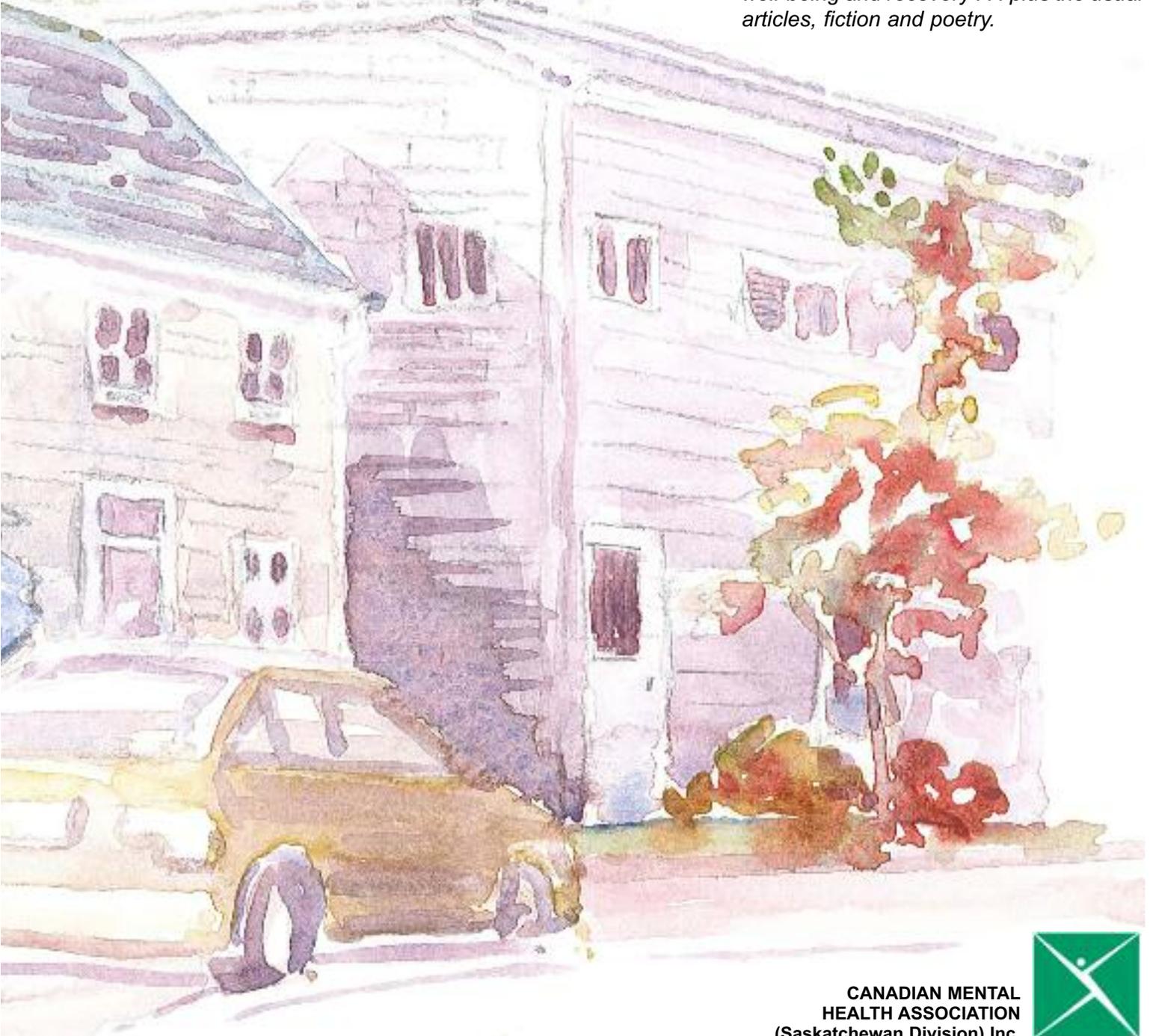


# TRANSITION

FALL 2008

***INSIDE:** Read about a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project that looks at older adults living with a serious mental illness and the factors that support their well-being and recovery . . . plus the usual articles, fiction and poetry.*



CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
(Saskatchewan Division) Inc.



# TRANSITION

## PUBLISHER:

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

EDITOR: Ted Dyck

MANAGING EDITOR: Lynn Hill

### *Our Mission:*

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

TRANSITION Magazine is published twice a year by the Canadian Mental Health Association (Saskatchewan Division) Inc, 2702 12th Ave., Regina, SK S4T 1J2.

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Phone 306 525-5601 or  
toll-free 1-800-461-5483 (in Saskatchewan)  
Fax 306 569-3788  
E-mail: [contactus@cmhask.com](mailto:contactus@cmhask.com)  
Website: [www.cmhask.com](http://www.cmhask.com)

Printed in Canada

ISSN 1913-5408

Cover art by **Gordon Stairmand**, painted while attending the CMHA National Conference in August, 2008 in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

	<p><i>Special acknowledgement is given to Saskatchewan Lotteries and the United Way for financial support</i></p>
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## NEW (June 2008)! CONTINUOUS SUBMISSION GUIDELINES FOR TRANSITION

1. TRANSITION is published twice a year by The Canadian Mental Health Association (Saskatchewan Division) Inc. Subscription by joining CMHA (SK) at \$15 per year.
2. Send original, unpublished articles, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and visual art that represent current mental health issues and reflect on their impact on individuals.
3. Maximum manuscript lengths: articles – 15 pages; all other prose – 10 pages; poetry – 10 poems or 10 pages, whichever is less; visual art – 10 pieces.
4. Reprints and simultaneous submissions (to several magazines) are not considered.
5. Turnaround time is normally one issue or 6 months: do not send a second submission before the first has been reviewed.
6. Payment is \$25.00 per printed page (\$12.50/half page); \$20.00 per published visual art work; and \$100.00 for cover art.
7. Electronic submissions are preferred (full contact information). Submit manuscripts in Word or WordPerfect format (12-point Times New Roman, double-spaced, 5 cm margins) as e-mail attachment to: [contactus@cmhask.com](mailto:contactus@cmhask.com)
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TRANSITION  
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Regina, SK S4T 1J2



CMHA SK Division's Telefund Office staff celebrated Halloween in grand style this year. The Telefund Office raises money through the sale of a lottery calendar.

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# A prairie crocus of recovery

TED DYCK

Ever since “A recovery plan for mental health and addictions in Saskatchewan” was published in our Spring 2008 issue, I’ve been thinking about *recovery*. I missed the Spring Conference on the same theme, but I read its hand-out booklet from cover to cover, poring over the outlines of the addresses by the keynote speakers as well as the papers presented by others. I even consulted the most reliable internet sources I could find, where I discovered Pat Deegan’s famous image of recovery as a sea rose of hope.

In a nutshell, here’s what I learned:

1. Recovery is a not a cure.
2. Recovery involves the person with a mental illness managing the illness while living as full a life as possible.
3. Recovery asks mental health services to actively support such individual efforts.

The *recovery model* seems to mean the individual takes *responsibility for* or *ownership of* the immediate issue in the context of her/his life to be lived. An example, based on the Conference outlines: If a client expresses the goal of opening a banking account, what do you (the mental health services worker) do? Option 1: Start a skills group on how to open an account and invite the individual to join it. Option 2: Invite the individual to go with you to actually open an account. Which option is recovery oriented?

Besides being a client of mental health services (diagno-

sis: clinical depression), I’m a professional skeptic. So I asked myself, *What actually are the major differences between the two options?* I could readily see that Option 1 is group-oriented, Option 2 is individual-oriented. There are, moreover, major similarities in the two options: (1) the individual has articulated a personal goal; (2) an outside agent or agency responds by helping the individual to realize that goal; (3) the circumstances under which the individual actually achieves that goal are open (will the individual open the bank account entirely on her/his own, or will the outside agent intervene by helping the individual directly). Oh, yes – as I write this, I see that there is another major difference: Option 2 seems to be more hands-on than Option 1.

My teaching experience tells me there is often a third option that combines the best elements of both the *either* and the *or*. In this case, a third option might involve both the invitation to join the skills group and the offer to go with the individual to practice the skill learned. All three similarities above are maintained, in particular, the responsibility of taking ownership of a problem in the life to be lived stays with the individual.

That’s when I looked again at Kathleen Thompson’s outline of the project she conducted in Weyburn. Here seemed to be a living example, down home, so to speak, of what the recovery model might do. Here was a way to cut the Gordian knot that tied me up, namely, my fear that the recovery model itself might be yet another version of mental health services imposed by the system on its clients. And that’s why I asked her for the article that we are publishing in this issue: “Transitions towards Recovery: The Weyburn Research Project.”

Thompson was more than equal to the challenge. I think you will agree that her article is not only a demonstration of how individuals can move toward recovery during a particular project, but also a significant step towards our understanding of how the recovery model works.

Having gone on so long about recovery, I thought I might look at the other pieces in this issue from that perspective. Of course I can’t comment on every piece, but you might do the exercise yourself as you read through this issue.

All three non-fiction works relate to recovery, and Leedahl’s piece, perhaps the most positive of the three, shows the narrator recovering her mental health through an act of her own volition. Enns’s powerful poem, “Jimmy Bang’s desperation blues,” points out the limits of the recovery model – not everything can be solved by the individual’s voluntary actions; and Staite’s “Reaper Poems” present an everyman/woman who will be familiar to us all as the figure of our fears and hopes of and within recovery. In fiction, Little’s rather chilling “Monochrome” can be read as the study of a volitional act toward recovery that is turned upside down, the other side of Leedahl’s downside up.

To adapt Deegan’s image: hope (of and within recovery) is a prairie crocus . . .



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# Director's report

DAVID NELSON,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

It has been a busy and productive summer and fall with work progressing and moving forward with DISC (Disability Income Support Coalition). Government has stated they will look at a separate income system for disability. The details and scope of the same need to be worked out, and our Association will have input into that process.



Our Association also actively participated in the Community Based Organization (CBO) Summits which took place in September, 2008. These were well received, and we are working with our partners in both the Mental Health Coalition and PIND (Provincial Interagency

Network on Disabilities), moving to follow up on and present to Government items which would benefit CBOs.

In addition, we have been part of committees put together to improve inpatient and overall mental health and addictions services in the Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region, and look forward to working collaboratively as this process moves forward.

As your Executive Director, I attended a three-day retreat in Montreal to discuss the future direction our provincial Executive Directors and national CEO would like to present to the National Association Board, given the exciting changes taking place with the advent of the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

We look forward to the coming year with optimism, and invite any who have not already joined our Association to consider doing so to help move mental health issues further "out of the shadows" and "into the light."



ART BY JAMES SKELTON



# Transitions towards recovery: the Weyburn research project

BY KATHLEEN THOMPSON

## ABSTRACT

About 50% of older persons with a serious mental illness (SMI) in the United States and Canada are living with elderly caregiving parents. Previous research indicates that few families are preparing for transitions beyond caregiving for older adults living with a SMI. The objective of The Weyburn Research Project was to understand – from the perspective of older adults living with SMI – the factors that support their well-being and recovery. The project used Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is a collaboration with community-based co-researchers. A group of nine co-researchers and the principal researcher conducted a 16-month study which generated qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with community members. The data reveal that the most difficult part of living with a SMI is the chronic poverty that commonly accompanies it. The study showed that a significant factor in the well-being and recovery of the participants is their ability to earn additional income through paid employment. Supportive friendships and therapeutic relationships along with community involvement also play positive roles in supporting the older adults who live with a SMI.

## BACKGROUND<sup>1</sup>

The North American population is aging. Current research shows that 50% to 70% of older people living with a serious mental illness (SMI), such as schizophrenia spectrum disorders, are cared for by the elderly; some 50% are living in a parental home; and 80% of parental caregivers are mostly older women. Earlier research indicates that few North American families are preparing for future changes in caregiving for older persons living with a serious mental illness (SMI).

Older individuals with a SMI are at risk for poverty, isolation, ill physical health, homelessness, degenerative neurological diseases (e.g. dementia), and suicide. Preparing for the future by making financial, housing and health care plans for older persons with mental illness (PMI) could reduce the risks they face due to the death or diminished capacities of their aging caregivers. A review of the literature indicated a lack of research on planning for the future from the perspective of older people living with a SMI; including these voices therefore became a focus of this inquiry. The initial research question was: *What are the best ways to support middle-aged and older citizens living with a SMI who experience the advanced aging and death of elderly caregiving parents?*

<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Full documentation of the research referred to in this section is available from the author. See also the Bibliography, below.

## PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)<sup>2</sup>

PAR involves a principal researcher working with community groups as co-researchers. In the form adopted for this study, power and decision-making authority are shared between the principal researcher and the co-researchers. PAR assumes that the experts are people who live the experiences that are being studied. Co-researchers in PAR use their own experiences as a lens through which the research is conducted. PAR has origins in Central America and is widely seen as a successful tool when working with oppressed peoples. Given that people who live with a SMI in our culture are marginalized and vulnerable, PAR was an ethically sound approach for The Weyburn Research Project.

PAR respects marginalized peoples by assuming that knowledge is produced through the active engagement and interaction of the group being researched. Ideally, PAR (1) produces *new* knowledge and (2) is *transformative* in some way for the participants (who are referred to as co-researchers). Rather than inventing or importing knowledge, the focus is on recovering and co-creating knowledge that has been suppressed due to marginalization. PAR's holistic view of knowledge considers all forms of knowledge, ranging from the rational to the spiritual and dreamful (see Figure 1), as valid. PAR also seeks to renew our commitment to working collectively and cooperatively to co-create a caring society in which recovery is important. It aims to improve social justice in partnership with marginalized and oppressed peoples of the world.

This project used a form of PAR called Co-operative Inquiry (CI). CI engages co-researchers in reciprocal relations that use the full range of human sensibilities to obtain holistic knowledge as depicted in Figure 1. The co-researchers investigate a topic through their own experiences in a series of cycles which involve moving between and reflecting together on those experiences. Rigor in CI is established by repeated cycling through the following four phases:

Phase 1: Initial relationships are built, an exploration plan is created, and a collaborative topic of inquiry is determined.

Phase 2: The research activities agreed to in Phase 1 are engaged.

Phase 3: Co-researchers engage dynamically in an action process related to the topic of inquiry.

Phase 4: The group reassembles to share experiences from Phases 2 and 3 and to re-consider the original question.

<sup>2</sup> Editor's Note: Full documentation of the research referred to in this section is available from the author. See also the Bibliography, below.

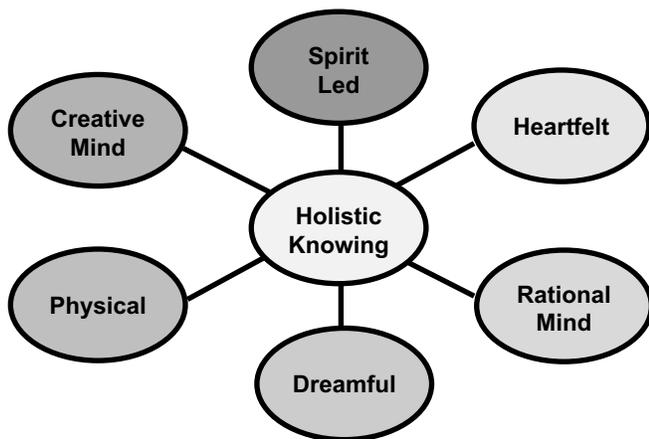


FIGURE 1: TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED FOR OBTAINING HOLISTIC KNOWLEDGE<sup>3</sup>

### THE WEYBURN RESEARCH PROJECT<sup>4</sup>

A group of nine co-researchers was recruited in 2006 through the Weyburn Branch of the Saskatchewan Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA (SK)).

All nine met the following criteria: over forty years of age; resident in Weyburn or the surrounding area; diagnosed with a serious (chronic and persistent) mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia spectrum disorder); and living independently of parents. The project began in September 2006 and concluded at the end of December 2007. The group met twice monthly starting in September 2006 until July 2007 and then monthly from September 2007 to December 2007. All of the meetings were held at the Weyburn Inn in downtown Weyburn.

Early on in the project, it was felt that the initial research topic of exploring transitions from caregiving would be too stressful for persons living with a serious mental illness (SMI) who are experiencing advanced parental aging and/or death. The co-research group therefore revised the research question: *How can policies and practices best support the well-being and recovery of middle-aged and older people who live with a serious mental illness?* Sub-questions created by the co-

<sup>3</sup> From *Nurtured by knowledge: Learning to do participatory action research* (p. 225) eds. Smith, S.W., Willms, D. G., and Johnson, N.A., 1997, Ottawa: International Development Research Centre

<sup>4</sup> This study was approved by the University of Calgary Cojoint Faculty Research Ethics Board and funded by SSHRC, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, through a *Canada Graduate Scholarship* (2003 - 2007). The author expresses sincere appreciation to the co-researchers for the dedication and insight each individual contributed to the project. As well, the author thanks Gladys Perepeluk, Director of the Weyburn Branch of the CMHA (SK), and Dave Nelson, the Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Division, for in-kind support provided to the project.

research group include: What is the impact of a SMI diagnosis; What supports are helpful (e.g., family, friends and community)?; How exactly do people cope? and What factors support well-being and recovery?

The research also explored the inter-relationships between factors that support recovery as well as specific actions that support the long-term well-being and recovery of older people who live with a SMI.

Table 1 provides a summary of the ten cycles the research group experienced during the project. The middle column describes the research activity and the final column describes the actions the co-researchers undertook that supported the research.

#	Date \ Research	Action
1	Dec 2006 – Jan 2007 Self-interviews	Small & Large Focus Groups
2	Feb – Mar Small group interviews	Focus Group
3	Apr – June Create & pilot questionnaire	Small & Large Focus Groups
4	June – July Gather data	Interviews
5	July Analyze data	Focus Group
–	Aug - Summer Break	Rest, Reflect, Journal, Write
6	Sept Prepare to share results	Focus Group
7-9	Sept – Nov Share results at a series of community Roundtables	Roundtables: - CMHA Staff & Board - Health Practitioners - Interviewees
10	Dec De-brief & transition to 2008	Focus Group



## DESCRIPTION OF CYCLES

### *Cycles 1-2:*

#### *Developing a focus and strategy*

The first two cycles engaged the co-researchers with focus groups exploring the impact of living with a SMI. The discussions occurred after each co-researcher conducted two interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire exploring the impact of a SMI, the role of *supports*, and the factors that support wellbeing and *recovery*. The first interview was a self-interview, meaning each individual contemplated and completed the questionnaire themselves. Then, the nine co-researchers formed three groups of three. Each trio engaged in three aspects of interviewing by interviewing another group member, being interviewed by another group member, and, thirdly, transcribing the interview. The group discussed all of the interview data at the end of phase two.

All of the co-researchers agreed that being diagnosed and living with a SMI is stressful. Yet, five out of nine co-researchers reported feeling at peace with their diagnosis. Co-researchers also agreed that supportive relationships with family members, friends, and professionals were important and sometimes critical. The group members noted that not all relationships are supportive of individuals living with a SMI. Specifically, two of the nine co-researchers indicated feeling unsupported and misunderstood by family members.

The co-researchers observed that being entirely without supportive relationships results in severe isolation and loneliness. Finally, the co-researchers concurred that it is difficult to relate positively to people who believe the myths of mental illness.

One of the most pressing issues raised in the interview process and discussed at the roundtables was the importance of preventing relapses. The impact of isolation on relapses was noted by the majority of the co-researchers during the first two cycles. Co-researchers emphasized that isolation is commonly experienced and is related to poverty.

Co-researchers emphasized during the first two cycles that community involvement, too, is critical to well-being and helps prevent relapses. Paid work, particularly, and also volunteerism were reported as valid ways to diminish isolation and develop supportive relationships. Strengths, interests, and abilities that support well-being were also discussed in detail during the second cycle. Activities such as exercise, spending time with family pets, talking, praying, reading, writing, listening to music, watching TV, and positive thinking were reported by co-researchers. Co-researchers felt that creating artwork and “persistent action” are activities that support recovery.

---

*The co-researchers observed that being entirely without supportive relationships results in severe isolation and loneliness.*

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### *Cycles 3-4: Creating a research instrument and interviewing community members*

An exciting time of the project was the third and fourth cycles when the co-research group interviewed community members. The group found the data gathered in the first two cycles to be extremely practical and helpful to their understanding of mental illness, generally, and of their own experiences of living with a SMI, specifically. The co-researchers decided to strengthen the semi-structured questionnaire used in cycle one. The instrument was amended to include some additional questions and to better reflect the strengths-based and recovery-oriented philosophy of the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

The inclusion criteria for people to be interviewed were similar to the criteria the principal researcher used for recruiting co-researchers. Posters were created and posted seeking individuals who were: diagnosed with a serious SMI for at least ten years; not dependent on or living with parents; and resident in the city of Weyburn or area. The age criterion of the study (over forty years old) was not used in the selection of interviewees. Some of the co-researchers were interested in interviewing people who were not yet 40 but who had lived with a SMI for a long duration of time. It was assumed that people who have survived ten years or longer since being diagnosed would have enough experience to speak to factors that prevent relapse and support recovery. The group therefore agreed that a ten-year duration since diagnosis was a more suitable criterion than the age of forty. In the end, nine community members were selected.

The strategy in cycle three was that each of the nine co-researchers would interview one community member who met the criteria. The conditions for each interview were as similar as possible. Like the research meeting, all interviews occurred in a business room at the Weyburn Inn. The primary researcher was present for all of the interviews, managing the ethical approval forms and transcribing the interviews directly onto a laptop as the interviews occurred. The transcription method responded to an ethical concern of the co-researchers about being video- or audio-taped. The co-researchers did not want to video- or audio-tape cycles one or two as they were uncomfortable having their words recorded. Similarly, the group decided they did not want to record the interviews. Thus, the only record of the interviews was the words transcribed during the interview. Interviewees sat next to the transcriber and were able to watch the screen throughout the entire interview. Interviewees later received a print-out of the interview and were asked to give input on the transcription both for accuracy and for any additional ideas or questions that might arise after the interview.

In debriefing from the interview experience, co-researchers spoke about how much they enjoyed and learned from interviewing a colleague. Unanimously, the group said the process was positive, interesting, and honourable. People spoke about how preparing for and professionally completing the interviews was “an accomplishment.”

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## Cycle 5: Description of results

As indicated, the questionnaires had three sections, focusing on the *impact* of living with a SMI; the role of *supports* of family, friends and the community; and factors that support *recovery*. Interestingly, the demographics of the interviewees were similar to the co-research group. Six of the interviewees were people diagnosed with schizophrenia (or a related disorder such as schizoaffective disorder). Three of the interviewees had other diagnoses such as depression and anxiety. (The co-research group consisted of six people with schizophrenia, or a related disorder, and three with other diagnoses.).

The interviewees were diagnosed at varying ages, ranging from thirteen to forty-two. The experience of being diagnosed with a SMI was life altering for all interviewees. The diagnosis brought understanding and positive outcomes through group and individual therapy. Diagnoses also were accompanied with stigma and negative outcomes related to isolation and poverty, most interviewees reported.

All participants had been hospitalized in a psychiatric facility at least once for acute treatment of psychosis. Four of the nine interviewees reported the experience of being hospitalized to be a positive experience. Five people said that the experience was neutral, meaning there were positive and negative aspects of acute hospital treatment (mostly good, some bad). No one reported hospitalization was a negative experience.

The questionnaire asked interviewees whether or not they experience the positive symptoms of psychosis (e.g. hallucinations and delusions) and if medication is effective in controlling such symptoms. Three of the nine participants reported that symptoms are not entirely controlled through medication. Strategies employed to cope with untreated symptoms include: being careful to take medications as prescribed; individual and group activities; and listening to music. One person said, "I just fight them off."

Six of the nine interviewees reported feeling worried or concerned about their illness, particularly the long-term side effects of antipsychotic and/or anti-depressant medications. The long term effects of medications arose as a commonly expressed concern. "Those drugs are powerful," one interviewee emphasized.

In terms of community involvement, five of the nine participants spoke about feeling limited by their illness. One person spoke about not being able to hold down a full-time job since the diagnosis. "I don't seem to learn as well as some of the other people where I work," another person said. "I have to be careful to not try to do too much," said one interviewee. One person spoke about feeling socially limited by their SMI: "Most of the time I am afraid to go out in public."

The realities of poverty were commonly expressed as hav-

ing a significant impact on persons living with a SMI. Research participants talked about feeling limited by poverty and relying on government assistance for income. A common concern relates to the potential for being cut off of disability benefits while pursuing employment. One person expressed their concern this way:

That's the part that scares me ... if I make enough money and they take my disability [benefits] away. Then, I end up in the hospital and then I lose disability [benefits] and then I'm on welfare. I've seen what welfare does to people.

On the topic of supportive relationships, seven of the nine interviewees said that family members offered significant supports. Words such as: *important*, *critical*, *everything*, and *cornerstone* were used. Family-of-origin was reported to be less significant for two of the nine participants. Both interviewees reported being involved in the lives of family members, but said they *relied* on other people for supports (e.g., friends, partners, or professionals).

Unanimously, interviewees discussed how helpful supportive friendships are. Interviewees spoke about how friends offer a form of sharing and caring. People's closest friends tend to be people who also experience a SMI. People with a SMI are the only friends of a third of the interviewees.

Everyone agreed that positive relationships with professionals are important. One person said that community-based supports offer a "shoulder to lean on." Another person expressed appreciation for the encouragement offered by mental health workers, saying, "They are supportive." Relationships with practitioners sometimes lack authenticity, as one interviewee articulated, because participants do not always feel free to tell a therapist when they are not doing well:

I might say everything's fine, but I might have some times when things are not fine. I should tell her/him, but I don't. Sometimes I do, but sometimes I don't.

Just as all of the interviewees reported supportive relationships with professionals, everyone interviewed also stated that they feel that someone close to them understands SMI. People who understand are friends also living with a SMI and/or mental health workers. Family members were understanding for some participants (three of nine) and not for others (one of nine).

Interviewees were also asked about who, precisely, they turn to for tangible support during crises. Tangible support is described as quantifiable (e.g., financial support or transportation). Intangible support is qualitative (e.g., as emotional support and encouragement). Eight of the nine interviewees said that the first person they turn to for tangible help during a crisis is a mental health worker, particularly those at the Weyburn Branch of the CMHA(SK). Three of the nine interviewees said they turn first to family members and/or friends during a crisis. Five of the nine interviewees said that they turn to a family member or friend for intangible support. One participant reported s/he calls the 1-800 Provincial Mental Health hotline



for emotional help during a crisis.

Everyone interviewed was active in community involvement, with five of the nine working regularly for pay. Involvement in community-based activities alleviates poverty, reduces isolation, and provides enjoyment, interviewees reported. The interviewees reported a variety of strengths, interests, and abilities. In addition to having a good sense of humour, interviewees said their strengths include: “Being level-headed in the morning”; that “I enjoy the company of others”; that “I have friends and family”; “being easy-going”; and that “people can talk to me.”

A wide variety of interests and abilities were reported. Interests included: walking, golfing, dancing, listening to music, reading, watching TV, visiting with friends and family, and being in a crowd. Some people reported interests such as “enjoying the library,” “helping people,” and “having good friends.” Abilities included hobbies such as baking, crochet, yard work, and reading. One person reported enjoying and taking pride in being able to do their own housework and laundry.

Numerous coping strategies were reported, such as exercising (walking, dog walking, bicycle riding), prayer, working, volunteering, and visiting with friends. Activities such as enjoying music (including singing and dancing to), resting, and watching TV were reported to be helpful in promoting wellbeing. Three interviewees stressed the importance of restful activities, highlighting the importance of “resting,” “laying down for ten to fifteen minutes,” and “taking a bath.”

Interviewees were also asked about their experiences with groups. Seven of the nine interviewees said they have been or are involved in groups (therapy, work, or project-based). Six of the nine interviewees reported positive experiences with groups (such as the CMHA work group in Weyburn). One person reported a negative experience with a group therapy in Regina in the past.

Interviewees were also asked about experiences with the rules regarding private-sector and supported housing options. Nine of the nine interviewees have been or are tenants in private housing (with a landlord). Only four of nine participants were aware of their rights as a tenant (regarding, e.g., damage deposit, giving notice, conditions of eviction). Five of nine have lived in or are living in assisted living units (e.g., in supported housing or a group home). Only three of nine people were aware of their rights as a resident (regarding, e.g., belongings, finances, leisure time).

The final question was added by one of the professionals the co-research group asked to review their semi-structured questionnaire before conducting the interviews. Jayne Whyte, a well-known, longstanding member of the CMHA (SK), pro-

posed finishing the questionnaire with the following question: *In a perfect world, what would be the best way to help people who have a mental illness have a full and meaningful life?*

Interviewees responded to Jayne’s question by talking about the importance of reducing stigma. “Have an open mind,” and “Don’t judge too harshly – it is an illness,” interviewees said. One person stressed the significance of talking *with* people rather than just talking *to* them and giving advice. Another said: “In a perfect world, people would understand.” Others spoke about the importance of accepting, caring, understanding, and helping each other. Several interviewees spoke about the importance of more community involvement for people impacted by a serious mental illness: “Community involvement has changed my life significantly. The people are so nice. It gets my mind off my stress.” “Get involved in the community!” another said. Interviewees also spoke about the significance of keeping busy. Another said that ideally, people with a SMI should be included in decisions that affect their lives. Finally, one interviewee said that, in a perfect world, people would have enough money to pursue meaningful work and hobbies.

### *Cycles 6-10: Sharing the results*

In these cycles the research results were shared with the community through a series of roundtables held in Weyburn. The three roundtables involved the interviewees, the staff, selected board members of the Weyburn Branch CMHA(SK), and, more broadly, mental health practitioners and community members. The largest roundtable, involving the practitioners, was a peak experience. The event was well-attended by local psychiatrists, other practitioners, senior administrators, and the community. The results were well-received by the community. During cycle ten, the debriefing cycle of the project, the co-researchers expressed feelings of accomplishment, pride, and celebration at the success of the roundtables. The research has subsequently been presented by some of the co-researchers at provincial and national conferences.

## **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

The eighteen people involved in this research, nine co-researchers and nine interviewees, are all middle-aged and older adults living with a SMI. The qualitative interview and focus group data highlight that the most difficult part of living with a SMI is chronic poverty. Co-researchers and interviewees reported that it is more challenging to face chronic poverty than to accept living with a stigmatized, chronic, and persistent illness. The co-researchers and interviewees stressed that income security is fundamental to the well-being of participants.

The most common theme in the research is that meaningful community involvement reinforces the recovery process. The well-being and recovery of participants is best supported by reducing the poverty, isolation, and limited life choices that commonly accompany living with a SMI. Paid employment and community involvement are important to the recovery of

participants. Recovery is also supported through enjoying supportive relationships with friends, family, community members, and mental health practitioners.

Another strong theme in the qualitative data is that a barrier to recovery and a source of stress for participants is the provision of *care* by family members or mental health professionals in a way that is perceived by the recipient as *controlling*. Additionally, some interviewees expressed barriers to telling mental health practitioners when they are not doing well.

Figure Two depicts the factors that support the wellbeing and recovery of a SMI, according to the co-researchers and the interviewees involved in the Weyburn Research Project.



FIGURE 2:  
FACTORS THAT SUPPORT RECOVERY

## CONCLUSION

This inquiry highlights that the most significant factor that tangibly supports the well-being and recovery of the participants is the ability to earn additional income through paid employment. Not only does working reduce the isolation that often accompanies living with a SMI, but paid employment reduces the harshest impacts of chronic poverty. Extra income allows participants to afford healthier groceries, transportation, and opportunities to socialize, as well to pursue meaningful hobbies and activities.

With respect to the experience of being part of a PAR project, the Weyburn Research Project was transformational for the co-researchers and the primary researcher. The non-clinical focus of PAR offered clinical breakthroughs for co-researchers throughout the project and beyond. The Weyburn Research Project positively impacted the lives of the co-researchers and the principle researcher.

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## APPENDIX ONE

### Special inquiry skills for Co-Operative Inquiries<sup>1</sup>

There are two groups of special inquiry skills that co-researchers are encouraged to develop.

Group 1 is designed to help co-researchers develop abilities to be descriptive and explanatory in the inquiry domain. All of the skills relate to what is going on in a person when he or she is actually there, engaged with the process.

#### *Being present*

- Being open, empathic, resonant, attuned
- We are open to the meaning we give to and find in the world

#### *Imaginational openness*

- Using sensory and non-sensory imagery (e.g., intuition)

#### *Bracketing*

- Holding in abeyance the classifications and construction we use to see the world

#### *Reframing*

- Trying alternative constructs (related to bracketing above)

Group 2 helps co-researchers to engage in the action the study seeks to change within the domain of the research questions. As with Group 1, these skills relate to what is going on in a person when he/she is engaged with the action (e.g., busy doing it).

#### *Dynamic congruence*

- Practical knowing; knowing how to act; being aware of congruence or a lack of it

#### *Emotional competence*

- Ability to identify and manage emotional states; keep action free from unprocessed distress of earlier years

#### *Non-attachment*

- To wear lightly the purpose of the action

#### *Self-transcending intentionality*

- Having other forms of action in mind while acting on one issue

### Validity procedures

These procedures help to free the various forms of knowing involved in the inquiry process from the distortion of uncritical subjectivity, that is, from a lack of discriminating awareness. These procedures need to be planned for, or applied, within the reflection phases.

#### *Research cycling*

- Repeating Phases 1-4 numerous times (e.g. 5-8 times over several months)

#### *Divergence and convergence*

- Diverge into different subtopics or converge on the same question

#### *Reflection and action*

- Need the right balance between the two

#### *Aspects of reflection*

- Balance presentational (expressive / artistic) and propositional (verbal / intellectual)
- Apply learning to future cycles

#### *Challenging uncritical subjectivity*

- Anyone at any time can become the devil's advocate
- Co-researchers should notice and mention aspects of experience that show the limits of a model
- Unaware fixation; False assumptions; Unaware distortions of the inquiry;
- Lack of rigor

#### *Chaos and order*

- Interdependent; the inquiry can be conflicted and harmonious

#### *Managing unaware projections*

- Researching the human condition stirs up stuff

#### *Authentic Collaboration*

- Everyone is meaningfully involved

<sup>1</sup> Source: Herron, J. (1998). *Co-operative inquiry: Research into the human condition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Inc. Prepared by Kathleen Thompson and shared with the Weyburn Research Group for discussion (February 1, 2007).



# I wasn't always like this

BY SHELLY ANNE LEEDAHL

I am a 39-year-old woman, in love with my husband, having fun with my teenagers, and I have spontaneously just bought myself a house away from them all. Today, the day after I signed the deposit cheque and lined up a lawyer, I am four hours north of the city that's been making me crazy, raw nerve by raw nerve.

My daughter has turned 16, and to celebrate she's invited five friends to the northern Saskatchewan lake where my parents own a cottage. We call it a family cabin because we all – my parents, three siblings, me – take advantage of it, but really, it belongs to my folks. On a Friday at five, Taylor and company squeeze into our van and we make for the lake. The girls sing, pop their heads out the window, maniacally wave at people in other vehicles.

Some of these friends have never been to this part of Saskatchewan. Two hours in we leave the mostly tree-barren prairie and enter the Northern Provincial Forest. I ask them to watch for deer; we just miss hitting five.

At dusk we arrive at the squat log cabin to learn there's a boil water advisory in effect. Cryptosporidium and its cousins make everyone fearful. The water is not hooked up; I find someone with a well. We fill jugs for drinking water, carry dish and wash-water from the lake. No one minds.

After spending a late night with a rented video – typical, Hollywood teen fare the girls brought with them – I've awoken knowing with utter certainty that buying the house was the right thing to do. I did not know until now.

It's been variously said – and famously so by Virginia Woolf – that every woman needs a room of her own.

I had a room.

It was not enough.

In our inner city neighbourhood, there's at least one artist, student, professional, senior, and addict on every block. As a writer of literary books – and other things that actually pay, including articles for the Western Producer and short humorous pieces for radio – I fit in. But the city also turns me inside out: the noise, the crime, the busyness. When the elderly couple who lived next to us for a decade moved on, the house was purchased as a revenue property and the troubles began.

Always, it's been young men. Drinking. Drugs. Dangerous driving. Coming and going through all the devil's hours of the night. I haven't slept properly in my own home for years. Aside from the pair who really trashed the basement suite – and had gangster rap blaring day and night, left hypodermics in my flowerbed, and went from province to province fleeing arrest warrants – I likely don't have any reason to fear the convoy of punks who park in our spot, deliberately cross our front lawn, shatter beer bottles, and whoop, yell, and knock on our windows along the shared sidewalk between our houses (where they also occasionally relieve themselves). They haven't threatened me or anyone in my family, but I sense the potential

for violence (there was the beer-swiggling trio who chucked machetes around the yard after they hacked down the old couple's beloved crabapple tree).

I fear for my teenagers, who often traverse the corridor at night; my husband, who once confronted a half dozen of them; and I fear for my own body, mind, and spirit.

Something terrible is imminent.

A car screams down my street. I hear doors slam. *Wazz up?* Fuck this and that and you. Stupid-drunk girls. Rowdy boyfriend friends. Fighting.

I bolt to the window and one-eye-peek through thick curtains. I keep doors locked, check and double-check before I use my front door or step out back to the English country garden. We built a six foot privacy fence, but relaxing beneath the shade of the lilac – my favourite spot in the world – remains out of the question. If I know the neighbours are outside, or might come outside, or have just been outside, I barricade myself inside. I'm a self-styled hostage.

This paralyzing fear once led me to moving in with my mother-in-law for five days. I was a weeping basket case. Couldn't work. Couldn't concentrate. Couldn't be a regular human being. What was wrong with me?

My Internet diagnosis – we're all doctors now – confirms that I share characteristics synonymous with Paranoid Personality Disorder, chiefly, my constant suspicion that my neighbours have sinister motives. But there are big buts: I don't have excessive trust in my own knowledge and abilities; don't avoid close relationships with others; don't search for hidden meanings in everything; don't challenge the loyalties of friends and loved ones; and don't, I hope, appear cold and distant to others.

Perhaps I'm not paranoid after all. But what am I? Clearly, I am something.

One troubled season has held hands with the next. I'm only happy when my work takes me away. Fortunately, work takes me away often.

Spring 2002. I was perilously close to the edge, and although I'd hoped to sail through this life without drugs or psychiatric help, I succumbed to the former. How many times could I break down in my basement and scream at my husband: *You don't understand?* I resented him for Not doing something. (And, variably, for Not doing anything.)

Is menopause to blame? At 37 I'd had a cancer scare and underwent an emergency oophorectomy – an across-the-board evisceration of all things reproductive – which catapulted me into radical menopause, complete with the much-maligned hot flashes.

Or maybe I'm just going nuts: mental illness has been the skeleton in our family's closet. There have been numerous suicides, including my grandfather's barn-hanging on a Halloween night (he one of four siblings who took their own lives) when my father was just a boy, and my first cousin's car-



bon monoxide poisoning (my brother discovered him in the garage).

Breathe, I tell myself when I feel that familiar dread mounting. In, out. In, out. I unconsciously repeat simple mantras. Blue skies. Blue skies. Blue skies. Good efforts, but damn it, not nearly enough.

Now I take drugs. *Mother's Little Helpers*, as Mick J. and the boys put it.

The pills aid my journey to the good country: sleep.

The girls are delightful.

Bright, untroubled, beautiful in their long legs and perfect skin. At any given moment they might break into song, or tackle one another, or ask if they can help with anything. They are the kinds of kids who ask how your day is going and really, really care. This daughter of mine – against all odds and smothering overprotection – is right as rain.

The girls prepare for a forest hike. I offer an empty, plastic pop bottle and ask them to add a few rocks to make a shaker. "Something to alert the bears with." While they're gone, I take two lawn-chairs (one for a foot prop) and a manuscript I'm editing onto the deck.

Oh, sun, you've been missed.

It's almost intoxicating to be out here with the blue jays and pileated woodpeckers, the ebullient light (so brilliant it's almost its own emotion), and a glass of Diet Coke, the drink I've long been addicted to.

Oh, May. All praise and glory to you.

The girls squirm into bathing suits, grab books and a beach ball, and spend hours beside a lake still mostly wearing its lid of ice. They are reading *The Vagina Monologues*, and *The Celestine Prophecy*, and old *Archie* comics. Someone's unearthed a Harlequin Romance. They read the juicy parts aloud.

I join them on the beach with my camera and black and white film, say I'd like to interview each of them about their lives now and where they expect to be in ten years. We'll have a reunion when they're 26. (These are the kinds of things I think about.) The girls approve of the idea, but no one wants to do it right this minute, and before the weekend folds itself up, the opportunity will pass.

I wasn't always like this. The one thing that made me happy – made me feel safe -- was leaving the city. A few weeks ago, after delivering a day-long writing workshop in a small town – and getting zero sleep the night before thanks to the neighbouring all-night party – I detoured to visit a friend in the country. She has her own problems: single parent, struggling writer, a court case about the farm property she's splitting with her ex. Still she bakes bread. Still she listens to my rants.

She met me outside, hair streaming Godiva-like as she welcomed me up her stairs, past the latest episode of kittens, and inside.

*I'm behind*, she said, clearing dirty plates from the table. *Please forgive the mess.*

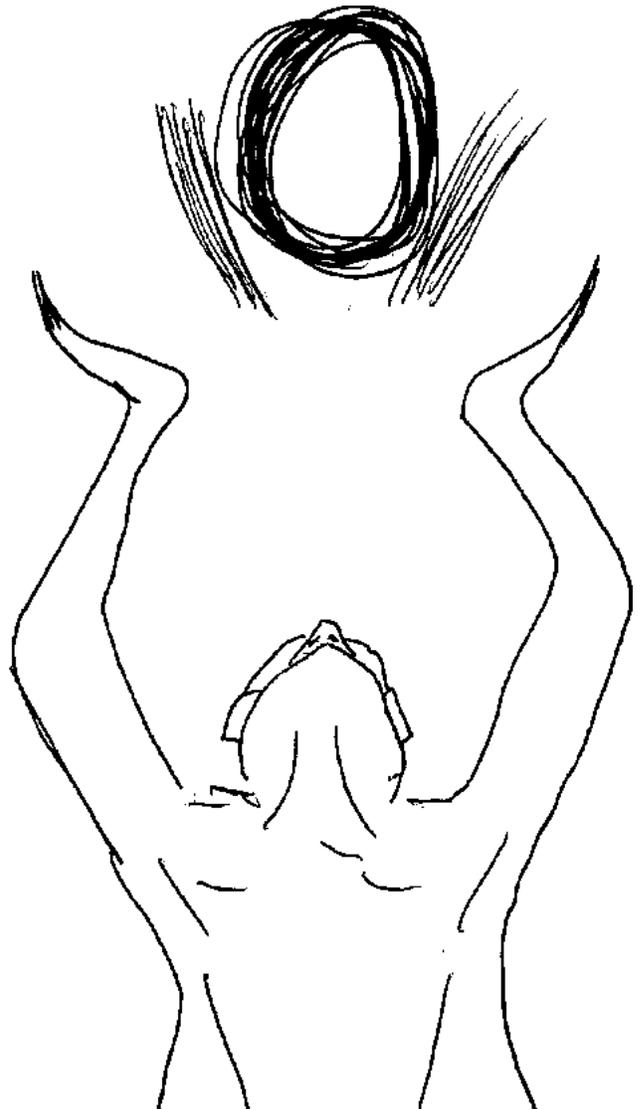
It felt like home should be.

There's a song by artist Mary J. Blige, in which she sings, *Leave your situations at the door*. I wanted to. I wish I could have dropped my accumulated metaphorical baggage at the door: or even further, back in the city, but this was not possible..

*So how've you been?* My friend opened one of the warm Labatt Lite I'd brought.

Truthfully, I hate to complain. I dislike complainers, and without any real attempt, I've managed to socially surround myself with positive, upbeat, people. Shiny, happy people; another song.

I told her everything. I purged while her teenaged son and



ART BY JAMES SKELTON

his band played “Californication” on drum and electric guitars in the basement. Before long the boys appeared for food, drink, main floor air. An emaciated teen with long hair the colour of corn had dough and instructions for baking powder biscuits. “Mom says not to mix it too much.”

It was dizzying. Wonderful. The clatter of plates and cutlery. Thunderous music. My friend making a whopping amount of spaghetti and meat sauce for this ravenous party of teenaged rock and rollers. Then: the phone, for me. “It’s your husband.” He had news: the landlord of the house-next-door had evicted the hellions in the basement. I believed him (although after the requisite thirty days had passed – eviction law, apparently – I learned that it was only a half-truth).

After dishes, my friend and I went backroad. Like teenagers ourselves, we stuffed bottles of beer into our jacket pockets and climbed into her half-ton to tour the hills where she lives and rents out farmland.

I have yet to mention the drought. Saskatchewan’s worst since the 1930s. We rode around inspecting the damage, the cartoonish tumbleweeds, the topsoil peeling away from the land like burnt skin. Eventually we arrived at an abandoned farmhouse on a grassy crest and sat, like children pretending to be lost, in the brome. My friend rolled and smoked a joint. I sipped my beer, and we adjusted ourselves to comfortably peruse the prairie night sky. She pointed out Venus, Saturn, and Mercury. I didn’t care if she wasn’t right.

We sat in the grey-boned shelter of that homestead for hours: two middle-aged women beneath the moon.

And coyotes sang.

And we talked about why we are the way we are. Scoured our childhoods for early signs.

I was six, and believed that a lecherous school bus driver was trailing me as I made my way to my piano lessons, with nothing less violent than rape on his mind. (How I knew about rape at six is another essay.) This was during the time I lived in comically-named Turtleford: three years that were anything but funny to me.

It goes back a terminally long way.

Back to daily being chased by a posse of older boys. (They hid among balers and combines in the farm equipment lot I had to cross on my route to school.)

Back to being five, six, seven.

And getting caught.

Often.

I needed to break out of the prison of my life. But go where? My husband and I have scoured the real estate section of the newspaper, dreaming of acreages. Who were we kidding? I’m a writer of non-bestselling, small press books, and my husband makes less than \$14 an hour cleaning surgical equipment: acreages don’t exist in our universe.

Maybe we should just sell this house and buy another? Nope, can’t do that. Despite what happens around its prime-

ter, I am connected to this old mongrel of a home, with its slanting floors and leaky roof, its windows that welcome winter winds to breeze right through them. I’ve suffered numerous nightmares about selling it. I’d be traumatized to pass by one day and see another family watching a thunderstorm play out from the verandah, or see my tiger lilies uprooted beside the front step. This home, the only my children have ever known, has been a harbour in a storm-tossed-sea of a life – years saturated with mental and occasionally marital turmoil – and there’s not a surface we haven’t sanded, painted or patched with our own hands, using money we’ve scraped together in blistered fits and starts. We’ve placed so many personal time capsules in these walls, we couldn’t begin to remember where they’re all buried.

Doomed, I felt. Then one morning I split the newspaper, spread it like a map across the dining room table, and spied an ad for Saskatchewan’s Best Kept Secret: a cheap house on a private lot in a small town, a mere ten-minute walk from a lake. I called, we looked, I made an offer. Done.

My husband: *You’re splitting us up.*

Me: *Wrong ... I’m keeping us together. Me together.*

We both knew I had to have it.

I couldn’t have picked a worse time, but is there ever a good or right time for anything: having babies? Taking holidays? Dying? We spend too much time planning, not enough following those instinctive animals we know as our guts.

I bought the house for a song. And it awaits.

The girls are still hiking. Alone at the cabin for these few hours, with this gift of full sun, I could weep for all that’s ahead of me. Solitude, and my own furniture. My own yard. The requisite planting around the house (the flowerbeds look as though they have been neglected for years). A wood stove. Rooms that require scrap rugs. And paint.

Right now it’s just the dog and me: he’s on pills, too. Hip displacia. My running partner for eight years, he’s old now, and sad about his decline. I think he also feels somewhat guilty.

*Alex, I bought my own house, I tell him. A house by a lake.*

Alex is my best friend; he totally gets it.

We construct a campfire, though we keep it respectfully small – with the drought and all things poised to explode into flame, I don’t want to be responsible for razing the forest.

The girls have brought Jersey Milk bars, marshmallows, and Graham wafers. We make s’mores. Chocolate is a good thing.

And there is capricious laughter.

And bat sightings.

Michael Jackson-esque dancing.

And campfire smoke in our hair.

Perhaps – as my son once implied while lying in an field between his grandmother and me, beneath the rain of the Perseids – this is as good as it gets.



June now, and I'm improving. No anxiety attacks for weeks, no need for the grace of small blue pills.

My books are still not making waves, the sky's not yet releasing rain, but the wind lifts the white lace I've draped across the window in my modest home away, a trio of rabbits

is running figure-eights on the lawn, and I have the glorious woods as neighbours. I've become a woman who sits beside a window and finds bliss in looking out.

Virginia, I think it's enough.



ART BY HENRY PETERS



# My pain

BY LORRAINE WARREN

I always dreaded cancer. I tried not to get checked for it, and now I've got it. Maybe I'm paying for my fun and frolic with life. Death. I want life, God give me life. Jesus, stay close to me, hold me, hold my hand. I want to see You, I want to touch You, then I'll know I'll never be scared. Then I'll know everything will be alright.

Why do I feel that I have to be scared? God didn't give me fear. I have to wait and wait for something I don't think I have. I don't feel anything, I feel healthy. I enjoy living – life is precious. Why do I feel angry and tired of this wait and scared, so deathly afraid? They tell me that a woman can die if there's no help. I'm scared of death. I don't want to prepare for death. Why do I have to panic?

Chemo, I'm scared of chemo, I don't want to lose my hair or get sick. I'm vain. I'll scream at fate if I have to go through this. Get sick. People stay away from me. Leave me alone.

## Squeaky

BY PEGGY WORRELL

*A slow learner, a gold mine explosion, small town Saskatchewan, a teenager on drugs, murder, a million dollars, wavering public sympathy...*

### GARY

"Hey Squeaky! Whadyaknow?" smart-alecky teenage boys yelled out of car windows, then roared with laughter when Gary Walter turned on his heels and scrambled the opposite direction. Head down, eyes scanning the sidewalk, muttering "Assholes" to himself, Gary hurried home. He was one of those small town jokes, scorned and ridiculed by a few, invisible to most. That was before April 8, 2004. Say the name "Gary Walter" in Nipawin, Saskatchewan, now, or "Squeaky," and you won't hear even a snicker.

Back in the 1950's, Ada Walter doted on her first and only child, Gary, born when she was forty-two. Max Walter brought his ten-year-old son with him to the farm of a relative, Bill Walter. Bill was in the garage, putting new licence plates on his truck and, when he put away his screw driver, he said: "The wife will have coffee on." Gary stayed behind in the garage. When the screen door in the porch creaked open, Max said: "Gary, what are the numbers on Bill's licence plates?" To the adults at the kitchen table, Gary recited the numbers accurately from memory.

"Always a little different" is how family members recall Gary as a child.

In the one-room Inkster School southwest of Nipawin, near Max and Ada Walter's farm, Gary was considered by his

Don't be kind to me. Don't talk to me. Don't yell at me or talk negative, or I won't survive. Don't gossip about my past because I need good things in my body. Why do people want to hurt, especially when I'm so scared now? Let me be sick alone. Only me and my pets. My pets never hurt me or talk about me or yell at me. They don't hurt; they give unconditional love to me. Forever love, never pain. I'll cry in their fur. I'll be glad to die. I'll die and go to heaven if my pets are with me.

Sometimes I wonder if there is a God. Sometimes I hate God, but then I get tired and I want to be with Him. So tired that I just want to sleep and sleep and sleep. Sometimes I want my mom, I want her to hold me and make it right for me. I want her to be my god.

Afterlife – Life eternal. Maybe God is slowly calling me or maybe He still has work for me. If I ever get out of this, I'll do His work. My job. I want the life.

I'm writing this for all the women who have breast cancer. I feel one with you.

teachers to be a slow learner. Bill Walter comments: "There were no schools for them people in those days. Show Gary how to do something and by the next time, he forgot. I'd try to teach him to do things on the farm and he'd balk. If I got after him, he would say a lot of swear words and walk away."

Knowing Gary was capable of doing repetitive tasks, Max lined up a job for him as a seed cleaner at Newfield Seeds in Nipawin after Grade 8. Gary drove the car Max fixed up for him five miles from his parents' farm to work, arriving with a goofy smile and mussed hair stuffed under a cap or toque. It was the men at Newfield Seeds who dubbed him Squeaky because of his high-pitched voice. They taunted and teased him until he turned red in the face, blustered, and spewed out exasperated bursts of phrases. "Sonsabitches. Leeme alone for Chrissake. Cccaaaant ya jus leeme alone and gegegeback tawork," the pitch of his voice rising even higher than usual.

Capable of driving a tractor or a combine, Gary worked as a hired man in the Elkhorn District. Sometimes he helped a man pick up old batteries from farms for recycling.

After Max died in 1971, Gary kept his mother company on the farm until he was smitten by Shirley McClintick's bushy, blonde hair and eager, toothy smile. Next to her slight frame, Gary no doubt felt strong and manly, blushing at her attentiveness. He and Shirley were married on July 12, 1975, then moved to Saskatoon, where Gary worked in a vinegar plant. After a few years, they returned to live in Nipawin.

"Shirley had more gumption than Gary," Bill said. "Thank goodness they had no children." But the talk around Nipawin was that Gary did father a son. After they separated in 1990, Shirley gave birth to a mentally challenged boy.



A rudimentary little shoe-box house in Nipawin was Gary's home, the rent cheque sent directly to his landlord by Social Services. His aunt Ruby invited him over for a meal some days. When word of the stockpile of food in his deep freeze got around town, men came to his place asking for food. If he refused, they broke in through a window, took a few pork chops or a ball of hamburger and left Gary fuming. "You good-for-nothing bbbbastards, get outta my place. Go buy your own food."

The pastor from the Alliance Church, Mike Smart, took Gary under his wing, picking him up Sunday mornings for church. Gary's mother was a devoted church-goer, giving the proceeds from the sale of the farm to the church before her death from breast cancer in 1986. "Anything Aunt Ada did, she did out of her heart," remembers Gary's cousin, Marj Becker.

The Oasis, a drop-in centre in Nipawin for the long-term mentally ill, was a place Gary hung out. People there called him Gary instead of Squeaky, noticed his smiling eyes, and overlooked the food spills down the front of his jacket. He drank coffee with lots of sugar, played rummy, went on camping trips, sang along with a guy playing country and western music on a guitar, and laughed along with everyone else at foolish skits at Christmas parties.

Outside of The Oasis, Gary's only other 'friends' appeared at the end of each month when his social assistance cheque arrived. A few days in advance of welfare day, postal workers expected his scrunched, red face to appear at the counter. "Your cheque isn't in yet, Gary. Try again tomorrow." When it did arrive, addressed to General Delivery, he cashed it at the credit union, paid his bills, and kept the rest of the money in the same envelope, a Manila government envelope with a window. To pay for a cup of coffee in a restaurant, he took the folded, tattered envelope out of his jacket pocket and reached in for his money.

After he left restaurant bathrooms in a mess, the owners kicked him out. Because his hair was wet, they assumed he was washing his hair, but in fact he was washing his itchy neck. Whenever he saw a Ford truck, he had to wash his neck immediately because it became unbearably itchy... and there are plenty of Ford trucks in Nipawin. Store owners considered his body odor bad for business and discouraged his patronage.

"No one was with him if you saw him on the street," Bill recalls. Unable to afford a vehicle, Gary walked everywhere. One of the reasons he walked alone was his peculiar habit of walking twenty feet one direction, spinning around, then walking ten feet the other direction, and so on. With this weird pattern, a goofy smile, and his screechy voice, Gary was seldom really acknowledged. The most he would get was townspeople giving him a cursory "Morning." Or "Cold wind, isn't it?" Or "How ya doin'?"

Two great fears that must have haunted Gary during his lifetime became his ultimate fate – being assaulted and becoming the centre of attention. On several occasions, men (not

teenage boys) jumped out of their trucks after dark and, with alcohol on their breath, mocked and threatened Gary, then pushed him down on the sidewalk and drove away. Police investigations never led to arrests.

While Bill Walter was ploughing his field on April 8, 2004, the RCMP came to his farm home and informed his wife Gary had been murdered. "I'll never forget the look on her face when she came out to the field to tell me."

*Members of the Nipawin RCMP responded to a complaint of an assault at about 1:40 a.m. April 8, 2004 on the 1100 block of Second St. W. The victim, 56-year-old Gary Walter, was found deceased upon their arrival.*

*A suspect, 18-year-old Wesley Harker was taken into police custody within minutes of the incident. An autopsy has been ordered in the death and investigation into the incident continues. Harker will appear in court in Nipawin April 14 to answer to the charges.*

*- The Nipawin Journal,  
Wednesday April 14, 2004*

"No one expected that's the way Gary would go, said Bill. "He minded his own business, never hurt anybody."

On the street and in the post office in Nipawin, the talk was of Gary Walter (both names run together, GaryWalter). Shaking their heads from side to side, people said: "Poor GaryWalter. Harmless. Head smashed into the curb. Died less than a block from home."

The evening before, Gary had gone out for pizza with two friends. They decided to go to his house to watch a movie, but the two men were walking a block behind him when it happened.

In coffee shops, in schools, in the staff room at the credit union, and in private conversations, when people asked, "Who's GaryWalter?" the reply was, "You know. Squeaky. The retarded guy with the high-pitched voice." The consensus was that it was shocking for a handicapped man to be beaten to death in a safe and relatively sleepy Saskatchewan town.

At The Oasis in Nipawin, those who knew Gary cried and hugged one another. "Gary was a real friend. Upbeat. Hardly ever went out after dark."

Marj Becker, Gary's cousin, planned the funeral and arranged for Gary to be buried with his parents in the Elk Hill Cemetery. One hundred people, a mix of family, churchgoers, and members and staff from The Oasis attended the service at the Alliance Church. The church ladies served a big funeral lunch typical of small town Saskatchewan.

### WESLEY

On the street and in the post office in White Fox eleven kilometers west, the talk was of Wes Harker (both names run together, WesHarker), a local teenager, killing a retarded guy in Nipawin. Shaking their heads from side to side, people said: "I knew that boy was headed for trouble, growing up without

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a father. Smashed the guy's head into the curb." In coffee shops, in schools, in the staff room at the credit union, and in private conversations, Wes was called a high school drop-out and a druggie. The consensus was that it was shocking for a boy from a safe and relatively sleepy Saskatchewan town to commit murder.

At his mother's farm home near White Fox, Doreen (Wesley Harker's mother) and her family and friends cried and hugged one another. "To think... Wesley wasn't a violent boy. Drugs can turn you into a different person. If I'd had any authority, this wouldn't have happened." To her husband, Bob Harrison: "Remember when we took him to that detox center? We weren't there for three minutes and that counselor turned and said to Wes, 'You can leave whenever you want.' OK, back to square one, because I know this kid is going to walk out the door. Three days later, Wes walked out the door." Doreen hired a lawyer for Wesley and visited him in the holding cell at the RCMP detachment in Nipawin. She was his only visitor.

In 1985, Wesley was born to Robert and Doreen Harker. An older brother, Dwight, had been born two years before the marriage. Four years later, Doreen moved to Yellowknife, NWT, found a job at a bar, and tried to live on \$1000 per month. The boys remained with their father, Robert Harker.

In October 1989, she began a common-law relationship with twenty-five year old David Vodnoski, a gold miner's helper employed by Royal Oak Mines at Giant Mine, earning \$4800 per month. Vodnoski was from Carrot River, near Nipawin. After graduating from Grade 12, he worked as a trucker, hauling gravel and logs. In 1988, Vodnoski moved to Yellowknife and worked for Ed's Trucking. On July 21, 1988, Giant Mines hired him as a miner's helper.

Robert Harker arrived in Yellowknife with Wesley and his brother, and left the boys with Doreen and David Vodnoski. Harker exercised access to his sons only sporadically. He agreed that, after Doreen and David had their first anniversary, he would consent to David's adopting the two boys. Doreen and David planned to have a child of their own and remain in Yellowknife because of employment opportunities and education benefits for the boys. The family of four lived together for the next three years. According to Doreen, an attachment quickly developed between Vodnoski and Wesley. Doreen changed jobs – pumped gas at YK Motors, was promoted to secretary, then accounting clerk.

In May 1992, the Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers (CASAW) union went on strike. While taking his shifts on the picket line, Vodnoski worked for his old boss at Ed's Trucking to earn money. On August 6, 1992, he made the tough decision to walk past his buddies on the CASAW Local 4 picket line and return to work at Giant Mine. Crossing the picket line, he hoped, would increase his chances of being hired as a miner when the strike was settled.

A disgruntled striker named Roger Warren took matters into his own hands. He snuck underground and set a bomb,

which was detonated at approximately 8:45 a.m. on September 18, 1992, triggered by a man-car carrying David Vodnoski and eight other men. Vodnoski and five of the men had been members of CASAW Local 4 before crossing the picket line to accept employment by Royal Oak. The other three men were replacement workers (scabs) provided to Royal Oak by a company known as Procon. One of them, Chris Neill, was distressed that morning before venturing underground, predicting the strikers were going to kill them. The body parts of the nine men were mostly unrecognizable.

Roger Warren was first interviewed by the RCMP on September 25, 1992, and after thirty-eight interviews, confessed on October 15, 1993. Warren admitted his intention was to frighten the scabs, shut down the mine, and bring the strike to resolution. He was convicted of nine counts of second-degree murder on January 20, 1995.

Three or four days after the death of Vodnoski in the Giant Mine explosion, Doreen left Yellowknife with Wesley, age seven, and his brother. They went to White Fox to stay with her parents. A month later, she returned to their trailer home in Yellowknife and resumed her job at YK Motors, in the hopes of regaining some normalcy for her sons. However, she drank excessively, becoming dependent on alcohol to sleep. YK Motors fired her three months later because she was unable to deal with the public, particularly those who were members of CASAW Local 4. Moreover, there was friction between her and another employee over the strike.

In the spring of 1993, after someone set fire to her trailer, Doreen left Yellowknife, and moved in with her parents in White Fox. The boys attended the White Fox School, and Doreen had a string of short-term, low-paying jobs – in hotels, restaurants, at a window and glass shop. After her termination at YK Motors in Yellowknife, she claimed she was unable to keep a job because of her inability to "properly interact with others." She purchased an acreage near White Fox for her and the boys. Robert Harker participated more actively in his sons' lives when they first lived in White Fox.

In late 1994, Doreen became romantically involved with Bob Harrison, a divorced farmer who owned fourteen quarters of land near White Fox. In May 1997, Doreen sold her acreage and moved in with Harrison, in a house he had built. Wes and his brother shared the home with Harrison's two children when they visited their father.

Doreen felt Wesley blamed her for the death of David Vodnoski. When he was in Grade 7, she found him in the fetal position under his bed, saying he wanted to die. After Grade 9, all the White Fox students transferred to the high school in Nipawin. Wesley wasn't a serious student, but he was serious about partying. His mother took him to counselors, and eventually he was hospitalized in a psychiatric ward in Prince Albert for one week and diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. By the age of sixteen, he was using drugs and was convicted of theft.

During summer holidays, Wesley earned money to buy



cigarettes and gas for his car. Ironically, one of his employers was Bill Walter, Gary's uncle. "I grew grasses for Newfield Seeds and had Wesley Harker out on my farm helping with roging in the fields with other teenagers."

After Grade 11, at the age of seventeen, Wesley left school and home. Doreen and Bob Harrison patched the holes in his bedroom walls and didn't have to lie awake at night listening for Wesley to come home. "We tried everything to get him help. Took him to a drug treatment centre and, when they told him he could leave any time he wanted, he did just that." Wesley found odd jobs and lived with friends in a house in Nipawin. For a while, he worked on the oil rigs outside of Lloydminster.

The actions of Wesley on April 8, 2004, when his cognitive processes (and those of his companions) were skewed by chemicals, withstood neither the scrutiny of hindsight nor the examination of the courts. Witnesses testified Wesley knocked Gary to the ground and then repeatedly punched and kicked his face and head. At nineteen years of age, he was incarcerated for eleven years for manslaughter.

*Wesley Alan Harker, 19, of Nipawin was sentenced to 11 years in a federal penitentiary for a brutal beating that led to the death of 56-year-old Gary Walter, also of Nipawin. He had changed his plea from not guilty of second-degree murder to a plea of guilty of manslaughter on January 6.*

*- The Nipawin Journal, January 12, 2005*

Some Nipawin and White Fox townsfolk were satisfied that justice had been served. Others argued that it was too light a sentence for WesHarker, who deserved their pity a few short years ago. "He should get exactly what he gave GaryWalter." "Bring back capital punishment." "An eye for an eye." "Life with no chance of parole." "Lock him up and throw away the key!" "Drugs are no excuse."

Bill Walter showed more compassion: "Wesley didn't know what he was doing when he murdered Gary. He was on drugs. He sent a letter to Marj apologizing for what he done. Maybe he learned something from that situation. Probably he wanted money for drugs and Gary wouldn't give him any. Gary wasn't involved in drugs at all himself."

Killing Gary was "a very long, bad dream," Wesley said in an interview at Saskatchewan Penitentiary in Prince Albert. "Yep, for sure, I feel that way sometimes. A lot of times, actually. Wake up and think I'm in my bed at my Mom's house. Look around me and there's bars and a six-foot cell.... It's pretty intimidating."

Harker described the minutes leading up to the murder: "There was no motive, other than the fact I just went to bug him and then he called me a name. That seems very juvenile. I just lashed out and he was there and he was the one who called me that name. I guess that's the reason. Wesley can understand why Gary's death touched people the way it has. "An innocent guy being killed over nothing, that's got to touch

people in some way or form."

In jail in Prince Albert, gang members with whom Wesley had dealings in the past, made life tough for him, so he was transferred to Edmonton. In a telephone interview from Edmonton, he explained that before he has any chance of parole, he will be required to take two programs: Narcotics Substance Abuse Program and Aggressive Behaviour Control (available only at the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon). In 2008, he has a chance of getting out, or he may remain incarcerated until his statutory release in 2011.

### AFTERMATH

On December 16 of the same year that Wesley murdered Gary Walter, his mother, Doreen, was awarded \$1,115,499.34 by the Supreme Court of the Northwest Territories in the case Fullowka et al. v. Royal Oak Ventures Inc. et al. Eight other women widowed by the Yellowknife mine explosion were awarded 'relief,' in amounts ranging from \$64,000 to \$2,200,000. To this date in 2008, due to legal wrangling none has actually received the money.

On the first anniversary of the murder, The Oasis had a 'Gary Walter Day', inviting his relatives, the media, even the mayor of Nipawin to a two hour ceremony, unveiling a plaque in Gary's memory. It was the idea of the outreach worker, Doug Lowe. Group members read tributes. The CBC sent a journalist from Saskatoon, who did a piece for TV, dubbing Nipawin "the town that cares."

The village of White Fox might like to forget Wesley Harker, but his family is standing behind him. "My mother always encourages me. We're a pretty close family." Besides his mother, father, and stepfather, he has a grandmother, aunts and uncles, who care about him.

Wesley has no illusions about what it will be like when he returns to White Fox or Nipawin. "When I take my Mom out for dinner, I'll feel the eyes on me." "I have a good work ethic and want to become a productive member of society."

Wesley Harker's persona metamorphosed from that of an unfortunate young boy growing up without a father, to a teenage drudge, to a ruthless murderer.

Gary Walter's persona metamorphosed from that of a small town joke, to an innocent victim, to a posthumous hero.

Public sympathy is indeed fickle.

[Note: Responsibility for ensuring that all persons interviewed and quoted, namely, Bill Walter, Marj Becker, and Wesley Harker, were informed of the author's research and have given permission to publish their names and words rests with the author. Sources of other quotations and factual information are: The Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, The Nipawin Journal, and The Giant Mine Court Settlement documents (available on the internet). The author has assured TRANSITION that the events narrated are historically accurate, to the best of her knowledge. – Editor]



# In search of sleep

BY GORD BRAUN

turning over and over like meat on a skewer  
eluded by sleep while the hours grow fewer  
i dwell on tomorrow that is now today  
pleading for slumber to take me away

over and over, a whale on a beach  
i long for the tide that is out of my reach  
i ponder the planet's precarious state  
the people who help and hinder and hate

at the noise of a train, the sound of a bark  
i pummel the pillow and wait in the dark  
consider the fate of this party of one  
the things that are finished or yet to be done

i think of a joke and then laugh like a fool  
flip over the pillow to where it is cool  
and still that entreaty envelops my head:  
“let me sleep like a rock if not like the dead”

twisting about like a key in a lock  
a fish on a line or the hands of a clock  
i wonder if man is the sole humanoid  
alone in a vacuum, adrift in the void

over and over a galaxy turns  
a new day begins, an insomniac yearns  
and wrestles with troubles that jealously keep  
his body and mind from the business of sleep

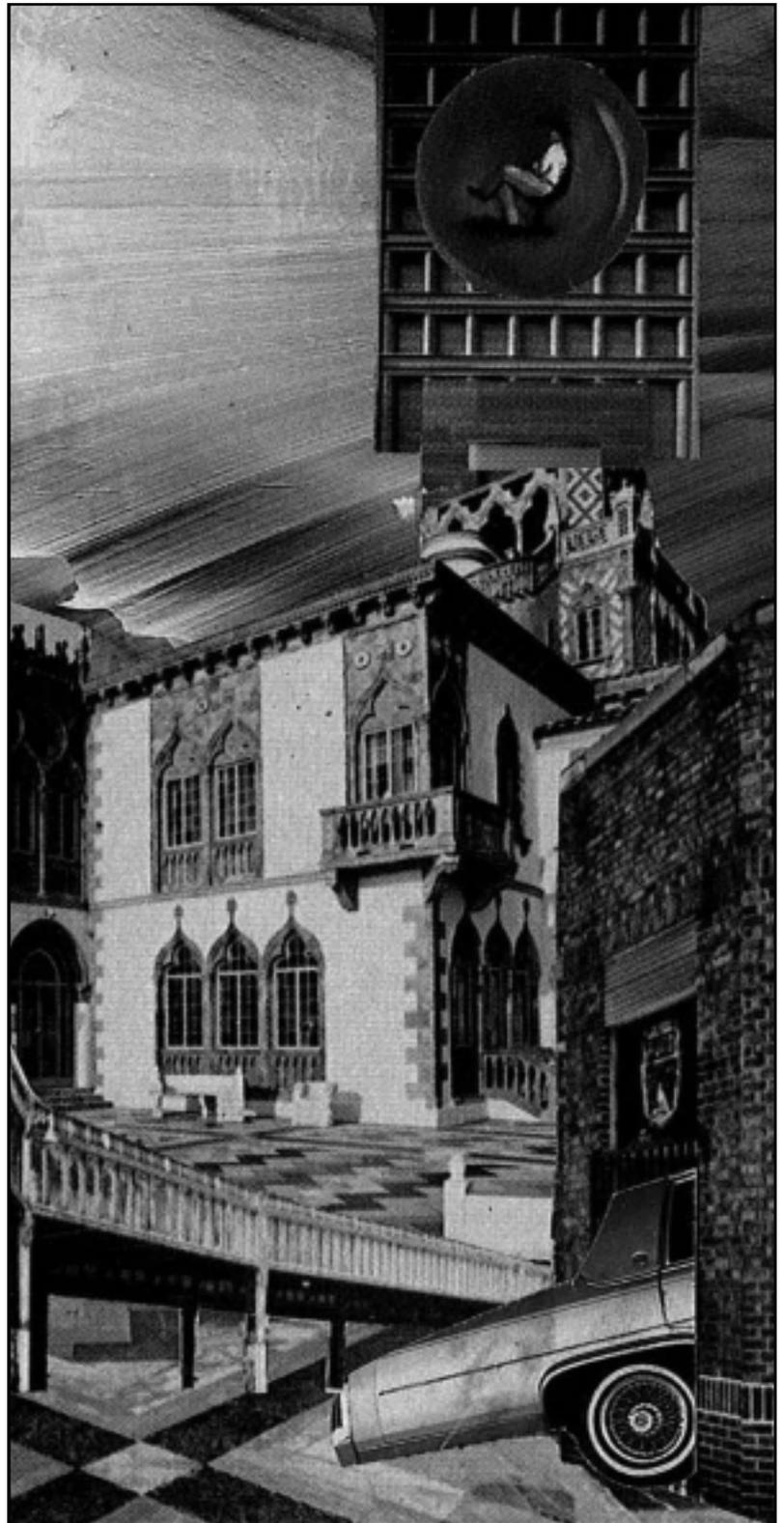
and over again like a lottery drum  
i turn on my stomach but sleep will not come  
i make it a project, i make it a chore  
and fail a night's sleep as i've failed it before

turning once more like a carnival wheel  
i toy with illusion and run from the real  
from people unwilling to live and let live  
those who preach love and will never forgive

i fight with regret and unreasoning guilt  
as i batten my eyelids and fuss with the quilt  
i come to a border and try to be still  
while some other world takes hold of my will

around and about, i am burned in the sun  
another rotation and i will be done  
at last here is sleep, a cauldron, a brew  
of things that are vying to taunt me anew

flashes of light like a solar flame  
bar me and jar me the way that i came  
they frighten me so, then i make the mistake  
of turning once more—and once more i'm awake



ART BY HENRY PETERS



# Jimmy Bang's desperation blues

BY VICTOR ENNS

*I'm desperate I don't care who knows it  
I'm desperate I'm going insane  
Just a rider in the rain  
Just a rider in the rain<sup>1</sup>*

I got the desperation blues, desperation blues every night  
and day  
I got the desperation blues, desperation blues every night  
and day  
How long, how long, must I feel  
This way

## **Desperation blues in my heart**

Can't love nobody, nobody can love me  
Can't love nobody, nobody can love me  
Got the desperation blues, baby  
I'm as desperate as can be

## **Desperation blues in my house**

They come in the morning, in the middle of the afternoon  
They come in the morning, in the middle of the afternoon  
The desperation blues just won't leave  
Me alone

## **Desperation blues over my shoulder**

Got nothing to hang on to, sink lower every day  
Got nothing to hold on to, sink lower every day  
Ain't no way of telling how long  
These desperation blues will stay

## **Desperation blues without a day off**

Can't work in no office, can't work in no school  
Can't work in no office, can't work in no school  
Got the desperation blues, can't get any  
work at all

## **Desperation blues in Sunday best**

Went to see the God doctor, this is what he had to say  
Went so see the God doctor, this is what he had to say  
When you got the desperation blues, son  
All you can do is pray

## **Desperation blues on my knees**

Nothin behind me but a pit full of snakes  
Nothin behind me but a pit full of snakes  
Can't see ahead of me  
Or what difference it makes

## **Desperation blues on the couch**

Went to see my head shrinker, to see what he could do  
Went to see my head shrinker, to see what he could do  
Gave my blues a listen  
Listened years on through

"I got the desperation blues, desperation blues every night  
and every day"  
I said "I got the desperation blues all night and all day  
Dear doctor make them blues  
Go away"

"How long must I feel this way, how long how long  
How long will I fee this way, how long, how long  
Will I feel this way until I'm dead  
and gone"

"There's no way of knowing, but we'll charm those snakes  
away"  
He said "There's no way of knowing but let me show you  
the light of day  
I'll keep listening until those blues  
fade right away"

## **Desperation blues get medicated**

The shrink did more than listen, he gave me pharmaceuticals  
The shrink did more than listen, he gave me pharmaceuticals  
To get them desperation blues, desperation blues  
off my balls

Now I just keep on talking, taking my pills every day  
A little cognitive behavioural therapy, sometimes I pray  
To keep those desperation blues, desperation  
blues away

*(That's all. I got to s(t)ay. Good day)*

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<sup>1</sup>Garbled paraphrase of two Randy Newman songs on his album  
*Little Criminals*



## Complain

BY NEIL HOWARD

I went to the park, and thought  
How nice it would be to write a poem  
Do I have too much time on my hands?  
Get a job

I walked down the street, and fretted  
At the garbage cast on the ground  
Am I an angry citizen?  
Don't litter

I watched the news, and laughed  
At all the fools in their folly  
Am I an armchair critic?  
Read the paper

I shopped at the store, and stared  
At all the candy I can't eat  
Am I losing my will power?  
Look down

I drove my car, and dreaded  
Today's prices at the pump  
Why didn't I buy a sub-compact?  
Take the bus

I looked in the mirror, and sighed  
At one grey hair on my head  
Where did that come from?  
Get over it

I looked at my resumé, and smiled  
At all the things I've done  
How did I have so much vitality?  
Things change

I had a job once, and lost it  
Because of a falling out  
What do I do now?  
Write a poem

## Begin again

BY JAMES SKELTON

I want to begin again  
You want to begin again

I am not ready  
You are not ready

I am not dependent  
You are not dependent

I am not crazy  
You are not crazy

May I have peace  
May you have peace

May we have peace

I have earned this  
You have earned this

We have earned this



ART BY JAMES SKELTON

# Reaper 1

ADAM STAITE

In the dark he reaps hidden in shadow she lurks.  
Black devil is the shadowy form he hasters.  
Undetected she roams free from house to house  
Across through buildings outside.  
Intimidated you become of him  
He glances at you when to show her face it's gone.  
All there is there is red crimson fire bird glances.  
The nervous shakes you get  
When they brush by not seen at all.

This to you is I, to me this is you!

Seigrik Maru



*Carved figure of  
Hawaiian God of War, Ku*

# Reaper 6

ADAM STAITE

I'm now staring, peering as I sit here alone,  
Lone wolf swayed from the pack.  
No one could know this wolf sits in the dark of his cave.  
No lights, no TV, just me myself and I.  
That I sit here sometimes loathing sometimes coping.  
I sit in the dark to get the light away from me  
To sit in calm and regenerate the mind.  
When it runs scars.  
Here is nice and soothing a perfect place  
For a wounded wolf without his pack.  
Here I sit quiet. No one bothers me.  
When the light's off no one's home or cares to answer who's at my door.  
When in loathing dark makes bad turn to quiet good.  
And I sit here calmly until the mind passes through its phases.  
Then when they're gone I wake my mind  
Turn on the T.V. that gives enough light  
Makes everything go back to the way it had been.  
Darkness covers all from light and makes the mind uneasy  
For when it's dark up there it's only right to make everything else just as dark.

Seigrik Maru



# The lesson



BY KEITH STONE SR.

(Key of A)

**A**  
He gets through each day  
**D A**  
The best way he can

It's a constant battle  
**E7**  
For this troubled young man

**A**  
He fights off the demons  
**D A**  
That torture his soul

For he knows deep within him  
**E7 A**  
Somehow he must keep control

**D**  
Fate placed him in a world  
**A**  
Where he meant no harm

You could read his life story  
**E7**  
From the marks on his arms

**A**  
Lonely and wasted  
**D A**  
No place to turn

A life filled with hardship  
**E7 A**  
Was the lesson he learned

**A**  
Yes, he'd been through pure hell  
**D A**  
With his back to the wall

He'd been pushed to the limit  
**E7**  
But be damned if he'd crawl

**A**  
His struggles each day  
**D A**  
Are almost too much to bear

He just want to find someone  
**E7 A**  
To show him they care

**A D**  
Fate placed him in a world  
**A**  
Wher he meant no harm

You could read his life story  
**E7**  
From the marks on his arms

**A**  
Lonely and wasted  
**D A**  
No place to turn

A life filled with hardship  
**E7 A**  
Was the lesson he learned . . .



ART BY JAMES SKELTON



# Course of study

BY ROBERT SWARD

*(From "After the Bypass," a three-part poem  
in which a podiatrist, deceased, is speaking to his son)*

## Lesson #1

Stars ejaculate. That's how the world  
came into being.  
From sperm. The Sperm of the Stars.

## Lesson #2

There is no place empty of God.  
Darkness is a candle, too.  
So open the window in your chest.  
Let the invisible fly in and out.

## Lesson #3

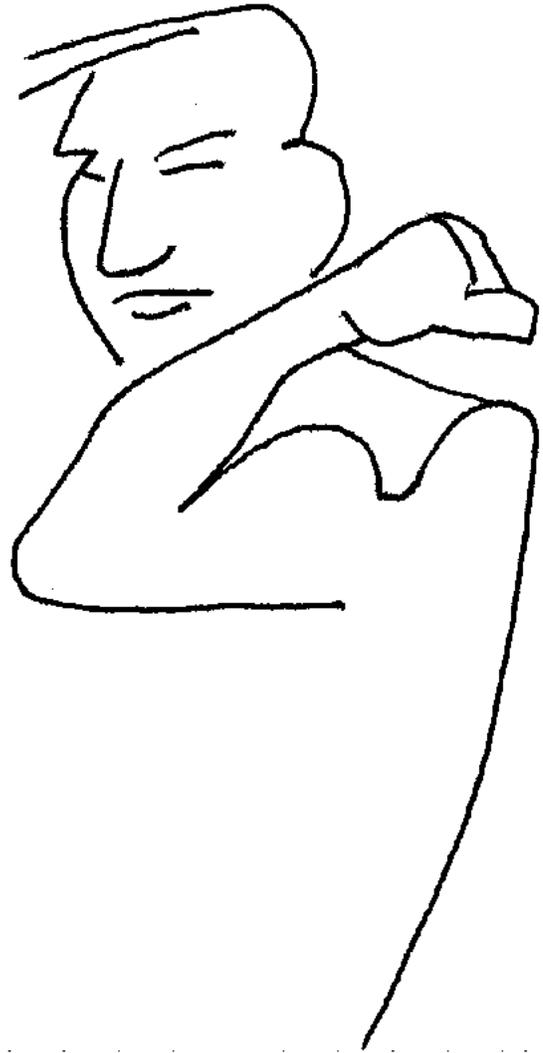
*The invisible is more existent than all the visible things,  
the Talmud says.*

Still, when you leave your body there's not much to stand on.  
And there's a crack in the cosmic egg.  
Truth is, this world is just one side of the nothing  
that's on the other side.

## Lesson #4

Now I'll tell you about death.  
*Life has an eye to see, says the Talmud,*  
but what do you think Death has?

Death is made of eyes,  
made of eyes, dressed in eyes.  
And when she comes, she comes with a knife  
in her hands.  
And you go through the wall and it's a flaming word.  
Death is what happens when all you have left  
is the life that was there all along.



ART BY JAMES SKELTON



# There's this thing about leaving

BY LAURA BEST

I watch people through the window in the family room getting into their cars and driving away. In the street it is the same, I hurry down the sidewalks whenever I'm in town, always feeling as though I am leaving someone behind.

It was nearly Christmas when Mrs. Weaver informed me that my son was coming to see me. She stood beside me with her hand on my shoulder and I wondered if the gesture was not meant in some way as an apology. Then, she acted as though all was well. She smiled and said, "Your son has tracked you down. Imagine, after all the years. And just in time for Christmas."

I didn't know what I was to say so I stood there looking at her not saying a thing. It was then I remembered that I'm not particularly fond of the holidays. The thought of Christmas, the decorations, the music, the colored packages all bring about feelings of indifference for me. I know it is not supposed to be this way. All over the world people sing and laugh, they buy each other gifts just for the sake of pleasing one another, yet that has not been my experience. The only Christmases I can recall are those spent here at Liberty House; dull and ordinary, the monotony broken up only by those family members who might drop by later in the day to wish us a Merry Christmas. And then of course our Savior was born on Christmas — but for some reason that has always seemed secondary to me.

I attend the Christmas Eve service each year at the Episcopal church around the corner along with everyone else here at Liberty House, but I don't sing the carols or walk up the aisle for communion, and when everyone bows their heads in prayer I secretly watch the minister to see if he knows the prayers by heart or if he must read them from his prayer book like the rest of us. It seems to me he should not have to look for the words, but he does.

Mrs. Weaver is in charge of everything here at Liberty. She makes all the decisions concerning our wellbeing. Rules and regulations are set up to keep things flowing smoothly. I'm sure I sound very much like Mrs. Weaver when I say these things, but they are the truth. I used to think she must be older than I, but I know differently now. I'm sixty five, or at least that's what the records show, and Mrs. Weaver is only now talking about what she will do sometime off in the future when she retires. She talks about her friends who all work at offices in town and the Caesar salad they had for lunch at some fancy restaurant last week. It is not surprising to know that not one of them has ever had to dirty their manicured hands for money.

When Mrs. Weaver's friends come here to visit, they sometimes bring their old copies of *Canadian Living* and *Chatelaine* and scatter them about the coffee tables. Often they bring houseplants to help brighten things up. Last week they arrived with three large poinsettias in clay pots and a shopping bag filled with *Readers Digest* magazines, offering vague smiles but not once stopping to say hello or to make polite con-

versation. And yet I overheard one of them tell Mrs. Weaver how good it made her feel to come here. She was a tall thin woman whose face looked as though it had been painted in place, her hair hardened with hairspray. She reminded me of a model — thin narrow waist and a backside pushed up high on top of her legs. "It feels good to do something for those less fortunate," I believe were her exact words.

I find it strange that somewhere on some paper report is a record of my age and the whole gamut of treatments I've had over the years, but when it comes to next of kin there's a blank space. I questioned Mrs. Weaver on this one time. When I was certain that we had some semblance of friendship, I asked if there was ever any mention of my children. I can't remember how she put it, but I do recall her asking me if I was one hundred percent sure that these children I was claiming to have memory of were even my own. I hadn't considered that much. Who here at Liberty is one hundred percent sure of anything? I wanted to ask.

There was a time when I would lie in bed at night and listen to the muted sounds of soft-soled shoes in the corridors and repeat my children's names until I fell asleep. I feared being snatched from my bed, hooked up to wires and gadgets, having what little bits of my memory that were still intact taken away. Of course they never came at night, but still I could not let go of that fear for many years. I do not remember many of the treatments I received during my stay at the various hospitals over the years, although I can recall on several occasions begging that they be administered. They left me numbed, but at least I was able to function on some menial level. That was back in the seventies.

It is impossible for me to explain what takes place in the mind, how your fears can be so overwhelming that you are desperate for relief even when you become aware that each treatment pushes you further and further away from the person you once were. You try to not think about that, concentrating only on the moment you are presently in and what feels right and manageable. You even see your past slipping away, and you surrender the notion that it was worth trying to hang on to.

Except for Jewel and Jacob, I surrendered more of myself than I might have wanted to. I was never about to relinquish their names, their tiny little faces into some empty chasm and walk away wiping the dust from my hands. There came a point, I believe, where I clung to them out of my own stubbornness and nothing more. I often wanted to place them inside some larger memory, a trip into town on a hot summer day, a special Christmas we might have had, or birthday parties with games and prizes, but it is useless for me to try. I wouldn't know where to begin; which reality to set them in.

"What will I say to him?" I finally asked Mrs. Weaver as she stood there touching my shoulder. She did not answer. She smiled, looking at the Christmas tree that was decorated and standing in the corner of the family room. I almost wish that



Mrs. Weaver had not told me about Jacob's phone call. I asked her for an extra nerve pill and she refused. "I wasn't expecting this," I said.

The Christmas tree has been in place for some time, pushed back into the corner opposite the television. Every year they put the tree up too early in my opinion, and I suppose the stir that it causes when the tree is assembled somehow seems to make it worth the effort. It is all anyone talks about for a time here at Liberty House. Have you seen the tree? Isn't the tree lovely this year? Come look at our tree. And on and on. It is the first thing you see when you walk through the front door. Perfect round balls hang on every bough, the garland looped around both the front and back upon Mrs. Weaver's insistence. A small group of us stood back to watch the procedure. Lacking any sort of artistic abilities, most of us are more than happy to have such things unfold before us.

"Garland in the back! No one's going to see the back," yelled Harley, and then Mrs. Weaver went on to tell him how everything must be done properly, speaking in a quiet voice; one that lacked conviction. But then, Harley likes to be spoken to that way even when he himself is screaming at the top of his lungs.

There was some discussion over the use of tinsel. "It'll look naked if we don't use the tinsel," Harley said

"I like the icicles," said Sharon.

"Tinsel," Harley said tilting his head to one side. "It happens to be called tinsel."

"It sticks to everything," complained Missy. "You get it on your clothes and in your hair. Down your underwear and in the crack of your ass. It's everywhere."

Everyone looked at Missy in surprise. Missy had not spoken since last Christmas when they took her baby from her. No one knew who the father was. It could have been anyone. Sometimes Missy walked into town by herself. People said that men could get her to do things for cigarettes. They said she was like that from the time she was a teenager. She liked to wear tight fitting clothes and tops that showed too much. Mrs. Weaver said that no one was a prisoner here at Liberty House. She said that Missy was free to go where she wanted.

No one knew she was pregnant, not even Sharon who shared a room with her. Not until the morning she found Missy under the Christmas tree, howling into the floor. An ambulance came, bright lights and sirens. We crowded toward the windows to watch it drive in. Mrs. Weaver hurried to open the door telling everyone to stand back out of the way. Someone whispered that the afterbirth was still attached when they took the tiny bundle away. "It must be dead," someone else said. "They covered its face. You can't see its face."

Missy was strapped to a gurney and wheeled out the door. Her eyes were lifeless, her head turned slightly to the side. She was smiling, wide and ready but it looked fake.

Missy doesn't go into town much anymore, and when she does Mrs. Weaver sends Mildred along with her. She doesn't

wear tight fitting clothes either, but I think it's only because Mrs. Weaver will not allow it.

In the end, the tinsel was not put on the tree.

Mrs. Zimmer has shared a room with me for the past year and a half. Before that I roomed with Gloria Smeltzer who would sit upright in the middle of the night and talk to her dead mother at great length along with some small furry animal she called Fluff Ball. I could not tell if Fluff Ball was a cat or some small breed of dog, and when I asked her she looked at me as if I was off my rocker. "I most certainly did not talk to a Fluff Ball," she snapped. I was happy the day Mrs. Zimmer arrived and Gloria asked to switch places.

Mrs. Zimmer is short and round and has lumpy skin. Her side of the room is filled with teddy bears with pink and yel-



ART BY JAMES SKELTON

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low ribbons tied around their necks. Each one of them has a silly name like Fuzzy, Beanie, and Skippy. She recently began a collection of porcelain dolls after her niece brought her one the day she came to visit. I lay on my bed with my back to them and pretended to sleep and I heard Mrs. Zimmer say to her niece, "Her mind's not worth a fiddler's damn."

"What happened?" the niece whispered.

"Shock treatments. You know what Swiss cheese looks like? They say there's big holes in her brains. She's nothing more than a cardboard dummy. A frigging shame, really." I got up then and walked out the door, and Mrs. Zimmer has not apologized or made mention of the incident.

I hoped Mrs. Zimmer would not listen in when Jacob came to visit. I could hardly tell her to leave, for it is her room as well. Mrs. Zimmer has a habit of telling people more than they want to hear, and I fear Jacob will be appalled to hear about Mrs. Zimmer's second husband who had an insatiable appetite for sex, as I once overheard her tell her niece.

"Aunt Helena!" the niece squealed, "You're so bad. So deliciously bad."

I left the room that time as well.

Jacob came the same evening as the carolers. The carolers actually arrived first, hurrying in the door with a rupture of cold air, rustling their sheet music while removing their winter coats and migrating quickly toward the piano in the family room. They invited us to join in, smiling and laughing as they passed around a booklet containing the words to the Christmas carols. I thought at first he was one of the carolers arriving a bit late until I saw him speak to Mrs. Weaver who then led him across the room to where I was standing.

I did not expect him to choose the very same evening as the carolers, but I smiled when he reached out to me, the piano music vibrating so loudly that I could not make out what he was saying. We exchanged awkward hugs, his cheek brushed against mine and I felt myself tremble, my knees begin to fail.

"Take your company back to your room, Elizabeth," Mrs. Weaver said, smiling. "It'll be more private there."

I was in hopes of staying in the family room melding in with the singing and music, pressing our expectations somewhere to the back, perhaps ignoring altogether the complexity of our situation. It was enough for me to see Jacob, to be in the same room.

"So noisy," he said unbuttoning his coat as we settled into the room I share with Mrs. Zimmer. "Here." He placed a small package in my hands and told me to open it. There were tiny pink and white soaps and powder with a bright pink puff wrapped up neatly in a clear plastic package that was impossible to open. I fumbled with it for a bit until Jacob said I could get someone to help me later.

"This is nice," I said, grasping for something to say, something that would make it worth his while to have come. "You came from a long way."

"Longer than you think."

"I didn't know. Couldn't remember," I attempted to explain, stumbling and sounding quite immature, knowing what little I had to offer him.

"It's okay," he said, touching my hand.

"I don't think I wanted to leave," I added. "I think maybe I had no choice."

"Then we won't talk about it. Not now," he said. I was happy to be left off the hook. I had imagined there would be questions, along with a whole list of do you remembers, that I knew would reduce me to little more than the cardboard image Mrs. Zimmer once described me as. "We can go out and listen to the music if you want," suggested Jacob. Only we sat on the bed not moving, until Jacob finally said, "Why don't you tell me a story?"

So I told him how I picked rocks in the farmer's field one summer in the late seventies. I told him about the big painted bus with bright red flowers that we drove in each day and about Sampson, the hospital worker, who went with us to the field and the time Bernice grabbed the cigarette from his mouth and twisted it into the ground with her foot and, about the cars that would speed by daily, drivers sometimes blowing their horns or waving their arms frantically out the windows at us, and I even told him about the little store where we'd stop on the way back to the hospital to buy candy bars.

Most of all I talked about Reggie, a young fellow in the group who managed to keep things quite lively. He whooped and hollered at various intervals and did his impression of the Bee Gees, moving his hips in exaggerated motions while singing, "Staying alive...I'm staying alive...Ooh, aah...I'm just staying alive." His long gangly limbs made it even more comical to watch. Scolded by the hospital staff for making such an ungodly racket, Reggie would make rude gestures behind their backs and it wouldn't be long before he'd break into song again. It became a continual cycle. Finally, someone from our group would yell out for Reggie to shut the hell up but even that wouldn't quiet him for long. When the day was over, when there was no time for Reggie to act the fool, he would often talk about his parents in Antigonish. Most of us envied Reggie, for he was one of the very few who would get to go home on a weekend pass.

And all the while I spoke I could see that Jacob appeared to be quite interested in my stories, stopping from time to time to ask a question or make a comment.

"I wonder what happened to him, Reggie, I mean?" he asked when I finally finished speaking.

"I'm so sorry," I said, feeling suddenly foolish at the way I had rambled on. I was no better than Mrs. Zimmer when her niece comes to visit.

"Sorry? About what?"

"Reggie. About telling you all about Reggie. I shouldn't have gone on so. It was silly. It's just that I remember that time in my life. It wasn't unpleasant, you see. Most of the treatments were over. I was beginning to piece things back together." It was impossible for me to explain this to Jacob, this strange



man sitting on my bed. How peculiar it seemed trying to imagine him as the little boy I left somewhere in the past although it was a certainty that he would now be a grown man perhaps with children of his own.

“Did I tell you many stories when you were small?” I asked trying to shake off my embarrassment.

“No. You never told stories.”

I pretended to see the disappointment in his eye when he said this, thinking that he might have liked it if I had. Tears blurred my eyes then and I wiped them away. How ridiculous of me to sit crying on the bed with my son beside me, this son whom I had not seen for almost thirty years, this son whom I had not been absolutely sure existed until now. I was not at all sure why I was crying – if it was from having Jacob beside me after all these years or because I just then remembered what happened to Reggie. We sat on the bed, Jacob with his arm

draped across my shoulder. I looked up into his eyes, through this veil of forgetfulness that has plagued my past only to see some deep understanding embedded there.

We were told one day that Reggie had hung himself in the basement of his parent’s home while out on his weekend pass. He had left some sort of note behind that said, “Tell everybody I’m just staying alive.”

It was then I realized that we are all of us leaving whether we plan to or not. In one form or another, no matter what way you look at it, there’s always someone walking away. There’s nothing out there that can change it, the only things that are changed are the things that we learn to accept.

We rocked back and forth on the edge of the bed, not in time to the music that was rumbling in the family room, the plink, plinking of the piano keys, but to the steady, slow rising and falling of our chests as we breathed.

## The Elysian pawnbroker

BY STEFAN CHIARANTANO

She was caught in a struggle with the past and couldn’t move forward. She was trapped in a landscape of sorrow. Her defenses worn thin from the harshness of her experiences. Nothing remained and happiness was beyond her. Her dreams of hope had vanished. Grief beat at her heart. Her passion spent fighting inner demons; her feelings bruised and battered. She had had enough of wading through the sewage of life. She had nowhere to go. She had nowhere to hide. Her emotions were beyond her control. God had abandoned her. An appointment was made at the Elysian Pawnbroker’s on Church Street just south of Queen Street East. They specialized in cases like hers.

A lifetime of disappointments, negative experiences from infancy to adulthood, her numerous bouts of depression, and her lingering despair were packed into two pieces of luggage. Sweat poured down her brow as she struggled to carry her heavy-laden bags on the transit system to the pawnbroker’s. Her baggage put up a fight; they resisted. As she tried to enter the shop, a burly man with a coarse beard, a big chest and muscled arms came forward to provide assistance. Hidden in his coarse and grizzled beard was a gentle smile. The pawnbroker reached for her bags.

“Here, let me help you. It’s always like this. The bags always put up a valiant fight in the end.” The pawnbroker took hold of Vicki’s luggage and dragged them into the shop. He placed them on the scale.

“Sorry I’m late.” Vicki said wiping the sweat from her brow.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s all good.”

“Thanks.”

As the pawnbroker weighed the bags, his eyes popped. “Your baggage weighs a ton. Had more than your fair share of bad luck, eh?”

“Hum... It’s all there. I followed the instructions to the letter.”

“There’s still time to change your mind?”

“No. I’m no good.”

“Once I give you this ticket and you go through those doors, there’s no turning back. Do you understand?” The pawnbroker pointed to the double doors.

“Yes, I understand. What will happen to my baggage?”

“Well, we’ll sort through them and package what we think we can sell. There’s a niche market for some of your experiences. What doesn’t sell we’ll likely incinerate.”

“Incinerate?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Dust to dust, ashes to ashes ... By the way, will my sadness follow me?”

“No, it won’t. Isn’t that a relief?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You needn’t worry anymore. Here’s your ticket. When you’re ready, just go on through.”

Vicki took the ticket from the burly man and held it tightly in her hand. Teary eyed, she hurried towards the double doors, happy to end it all. As she entered, a burst of white light blinded her. Gentle hands guided her through a shaft. As she neared the light, her sadness lifted. She could go on.



# Monochrome

BY ASHLEY LITTLE

I'm only really happy when I'm miserable. You could call it emotionally challenged if you're the kind of person who needs to put a name on thoughts. Somehow between November and January of last year, my vision became monochrome. Every day blurred with the next, there was never anything exciting or different. I'm not talking about the winter doldrums here. I felt trapped inside my own life. Like that full body pain when you wake up too soon from a dream and you're still paralysed.

I could feel the grey closing in around me; buildings loomed like pallid gravestones against an ashen sky, the reflection in the mirror turned into a stranger with a silver-toned smile. I felt completely detached from my physical body. I'd catch glimpses of a youngish overweight man passing a window, but I barely recognized him as me. I felt as if I was watching myself go about my daily routine instead of living it, doing it. So I stopped. I indulged in doing nothing. I wanted to be asleep more than awake. I liked dreaming better than living. For weeks I stayed in bed and didn't open the curtains once. I didn't care to see the outside world. I didn't call anyone. And no one called me. I sustained myself on all things deliverable. I scribbled on yellow notepaper and watched late night phone-sex commercials for hours. I talked to myself a lot, but it was different sides of me. We coexisted. Sometimes violently, sometimes peacefully. Sometimes it felt like there was nothing inside at all, that I was just hollow, a shell that a real person could crawl inside.

Eventually I tired of staying in bed all day. I had thought of myself as a xenophobe, but I found that I craved human interaction. Contact. I missed chuckling to myself about the stupid things people would do or say. I missed the way women smelled. I had been in bed far too long. Any sane person would have been embarrassed to see the state of my cage-like apartment: piles of pizza boxes stacked by the door (I had made a moat), empty beer bottles and cans littered the hallway and kitchen, dead flies floated in aluminium pots filled with swamp water, greasy paper bags and Styrofoam refuse strewn about. My dirty napkins, dishes and underwear stank stank stunk. I hadn't taken the garbage out for two months and roaches scurried gleefully amongst the filth. Lumps of melted plastic and other remnants of things I had burned or taken apart were decoratively placed around all the other junk I owned but never needed. I had stopped shaving so I sprayed all the unused shaving cream into pieces of art on the cupboards in a flash flood of creativity. Jam, mustard, ketchup, mayonnaise, Squeeze Cheeze and barbeque sauce had also made adequate paints. Newspaper hats, boats and airplanes floated on a sea of soft grey carpet that I had spilled milk on again and again.

I didn't mind the mess; it was all mine, and no one could make me clean it up. The roaches were okay at first, I thought of them as my tenants, me the fat cranky landlord. When they started bringing their little friends along with them though, I

knew I had had enough. One night I woke up with a tickle in my ear, put my finger inside and there was an earwig there. *What if it had made it through to the other side?*

That's when I decided to get away for a while, go on vacation, find whatever it was I needed to get on with it. Find something to stop the rats in my brain stuck racing around this trick maze. Make sense where there was none.

My first inclination was to go somewhere oily and foreign, above all hot. I thought temperature could warm my insides. That somehow the heat could boil what I needed to feel to the surface. There was only numbness within me. I couldn't get excited or mad about anything. Even when I tried to masturbate, I got tired after a few minutes and gave up. Emotions didn't come. I didn't come. There was nothing I cared for or about. I needed out.

After some quality time with my calculator I realized there was no plausible way I could afford a trip south. The inheritance money I received from my third foster mother was enough to quit my job and order in for a few months, but the death cash dwindled steadily and I lacked the motivation to look for any other form of income.

Oh, but I could escape for free. Together (me, myself and I), we decided that any kind of change would do, it was the monotony we were fleeing. The boring, stagnant questions without answers. Always asking too much. The demand exceeded my supply. The Pointless Worthless Useless existence of myself and all humankind. *Why?* It depressed me to think. Nothing but grey matter. It wasn't inspiration I was chasing, I needed to know something about myself but didn't know the right questions to ask. I needed a rest, a break, a sabbatical, a solution. I needed to make my fraction of a life into a whole. For months I had felt like a drowning man, the world took on an underwater quality, everything blurry, distorted, thick. I felt like I was screaming underwater, but no sound would come. I was sinking deeper into the depths of psychosis. Free falling, like Alice into an infinite lightless abyss. With dull eyes I watched my own descent into the depths of psychogenic hallucination.

Using my signature as currency, I bought some time to sort through the apathetic numbness clouding my days. It was the right thing to do, sign myself away like that.

Day One at Lacus Somniorum: extremely surreal. Everything was exactly as I had envisioned, the rock garden, the bad coffee, the petite nurse with perky breasts, and the pale green walls. Green is a calm, soothing colour they say. Green is the car colour geniuses choose. I saw envy and sickness. Jealousy. Detachment.

The smell I had not anticipated. Too much chlorine bleach and twice breathed air. Raw and stale at the same time. Like an old scab freshly picked back to the bleeding point.

Leonard was there for me on my first day. He motioned me over to where he perched on a shabby grey sofa. Even though I had never seen him before - in a way, I had always known



him. Leonard had greasy mud brown hair, several nervous ticks and glasses that covered half his face and were attached to a yellow neck string. His skin was yellow too, it looked like he hadn't been outside since the 80s. There were grey-green pools under his eyes, which were severely magnified by the glasses, so they were huge like brown beetles, always watching and blinking and blinking and squinting and watching. His teeth were stained and rodent-like, and he looked harmless enough, even though he was smoking a cigarette.

I sat down cautiously on the couch beside him. His huge glasses reminded me of someone, maybe a man I once lived with, but I couldn't remember.

"They're watching all the time you know," he whispered, staring into my neck, blinking hard, "You don't have any secrets here."

Looking back now, it would seem that Leonard held all the answers. But then again, reality isn't always how you remember it to be.

I met with Dr. Louise Borling Monday, Wednesday and Friday each week. The first time I saw her I couldn't believe she was going to be my psychoanalyst psychologist psychiatrist shrink doctor. She was a woman *and* she was black. I never knew any-one black before. I mean, I knew *of* black people, but they never really talked to me. No one ever really talked to me. I liked Louise right away even though she was a woman, I usually don't like women right off the bat. They're usually so annoyingly chatty and superficial at first. Not Louise though. She was quick and funny and intelligent. I appreciate that. I could tell she was smart. I guess you'd have to be smart to get all those degrees and diplomas she had on her wall. She told me she wanted to help me, she told me she wanted us to be friends. No one ever told me they wanted to be my friend before. She said I could call her Lou. She spoke in a way that made me know she wouldn't bullshit me.

I told her I was ice inside, I told her I didn't feel anymore and I didn't know who I was or what the point of anything was. She said it was okay, and that all we needed to do was unthaw me and see what the liquefied problem was. I wanted to dive into her eyes. They were inky and round and infinite, they could suck you right in - like black holes.

Lou wanted me to make lists and read them to her. At least one thing every meeting. Something that elicited some sort of emotion in me. Regret or grief or love or jealousy or hate or fear or longing or misery or anger - anything at all - just something that made me feel and why it made me feel that way. I didn't have to edit or make it like an essay, just write what I was thinking.

My roommate was a pyromaniacal, pathological liar with acne named Simon. His pocked face reminded me of my own battle with pimples in high school, and I cringed recalling that dark, uncertain period of my life. Simon wore grey camouflage pants

and shirt every day. He gave me the creeps and talked and yelled in his sleep. He had nightmares that kept me awake. Simon shaved his head every Sunday and talked about militia a lot. Most of the time I tuned him out or just asked him to go away. He didn't get offended, he seemed to understand that I needed privacy. He had his own agenda anyway.

I bought a black notebook with red triangles on it from the Somniorum Stationary Store to write my lists in. It was filled with smooth creamy paper without lines. I bought #2 pencils too, so that if I made mistakes I could erase them. I spent all of my first Sunday outside on a lawn chair wrapped in a grey woollen blanket staring at the rock garden.

### LL Entry #1

- I like rocks and stones. I used to collect pebbles and rocks when I was a kid. I like the way the water made some smooth after so many years of washing against it.

Like when you bite your nails without paying attention and before you know it they're raw and bleeding. The water eats away at the rock so slowly, you don't even notice.

- I like the black space between the stars at night. Did you know when you look deep into space, you're really looking *back* in time? You can see infinite Milky Ways forming; the universe as it was billions of years ago, how it came together to be how it is today. All we are is a salt molecule in the vast ocean of the universe.

I thought Louise would be proud of me for having two things I liked.

"What is that like?" Louise asked me after she had finished reading.

"What is what like?"

"To see the world in a grain of sand."

I sat silent. Staring out the window.

"Do you feel insignificant in the world?" She asked.

"Of course," I said, "I am."

### LL Entry # 13

- I like finding patterns in things. There are patterns in everything if you look closely enough. Circles, cycles, all there. Astronomers figure there is an extinction period on Earth every 25 million years. A theory stems from this: that the sun has a companion – a nemesis called The Death Star – which comes around its own orbit every 25 million years and knocks asteroids around and into Earth's atmosphere. So, the theory is that the sun is really a binary star. A twin, a half, a partner. 41% of the points of light we see in the sky are binary stars, dual systems, orbiting each other. It could be that the sun has an evil twin. With an evil bizarro-solar system of its own. With an evil earth. Or maybe they are the good earth.

"Do you think you have another half?" Louise asked gently, too gently.

I got lost in her black liquid eyes.

I wrote that entry after the first full moon I spent at Lacus. Man, you'd think it was an insane asylum the way everyone freaked out. Ha ha. The P.A. was calling out codes all night and people were screaming and hollering and running around like crazies. My crater-faced roommate got hold of some matches and when I came into our room he was setting fire to it. Flames licked up the soot coloured curtains. The smell of sulphur burned my nose. Simon turned around and grinned demonically, "This hot enough for ya?" Then he ducked behind the curtains and disappeared. I never saw him again.

I got a new roommate. It was Leonard, which was good because we got along.

Leonard and I played chess or checkers together most afternoons, sometimes we'd watch the girls together and say which ones we would fuck. We were friends me and Leonard, we looked out for each other. He didn't scream in his sleep. That was nice.

#### LL Entry # 15

● I hate MOLES. Grotesque disgusting blotches of shit brown-black. Sprouting snaky wire hairs, several hairs sometimes. A forest of gross. I heard they're not supposed to pluck these because it will lead to a capillary, which will lead to a vein and then the mole bearer dies but surely trimming is not too much to ask! I once saw an old Asian man on a ferry with this mole the size of a poker chip on his cheek, and a single black hair squirming out of it. This hair was so long you could see it swinging from side to side. I had a vision of myself going over to him and ripping that hair out of the mole, the mole started gushing blood everywhere and the man looked at me in horror, then died of heart failure. It was sick. I vomited soon afterwards; more from the mole image than seasickness. I think moles are spots of sin from past lives. The ugly, evil parts of people that have stuck with them, on them. Disfiguring them, punishing them, reminding them of their own disgrace. Shame spots.

I woke up on the soft brown couch in Lou's office.

"Do your visions often mix up into your real life?"

"What?" I stared at her, sitting there so sweetly, asking me one of her thoughtful

questions, eyes like ink blots. How did I even get in here? I don't remember coming here today. Isn't today Thursday?

"It's all mixed up Lou. It's fucked. I don't even know. I don't even know what to tell you except that I don't know."

Leonard and I were out on the balcony smoking a cigarette.

"Why are you in here?" Leonard asked me, taking a long drag. Thunder

gurgled in the distance, a light rain pattered in the trees. A halo of smoke encircled Leonard's head.

"Same reason you are, Leonard."

"And what's that?"

"You know that place between dreaming and waking life that's just shadows

and grey fog and it's all there but it's nothing and you're lost in between?"

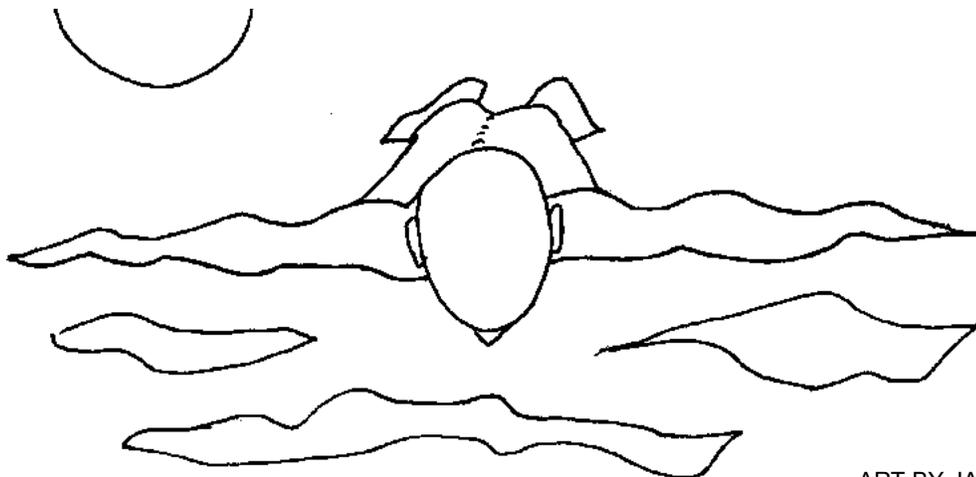
"Yeah."

"That's where I live."

"What do you m-m-mean?" He was rocking back and forth on his heels.

"I mean I don't know which reality to choose."

My Louise sessions were cut down to once a week by this time. We talked about perception, and if it was all in my head - then everything was in my head, and I could make anything happen by believing it would. I could just make-believe that I was here, and really be somewhere completely different. I could be *someone* completely different. We decided that I would never again care what anyone else thought because it was only my thoughts that counted. It's only my thoughts that are real to me, they are the only thing I can be sure of - and I'm not even sure of them. Well, if it's all in my head anyway then who really cares?



ART BY JAMES SKELTON



“What is real?” Leonard asked me one afternoon after he finished his third cigarette in a row.

“I don’t know Leonard. It just doesn’t make any sense to me anymore. There is no sense at all.”

“Did you ever want to be dead just so you could see what it was like?” He looked right through me. He wasn’t blinking. He was begging.

#### LL Entry # 17

● Echoes trip me out. I get to greet myself. It’s awesome to hear the other voices of me. It’s the only time I feel whole.

“Asher! What are you doing in here?” A light grey cat one of my foster families owned had slinked through my and Leonard’s window. It was definitely Asher, she had a patch of white on her front left paw. I would never forget that cat. She put her slimy nose into my hand and vibrated with purr. She opened her little pink cat mouth.

“What are you doing?” she asked me in a voice scratchy as sandpaper.

“I’m just trying to get shit figured out, Asher. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

She pushed her head hard into my wrist, swished her tail around a few times, then jumped out the window. Gone as quickly as she had come.

Leonard opened the door then. “Well, I’ve decided to kill myself,” he announced.

“Oh. When will you be doing this?”

“Oh, just as soon as I get all the details worked out. Say, would you like anything of mine, to have for yourself, I mean,

I could write you into my will.” He was squeezing his fists, they looked like pulsating hearts.

“I don’t really want you to die, Leonard.”

“Well it’s not really up to you is it? This is my decision. You can’t tell me what to do. I make my own decisions.”

“Well, I wish you wouldn’t kill yourself is all. I’d miss you.”

“No, you wouldn’t. You don’t need me anymore.”

“Yes, I do! Who would we talk to?”

“The other personalities. Yourself.”

I sat dazed. Looking at him, not seeing him.

“You do all the time anyway. You are right now.”

*What was I thinking?*

“I...I...”

“See!”

“I guess you’re right,” I admitted.

“Well, let me say goodbye to you now then in case we forget later or something.”

“Okay, pal.”

“Alright!” He was looking around nervously, always so afraid.

“Goodbye then.”

“Yes, goodbye. Nice knowing you and all that.”

“It was nice having you as part of my life, Leonard.”

We shook hands. His palm was as dry and cool as the evening air.

I haven’t really trusted anything I’ve heard or seen or thought since Leonard and I said goodbye to each other. There is no way of telling what is real now. There is no way of ever knowing for sure.



ART BY HENRY PETERS

*underwater Motorcycle*



# Internment

BY JOANNE SHANNON

Anne stands back, out of the way, as her husband Bill and her brother, Edgar, with much stomping, noise and discussion, haul in the teleposts to prop up the small house.

“It wasn’t much of a bargain,” Bill grumbles as they pass by her, “if the foundation’s giving way.”

Afterwards, the two men sit outside drinking beer, laughing and talking. Anne watches through the kitchen window. She feels no urge to join them. With the men outside and her inside, a sense of calm flows over and around her. A leaf drifts past. Fall has come again.

Fall is Anne’s favorite time of the year; a time of retreat before hibernation, when the earth will be covered again in a soft blanket of snow. Fall also means that Bill will be leaving for his work as a geologist up north and the house will be hers again. Hers alone.

It isn’t that she doesn’t love her husband, or her brother either for that matter. It is just that they are such an intrusion on her space and her time.

She remembers, with a smile, that she hasn’t always felt this way when it is time for Bill to leave for his job. The first time he left was just after the doctor had broken the news to them that she should not try to have children – that it could endanger her life as it had her mother’s. That year, when Bill went away, she had felt insecure and restless. Now, so many years later, she realizes that Bill had never really cared if they had children or not, and might, in fact, be thankful never to have that burden of responsibility.

She hears a sound outside – digging and dirt being thrown against the outside wall of the house. Curious, she ventures outdoors.

“What are you doing?”

Bill pauses. “Banking up the dirt. That way, when spring comes, the water will drain off and we won’t have a flooded basement.”

He turns back to his work. He and Edgar set up a rhythm with their shovels: dig, throw, dig, throw. The soil piles up slowly, good rich earth rimming the siding with a band of black. At last, they are doing something that makes some sense. Anne feels at peace.

Bill’s post is isolated – no roads, no phones, no boats or barges. The preparations for his leaving are almost complete. He has bought food and other supplies in large quantities to last the winter, storing them carefully in labeled boxes in the garage.

This year, Anne joins him in his stocking-up by storing away food and other necessities for herself before he leaves; filling the shelves, the pantry, and the back room with toilet paper, boxes of cereals, potato chips, canned milk and baked beans.

“It’s so much easier to do it while you’re here,” she says. “You know how I hate to drive”.

She had gone north with Bill only once. She had thought it would be wonderful to get away from the city with its cars and people. But she was terrorized by the vastness of it all – the horizons of empty space. For three days, she cowered in the tiny room that served as their bedroom in the quarters they shared with two other men. Anne listened to the men’s comings and going, to the wind that whipped around the building like a banshee. She didn’t eat. She thought she was going to die.

Bill called the air ambulance on the fourth day and she left. They had never spoken about it since. It was a silent reminder of the differences between them.

Anne digs her fingers down into the soft earth, warm from the sun of Indian Summer. In each hole, she carefully places a bulb, then covers it over with black dirt, patting it down solidly. Geese honk overhead as they make their way south.

Bill left by air that morning too, heading in the opposite direction. There were no long goodbyes as he waited for the taxi to the airport. This was a routine they had been through before and they both knew (although they never said) that they enjoyed the time spent away from each other. When they heard the taxi outside, it was just a brief hug and a “See you in the spring,” and he was gone.

Now, she is treating herself, planting bulbs as a celebration of her solitude. She enjoys the digging, the placing of the bulbs one by one into the ground, burying them in the soil.

A shadow falls across her work.

“You’re putting them in wrong. They’re upside down.” Ralph, her next-door neighbour, looms behind her. “They’ll never grow that way.”

Ralph isn’t over at her place to check on her gardening. She knows that. He’s come to find out if her husband has gone again.

The first time, Ralph had been sure that Bill had left her for good. Now he knows very well that it is an annual and temporary separation, but Ralph still comes to ply her with questions each time Bill leaves.

“Yes, he’s gone.” She pauses, bulb cradled in her palm. The ritual of planting isn’t the same when someone is watching. They stare at each other in silence. She isn’t any good at small talk like Bill is. Finally, Ralph turns around and shuffles back to his house. She can hear him muttering under his breath.

She turns back to the bulbs. Upside down? No wonder they never came up last year. She didn’t realize that it made any difference.

She gazes down at the row of bulbs already tucked safely under the dirt and then continues her planting, placing them carefully along the row – upside down. She thinks of the plants waking to the warm moistness of spring, their little shoots stretching downward deeper into the earth. She remembers Ralph’s comments as he turned away. “They’ll be sprouting up in China, they will.” She smiles to herself. She doesn’t know if she is doing it for spite or if she just doesn’t care. The won-



derful thing is that it really doesn't matter.

Thanksgiving. Edgar has come. "To check up on you," he says. She is thirty-six years old. She doesn't think she needs to be checked up on.

Unlike Bill, Anne doesn't get along well with Edgar and only barely tolerates his brotherly helpfulness. Because their mother died in labor with her, Edgar has always felt that he has to be more than a brother, that he has to take charge of her somehow.

It hadn't been so bad when their father was alive, although her father's domination had been bad enough in its own way. She has never gotten over the feeling that she is a compensation prize for her own mother's death; burdened from birth to accept the overpowering love that the two men felt for someone else that she herself would never know, except through them. They never seemed to realize that she had grown into a woman, that she didn't need to be looked after any more.

Tensions are there from the moment she opens the door to let him in. Edgar trips as he steps inside.

"Geez," he says. "I didn't know you had a step there".

He scrutinizes the porch. "It's sunk." He pauses. "Thank God we put in those teleposts when we did. It could have gotten worse."

That afternoon, Edgar takes it upon himself to build up the porch floor, jacking it up and putting in new beams. With each pound of the hammer, she becomes more agitated. All she wants is to be left in peace. So what if the house is sinking? She likes it just the way it is.

After supper, they have a fight. They always fight when they are alone together. What it is about doesn't really matter. It never does. Edgar has had too much to drink. He storms out yelling, "You can sink all the way to Hell. See if I care." He slams the door behind him.

With her brother gone, Anne thinks that her sense of peace will return, and yet, as she wanders from room to room, she feels that something is still not quite right. A sense of disquiet lingers, a feeling that her privacy has been invaded, her space

intruded upon. Then, she remembers – the teleposts; fighting against the natural movement downward into the earth, thrusting upward against the very floorboards where she walks. She dashes downstairs to the basement, and with swift, strong kicks, she knocks the posts to the ground.

Soon after Edgar leaves, the snow begins to fall, and Anne relaxes as she looks forward to the long winter months and their promise of peace and solitude. She never goes out anywhere. If not for the lights, passersby and her neighbours might assume that she has also gone away for the winter. She would be completely content, if not for Ralph who persists in dropping by periodically to see how she is.

"Haven't seen you out and about lately?" he says, standing awkwardly at the door. "You been sick?"

She never invites him in for a coffee and tries to be as aloof as possible, but still he makes regular trips from next door, wondering, she guesses, what she does there by herself. Finally, she has enough. She phones Fred, the local handyman and the next day, he boards the house up, with her inside it. He assumed that she had gone up north with her husband. Now, she feels assured that everyone else will assume that she has gone away too, and will leave her alone.

Once the house is boarded up, Anne begins to neglect her utility bills. Her light and water stay on, however, the telephone quickly goes dead. At any rate, she doesn't feel that she needs a phone any more. Bill is the only one who might call and he is hundreds of miles from the nearest phone.

At one time, the telephone was very important to Anne. It was her main contact with the outside ... used mostly for ordering video movies and pizzas. It was a way to avoid actually going out. But now, she is content with the food she still has stored in ample supply, and for entertainment, she finds a new pastime. She begins to sort and file the used cans, bottles, and boxes. She carefully puts them with their labels into their various categories: fruit, vegetables, meats and then when that is done, she refiles them again, perhaps into alphabetical order, or according to their expiry dates. When handled like this, the food boxes and cans are no longer refuse to be discarded, but a compete catalogue of her existence, a record of her history.

Anne spends the winter in cozy contentment.

Towards spring, the power is finally turned off, but with the warmer weather, she does not require any extra heat, and she has plenty of candles. There is still water, but Anne begins to take precautions, always making sure that she has a supply sealed and dated in various jars and containers, and that the bathtub is always full.

While the utilities are of little concern to Anne, as the days continue to slip by, she becomes apprehensive about another matter. May 30th, the date her husband will be returning, looms ever closer on the calendar.

What will Bill think of the house? Will he be angry for her letting it sink the way it has, for boarding it up? Will he think



ART BY JAMES SKELTON

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that she is crazy? Could he have her hauled away to an institution somewhere?

Perhaps, and this is what Anne secretly hopes, Bill won't come back this time, or will come back and seeing the house closed up, will leave again.

With each passing day, her unease grows. Sometimes she will pace back and forth in the tiny living room until she eventually resorts to taking a tranquilizer or settles down with a bottle of rum. Then she relaxes enough to enjoy her surroundings, again feeling the security and comfort of the four walls around her. At night, she tosses and turns, fighting against a recurring nightmare where she awaits her execution and her time is running out. Eventually, she stops marking the days on the calendar, and when the tick tick of the clock becomes unbearable, she smashes the bedroom alarm and hides the

pieces in the closet.

Then the inevitable happens. Footsteps and voices. She covers her ears but the sounds still reach her from outside.

"She's in there alright. Could be dead for all I know, but she's there."

It is Ralph. So she hasn't fooled him after all.

Then, the sound of a crowbar, cutting, splitting tearing. Bill is home.

She wants to run but there is nowhere to go. A shaft of sunlight slices through the doorway like a knife. She screams.

The noise stops. A voice, hesitant. "Are you there Anne? Are you alright?"

She can't answer. She backs up, slowly retreating into the corner of the living room, curling up tightly, sinking silently into the depths of the shadows.



ART BY HENRY PETERS



# Sometime soon

BY LINDA WHITE

**Coma:** *the patient is in a state of prolonged deep unconsciousness.*

Jennifer listens intently to the doctor. One thing stands out in her mind. David is awake.

She thinks, "He's not in a coma. That's good news." She looks at him on the hospital bed and her husband is suddenly diminished, his strength lost. His eyes are open and the doctors say he doesn't see her. She knows he does, maybe not really clearly or maybe not totally understanding what he sees, but he does see her.

**Vegetative State:** *the patient is awake but is not aware.*

"It's me, David. I've brought you some flowers." She thinks she sees awareness in his smile. More than she has seen before. A feeling of great hope floods her being. Jennifer calls the nurse, but by the time the nurse arrives, he is blinking and nodding at something in the farthest corner of the room. The nurse is irritated.

"I have patients with real needs," she says. When she sees the look on Jennifer's face her own expression softens.

Jennifer hates the discreet pity of the professional caregiver. David was almost lucid.

**Persistent Vegetative State:** *the patient has been awake but unaware for a month.*

Jennifer comes every day at the same time. She always says, "It's me, David." And then she tells him about her day and about the kids. She is careful to explain how busy they are and why they can't come to see him as often as she does. David, Jr. is on the hockey all-star team and Kelly is going to a gymnastics tournament. They both miss him, really, really miss him.

She never cries. That is, she never cries when she is visiting him. She refuses to give up and she is sure that David can feel her determination. As long as she believes there is hope. She has strong faith in positive energy.

**Permanent Vegetative State:** *the patient has been awake but unaware for a full year.*

Jennifer is very upset with David's doctors. They want her to let them remove his feeding tube. "But, he'll starve," she protests.

"He has no quality of life."

David Jr. and Kelly stand looking on. David Jr. shifts uncomfortably and then he says, "The doctor is right, Mom. Dad wouldn't want to live like this. You're not being fair to him."

Even Kelly agrees. "This isn't Dad." She cries silently,

tears streaking her cheeks.

Jennifer looks at David Jr., and she wipes her tears away angrily. She does not cry when she is with David. The doctor leaves. David Jr. and Kelly leave.

She wants to scream. She wants to shout that it isn't fair. She wants to punish her disloyal children. She wants David to wake up and come home.

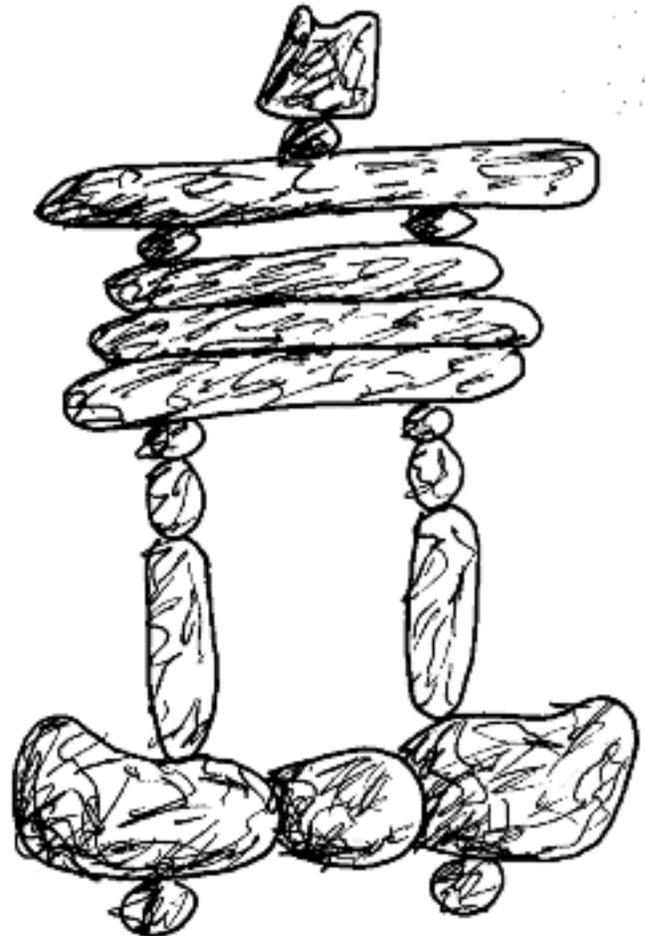
David is smiling and he is drooling. His eyes are blinking, but he does not see. His hands make spastic grasping motions at the edge of his blankets.

"Oh, David," she says. "What should I do?"

"Hmmpmph, huhhhh," says David. His right hand paws at the air.

"It's beautiful outside today," she says. "The birds are singing and the sun is melting the snow. Spring is here at last." She sits with David a long time, longer than usual. She holds his hand and strokes it. When she kisses him good-bye, she looks deep into his faded blue eyes. She looks for David and can not find him.

"It is a beautiful day," she thinks. She knows she will have to give the doctors permission soon. Sometime soon. Not today.



ART BY JAMES SKELTON



# A brief anatomy of anxiety

BY TED DYCK

Pearson, Patricia. *A Brief History of Anxiety (Yours & Mine)*. Random House Canada, 2008. Hardcover. 198 pp. \$29.95

Patricia Pearson has done all of us a great favour. She has written a totally engaging account of her struggle with one of the major mental illnesses of our time. To do so, she has examined her personal history for the beginnings (not causes) and progress of the generalized anxiety that has accompanied her through her adult life and has led her to three major crises.

The first was triggered by a failure in love when Pearson was a graduate student at the University of Chicago: she dropped out but returned to study journalism at Columbia. The second followed an over-extended exposure to crime in America as a very successful journalist: her study of violence among women won the Arthur Ellis Award for Best True Crime Book. The third crept up on her through an increasing dependency on prescribed drugs: she ultimately became totally “disinhibited” and eventually stopped using drugs entirely. In each case, Pearson survived the crisis through the understanding of family and friends, the support of the medical profession, and, if I may say so, her ability to tap the healing power of the absurd.

Yes, the absurd. A notable feature of this serious book about a very serious subject is its wit, its humour- and sarcasm-laced insights. Nothing could be more absurd, more belly-achingly funny than the list of fears with which Pearson begins the book. Yet any fear may be inherently valid and thus may become the underside of the most terrifying anxiety, just as anxiety without its oh-so-slender thread of hope may become a full-blown depression. Besides surveying fears real and imagined in our precarious world, Pearson skewers the stupidity of a pharmacologically obsessed psychiatric profession, a profession that has in her view essentially sold out to the big drug companies. She dissects our absurd societal infatuation with high crime, a romanticization that ignores all those small acts of kindness and of caring upon which a healthy society rests. She queries the developed world’s capitalistic individualism given its rampant anxiety, contrasting the less anxious communalism found, ironically, in some less developed worlds.

Pearson’s brief history of the term anxiety further underscores the terrible absurdity of the illness. Classical Greece embodied anxiety in its myths and gods (Pan); early

Christianity had its patron saint of anxiety (St. Gilles); and the first pseudo-medical description of “the English malady” appeared in the 18th C. Anxiety came into its own in the 19th and 20th centuries, when it first separated itself not entirely successfully from the more serious “degenerative” mental diseases, then tried to locate itself outside the brain in the “nerves,” and finally was studied and renamed by that master of the talking cure, Sigmund Freud, as “anxiety neurosis.” Interwoven in this medical history is a veritable who’s who of generalized anxiety: the scientist (Darwin), the poet (Yeats), the philosopher (Kierkegaard) – these are but a few of Pearson’s list of distinguished sufferers.

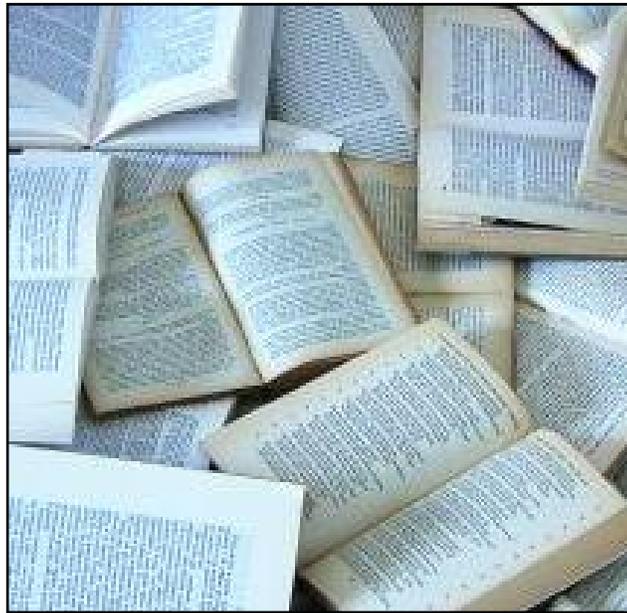
One factor in the course and progress of anyone’s experience of anxiety, a factor everywhere present in Pearson’s book but surprisingly never explored, is one’s position in society. Pearson herself is the grand-daughter of a prime minister, the daughter of a diplomat, and by her own account has had access to the best education, the best doctors, and all the other advantages that wealth and position can provide. If you think it churlish of me to say this, consider the nature of the experience of

anxiety disorder for a street-person in Moose Jaw: no healing retreats in a cottage in the woods of Ontario or a house in the plains of Mexico; no quick access to the latest medical advances; no larger intellectual setting in which to place one’s absurd and awful fears.

Of course, that the privileged are also subject to a disease so debilitating is a testament to the terrible equality that mental illness visits upon the population, and a measure of Pearson’s very great personal courage. Equally importantly, if the stigma associated with mental illness is ever to be overcome, it will be through the demonstration that we are all equally well or equally ill, that

mental health is always our issue, never theirs.

Naturally so slim a book cannot, nor should be expected to, treat anxiety exhaustively. Enough that it is wonderfully readable. I would have liked to see, however, at least a mention of Richard Burton’s equally witty and classic study of a somewhat wider subject, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. And if the over-all narrative has a slightly rosy quality – do some cognitive therapy; surround yourself with a caring family and a supportive husband; wean yourself off all those bad, bad drugs; join a church for the healing power of its rituals; and above all be sure to grow up – the plot, nevertheless, rings true. Anxiety can be temporarily overcome – perhaps not cured, but then neither can Urangst.





## Our readers say . . .

Note: This is a new feature of TRANSITION – send us your comments about the magazine and, if we can, we'll print them with your express permission. – Editor

### **ABOUT AMBER COLWELL'S COVER OF SPRING 2008:**

Carol (Moose Jaw SK) writes:

I would like to express my appreciation for the cover of the Spring 2008 edition of TRANSITION magazine. It was not only interesting and beautiful, but a powerful piece of art. I had a visceral attraction to it, which became evident when I wanted to pass on the magazine to a friend but hesitated, because I was conflicted about parting with the cover. (I resolved that by getting myself another copy!) I have been intrigued by both the general beauty and the thoughtful design of it. It is exquisite. Please pass on my thanks to the artist for sharing her work with us.

Please also pass on my thanks to the editors for selecting

such a remarkable piece for the cover. Its inclusion speaks volumes about the impact of CMHA in our community, the insight and connectedness of the editors to real people and to mental health, and the role of visual arts and words in mental health. The creation and sharing of such things does not happen without a lot of hard work and investment by many. Kudos to all who have contributed, are contributing, and will contribute to the life and impact of the artist and all of us whom she represents.

Henry (Winnipeg MB) writes:

The Spring 2008 issue is beautiful, brilliant! TRANSITION magazine has succeeded in setting another unprecedented work of in-house genius. I utilized the cover collage art by Amber Colwell as an inspirational prop during an art workshop on print collage at my shared studio space. I read aloud to participants the text headlines from the piece, making for a lively session of discussions and hungry searches through magazine stacks provided.



ART BY HENRY PETERS

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# Notes on contributors

## Cover

### **STAIRMAND, Gordon**

Weyburn SK artist whose work has frequently appeared in CMHA's Cash Calendar

## Artwork

### **PETERS, Henry**

Winnipeg MB artist who has been contributing to TRANSITION since 1989

### **SKELTON, James:**

Writer and artist from Saskatoon SK. Artwork prominently featured in previous TRANSITIONS.

## Authors

### **BEST, Laura:**

Member of the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia. Widely published in Canadian magazines and in TRANSITION 2005.

### **BRAUN, Gord:**

Yorkton SK writer and very close reader of TRANSITION.

### **CHIARANTANO, Stefan.**

Toronto ON writer previously published in TRANSITION Spring 2008.

### **ENNS, Victor:**

Writer and arts bureaucrat from Winnipeg MB. Author of several collections of poetry. Work-in-progress: "The Jimmy Bang Blues Project," about his depression experiences.

### **HOWARD, Neil:**

Toronto ON writer, volunteer, and speaker on understanding mental illness.

### **LEEDAHL, Shelley:**

Fulltime, multi-genre, prize-winning writer from Middle Lake SK. Author of eight books, and a winner of the J.V. Hicks Manuscript Awards for Poetry 2008.

### **LITTLE, Ashley:**

Writes and lives in Ucluelet BC. Recent winner of Okanagan Short Story Contest.

### **SHANNON, Joanne:**

Regina SK writer active in the arts of writing, film and video, and painting.

### **SKELTON, James:**

Writer and artist from Saskatoon SK.

### **STAITE, Adam:**

Moose Jaw SK writer and member of CMHA Writers Group. Regular contributor to TRANSITION

### **STONE, Keith, Sr:**

Country and western songwriter from Saskatoon SK.

### **SWARD, Robert:**

Prominent American and Canadian author and teacher based in Santa Cruz CA. Recent publications include *The Collected Poems* and *God is in the Cracks* (Black Moss Press).

### **THOMPSON, Kathleen:**

Doctoral candidate at University of Calgary and presenter at CMHA (SK) Conference Spring 2008. Teaches at University of Regina and resides in Lumsden SK.

### **WARREN, Lorraine.**

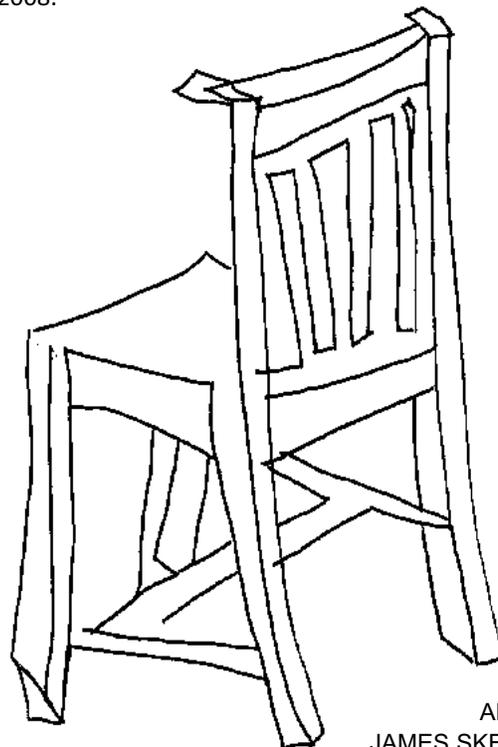
Member of CMHA (Moose Jaw) Writers Group. Previously published in TRANSITION Fall 2007.

### **WHITE, Linda:**

A retired teacher from Wainwright AB who just won't quit. A young adult vampire novel in progress.

### **WORRELL, Peggy:**

Swift Current SK emerging writer, social worker, and long-time supporter of CMHA. Presenter at mini-launch of TRANSITION Spring 2008.



ART BY  
JAMES SKELTON

Big Fishing @ the Biomorphhic Pool of Liquid.



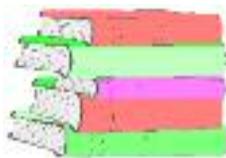


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### DIVISION OFFICE

2702 12th Avenue, Regina, SK S4T 1J2  
Phone 1-800-461-5483 (SK) or 525-5601 (Regina)  
FAX 569-3788 • email [contactus@cmhask.com](mailto:contactus@cmhask.com)  
Web Site [www.cmhask.com](http://www.cmhask.com)

### CMHA Branches

**BATTLEFORDS BRANCH**  
1011 - 103rd Street  
North Battleford, SK S9A 1K3  
306 446-7177 • Fax 306 445-7050  
[kevin.s.mh@sasktel.net](mailto:kevin.s.mh@sasktel.net)

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306 463-8052 • Fax 306 463-5506  
[kincmha@sasktel.net](mailto:kincmha@sasktel.net)

**MOOSE JAW BRANCH**  
261 High Street West  
Moose Jaw, SK S6H 1S7  
306 692-4240 • Fax 306 693-7479  
[cmha.mj@sasktel.net](mailto:cmha.mj@sasktel.net)

**PRINCE ALBERT BRANCH**  
1322 Central Avenue  
Prince Albert, SK S6V 4W3  
306 763-7747 • 306 Fax 763-7717  
[pacmha@sasktel.net](mailto:pacmha@sasktel.net)

**REGINA BRANCH**  
1810 Albert Street  
Regina, SK S4P 2S8  
306 525-9543 • Fax 306 525-9579  
Members' Phone 525-8433  
[info@cmharegina.com](mailto:info@cmharegina.com)

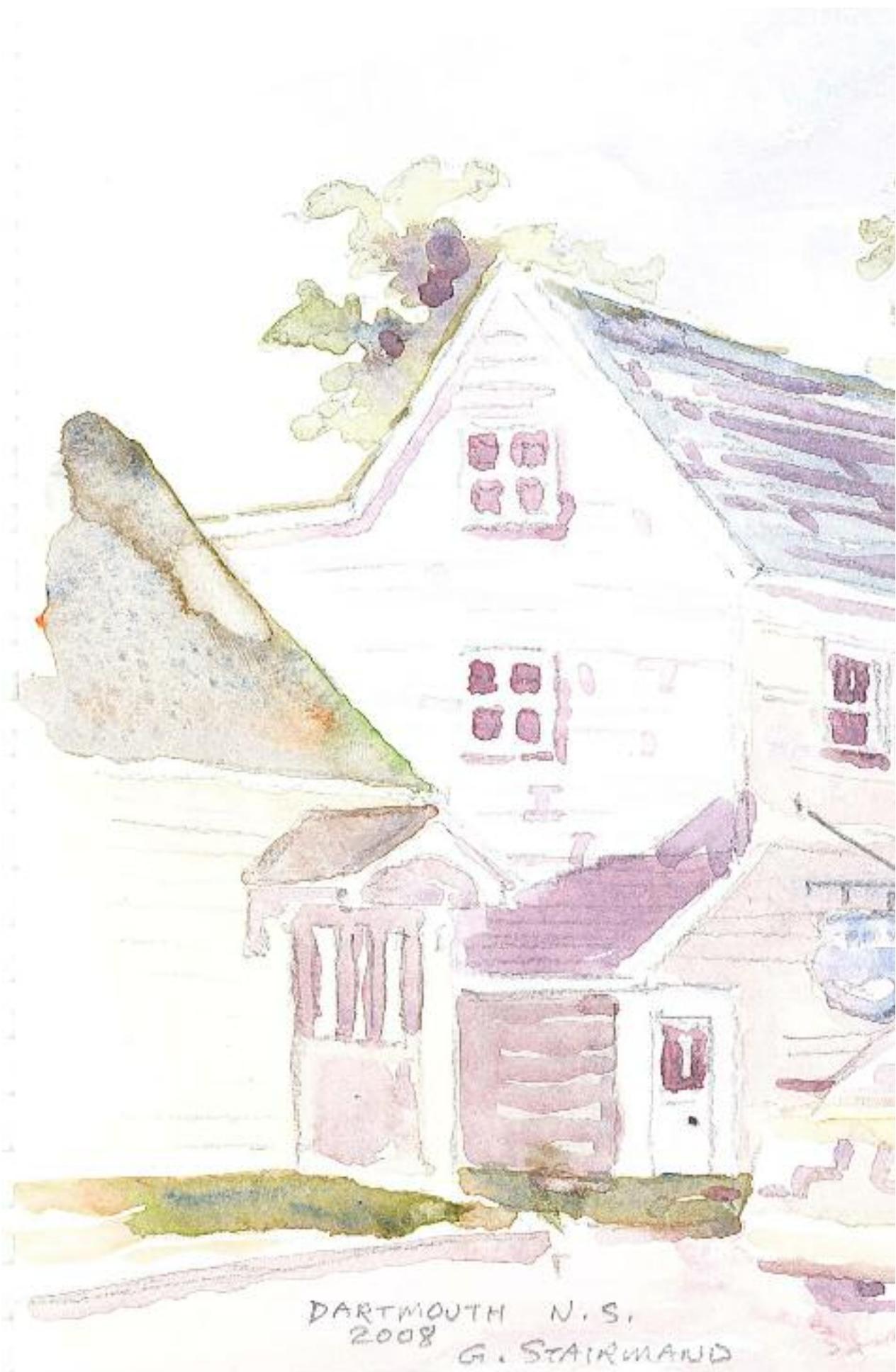
**SASKATOON BRANCH**  
1301 Avenue P North  
Saskatoon, SK S7L 2X1  
306 384-9333 • Fax 306 978-5777  
[gmast@cmhasaskatoon.ca](mailto:gmast@cmhasaskatoon.ca)

**SWIFT CURRENT BRANCH**  
170 - 4th Avenue NW  
Swift Current, SK S9H 0T6  
306 778-2440 • Fax 306 773-0766  
[sccmha@shaw.ca](mailto:sccmha@shaw.ca)

**WEYBURN BRANCH**  
404 Ashford Street  
Weyburn, SK S4H 1K1  
306 842-7959 • Fax 306 842-3096  
[cmhawey@sasktel.net](mailto:cmhawey@sasktel.net)

**YORKTON BRANCH**  
Box 1226  
Yorkton, SK S3N 2X3  
306 621-5925 • Fax 306 783-9662  
[ybranch@cmhask.com](mailto:ybranch@cmhask.com)

**RURAL COMMITTEES:**  
Duck Lake • Nipawin • Shellbrook



DARTMOUTH N.S.  
2008  
G. STAIRMAND