



THE
ACROBAT

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Editorial Notice: *The Acrobat is an official extension and offshoot of Tightrope Books. The work appearing in this PDF edition of the premiere issue is the literary supplement. The rest of the magazine exists in other forms. Visit the tumblr page via the link on the Acrobat page on the Tightrope Books website for all that jazz. We recognize support from the OMDC.*



FICTION

Habitat 67 by Andrew MacDonald

Armen knew nothing about bombs, but he did know this: if you hired one bomb maker to make enough explosives to topple a small skyscraper, a second bomb maker of equal or greater skill should be hired to inspect the work of the first and, if possible, supply sufficient explosive compounds to ensure - as a skydiver does when packing a second parachute - that should the first bomb maker's bomb somehow fail, the show would go on.

Contingency plans. Armen had always been good at contingency plans. What architect wouldn't be? That is after all, what a good buttress is for: ensuring structural integrity when the walls of a building shake, begging to crumble. You think Doric columns are there for show?

Opening the trunk of the car, Armen marveled at how boxes so small could have the potential to wreak such havoc. They didn't even look like bombs, which he supposed was the genius of them. He could be stopped at customs and nobody would look twice.

He put his ear to one of the boxes and listened for ticking. Any sign of impending anarchy. A shiver. The sound of housed kinetic energy. When Armen was a child, all the bombs on television ticked and tocked. These boxes did nothing. It was almost too bad, their silence.

He settled his affairs. He would leave the office to Guy, his second in command. Guy practically ran the firm

already, bidding on contracts, managing the construction of the home for sick kids, organizing the staff Christmas party which Armen attended only briefly, stopping by in an itchy Santa suit to toss out bonus cheques tucked neatly in woolly red socks.

Business wasn't booming, but Zentsnov Architects had been around for a third of a century, was occasionally recognized for its work by the appropriate governing bodies, and could have a bright future without him.

Guy was still in the office pouring over plans for a new wing in the Sick Kids building. The other associates had left, as had the support staff. Armen stared at the explosion of curly black hair and noticed for the first time some silver at the roots.

"You standing there staring is creeping me out," Guy said, swiveling his chair around.

"Here are keys to the safe in the back."

Before leaving, Armen unlocked his office and moved the Matisse reproduction aside to unlock the wall safe. The napkin. For the first time in eighteen years, Armen removed it from the plastic sheath as delicately as one would handle butterfly wings. In the light of the desk lamp, the paper became translucent; the tips of his fingers were visible through to the other side. On his way out he stopped at Guy's desk for a second time.

"Have I ever shown you this?"

"What am I looking at?"

Folding the napkin into his pocket, Armen shook his head. "The great, all fucking powerful architect, Moshe Safde asked the same question."

Guy stopped typing and pushed his keyboard back. "Again with Safde. Can't you give it a rest?"

Armen patted his understudy's shoulder and wondered how, in a single person; genius and stupidity

could coexist so peacefully.

In Montreal, Safde and Armen were working on their dissertations at the same time. They had entered the class of '62 as outsiders: Safde a Jew and Armen the son of Ukrainian immigrants. They had been drawn to each other in the cafeteria with the magnetic pull of pariahs seeking their own. Just as his slacks and shirts seemed two sizes too big, Safde had yet to grow into the pencil thin moustache above his bottom lip. It hung on his face awkwardly like a smear of ash, and he moved through the hallways the way pinballs bounce around arcade machines, ricocheting off shoulders, bumping on and off lockers.

Safde and Armen quickly became allies against the world, meeting regularly for tea between classes. They shared designs and exercised together twice a week early in the mornings. Safde always a few steps ahead on their runs, and Armen always a bit stronger when it came to the dumbbells.

They lusted after building designs, fellowships, women, though the latter seemed more Armen's passion than Safde's. But architecture always came first. Armen would turn away all of life's other passions to perfect the static form.

One evening, in the graduate student lounge, Armen showed Safde a design scratched onto a napkin he'd been working on. The inspiration: a wasp's nest he'd had come across on his walk to school split with remarkable symmetry by an equatorial crack running the sum of its circumference.

"It's a mixture of the natural and the cubist," Armen explained, spreading out the napkin on the table. To the untrained eye, it seemed little more than a series of squares awkwardly placed one on top of another. Brick upon brick, with stilt-like buttresses built into the exterior giving the illusion of thwarted gravity.

Safde pulled the design closer to him and studied it. "It's a bit on the clunky side."

This was 1965. A national call for submissions had swept through the architectural departments at every university. The winner would have his design built for the 1967 World Expo in Montreal. A high honor and both had agreed to enter. The drawing on the napkin had, in Armen's eyes, potential.

"Too clunky," Safde repeated, taking out his pen and running it over the cubes. "You need more balance."

For the next hour they corrected the napkin, cube-by-cube, until, exhausted, stomachs bloated with tea, they shook hands and went back to their apartments in the student ghetto. The napkin naturally went with Armen, who put it in his desk and promptly forgot about it. The design he entered into the competition was in many ways the napkin-blueprint's antithesis: a gothic revival, complete with twin turrets and a courtyard ensconced by stained glass.

To Armen's surprise, Safde intended to enter a blueprint eerily similar to the wasp's nest Armen had drawn on the napkin.

"You can't enter that. It's my design."

Safde wiggled his moustache. "Armen, this is my thesis."

Reality dawned: Safde had been squirreling away Armen's ideas, stockpiling the good ones and nurturing them into fruition. "Motherfucker," Armen said.

Safde frowned. He dunked his teabag a few times in his cup, sending inky tannins pluming through the water. "What's the purpose of discussing ideas if they just stay ideas? Besides which, I was the one who brought up the idea of the cubes needing balance. It was mine first."

"The fuck it was."

"Armen."

Standing up with such force that he spilled both their teas, Armen spun on his heel and walked out

of the cafeteria, making sure to bump the table with his hip. Safde's cup of Earl Grey teetered, hanging on the precipice of catastrophe, before Safde righted it.

After Safde's design won the competition, Armen contacted the university's dean, as well as the chair of the architectural department and the judges of the competition. His charges were relatively simple: Safde stole his design and entered it without so much as a footnote referencing the inspiration.

"You have a napkin," the dean said, knitting his fingers in front of him. "You have a napkin and nothing else?"

Clearing his throat, Armen said, "The napkin, of course, can be carbon-dated."

Meanwhile, Safde sat very still in the seat across from Armen, his moustache, as usual, impeccably styled, his shirt and corduroy jacket too large.

As yet he'd said nothing in his defense.

Armen stood up, and buttoning the middle button of his coat he said, "I'm not going to pretend that the entire building, in all its intricacies, is mine. Not hardly. Mr. Safde should be commended for putting it all together. However, I feel it's only right that history - " here Armen paused, letting the syllables drift for effect - "history should be about facts. How we recognize them. Because, gentlemen, if we can't trust history, by Christ, what can we trust?" He glanced at Safde to see how the Christ reference went off. "In summary: history should recognize my contribution to the Habitat 67. I don't want money. I don't want fame. Just recognition for the part I played in the construction of art."

He sat down, satisfied as the committee nodded to Safde.

"Your turn."

Safde opened his sketchbook. "Predating his napkin by two years." The sketchbook passed around

the room, leaving mumbles, nods, somber faces in its wake. Safde also passed around a notebook containing more esoteric musings on the design, each similarly dated, along with a paper he wrote for his first year perspectives class containing passages highlighting the germ for what would eventually become - Safde pointed, Safde orated - his grand design.

After they'd been dismissed, Armen sped-walked to the washroom with Safde a step or two back.

Safde sidled up to the urinal next to him. "Why are you doing this?"

Armen kept his eyes on the tile in front of him. From the corner of his eye he could see Safde's head turned, his moustache curled downwards in a frown. Self-righteous Jew. Which was not to say that Armen was an anti-Semite, he was just one to call a spade a spade. Yes, your people have suffered, he wanted to say to Safde, shaking him by the shoulders. But why do you get to cash in on that, decades after the fact? Where's the fairness in that?

Armen gave himself a few crisp shakes and zipped up his fly. Only then did he turn to address Safde, who had yet to finish urinating. "You stole my idea, you self-righteous prick."

"We both know that's not true."

"You fucker," Armen said.

Safde patted him on the shoulder. "Go with God, Armen. Forget. Forgive. Move on."

In the coming years, Armen had tried all three. The problem was this: Safde was famous and Armen was not; Safde was rich and Armen, though comfortable, was not; Safde's now considered one of the finest architects of all time while Armen tried to hit on coworkers young enough to be his grandchildren, and designed buildings nobody gave a shit about. On most evenings, he couldn't even get an erection decent enough to ejaculate.

Armen caught wind that an apartment in the complex had opened up. Vacancies were rare, but on the strength of his contacts, Armen was one of a handful of short listed candidates. He had met so many people that weekend - members of the Habitat 67 condo board, other residents - that he could no longer place names to faces.

The man giving him a final look at the vacant apartment could have been a total stranger; a well-dressed homeless man taking advantage of an opportunity to tour somewhere famous.

"You must understand," he was saying now, leading Armen down the hall, "that Habitat 67 is a very exclusive place. Just being short listed speaks volumes to your stature in the community."

"Of course," Armen said. "I know the magnitude of the address. Actually, I have a very personal connection to the architect."

The man raised his eyebrows. Armen went on to explain his connection to Safde, leaving out nothing save the circumstance that led to the breaking down of their friendship.

"So you were friends?"

"Classmates, friends, colleagues." Armen took a deep breath, reached out and touched a wall. "It's a wonderful building."

Armen's tour guide seemed duly impressed. As they shook hands, Armen noted that he held his palm longer than required, dipping his head almost reverentially.

"We'll be in touch," he said, and he was. Two weeks later, there was a message on Armen's answering machine. Armen paused the tape, poured a snifter of scotch, and braced himself while listening.

"Your application was strong, and certainly your connection to Safde is impressive. However, we've decided to go with another applicant. You will of course remain on the waiting list, at the very top, and will be the first contacted should another vacancy arise."

That was the breaking point. The next day Armen took out a sheet of paper and calculated how to go about blowing up the building as neatly as possible. In his eyes, it was Safde again that had fucked him over. Always Safde.

In the car, Armen pulled the seatbelt across his chest and stared at the napkin on the dashboard. Some of the ink had faded, the squares blurring together.

The tangibles, then, of vandalism were on a grand scale. The destruction of a building he could handle; it was, after all, his design. The Lord taketh, the Lord taketh away. But Armen was no murderer, so how does one set off a bomb in a building occupied by over thirty residents?

One by one he had approached the people in the west wing using the guise of a filmmaker who wanted free use of the side of the building. He offered each resident a thousand dollars, money he'd been saving for a retirement villa in rural Ukraine. Bribing the superintendents was no simple matter, either. He convinced them that each resident would have their apartment featured in a special issue of *Architectural Digest*, a magazine for which Armen had once or twice penned an article.

"One night is all I need," he assured them. "Six in the evening until about six in the morning. After that, it's back to normal."

It took some time, getting the logistics down. He filed for a business license, listing on the application, "Production Company: Documentary Films," as the business's mandate. Even with all of Armen's savings, destroying the entire place was beyond his means. What he could do, was cause enough damage to one side to threaten the entire west block's structural integrity. The tennis courts, Armen mused, would take the brunt of the blast. Tennis courts should have no place in a work of art.

He drove slowly from his condo in Outremont, across the river, and parked the car down the street.

It wasn't the first time he'd seen the building up close, but something about the way the setting sun hit it made the meat of Armen's heart tighten. It was beautiful. While his idea had been the seed, one could not, save for the inane cultural amenities - the tennis court, fault his technique. Would Armen have made it better? Of course. As it stood, Habitat 67 had too many bells and whistles, too many idiosyncrasies.

Originally designed to provide affordable housing in close quarters, it had become the housing destination for the rich and cultured. Each of the units was equipped with a small garden, the models ranging from 1 to 15 cubes apiece. More city than apartment building, really.

Armen had bribed the custodial staff - a surprisingly professional team of eleven immigrants - to take the night off. He found a door in the back propped open. As he walked through the halls of the west wing, Armen was overcome by the same sense of uncanny familiarity he felt when he visited other buildings he'd designed.

One by one, he knocked on the apartment doors, opened them, and inspected the rooms. Empty, all, on the first floor, the second floor, and then the third. Just in case, he'd bought a pistol. He felt it weighing heavy in the inside pocket of his coat. The same pocket he kept the napkin.

Armen had never fired a gun before and was surprised at its weight.

He heard rustling behind the door, the shifting of locks.

"Can I help you?"

"Are you - " Armen read the piece of paper - "Yitzak Brownstein?"

"What's it to you?"

Armen cleared his throat. "The filmmaker. I spoke to someone about you vacating the apartment for the evening."

"Not me you didn't."

“No,” Armen conceded. “Someone younger.”

Yitzak yawned. “My son.”

He was older than Armen, eighty at least. Skinny chest sunken inside a wrinkled white shirt, a bit of coffee stained on the lapel. Silver chest hair curled in the pocket of his neck, between the collarbones, like a fist of steel wool. His beard hung just as stiffly, and - this was precious, Armen almost chuckled, this was irony at its finest - a brassy Star of David under hung there.

On a cosmic level, things were starting to make sense. To conquer Safde, to make things right, he would have to confront this man, Safde's doppelganger. Besides, things had progressed to the point of no return. Anything less than complete annihilation of the buildings west wing, along with incarceration, would be a letdown.

"You have to go," Armen said, puffing out his chest. “Contractually, you’re obligated.”

“Contractually my ass.” Yitzak moved to close the door.

Taking stock of the situation, it occurred to Armen that he was bigger than Yitzak. He still had muscles on his arms, could still (probably) run a mile without his lungs imploding and his heart coming to pieces. It was nature, after all: the strong survive by dominating the weak. And so, for the first time in over twenty years, Armen resorted to violence.

Stopping his foot in the door, Armen withdrew his pistol and pressed the barrel against Yitzak's temple. The sheer criminality, the griminess of the scene, made Armen feel thirty years younger.

"Alright," Armen said. "Outside. Now. I didn't want to have to do this."

Instead of struggling, Yitzak turned until the barrel of the pistol grazed the tip of his nose. His eyes crossed momentarily and he shook his head.

“This is supposed to scare me? It’s not even a real gun.”

Armen tightened his grip on the handle. “The hell it isn’t.”

“Kid, listen. I was in the army. I know a real gun. That is a paperweight.”

The man who’d sold Armen the explosives had also sold him the gun. He hadn’t tried firing it, but all evidence pointed to its authenticity. Weight, the internal mechanism that clicked whenever he pulled the trigger, even the smell. The gun smelled like a gun, gritty with the faint sulfuric odor of combustion.

Yitzak folded his arms across his chest. “So pull the trigger.”

“At you?”

“At me, at the floor, whatever. It won’t make a difference. You can’t milk a dead cow.”

Armen raised the gun to the ceiling, closed one of his eyes and pulled the trigger. A click followed by silence.

“The safety’s probably on,” Armen said.

“If the safety was on you wouldn’t have been able to pull the trigger.”

Armen considered that. Would he even know what a safety function would look like? It was while he was examining the gun that Yitzak, with preternatural speed, lunged forward, took him by the shoulders and – like a bulldozer – buried his knee in Armen’s groin.

The curtains had been drawn and except for the small lamp on the writing desk, the room was pitch black. Armen woke on the couch, two bags of frozen mixed vegetables stacked on his crotch. On the recliner across from him, Yitzak had dismantled the toy pistol on the coffee table, each metallic piece carefully arranged to its neighbors. Similarly gutted was Armen’s wallet, which now sat on the other end of the coffee table, orbited by a half-moon of credit cards, identification, and an embarrassment of wrinkled receipts.

Starting with his fingers, Armen slowly began testing his body by moving one ligament at a time. He felt a slight, localized throbbing under the bag of vegetables: slower than a heartbeat, but just as strong.

“It lives,” Yitzak said, spitting on a small horseshoe-shaped piece of metal and giving it a good rub against his shirt.

“What time is it?”

“Half past midnight. You were out for a good hour. I was afraid maybe I’d ruptured your testicles and you were dying of internal bleeding.” He set a piece of the pistol down. “How are your boys, anyway?”

The bag of vegetables shifted on his lap. “Sore.”

“To be expected. Can I get you something to drink? Water? Scotch? I have a sharp Glenmorangie I just opened yesterday.”

“Water,” Armen sighed.

Yitzak kept talking from the other room, raising his voice until he was practically shouting over the sound of the faucet. “While you were having your beauty rest, someone dropped by. Something about your car. Dangerous person. A bit bonkers. Blah blah. Had a beard. Frenchman. I told him I hadn’t seen anything strange.” The sound of running water stopped abruptly and Yitzak reappeared, carrying two glasses in one hand and a pair of cigars in the other. “You smoke, I presume?”

“Did he say his name?”

“Something with a G. I could barely understand him. One of those accents.” Yitzak set the glasses of water down and rummaged through his pockets. “He left a card. Here we go. Guy. That was name. Skinny bastard, a bit faggy looking. Skinny tie. Who wears skinny ties? No meat on them. He seemed to think you were going to do something stupid. What did he say? ‘A danger to yourself.’ Which might explain this doohickey.” Yitzak swirled his drink around, took a gulp and dumped the rest into the potted aloe vera plant

beside the sofa. From behind the pot he retrieved the detonator for the bomb, a plastic case no bigger than a Rubik's cube. "Unlike the ersatz peashooter over there, this appears to be legitimate. A real professional job. I took the liberty of disarming it. Wouldn't want it to go off accidentally. Didn't take you for the Unabomber, but life is full of surprises. Don't bother trying to explain. I don't care, don't want to know." He leaned forward, making fulcrums of his elbows by planting them on his knees. "I'll make you a deal. If you can make me say uncle, I'll go without a struggle."

"Uncle?"

"What are you, an idiot?" He cracked the knobby set of knuckles on one hand, then the other. "You don't know what saying uncle means? When two people wrestle, the one who gives up says uncle. It means he quits." Yitzak stood, clapped his hands, and started to undo his belt. "Move the coffee table over."

The belt soared through the air before curling at Armen's feet, followed almost immediately by Yitzak's pants sliding to his feet. The shirt came next, wrenched in one hulk-like movement. There was a flurry of buttons popping off, dotting the carpet. He did a few jumping jacks and ran on the spot. Armpits white and untanned, the flesh in pockets around his elbows flapping up and down with unnerving slaps.

"You want to wrestle, here, in your living room?"

"Greco-Roman rules. No punching, biting, or head butting. And for your sake, nothing involving the groin. Everything else is legal."

Armen squinted. There wasn't much to Yitzak – a hundred and ten pounds, soaking wet. A wiry build, though his muscles were taut under the skin. "How old are you?"

"Seventy-six. You?"

"Fifty-two."

"See? An advantage of over two decades. The odds are in your favor, except for the balls."

Armen wasn't in bad shape. Twice a week he swam laps at the YMCA, more often than not in the fast lane.

Stripped to his undershirt and a pair of near-translucent white briefs, Armen did a few stretches. An old racquetball accident had gibbled his rotator cuff, the socket of his shoulder clucking every time he shrugged. He felt almost gladiatorial, the way Greek Olympians must have felt before competing in stadiums. The sun transforming sweaty backs into tanned leather, the anointing of olive oil before every event.

"I should warn you," Yitzak said. "I was the best wrestler back in the army. Won nationals two years straight at 65 kilograms." He had by now doffed his underwear and stood naked, his pubic hair a wiry explosion. Violently he slapped at his chest, leaving handprints pink and bright on the skin. "First one to say uncle loses. In the event you're speech is impeded, vigorous tapping on the ground or your opponent signals submission. Understood?"

"Do you have to be naked?"

Yitzak snorted. "You people these days. Everything's gay to you." He eased into a crouch. "If that's your stance, this is going to be over quick and easy."

Armen tried to mirror Yitzak's pose. Slowly they circled, Armen bumping into the sofa, Yitzak stepping briskly around Armen's slacks.

"Blitzkrieg, asshat," Yitzak shouted, lunging forward and diving for Armen's torso. Once he had a grip, Armen struggled to pry him off while Yitzak coiled a leg around his knee, dragging him to the ground.

Using his fists, Armen pounded on Yitzak's hands until they broke apart. He turned and buried his shoulder into Yitzak's stomach. The old man grunted, bending over just low enough for Armen to lock his head in an armpit. Wrenching the neck, Armen shouted, "Say uncle."

"Eat my shit, rookie," Yitzak said, his voice muffled by the crook of Armen's elbow.

An arm snaked around Armen's neck, tightening around the windpipe. Blood pooled in his forehead. He reached down and grabbed Yitzak's foot. His fingers were knives sliding between the toes. Taking a handle, Armen twisted until the grip on his neck loosened.

"You cheap son of bitch," Yitzak hollered, wrenching his foot back.

Exhausted, they slumped to the carpet. "I think I'm having a fucking heart attack," Armen wheezed.

"That was pretty good. You almost had me with the toehold. Very creative. Who did you think you were fighting?"

"Nobody."

"Pig's ass, nobody. I pretended you were my son, the fucking cockbag. He convinced some court that I'm a retard and tries to run my life."

"He cares, probably."

"Thanks to him I can't drive anymore. I can spot a nice pair of tits at two clicks and he thinks I'm blind." He reached down and scratched his crotch. "I think I'm going to have rug burn on my ass."

Armen nodded dumbly, rubbing his neck. The vertebrae near the base of his skull ached, a percussive throb echoing down his spine.

"Wouldn't worry about that. You'd know if it was serious. I'll go get the frozen vegetables again."

When he returned, Armen was on his back, staring at the patterned ceiling. He closed his eyes and said Safde's name.

"Come again?"

"He's the one who designed the building. The one I was pretending to fight."

“Never heard of him. Did he bang your wife? Shit in your loafers?”

He stole my life, Armen wanted to say. He robbed me of a place in history. Somehow, though, he couldn't bring himself to elaborate. For months his mind had been on Safde. Trees were Safde. Computer screens were Safde.

If Safde had walked into the apartment, then and there, he would have been indistinguishable from the walls, which were, of course, Safde. Even the air was Safde.

“I was going to blow up this building. Or at least half of it.”

“Far out.”

Armen coughed a few times and, in the wake of some spasms, felt the exhaustion of his entire body settle into his stomach. “Can I use your washroom? I think I'm going to vomit.”

“First door on your right, past the solarium. Don't forget to flush.”

Armen tried several doors before stumbling into what turned out to be Yitzak's bedroom.

On the walls, on the bed, were pictures everywhere. Armen picked up a handful, dealing them on the bed like cards. The first was of Yitzak, presumably with his wife and son, under the glossy blur of a dawning sun. Next a sepia photograph, the color all runny, of Yitzak in uniform, his hat looking very much like a deflated hot dog bun on his head. The third was a photo that had clearly been taken over a half century ago: A woman with thick dark eyebrows and velveteen lips in a coy smile, a pair of breasts threatening to burst from a one-piece bathing suit. In the background a beach, an ocean, one single wave rising as if preparing to swallow her whole. There were hues of color in it, subtle pockets of life that, on closer inspection, turned out to be the work of pencil crayons. In the top right hand corner, Armen noted the edge of something too close to the camera to make out. The smear of a finger, just grazing the lens.

Somehow it fit. Perfectly imperfect. Armen set the photo back on the bedside table and trotted off in

search of the john, closing the bedroom door gently behind him.

When he came back to the living room Yitzak had fallen asleep on the wooden chair next to the bed, a salty line of drool caked on his cheek. Evidently he'd pieced together the gun, slipped all the cards and receipts back into Armen's wallet, and screwed the casing of the detonator back together with a post-it note stuck to the red button.

Armen read the single word, scribbled in mirthful, almost childlike cursive: KA-BOOM. Armen dropped the napkin in the sink. On his way out, he locked the door. Outside, the building looked ugly and beautiful. Armen, walking to the car, turning the ignition on, felt the same way. He checked his face in the mirror; his nose was broken. Ugly and beautiful, too.

Andrew MacDonald won the Western Magazine Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the Journey Prize. He lives in Toronto, where he's writing a novel.

POETRY

SOMETHING, SOMETHING, SOMETHING,
NEW CANADIAN POETRY

Usually there is a lengthy poem preamble about the selected poems published in a given magazine. *The Acrobat* wants you to read the poems and know a little something about the poets before reading the poems. Here are the official bios of the poets involved in this supplement, followed by the poetry by the poets involved.

Catherine Owen is a Vancouver poet, writer, bassist and tutor/ editor with two English Literature degrees from SFU. She has been publishing trade books since 1998 and as of 2012 has nine titles out of poetry, one of epistles and an upcoming collection of prose essays/ memoirs. Her presses include: Exile Editions, Wolsak & Wynn, Anvil Press, Mansfield Press and Black Moss.

Robin Richardson is the author of Knife Throwing Through Self-Hypnosis (ECW Press, 2013) and Grunt of the Minotaur (Insomniac Press). She holds an MFA in poetry from Sarah Lawrence, and her work has appeared in or is forthcoming in many journals including Tin House, Arc, The Berkeley Poetry Review, The Malahat Review, and The Cortland Review. She would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Mike Spry is a writer, editor, and columnist who has written for The Toronto Star, Maisonneuve, and The Smoking Jacket, among others. Spry is a founder and Senior Editor at the literary sports journal [The Barnstormer](#); the author of [JACK](#) (Snare Books, 2008), which was shortlisted for the 2009 Quebec Writers' Federation A.M. Klein Prize for Poetry; and he was longlisted for the 2010 Journey Prize. His most recent work is [Distillery Songs](#) (Insomniac Press, 2011), which was shortlisted for the 2012 ReLit Award.

Jenny Sampirisi is the author of the novel is/was from Insomniac Press. She is the Managing Editor of BookThug where she also edits the Department of Narrative Studies imprint, which focuses on innovative prose. She is co-director of the Toronto New School of Writing, a series of reading and writing workshops designed and facilitated by working writers. She teaches English Literature and Composition at Ryerson University. Croak is her first poetry collection.

a rawlings (a.k.a. angela rawlings, a.rawlings, angel:a raw larynx) is a poet, arts educator, and interdisciplinarian who has presented and/ or published work in Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, and the United States. Her first book, Wide slumber for lepidopterists (Coach House Books, 2006) received an Alcuin Award for Design. rawlings received a Chalmers Arts Fellowship in 2009 and 2010, enabling her to develop and present new work in Belgium, Canada, and Iceland. Recently, she was selected the 2012 Queensland Poet-in-Residence; during her tenure, she spends three months in Australia on an interdisciplinary project

that combines poetry, acoustic ecology, and counter-mapping. She is currently pursuing a Masters in Environment and Natural Resource Management at the University of Iceland.

Ewan Whyte is a classical scholar and poet living in Toronto. His work has appeared in the Globe & Mail, Gulch, and Literary Review of Canada. He is the author of a translation of Catullus.

Oliver Sullivan is a Toronto-born poet and musician currently living in Montreal.

Sonia Di Placido is a writer, performer, and artist currently completing the Creative Writing, Optional Residency MFA Program, with the University of British Columbia. She is also a graduate of the Ryerson University Theatre School and holds an honours degree in Humanities from York University. She has worked as a Supernumerary with the Canadian Opera Company and is a member of the Association of Italian Canadian Writers. Sonia has published profile pieces, creative non-fiction, and poems in literary journals and anthologies. Her first book of poems titled Exaltation in Cadmium Red launched October 2012.

Dina Del Bucchia's first book of poetry, Coping with Emotions and Otters, will be released by Talonbooks in spring 2013. She writes for Canada Arts Connect magazine and is a coordinator of the Real Vancouver Writers' Series. Her work has appeared in literary magazines across Canada, as art in Old Friends', Funny Business, and her chapbook, How to Be Sad, was a part of chapbook exhibition, Arte Factum. Her story, "Under the 'I'" was nominated for the 2012 RBC Writers' Trust Bronwen Wallace Award. She lives in Vancouver.

Jess Taylor is a Toronto poet and fiction writer. She is the founder of the Emerging Writers Reading Series.

Gregory Cochrane is a Toronto writer and artist. He works in audio, clay, guitar and steel.

Kateri Lanthier holds a BA and MA in English from the University of Toronto. She is a freelance writer specializing in design, architecture and fine art—and the occasional poetry review. Her poetry has been published in journals in Canada, the United States, and England, including Descant, Grain, Matrix, The Antigonish Review, Saturday Night, Quarry, London Magazine, www.levelerpoetry.com and www.lyrelyre.com. [Reporting from Night](#), her first collection, was published by Iguana Books in December 2011. She should be working on her novel set in Toronto's Beach neighbourhood but is reading and writing poetry day and night.

Mat Laporte is co-editor and co-founder of Ferno House, a micro-press publisher of poetry. He is the author of the chapbooks Demons, Chance Poetics and Billboards from Hell. He lives in Toronto.

Andrew Murphy is a Toronto poet and English student.

Paule Kelly-Rbéaume is a Toronto poet and English student.

Michael Chernoff is a Toronto poet and English student.

Andrew F is a Toronto poet.

CATHERINE OWEN

Placket Asperous

I didn't mean to make you into a robot said the furniture on a morning where
The far distant factories resemble rotted molars beneath a fuscous sky and the cat
Coils its thick comma in my lap as I drink black java that is friendly, that is certified.
Relationships are never a straightforward gargle with Listerine but require realignments
Of the chassis and idiolects on an irregularly scheduled basis.
What's this business of being in love as if unless we always feel like crawling inside each others'
Gut buckets and whistling Figaro the contract to compost together is somehow void.
It's been a while since I was elated said the futon to the self-cleaning oven and welcome
To depression could be the reply or hello adulthood though there are crows
Twisting back to the river like wily licorice Niblets and you don't really want to jeté
Over the balcony do you knowing precisely how long it took for them to cart away
The stained mattress left at the intersection of Lovers' Lane & Lost Lagoon.

ROBIN RICHARDSON

The Future Should Not Be Shared

A clairvoyant caregiver dips her fingers
in the palm of an aging ballerina. She charts
the skid-marks on her leotard; legs of twine
once twisted in a waltz of soldiers, now
resigned to pacing pink-slippered
on a mismatched marble floor. Aplomb
she sits, back exact as starched lace,
shawl shoulder-slipping, folds revealing
moles in ominous configuration. Clairvoyant
slaps a photograph against the ashtray,
tattered two-page spread, Swan Lake, long-
necked congregation. *Past*, she says. *Present*
is the chipped-knee, crow's feet, square
tableau of kitsch and kitchen table. *Future*
falls between them; figures coming through
the curtain of an open window stand in tandem
with the spider plants and plaques in squall
against the far wall. Five men. Five chiming
in a ghost-like choir where a love affair
becomes a pulp-book, plotted perfectly to end.

MIKE SPRY

Bourbon & Eventide

1. It was 2008. The DJ played “Smells Like Teen Spirit”.

“I love this band,” she said. “I can’t wait to see them live.”

He bought her another drink.

9. At a friend’s Halloween party, where an obstetrician

was dressed as a pediatrician, she whispered:

“Sex shouldn’t be ironic,” and was dressed as a girl he loved.

11. He had had too much to drink. His bladder was full.

He could not for the life of him find the third floor washroom.

He had become an easy drunk. The house was a bungalow.

14. Turns out it was infection, not religion, that led directly

to his circumcision, leading her to believe

he was not Jesus, and perhaps not even Jewish.

22. They went back to her apartment.

As he climaxed, he could sense her disappointment.

“This must be what it’s like to enjoy soccer,” she whispered.

25. When she awoke, she knew she had made another mistake.

He moved his left forearm comfortably between her breasts.

She kissed his hand and said: “You’ll always be my future husband.”

30. She became a fan of his sterility.

Every time she got her period,
she called to say how much she loved him.

34. He couldn't remember his 24th birthday,
or when he started to go bald. But her smile,
the feel of her palm against his. That, he knew.

42. They rarely danced, but she fit well in his arms.

At a wedding once, they sat at different tables.

It was a sign of things to come.

49. It took three hours to find an open pharmacy.

She tore into the pregnancy test kit and shoved the stick
under her tongue. Soon they'd know.

52. They sounded like a country song. He turned
the radio off. The truck seemed to drive itself.

"It's getting late," she said. "This won't be enough."

66. She loved his touch. It felt like dayspring and terror.

They lay there for a while, after which she asked him to dress her.

"This is what it will be like after you find my body," she whispered.

77. It was fall. The lake had grown still. They passed
the bottle back and forth until it was empty and they were not.

He thought about it, but didn't.

They had stopped the truck when the road had grown to an end.

Sitting on the hood, they listened to a fading AM signal

and watched the headlights reach aimlessly into the gloaming.

Later, they danced in the tall grass until the eventide gave out.

“I don’t know the way back,” he said.

“I don’t know the way back,” she said.

JENNY SAMPIRISI

Heal

I reached for the key under the burlap sack under the small table-top barbecue under the wood bench under the flower pots. I reached for the key and felt the possum's belly. Rabbit-furred possum. It took such time to see her face. I smashed her jaw with a spade. Where is your face? I sprayed her with glass cleaner. In the rain, I threw stones at her back. Where is your face? I left my hand in her belly and climbed through the window.

I reached for the key in the possum's belly, full of teats and babies. I plucked the smallest from a nipple and tried the door. It spit milk and the door didn't open. I tried each one. But the door wouldn't open. Possum hissed and spat but didn't bite. I went in through the window with her babies in my arms.

The house was locked shut. I closed my eyes and felt for the key. The possum shifted. He rolled over as a cat and let my hands into his hair. He was calm and observant. I pretended this was what I was looking for. We sat together for a while.

I reached for the key and found the possum's tail and tummy, face and hands. I went to bed and dreamt of her. Her belly ripped open. My hand on her soft fur belly held the wound shut. If I moved she would die. I held her tight. When I took my hand back I whispered, sorry, sorry, sorry.

Heal

reached for key / burlap sack / small table-top barbecue / wood bench / flower pots. reached for key / possum's belly. reached for key in possum's belly / full of teats.

reached for key found possum's tail / tummy / face / hands. plucked from a nipple / tried door. spit milk / door didn't open. each one. door wouldn't open. possum hissed / spat. in. house was locked shut. felt for the key. possum shifted. rolled over as a cat / let hands into hair. calm / observant. this was what. sat a while. went to bed / dreamt of. belly ripped open. hand on soft fur belly held wound / shut. held tight. sorry / sorry / sorry.

Heal

Collects dryer sheets. Collects Tim Hortons cups. Collects ashtrays. Collects posters. Collects ointments. Collects cloth bags. Collects wine bottles. Collects VHS tapes. Collects empty pens. Collects repeated photographs. Collects cat hair. Collects single socks. Collects graffiti. Collects CDs. Collects notebooks. Collects graded homework. Collects books, unread. Collects birthday cards. Collects sticky-notes. Collects books, read. Collects half-candles. Collects burnt pots and pans. Collects screen doors, ripped. Collects phone numbers. Collects clocks. Collects speakers. Collects aspirin. Collects picture frames. Collects jewellery. Collects sweaters. Collects gift-wrap. Collects nylons. Collects pennies. Collects cutlery. Collects water bottles. Collects jars. Collects figurines. Collects winter coats. Collects screws. Collects elastic bands. Collects business cards. Collects paint cans. Collects remote controls. Collects unprocessed film. Collects anti-aging creams. Collects tape decks. Collects Ikea dish racks, cutting boards. Collects dresses. Collects make-up. Collects yoga mats. Collects Tupperware lids. Collects pillowcases. Collects cell phones. Collects addresses. Collects calendars. Collects to-do lists. Collects invitations. Collects AC adaptors. Collects prescriptions. Collects chalk. Collects rags. Collects disinfectants. Collects cross-words. Collects frozen meat. Collects mugs. Collects mitts. Collects boxes. Collects TVs. Collects shelves. Collects dried roses. Collects keys. Collects hair ties. Collects tinctures. Collects vitamins. Collects curtains. Collects lamps. Collects lighters. Collects steak knives. Collects dust.

Before that, there was the marsh where the ground didn't keep. How ground and water? How ground or water? How both? How neither?

I'm sorry.

a rawlings

'PATASITES

APPENDIX

Ascaris prunusoides: Common in subtropical regions, this 'patasitic worm embeds itself in hospital peaches. When humans consume these fruits, *Ascaris prunusoides* navigates the digestive tract to eventually reproduce in the appendix. Frenetic breeding causes pain and swelling in the host's appendix; subsequent appendectomies provide young worms a way to propagate their species, by exiting their hosts so they may seek their own hospital peaches.

BRAIN

Acanthamoeba tristis: Infecting the brain, this 'patasite enters the body through contact lenses cleaned with goldfinch feathers.

COLON

Trypanosonorama chlorocruzi: The 'patasite gains its nickname 'the kissing bug' from the sudden sucking sounds audible during its entry into the host's colon. The 'patasite roots itself in the colon and then sprouts a multitude of appendages that grow rapidly until they reach their feeding ground in the host's esophagus. See ESOPHAGUS.

ESOPHAGUS

Trypanosonorama chlorocruzi: Indigenous to Central and South America, the 'kissing bug' feeds on the patterned wings of the esophageal tract at night. See COLON.

LARGE INTESTINE

Dientamoeba fragilis: Upon ingesting food prepared by a knitter, this 'patasite performs intricate macramé within the bowels of its host.

Pteridophyta entamoeba: The largest of all 'patasites, *Pteridophyta entamoeba* resembles the furled fronds of young fern. These pseudofiddleheads travel to the large intestines of their hosts via ingestion, often accompanied by the savoury richness of browned garlic. Note that grapeseed oil provides a clean, neutral flavor that won't compete with the delicate 'patasite.

Pyroblastocystis: The 'patasite inflames its host with spontaneous collaboration.

SMALL INTESTINE

Cryptofungisporidium: This widespread 'patasite contaminates its host through the inhalation of phosphorescent spores of fungal cacti.

Giardia poltergeist: Lumen of the small intestine of any apparition provides the perfect haunt for the phantom *Giardia poltergeist*, which results in the reanimation of its ghost.

Isospora dorothea: Through the digestion of poppies, *Isospora dorothea* weaves its grid deep within the bowels of the host. Melting the host provides the best opportunity to harvest this popular cloth.

STOMACH

Spiointermezzotra erimeowaceieuropaei: The 'patasite enters its host through the ingestion of the songs of domestic animals.

TONGUE

Hymenopterus anisakis: Though typically dormant in all humans, this 'patasite rouses during the ingestion of an inverted wasp chasing inhaled pollen. Its primary activity is to coat the host's tongue with a thin membrane, traditionally considered a mark of revirginity.

EWAN WHYTE

Travelling on a Night Bus

Travelling on a night bus between cities
the overhead lights turned out,

a stillness of strangers resting side by side
in a packed seats.

Long after midnight, in the outer darkness,
along the sides of the highway

the mangled tree-tops of autumn come passing
in a grotesque parade of shapes

against the half-moon haze of the sky.
While watching a procession-

of collapsing monsters our ancestors
would have called gods,

I receive the confirming phone call
that you had died.

Most are asleep on this bus, from the back
I can hear the sleep-fighting voices

of talking children through the silencing
of their mothers.

In front a lit-up electronic devise is reflecting
off a window

double-imaging the trees on the ceiling

(2)

I think of you and your outrageous life-
an odd mixture of the high and low brow.

Your piano interpretations of Beethoven and Brahms,
your respectful mimicking

of Dinu Lipati's recording of Bach's Joy of Man's Desiring

during his remission from cancer.

Your interpretation of Bach as a subtle question and answering,
and how you would obsess on the disembodied bliss of static time in art.

Your sprit held back from the self-conscious rush of death we all face,
where for brief moments is no time at all.

Against this, there were the hardened strippers you would date.
Bringing them into the church to drink wine

and play the organ after the Montreal bars closed.
Your comment that this urge against the sacrosanct

is in all of us to smash past an image to get to what is behind it ...
to find only another persona. You said you had grown tired of this.

Your weeklong bush walks of a hundred miles.
Your interpretation of Colville's painting, Dog and Bridge,

the frozen instant of the dog crossing a bridge
where brooding imminence is created

by the carefully constructed geometrical design
drawing our line of sight to the German Sheppard in the centre right

intensifying our sense of impending violence.
You would speak of the storm of sorrow that would come back on you-

the ordained demons of darkness that are present at every second
hovering near you. The aching loneliness that

could only be taken away by impersonal art.
Passing near a town the opposing traffic comes toward the bus

as a sudden tachycardic flow of blood.
I block the headlights, covering one eye, losing myself

in the central yellow line on the road.
After a time, I look up waking into the changed landscape

to the sound of Mozart's Twinkle Twinkle Little Star
in the voices of small children from the back of the bus,

through their mother's gentle words about sleep.

OLIVER SULLIVAN

Slug Life

I am told that I am made of stars.
I have been told
that the energy of supernovas,
the same energy that gives birth to stars
pulses in the palm of my hand.
I was the fastest sperm.
I beat millions to the prize
and my reward was this life.
So what went wrong?
Why am I staring at a spoon
on my bedroom floor?
Instead of picking it up
and putting it where it belongs,
I am asking how it got there,
when it happened and what I used it for?
I am slacker galaxy.
The sperm that grew to become a slug.

SONIA ELISABETTA DI PLACIDO

Tell Me

where the dead children live. It is my duty to visit them
with poetry and gifts—doves for purity, jam for sweetness,

drums to dissipate, dream away demons. Shoes to stomp out
lonely feelings, red paint to swell their senses. Marbles for each
child to see our world, so they may visit whenever they choose.

Occupy this Room

Occupy these words--willful
regimented type
without remission.

Occupy this wire,
the ink ribbon

tardy electric phrases,
archaic instruments.

Occupy the [w]rite of metal clinch,
orchestrate the space.

Occupy corpus christi
in reverse.

Occupy the anima, this room.

JESS TAYLOR

Every Light on Every Cab

Rain coming down and Friday night fell into perversion and doorsteps and drunken stumbles and the rain was coming down and coming harder and three men peeing against a club, one blocking the other's floppy member from view, and rain was coming out, and urine soaked tarmac, and a girl was sobbing and rain was coming down and I was excited and this was my home and my shoes were soaked squelching leather and people were hugging on street corners and people fucking, trying to fuck, needing to fuck against peeling paint and rain soaked/urine soaked brick and then everyone was in taxis, rain coming down, hard, hard, hard, and I stood, and my feet were puddles, my hands unable to catch droplets, every light on every cab was off.

GREGORY COCHRANE

My First Poem

my first poem
my first poem should establish **my rhyming dominance over other alpha poets in the area**

nam flam glam
slam bam pam

dam ram tam
zam yam cram

my first poem should be succinct and other good poetry words
my first poem should be carved into computer screens and wherever else children get inspired

my first poem should be going viral any second now
my first poem just got laminated on Jimmy Fallon

my first poem will not catapult me to greatness
but may hurl me briefly from the yawning black mouth of time

guitar solo

my first poem should be right up the governor general's alley
my first poem should get me at least some of the chicks if not all of them

but whatever man if the first one takes off I'll think about writing a second
it all depends on how many zeroes you can write on this napkin

KATERI LANTHIER

The Drop and the Glance

WHAT would we do without the basement and attic,
the id and superego of the house?

Tell me, assembled phantasms,
would we finally get some sleep?

Three fingers of moon in the glass.
Enumerate, illumine me.
We haven't hit the threshold yet.
Light shoots from the lip.

Light has every intention.
I was born in black and white.
I cradle my head to expose the film.

The year of *La jetée*.

I was born in black and white.
Your year went psychedelic.
The troubled year of *The White Album*.
Every colour but none.

You thought those songs were full of ghosts
when you were twenty-six.

Now you must sing those ghosts to sleep.
And they've never heard of sleep.

Could a stone skip three Great Lakes?
The shoreline's glitter-shot.
Condos two-thirds full of themselves.

I'm cherishing a scenario.

Tongue in cheek and biting lip...
Ten thousand rapid-fire texts...

I'm not a girl who misses much,
dressed as I am for the comeback.

Hey, blackbird, I'll bring the ice
if you promise to sing 'til it melts.
One-three downbeat, four-four time.
Night flown, are we still awake?

A look will speed a living note.

Pixel-friction done, arise.
A beautiful ruin of the afterhours.
Run final footage, foot and line.

MAT LAPORTE

Antimotional Package

Microwaves offer smokeless cooking
to be inside my brain for however

many minutes. Another will be pleased
to bullshit walk these artifacts into their

unconscious mundane functions.
We suspect it was a dream, educated

like a computer animal, wishing everyone
onesies of death. Metal ducks excrete

different colored pellets; blank, white
pebbly convection cells, cool and warm

at the same time. A human being
passes out in front of the sun

in glasses and a t-shirt. Welcome back,
to the aforementioned sagas plus:

plastic corpse breath. At the bank today;
a baby rubbing herself with a baby,

spindles of surplus value that make
remarkable sports look like the blue velvet

unawareness award for entitlement, thanks
to that bodily sited contact phenomenon.

Barricades

Once upon a time, scorched earth
and thighs. The first word was “dough”
upon my lips. Some voip mixer plan
in highly performative social wear.
Something about how I ate everything
in the house and then proceeded to eat the house.
Life is so much better when you
don’t have to work. It’s hard to say
why anyone ever invented it. Pure power
is super-annuated and dull. I will probably
speak more than my twin brother this weekend.
There is no page to like. I am intact
in this case of lies and I don’t care.
Perhaps we trust our texts too much.
and so continuously toward the dark toilet
trembling in a sea of topless .jpegs, that
function in your night like bayonets,
those enemas and ecstasies!

Total Explosion

We shall be changed by our
boutiquey eating habits

into total waste or cool
organic essence

and my armpits shall smell
like marijuana

one-hundred days long,
an emotional amputee in training.

“No antagonisms, no progress”
and we are in Canada

antagonists *par excellence*.
So the mode of production

→ the mode of exchange
and the same goes for the actual body

of existing society.
Existential ex-lax or gas-x?

“That is what language means.”
Alcide Bava & the State of Siege

I want to write under every poem:
To Be Continued! or

Can't Be Beat! like fanning
oneself with one's debit card.

Like remembering an old song
with new friends.

Or a new song with old friends.
You get the gist.

ANDREW MURPHY

teefing twenty cent prizes

I sat every Saturday
beside the ancient bodies
guiding fingers to numbers
that only they understood, me
constantly cooking empathogenic
sludge in nasal cauldron
afraid of teefing twenty cent
prizes to feed the incantation.
They were all about to die,
and so was I, no longer volunteer
but shut-in with desired
epidermal elasticity
a perfect mannequin to draw in
more corporeal loops.

Listen, there was this man
plugged into a spacesuit
they called an electric wheelchair
slimming a Saturday with
Bingo Cards, forgetting a life
of yesterdays.

While he manoeuvred
his fingers to peepshow film
he told me how he invented
string theory
how we are tied by stars
to the bloom of a lily
how we are constantly
disappearing across
gaps in atoms, stepping
from electron to neutron
in shoes made of plancks.
He told me how once
he watched an woman raped
on wheel trans, how his screaming

and protestations were chambered
by his electric prison,
how his mother was dying on
the other side of the city
but he wasn't allowed out
on those shuttles anymore
wasn't allowed to escort her
past the galaxy
to her home along the edge of time,
how when he complained
they'd starve his failing body-

"Is he telling stories again?"
the sterile sabretooth growled at me,
wearing hospital mask and wielding
syringes,
smiling past fangs as her claws
dug into his back.
The fear, in his eyes, as she wheeled
him away-

*I don't know, maybe hell does exist,
I'm almost positive I smelled sulphur*

as the doors closed behind them,
as she shut him away inside those
inaccessible passageways
that labyrinth of unspoken sorrow.

PAULE KELLY-RHEAUME

Me with a gun

no, dicky
thumbtack slap
Wowiee
A bar of lead across my forehead
this is to replace tears
and what they've fought for
sodden milk
too many things scratched
too many things left to whack

this is me undone
wicker basket full of plum
gut me out
lend me a knife
this one to whack
89

fuck that crackerjack
here's talking to you "sonnie"

Florida Hotel

on the west side
orange lollipops
the green corvette

rhum in the mini-bar
plume sandals the colour

of soaked orchid, child
rev the engine
singe the tires

blow glass into a Florida
hot and sour

your one-way truck
latch the door

pick me up
the bathroom smells nice
pumice stone and pink ice
gold chain on the counter

his his his yours yours yours
I dedicate my life to this
some canvas runners

a felt head
knuckles, fat-hand knuckles

He sits on the bed
plush
velvet

unzips his anorak
blue with yellow, double stripes

I pretend he is James Dean and
kiss him in a flurry

his shorts swish swishing around
his legs hugging each other like wolves

so he is called a theatre school graduate
I am called lady technicolour with a twist

the twist in Florida is that I sit in your lap
and slit
the nerve behind my eye

a cross of smoke blinds
until you taste salt dried in a river down your neck

until my eyes are two pierced holes of blood
to match the stud cushioned in domes of pink

a crest to your wounded chest

until
until

starry night we're in Florida
eyelid to match crimson lip

we're in Florida I can feel the itch
bathing in a condo strip
lipsynch to shifted hip
we're in Florida on the mix
on a candy-cane strip
perfume strawberry slip

I'm your miss too close to grip
spill your mystic plug in the drip
I can smell you

guilty trick
ster
but I wanted it.

throw me another peachy, palm tree Bellini, will ya
look at me, do you know?
this is how I take a hit
head to oven, cut to fist.

MICHAEL CHERNOFF

Drome

Conjure: ivory, eye-brown,
small bust, unsound.

Click-click-clicking,
that beauty, that sticking –
now butting into starkness.

SQUEAK go the stools
rearing frail applause.

Aching for a pang of girth,
unearthing sweat from foul mettles

to reckon daylight's dupe
as punctuated faces
mock slow embraces.

Clenching whims and whimpers
over twisting boulevards

where starry, puckered brows
tsk histories aloud

to smolder delicate
round shoulders.
Thus disturbing darker nights.

ANDY FRIESEN

Dead Legends on the Rise

Petty calls of the Wild
in a cave basement bar—
where timbre sits dead as tables,
warped pool cues hang un-chalked.

Hear the worn-out waxed-up
speakers
hummmm Songs of the Tribe;
Is that a fire in the Valley,
or an incandescent light?
Yet two hours North
lay a bed of virgin stars,
that one by one reveal
a playful wink from god.

AMERICAN BEAUTIES: A CANADIAN ON NEW POETS IN THE U.S. *by Kateri Lanthier*

DISCLAIMER: The following is idiosyncratic. I use the first person, make no claim to gender balance or fair representation of the breadth of poetic styles in the U.S. or of publishing houses and use the occasional exclamation mark. Fair warning!

I have a brought-up-on-CanLit bias towards Canadian poets. While I'd read modern American poetry to about the early 1990s mark, without exactly meaning to I'd ignored the newer poets. Or perhaps I did mean to. They're rather overwhelming in their numbers and in the way they seem to "occupy" the master narratives, the themes and preoccupations of North America. Both *Their Poets* and *Our Poets* will write, say, about consumer culture, terrorism post 9-11, environmental degradation, relationships in a post-feminist (cough) society. But even the American poets who raise the harshest critiques of contemporary life can't seem to help conveying a kind of centrality. Do they have a greater tendency to use the imperative? (Kidding.) Are we more self-deprecating and oblique? (Maybe.) Beyond that, I find it hard to pinpoint the differences—not between the countries, but among the poets. We too have our L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, minimalists, surrealists, Flarfists, erasurists, sonneteers. I considered making a trend-magazine-style chart instead of writing the micro reviews that follow. In the no-holds-barred confessional booth, they have Ariana Reines. We have Lynn Crosbie. To anatomize the numbing brutality of the post-industrial world, we have Jacob McArthur Mooney. They have Timothy Donnelly. And so on.

The following are a few new or new-ish American poets, represented by a token book each. I think you should read 'em. I stumbled across them in my sleep-deprived-to-the-point-of-intoxication rambles through the online poetry village—thanks to the largely border-oblivious world of the internet, it's easier than ever to discover poets and sample their work. I'm offering just a teeny handful of gems here--I could easily name at least 20!--but space will not permit.

First, **Rachel Zucker**. Her book *Museum of Accidents* (Wave Books, 2009) captures the distracted, anxiety-ridden reality of motherhood with unnerving precision. She floods the pages with detail, ranging widely and wildly from car seats, Children's Motrin and Batman puzzles to Ad Reinhardt's black paintings, Beckett and Ginsberg to porn, iChat sex and dragon tattoos. Zucker's poems bubble over. They are urgent, expressing loss of control and exhaustion, approaching panic: "Motherhood has taken my *I* and smothered me to smithereens. I'm bothered./Hot. Lusty. Restless." But after a headlong rushing block of text, Zucker breaks up her long lines with stops and staccato phrases in a deftly musical way. The high pitch drops, of a sudden, to a whisper, in just the sort of shift that characterizes life with small children:

Hello memory. Hello childhood. Hello Middle Ages and Milan Kundera.

Vladimir Nabokov and Norman Mailer. Hello novels and plot progression/and movements and manifestoes. Hello pregnant pauses. Hello active labor.

Hello ringing telephone. Hello all the things waiting to happen. I'm sorry to disappoint you.

Just a poem after all...

Move along. Move along. Nothing
to see here.

As a mother of three, I identify all too well with Zucker's need to assert her own intellectual needs, and even with her emotionally driven, illogical-seeming rationalizations: "or/ I could keep having children which helps a little (hurts/a lot) because everything for a long time is so/keep-the-baby-alive". Her recounting of a miscarriage and its aftermath also rang true for me. The poems in this book are almost oppressive in their plaintive intensity. But I could not look away from these Accidents.

Coeur de Lion (Fence Books, 2007, 2011) by **Ariana Reines** is a breathtaking cri-de-coeur, a diary-like book-length poem that recounts the discovery of a lover's betrayal. It would be merely a transgressive tell-all were it not for the self-scourging, the amorphousness of identity of both the "I" and the "you," and the poet's dark, quirky humour and brilliant digressions. Perhaps this is, in part, writing-as-score-settling, but (just as in Lynn Crosbie's *Liar*, another book-length poem about betrayal) there is much more going on. There's the banality of the discovery and a blog-style flatness to the descriptions of the fallout: "Abigail called me/After I snuck into your e-mail/To say that you were flipped out/And that initially she was surprised/That I would do a thing like that" but Reines moves rapidly into musings on literature, memory, identity: "Now that I am not addressing you/But the "you" of poetry/I am probably doing something horrible and destructive./But this "I" is the I of poetry/And it should be able to do more than I can do." She can be quite funny (the book's title is in part, by the way, a reference to a particular kind of cheese): "Where is the "you" of You/Tube. Who is the/"you" of advertising". Guileless descriptions of sex, very matter of fact, are interspersed with references to Richard the Lionhearted, references to Flaubert, quotations from Marvell and Celan. At the book's best moments, these sorts of threads intertwine: "I told you about the red/Stone of the Strasbourg Cathedral/And that I feel a heat from Gothic/Buildings that feels so human, like/Geometry and plants fucked each/Other and went insane."

The rhapsodic voice in *Thunderbird* (Wave Books, 2012) by **Dorothea Lasky** seems artfully artless. There's a certain childlike, even childish simplicity to the grammar, the sing-song rhythms and pared-down vocabulary, which is accentuated by the lack of punctuation: "I am the horse people should bet on/I am the person most likely to save you from a fire/I am the person who is black smoke/And blows smoke into your eyes". But it's not all breathy effusion, even though the

anaphora builds a trance effect. Lasky is as caught up with the ugly as with the beautiful. Mortality may be the main theme, and Sylvia Plath the presiding spirit, but there's an ebullience to this poetry. In place of despair, a lushness: "We call conversation/Dark language/My body is dark red paper tonguing/The sun of the grave that I am in/Will you go tunneling through my grave/To find the setting sun/Will you go through my grave to get to another sun/One that is deep and blue/And fiery". There's also unpretentious humour: "I like weird ass hippies/and men with hairy backs/And small green animals/And organic milk/And chickens that hatch/out of farms in Vermont/I like weird ass stuff/When we reach the other world/We will all be hippies." The most-quoted lines will probably be: "Poets should get back to saying crazy shit/All of the time." Yes, they should. But for me, the first poem in the collection, which begins "Baby of air/You rose into the mystical/Side of things/You could no longer live with us/We put you in a little home/Where they shut and locked the door/And at night/You blew out/And went wandering through the sea and sand" was the most stunning: an eloquent homage to Plath.

Rollicking, highly spiced, often hilarious and always philosophically loaded, the ghazals of **Anthony Madrid's** *I Am Your Slave Now Do What I Say* (Canarium, 2012) lead the reader in a riotous dance. This is book as gorgeous, irreverent, cymbal-clashing parade, and not just one—a series of them. In traditional ghazals, the poet seems both a wisdom-giver and an extoller of beauty. The reader gets dollops of both here from this poet, but the sensuousness is disrupted by an antic sensibility and the self-contained couplets can seem like one mad intrusive thought after another—at least at first. For example: "THE unit of wine is the cup. Of LOVE, the unit is the kiss. That's here./In Hell, the units are the gallon and the fuck. In Paradise, the drop and the glance." Very well. But here's the next couplet: "Ants are my hero. They debate and obey. They can sit at a table/For eight hours, drawing. They spot out the under-theorized..." And now, this: "HAVE some. For they are as abundant here as the flecks of mica in the Iowa night sky./What are twenty-sided dishes of fancy almonds? What use jewels?" As the reader moves through this inventive first collection, with its heady mix of religious references, lyricism, pop culture, stand-up comedy and sly moral admonishments, it becomes clear that each poem builds its own little world: "HINDUISM! That fractal religion with gods sticking out of the gods!/Every time you open the faucet, you get a sinkful of gods./MADRID, do you not see your poetry gives comfort to the wicked?/It does give comfort to the wicked—but it also makes wiser the wise." Following the ghazal convention, the poet addresses himself in a couplet near the close of most poems, often chastising or sending himself up, but sometimes delivering a flash of insight: "A book is a dead thing. Take it to bed, you're asleep in a minute./Whereas, if a friend is lying next to you, talking—you stay up all the night./That's the way to write, MADRID! Be like a pillow-talking friend--/A good friend, full of question and answer, head propped up on one hand..." Part of the delight here is that you know the parade-within-a-parade of each poem will end, but you can rarely anticipate the final float.

Frederick Seidel seems to have styled himself as the emperor of *déclin de l'empire américain*, but **Timothy Donnelly** might actually be that guy. The poems in *The Cloud Corporation* (Wave Books, 2010) deploy the opaque and jingly, jingo-istic language of MBAs, advertising, political campaigns,

the military and Power Point presentations, all the legalese and sloganeering we swim in. In a time-bending, often melancholy and ironic way, he yokes this diction to imagery of early civilizations, of the ancient world, and then clicks us back to the present. From the title poem, Part 5: “The clouds part revealing the advocates of clouds,/believers in people, ideas and things, the workers/of the united fields of clouds, supporters of the wars//to keep clouds safe, the devotees of heartfelt phrase”. Despite its unflinching inclusion of references to contemporary horrors such as the torture at Abu Ghraib, there’s a plangent dreaminess to this book—its soundtrack could be Radiohead’s “Fitter Happier.” For “The Last Dream of Light Released from Seaports,” Donnelly drew words from The USA Patriot Act (2001) and Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run” (1975) (re-reading the poem after the havoc wrought by Hurricane Sandy made me shiver): “Automated language drones shall implement and expand/written combat, chance procedures, and the day period, while the night//force shall determine public and personal want and want-/removal with a program of general sense regulations, preventing/any means of notice, including not limited to the light//released from seaports, suicide, and the individual dream”. But I suppose there is a slim bit of hope, if we would only pay attention to the birds: “a sparrow sat for a spell/on the windowsill today to communicate the new intelligence.”

Kateri Lanthier holds a BA and MA in English from the University of Toronto. She contributed some poems to our first issue!

EROTICA FATIGUE : HOW SEX IN “LITERATURE” IS ALREADY AN OVERSELL and OVERKILL *by Myna Wallin*

There’s a new hybrid genre in town and it’s coming out with both pistols blaring.

You will buy it. You will like it. Everybody’s doing it. You don’t want to be left out, do you? There’s already a satirical play, *Spank! The Fifty Shades Parody*. The publishers of *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Random House) called E.L. James’ trilogy “romantic erotica,” released the book with a respectable-looking cover, and unleashed enough promotion to raise the Titanic. And *Fifty Shades* is only the beginning. American author Sylvia Day is now being heavily touted as the queen of purple prose passing her writing off as erotica. She’s been churning out this sort of thing for years, but now she’s added more sex to it and is using the same formula that’s sending convoys of raw cash to E.L. James’ new mansion on the hill.

Both Day and James follow the same narrative formula as the traditional Harlequin Romance: rich and worldly handsome man with a brutish manner seduces innocent young woman and sweeps her off her feet in spite of her protestations—and much to her delight. The authors update the traditional romance novel by throwing in plenty of sex (naughty, referred to as “mommy porn”), while the publishers de-emphasize the sleaze and market the work as hip, erotic literature (it’s acceptable to be seen reading these books in public). The resulting pseudo-highbrow “stroke books” are not porn because porn is hotter, are not erotica because erotica is sexier, and certainly aren’t literature because literature is presumably well written.

Here’s an example of Day’s turgid prose:

“He was a bright, scorching flame that singed me with the darkest of pleasures. I couldn’t stay away. I didn’t want to. He was my addiction . . . my every desire . . . mine.” —*Reflected in You*.

And here’s a tart taste of James’ writing:

“Does this mean you’re going to make love to me tonight, Christian?” Holy shit. Did I just say that? His mouth drops open slightly, but he recovers quickly.

“No, Anastasia, it doesn’t. First, I don’t make love. I fuck . . . hard. Second, there’s a lot more paperwork to do. And third, you don’t yet know what you’re in for. You could still run for the hills. Come, I want to show you my playroom.” —*Fifty Shades of Grey*

E.L. James and her BDSM-*lite* trilogy (to the uninitiated—Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism), introduce the world to a tame crash course in a vanilla dominant/submissive relationship. The writing never shakes its roots in Twilight fan fiction. *Shades* was originally published online as “Master of the Universe” under James’ nom de

plume Snowqueen's Icedragon. To put things into perspective, serious authors often cringe when writing explicit sex scenes because they fear they will end up winning the Bad Sex in Fiction Award (notable winners include Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer and John Updike). James' trilogy would qualify for a millennium's worth of these awards.

If readers are becoming aroused, finding that the books add spice to their sex lives, then great. If the printed word, and more importantly the novel, is not dead yet, then that's another reason for anyone in the industry to rejoice. But it's the deliberate dumbing down of the writing that offends my sensibility. And I am not alone. Salman Rushdie sniffed at a recent press conference, "I've never read anything so badly written that got published. It made *Twilight* look like 'War and Peace.'" It's "porn" for Peoria, the movie rights have been sold, and it's heading to a cinema near you soon.

Myna Wallin, author of A Thousand Profane Pieces and Confessions of a Reluctant Congar both published by Tightrope Books.

A woman with blonde hair and glasses is kneeling on a dark wooden floor against a light-colored wall. She is wearing a black tank top and white, patterned knee-high socks. She is looking upwards and to the left, with her right hand held flat, balancing a single red apple. The background is a plain, light-colored wall with a white baseboard.

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