro.

Father hardly turns his head to the sound
of my garbled moan. One hand on the
steering wheel, the other
grabs hold of the wooden sticks
dangling from my mouth, and tears
the popsicle off the skin of my tongue.
Without a word he hands it back to me.

Sorry

BY HAVANA KRAWEC

I'm sorry:

Sorry that I exist,
Sorry that I'm breathing,
Sorry that I'm standing,
Sorry that I'm crying,
Sorry that I'm depressed.

I'm still sorry:

Sorry that I came into your life,
Sorry that I didn't want to leave,
Sorry that I let you leave,
Sorry that I cried for you to come back,
Sorry that I let you think I'm a mistake.

I'm so sorry:

Sorry that I hold this blade,
Sorry that I bleed,
Sorry that I crumple to the ground,
Sorry that I cry out your name,
Sorry that my heart breaks.

I'm sorry:

Sorry that I bled too much,
Sorry that I stained the tile floors,
Sorry that I finally let go,
Sorry that I died,
Sorry that you didn't cry.





Noise by Amanda Weckworth



Experiencing mental illness

BY MAREIKE NEUHAUS

The Death of Small Creatures by Trisha Cull.
Nightwood Editions, 2015. 239 pages.

Let me be blunt: I had a hard time finishing Trisha Cull's *The Death of Small Creatures*. Not because it is a well-crafted memoir of surviving mental illness. Not because Cull tells her story with brutal honesty. No, I had trouble reading the book from beginning to end because Cull's narration is as piercing and vexing as the bipolar and borderline disorders she suffers from. Anyone battling mental illness will know that the journey to healing is a long and complex one with many a twist and turn — if healing ever comes. Mental illness has a habit of creeping up on you, like a patiently moving animal that will attack when the moment is right and wound you so it can play with your body and eventually chew you up slowly.

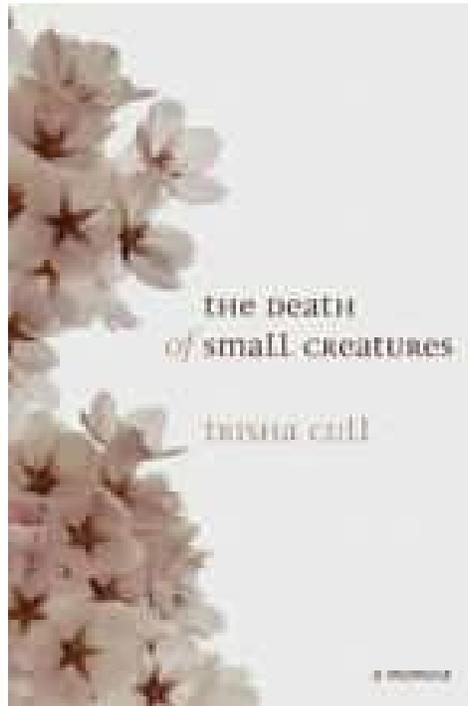
Cull's memoir stretches a period of about ten years, between 2003 and 2012, capturing her courtship and eventual marriage to the much older Leigh; their eventually break-up; her fall into depression and substance abuse; her commitments to hospital; the loss of employment and bankruptcy; her obsessive love for her psychiatrist, Dr. P.; the electroconvulsive therapy she eventually receives; and her new relationship with Richard, an admirer of her blog. *The Death of Small Creatures* is never merely chronicle, however; Cull's memoir is made up of a collage of memories, blog posts, journal entries, emails, and clinical notes that are held together by a lyrical prose that another reviewer, Melissa Hergott, has described as "dream-like." Much of Cull's narration does indeed feel like a trance; the narrator's

experiencing self usually gets the upper hand of her narrating self; present tense permeates the first-person narration, bringing readers right into the midst of mental illness: there is no escaping the narrator's experience, neither for Cull nor for her readers. In the end, *The Death of Small Creatures* is both narrative and documentary, fusing different styles and genres to create *experience*.

The main building blocks of Cull's memoir are the journal entries which begin in October 2008 and are initially interspersed with memories from Cull's past from 2003 and onwards and eventually merge in what on first look seems to be the story's climax: Cull's commitment to the hospital in both the journal entries and the narrative, in May 2009. From this moment in the narrative onwards, the narration avoids the constant back flashes of the first two-thirds of the book. Yet, the immediate events leading up to Cull's hospitalization are merely the beginning of a long struggle against depression, substance abuse, bulimia, and self-harm. To say that *The Death of Small Creatures* is a documentary and experience of mental illness therefore implies something entirely more relevant: when you follow the structure of the story more closely, you see a BPD survivor making sense of her experience, putting the pieces of her life together, going back in her thoughts to the first glimpses of mental illness in her life, all those moments and memories that in hindsight lead to what will have happened in the future already narrated. The very form that Cull's memoir takes on the

page is evidence of her perseverance through no other than the act of *writing her story*.

So, yes, *The Death of Small Creatures* is an unflinching, bold memoir. Yes, it demands a lot from its readers. And yes, so does mental illness from those afflicted by it.



"Mental illnesses are a thing.
They're real. And we need to
talk about them."

Notes on contributors

ARTISTS

COOMBES, WILLIAM

See Author NOTES

CRICK, MELODY

Artist from Regina, SK. First appearance in TRANSITION.

MITCHELL, JEFF

Member of the CMHA Estevan Arts program

PETERS, HENRY

Winnipeg MB artist and long-time contributor to TRANSITION.

ROLLI

See Author NOTES

SKELTON, JAMES

Saskatoon SK artist and poet. Member of CMHA Saskatoon.

SWALLOW, JUDY

Artist and illustrator from Alameda SK. Online at <www.swallowsartnest.com/>.

TATARYN, LUCY MAY

Saskatoon, SK artist. Member of CMHA Saskatoon.

TRAUTMAN, KIM

Artist from Saskatoon SK. First time contributor to TRANSITION.

VARNUM, SARAH

See Author NOTES

WECKWORTH, AMANDA

Artist from North Bay, Ontario

AUTHORS

BAGGOTT, KATE

St. Catharines ON prose writer (non-fiction, journalism, fiction, chick lit). Collection *Dry Stories* reviewed in TRANSITION. Editor B2B News Network. <<http://www.katebaggott.com>>

BROTHERTON, REESA

Ponteix SK member of Eastend WFYL Group. Experienced student of writing, recipient of many grants. Recently completed novel, *Dark Harbor*, despite living with depression and anxiety over twenty years.

BULMER, APRIL

Well-educated and award-winning Ontario poet and freelance journalist. Widely published: most recent book *And With Thy Spirit* (Hidden Brook Press, 2016).

BURT, JAQUELYN [formerly RUPP]

Minnesota writer and researcher in media literacy, gender and politics, mental health. Currently in master's program in sociolinguistics and media studies.

CALLAGHAN, SHIRLEY

PEI writer of creative non-fiction and regular contributor to TRANSITION.

CONNELLY, DANIEL ROY

Prizewinning poet. Professor of creative writing, English, and theatre at John Cabot University and American University of Rome. <www.danielroyconnelly.com>

COOMBES, WILLIAM

Ponteix writer, artist, and publisher. Frequent contributor TRANSITION.

CRATE, JOAN

Calgary poet and novelist. *Black Apple* released in Fall 2016 (Simon and Schuster). Four grown children, two grandchildren, one novel, and three books of poetry. Welcomes more of everything good.

FARROW, MADELIENE

Gull Lake SK writer. Currently busy finishing grade twelve. Lover of art, writing, books, and all things Harry Potter. First time publication.

FOSTER, KEITH

Regina writer. Published most recently in the poetry anthology, *Light Shines Through*, by the Saskatchewan Poetry Society.

HARDING-RUSSELL, GILLIAN

Regina author of three poetry collections and five chapbooks. Poems forthcoming in *The Antigone Review*, *The Dalhousie Review*, and *Prairie Fire*. Winner The Great Blue Heron Contest 2015 for "The Blind Poet."

KARETNICK, JEN

Florida poet widely published (three books, four chapbooks, many journals). Freelance dining critic, lifestyle journalist, and cookbook author. Creative Writing Director for Miami Arts Charter School. <<http://www.10best.com/local-experts/jen-karetnick/>>

KLASSEN, KAREN

BC writer raised in Vancouver. Published in various journals and on CBC Radio. Inspired by her Mennonite childhood and upbringing. Lives in Kamloops with husband and three children.

KRAWEC, HAVANA

High school poetry writer in Prince Albert SK.

LEBOR, MERVYN

Leeds UK teacher educator. Articles widely published in magazines – *Times Education Supplement*, *The Guardian*, and in peer-reviewed journals. Currently writing an academic book for MacMillan.



Art by Melody Crick

LILBURN, HALLI

Alberta artist, teacher of art journaling, and widely published author. "I have suffered from depression for over 20 years and every poem is a reflection of that." <hallililburn.blogspot.com>.

MASSON, VINCE

Independent filmmaker/playwright from Guelph ON. First publication in TRANSITION.

MATHIJSEN, DJANGO

Dutch author with extensive background as jazz-organist, technical TV consultant, and science journalist. Author of Dutch novels, children's books (with Anaid Haen). Now music composer and fiction writer. <www.djangomathijssen.nl>.

MATHEWS, MERLIN

The singlet identity of the Orion System. Student and writer of fiction and non-fiction.

MCQUEEN, N.T.

U.S. author of novels (two), children's fiction (one), shorter works (in *Kentucky Review*, *The Grief Diaries*, etc.). MA Creative Writing CSU-Sacramento. Lives in Northern California with wife and three children.

MONAHAN, LYNDA

Well-known poet and writing facilitator based in Prince Albert SK. Most recent publication *Verge* reviewed in TRANSITION.

NEUHAUS, MAREIKE

Regular reviewer for TRANSITION. Her *Decolonizing Poetics* won Saskatchewan Book Award 2016 for best scholarly writing.

NOULLET, ALAN

North Battleford writer. Frequent contributor to TRANSITION.

ROBICHAUD, CHELSI

Ottawa ON graduate student in English. Writes on women's and mental health issues. Published in various journals. Currently working on a comic book focusing on women's issues and social justice.

ROLLI

Author (books *Kabungo*, *I Am Currently Working On a Novel*, *Mavor's Bones*, etc.). Cartoonist (e.g., *Wall Street Journal*, *Reader's Digest*, *The Walrus*). Regular contributor TRANSITION. <http://rollistuff.com/>.

SCHMIDT, BELLE

Author of chapbooks (*Do Carrots Cry*; *Baubles & Bric-a-Brac*), a book of essays (*The Blue Butterfly*), and poetry in several anthologies and online. Lives in Colorado with husband and Fritz, the dachshund.

Notes on contributors

SINGH, SHELLY

Born and raised in Vancouver BC. Writing inspired by her grandmother who lives with dementia.

TARANTO, LEE

Capilano University Creative Writing Program grad currently in majoring in creative writing UBC. Editor, guest poet in Vancouver community, and published author (*Trueblue*, *Parenthetical Review*, etc.).

TITAN AMY

BC writer, teacher, and musician. MFA in Creative Writing. Working on a book about her adventures with Central Sensitization. <www.TitanAmy.com>.

TRETTWER, JAMES

Lives and writes in Regina SK. Poems published most recently in *Arborelalis* and *Spring* magazine.

VARNAM, SARAH

Toronto writer, artist, and founder of The Quilliad Press. Published in *Chrysalis*, *Third Wednesday*, and *Poetry Nook*. Featured reader and frequent exhibitor at various area readings and galleries.



Talking hairdo by Henry Peters



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DIVISION OFFICE

2702 12th Avenue, Regina, SK S4T 1J2
Phone 1-800-461-5483 (SK) or
306 525-5601 (Regina)
FAX 306 569-3788
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CMHA Branches

BATTLEFORDS
1011 - 103rd Street
North Battleford, SK S9A 1K3
306 446-7177 • Fax 306 445-7050
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ESTEVAN
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KINDERSLEY
Box 244 (113 - 2nd Avenue East)
Kindersley, SK S0L 1S0
306 463-8052 • Fax 306 463-5506
a.w@sasktel.net

MOOSE JAW
Rm 324 - 650 Coteau Street West
Moose Jaw, SK S6H 5E6
306 692-4240
donna.cmha@sasktel.net

PRINCE ALBERT
1322 Central Avenue
Prince Albert, SK S6V 4W3
306 763-7747 • Fax 306 763-7717
pacmha@sasktel.net

REGINA
1810 Albert Street
Regina, SK S4P 2S8
306 525-9543 • Fax 306 525-9579
Members' Phone 525-8433
info@cmharegina.com

SASKATOON
1301 Avenue P North
Saskatoon, SK S7L 2X1
306 384-9333 • Fax 306 978-5777
info@cmhasaskatoon.ca

SWIFT CURRENT
176 - 4th Avenue NW
Swift Current, SK S9H 0T6
306 778-2440 • Fax 306 773-0766
director@sccmha.ca

WEYBURN BRANCH
404 Ashford Street
Weyburn, SK S4H 1K1
306 842-7959 • Fax 306 842-3096
cmhawey@sasktel.net

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