ISSUE NO. 26

Copyright © 2021 The Feathertale Review and its contributors. All rights reserved. Some of the work in this magazine is non-fiction based on true events that occurred in the life of the author. Any offensive references to persons living or dead is done with satirical intent. All other work is fictitious. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously.

The Feathertale Review (ISSN 1911-2734) is published twice a year by Feathertale, PO Box 291, Ottawa, Ontario, K4M 1A3, Canada. Publisher’s mail agreement: 42369539.

This publication is set in Laurentian. Designed in 2001 by Canada’s foremost typographer, Rod McDonald, it was the first typeface ever commissioned by a Canadian magazine. Created for Maclean’s, it is inspired by the work of France’s Claude Garamond (ca. 1490–1561) and England’s William Caslon (1693–1766).

All work featured in this Review is previously unpublished or has been published on www.feathertale.com.

Subscribe to the Review and receive four issues for $30. The Review is printed by the Prolific Group of Winnipeg and is distributed in Canada by Magazines Canada and Disticor Distributors.

Feathertale acknowledges the financial support of the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts for helping to make this issue possible.

Printed in Canada
It’s a delightfully antiquated thing, a magazine: a source of periodic insight, delivered to your door with weekly, monthly, or, in the case of Feathertale, unpredictable frequency.

Used to be, a magazine was the preferred delivery mechanism of premium journalistic and literary content. Books were routinely serialized in their entirety and shipped to the masses in magazines, only for the chapters to later be combined and sold to the elites as overpriced hardcover tomes. Magazines were once packed so thick with miscellany they could literally save your life. In 1842, a British army doctor became the lone survivor of a retreat from Kabul after he tucked an issue of Blackwood’s into his hat for warmth. The magazine — which published anything from stories by the Bronte sisters to the philosophy of dress to annual tallies of sugar production in Brazil — blunted the slash of an Afghan sword, though a bit of skull was sliced off.

For precisely 290 years, magazines have been cheap to buy yet costly to produce, with the entire package generally subsidized by advertisements. Historically, consumers were courted by different magazines from the cradle to the grave and beyond. It didn’t matter if a reader died; publishers would keep their subscriptions going, with renewal notices dispatched to widows, widowers and orphans alike. It was a beautiful, lucrative industry.

Then came Feathertale. On the day we launched (August 31, 2006), there were roughly 1,200 magazines publishing in Canada and 17 million people reading them. Fifteen years later, we now understand that our launch party (held on the third floor of an old Czech pickle factory in Toronto) was the peak of Canadian magazine publishing. The industry began to decline six days later when Facebook launched the news feed.
Now, people no longer even read magazines whilst voiding their bowels. There’s survey data to prove it: 88 per cent of smartphone users say they prefer to scroll on their phone while sitting on the toilet. Of those same people, 89 per cent don’t clean their used-while-pooping phone before taking it to the kitchen. We wish we could say we aren’t aroused by these revelations, but there are coprophiliacs in our midst. As editors, we too would rather spend our defecation time on Facebook, Instagram or TikTok — which is why we have decided to produce an issue that is so artistic yet flimsy, you wouldn’t dare open it anywhere near a toilet.

Welcome to our latest reinvention: a magazine carved pleasingly into four like some medieval execution victim and inserted into a naturally air-conditioned box. This issue has literally been drawn and quartered. By removing its constituent parts, you are partaking in a metaphorical disembowelment. Inside each section (or Tome, as we’ve majestically named them), you’ll find the usual Feathertale miscellany. It’s all in here, from a questionable letter from Xi Jinping (Tome III), to two tubes of boiled, swollen meat (Tome I), to an office rhino named Steve (Tome IV), to a centipede squashed in a rage (Tome II). If dismemberment humour isn’t your thing, we suggest you avoid Habib Mohana’s story (“Circumcision,” Tome I) and turn instead to Ambika Thompson’s whimsical treatise on combatting misogyny with magical immolation (“Burned by the Stake,” Tome III).

The initial design concept came from our printer — a delightful little Manitoban named Christopher, whose previous claim to fame was he’d once thrown a lavish party to show off his latest paper samples to Lewis Lapham, Philip Gourevitch and the rest of the New York City literati. With this issue, Christopher finally has something new to brag about — as do we.

We’d like to use the remaining space on this page to boast that Feathertale was nominated for Best Magazine: Art, Literary, and Culture at the 2021 National Magazine Awards. What’s more, Jenn Lawrence and Kara Pyle won the coveted Art Direction Grand Prix for their work on Feathertale No. 25, which was also nominated for the Issue Grand Prix award.

All bragging aside, we will leave you now with something to read while you disinfect your phone.

— The Editors

HOW TO DELETE SOMEONE ELSE’S TWEET

By Christine Tran

The existence of an Instagram boyfriend belies the survival of Twitter almost-husbands who ghost. Tomorrow, the stakeholders will finally kick this garbage platform off the App Store. But tonight, our “Seen” checkmarks glow into each other’s pores with presumptuous eternity, pregnant with the cerulean blue stunt blood of a maxi-pad commercial. Next year, I take back my ex to simulate the user experience (UX) of sliding your fingers deep inside the pink, wet pillows of a V*nsetto R*cing Gaming Chair in search of a pesky earbud and finding a human tooth. But you and I will render different: I screenshot and file you deep in a hidden photo subfolder, which I titled in mutual annihilation, “This You?”
By Christine Tran

Does Lionel Hutz still live in Springfield?
Perhaps the long, yellow arm of the law
— or the real Nguyen Van Phuoc
(s05e06; “Marge on the Lam”)
— caught up with him.
It wrapped four fingers fatally
tight between his neck and
the knot of a necktie that
he is not even wearing
(s04e21; “Marge in Chains”).

Or can we believe Lionel outran this shadow?
Maybe a “Leo Hurtz,” Esq., fixes your wills,
suits and shoes from inside a Shelbyville strip
mall. He hammers heels and huffs with iron nails
between his teeth, but he nonetheless breathes.

Do an auburn-haired
Bart, Lisa and Maggie Hurtz
mimic chalk testaments in their driveway?
Do they also scatter before
Dad’s bumper-first return
into the garage, steel doors
and clouds parting before a golden
chorus of surnames?

Is there a Mrs. Hurtz on retainer?
Does she pull Lionel’s elastic shoulders
back to bed on nights
when YMCA flashbacks shake
his character model upright
into a standard scream?

“My problem is I’m a real user of women.
I move in right away and stay
until the money’s gone” (s05e22; “Secrets of a
Successful Marriage”). To embrace him —
like hearsay and conjecture — is to proffer kinds of
evidence (s07e18; “The Day the Violence
Died”). The Kwik-E-Mart
dumpster is a burning bed.

Squint & he’s there in the crowd.
Between the Bumblebee Man & the guy
with a bone in his hair.
We haven’t spoken in years.
My own life, I figured, was too dull to write about (it was), and so for source material I browsed bookstores (they still had bookstores in those days) and libraries (there were still a few libraries) and even newspapers (there were two of them).

Chancing, at last, on an inspiring idea, I shut myself away from the world and laboured for days on a poem that was, I humbly felt, the best thing ever written.

It was a ballad. A lengthy one. About an ornery sea captain.

Hoarding brilliance is criminal — sea captain ballads belong to all of us — so I stuffed the poem into an envelope addressed to The Biggest New York City Magazine, dropped it in a mailbox (they still had mailboxes in those days), and waited.

And waited.

While I waited, I daydreamed. Mostly about the Literary World, which I envisioned as a green lawn strewn with tapa tables and Who’s Whos. Into this imposing garden party I pictured myself strolling, stroking my bow tie, twirling a cane, and practising my affectations.

“I beg your pardon,” someone would say, sooner or later, tapping my shoulder, “but aren’t you the celebrated author of ‘The Ornery Sea Captain’?”

And I’d finish my crab puff, tap my bow tie twice, give my cane a flourishing twirl, and (eventually) say, “Yes.”

Then all the August Persons would pour forth in a near-deafening din of crinoline swish and cane clatter, a thousand jewelled hands reaching out for mine.

It was a glorious vision.

As the weeks of waiting became months, I returned to that fantasy again and again. Sometimes I’d be wearing a top hat, and sometimes a beret, but otherwise it played out identically. Until one morning . . .

Reaching into the mailbox, I retrieved — from among the political plugs and fast-food adverts — a letter from The Biggest New York City Magazine.

I secreted the letter back to my suite. As the August Persons peered over my shoulder, I tore it open — and stood there, perplexed.

Writers aren’t like other people.

They have less money. Considerably less.

They drink more. Considerably more.

Palely haunting basements and attics as they do, they could easily be mistaken for ghosts. But writers are themselves haunted — by one diligent ghost in particular. Its name is Rejection.

In my writing lifetime, I’ve received enough rejection letters, easily, to fashion the paper-boat twin of the RMS Titanic. I picture it filled to the brim with editors, floating noisily into icy northern waters.

I once received eleven rejections slips in a single day. What happened the rest of the day is, with a little help from gin, a mystery.

And I remember — how could I forget? — the very first time my work was rejected. That first cosmic shin-kicking.

It was twenty years ago . . .

Like most unimpressive youths with no notion of how or what to write, my first composition was a poem.
The envelope contained my original poem — and not a cheque, but a scrap of paper with a few lines printed on it. I remember the lines verbatim not because they stung (and they did sting) but because, in the ensuing years, I've received identically worded notes at least a million additional times.

*Dear Author:*
*We regret that we are unable to use the enclosed material.*
*Yours,*
*The Editors*

That was it.

The August Persons lifted their chins and laughed derisively. As they polished off the crab puffs, the green lawn receded into the dusty floor of my unswept apartment.

Convinced The Editors had made some dreadful, accidental error, I sent the Captain back to them. He came straight home in record time.

So I tried my luck with *The Second-Biggest New York City Magazine*. Then *The Third-Biggest*. Then *The Fourth*.

And every time, the Captain came sailing back, puffing on his corn pipe, shrugging. I was devastated.

I contemplated scaling a lighthouse and flinging myself into the sea.

I lived in the middle of the Prairies.

But there are other ways of drowning oneself. As every writer knows.

I reached for the gin bottle...

It took me years to have a trio of critical epiphanies.

The first: “The Ornery Sea Captain” was an atrocious poem. In fact, everything I wrote in those days was atrocious. Writing something worth reading takes years of rehearsal. I’m still working on it, actually.

The second: there really is a garden. A beautiful one, full of actual August Persons eating crab puffs, drinking wine and laughing uproariously. What I hadn’t noticed, though, in my youthful fantasizing, were the high walls surrounding the garden, and its oppressive iron door. Submitting one’s work — whether to a magazine or a publishing house — is like approaching that door and taking a random stab at the password. You *might* get it — eventually. If you’re extraordinarily lucky. And you might die trying. There’s really no way to tell which.

The third realization: if you purchase the really big bottles, you can save hundreds of dollars a year on gin.

I’ve still never been published in *The Biggest New York City Magazine*. Or *The Second-Biggest*. Or *The Third*. But I still submit to them. And they still send me Dear Author letters. With distressing regularity.

Though rejection still haunts me, I’ve grown accustomed, at last, to its rasping chains and fetid odours. Like sickness and in-laws, its visits are too numerous and always unwelcome. But I’ve learned to put up with them. If the writer’s life sounds unenviably grim, that’s only because it is.

Consider the following, though, aspirants to literary greatness, before flinging yourselves from lighthouses: from time to time, enigmatically, a possibly intoxicated editor will upset the cosmic order by actually accepting one’s work. This will, in all likelihood, earn one little praise, and less money. The thought of that acceptance, though, can be floated over one’s head for a time, like an umbrella, to protect one’s self-esteem from the downpour of rejections.

That isn’t much, I suppose. But it’s something. A drop of reassurance, to a writer, goes a very long way indeed.

So does a drop of gin.
Attention, families and offshore financial investors!

Feast your eyes on this absolutely gorgeous three-bedroom row house, perfect for a growing family or numbered corporation.

Boasting a professionally restored Victorian exterior and fully renovated interior, this cozy but spacious residence features two upstairs bedrooms, and a third room on the main floor that can be used as an extra bedroom, home office, nursery, or alternatively, simply not used at all.

Perfect for a professional couple with a growing family or a professional accountant with a growing need to wash and/or safely store illicitly gained capital, this immaculate single-family home has been completely redesigned with a beautiful open-concept living room that’s perfect for entertaining guests — or leaving completely empty while it accrues value — with plenty of natural light.

With bespoke finishes and a lovingly styled interior, this model home is available fully furnished for an added cost, so it’s move-in ready for your family. If you are a disembodied corporate entity that exists only on paper without any limbs or bodily vessel and are not in need of any furnishings, the staging furniture can be removed prior to occupancy.

This absolute gem of a property even boasts a fully renovated basement, with a laundry room perfect for washing those endless loads of your children’s clothes, or left completely unused as this property sits tenantless while laundering money.

And as if that wasn’t already enough, this historic downtown property even boasts an enclosed two-car garage in the rear, ideal for parking the family minivan, or parking an absolutely sickening sum of ill-gotten gains beyond the jurisdiction of their country of origin in the warm embrace of this heated structure protected by the rule of law.

Listing at just $2.6 million, this absolutely one-of-a-kind home is ready to move. But don’t let price be a barrier. Let our experienced team of realtors and mortgage brokers work with you and your family to help secure financing with as little as a 5 per cent down payment, or just pay the whole $2.6 million in cash if that’s the entire point of the transaction.

Act now! This property is sure to go fast, and prices are only going to go up!
Imran was a little shy of his ninth birthday, and almost every day he heard his parents talk about his upcoming circumcision. Every week his father bought something for the circumcision feast they were to throw for their guests.

After coming back from school, Imran slung his bag on the wheat sacks that lay in a corner of their bedroom and went out to join his playmates.

"Play good, dear friend, because tomorrow at this time you’ll be lying on your mama’s lap howling in pain," one friend remarked.

"At precisely this time tomorrow, your circumcised willy will be sticking out like a sore thumb, ha ha ha!" another boy giggled.

"I’m not scared of a small cut," Imran replied.

The next afternoon, their house pullulated with friends, relatives and neighbours. The air around the home was thick with the aroma of the meaty feast being cooked, the drummers pounded their enormous drums, and the rooftop heaved with the noisy children who had come to watch the circumcision. Imran wore crisp white clothes and new embroidered peep-toe shoes, while around his long, thin neck hung garlands of paper money, coconut slices, roasted peanuts, fresh basil sprigs, and toffees in transparent wrappers.
Female relatives and neighbours gave him money; some sang songs while others did a little dance around him. His father and aunts showered copper coins and toffees over him, and the girls jostled to collect them. His father and uncle ushered him towards the section of the house where the men sat enjoying the music being played by local musicians. When Imran appeared at the curtain that separated men from women, the musicians quickened the tempo and the children gave him a standing ovation. The scruffy old barber and his meek apprentice stood to receive him. The barber admired Imran’s clothes and shoes and then gestured to the drummers, who immediately stopped banging. The crowd raised their cupped palms towards the sky, and the mullah recited a brief prayer punctuated by a universal “Amin.”

The barber removed Imran’s baggy pants and wrapped a crimson bandana around his caramel-coloured loins. He then seated the boy on a big, upturned pottery dish that was draped in crimson fabric. The barber rubbed Imran’s foreskin between his scrawny fingers for quite a while, then he separated it from the glans with a tiny, smooth wooden stick before securing the foreskin in a homemade reed clamp. The apprentice sat motionless, observing the whole procedure without blinking.

To distract the boy, the barber said, “Look, there is a parrot on your street wall.”

The crowd held its breath; some looked away while others stared intently with morbid curiosity. As Imran turned his head to look to the wall for the parrot, the antique razor came down on the retractable roll of skin with lightning speed. Blood gushed from the fresh wound. Imran felt as if an entire colony of golden hornets had simultaneously stung him, and he uttered a sky-rending scream that made the uncircumcised boys on the rooftop squirm.

That night, Imran slept terribly. He dreamt that a bunch of small penises dangled from his groin while a gang of pirates, brandishing shiny cleavers, swooped at him, hacking off his penises one by one. Smiling gleefully, they thrust the bloody, flaccid penises into their pockets and fled into the night. When they disappeared, he was left to regrow his male organs, only for another gang of pirates to arrive to chop them off. Over and over this occurred, until the pirates began to squabble over the penises, tossing them from one hand to another while the drummers banged on. He awoke, screaming in terror, and continued to scream until his mother put his head on her lap and cuddled him back to sleep. Imran remained bedridden for a week. Each day, the barber made a house call to change the dressing on his penis. Nine days after his circumcision, Imran’s friends convened at his house and invited him to join them to play, but his mother would not let him go out.

The next day, while his mother was busy with chores, Imran snuck
out into the street to meet his friends. He’d been pantless for so long that he didn’t even realize that he’d exited the house in just a shirt that reached down to his knees. Everything seemed new and beautiful to him: the whitewashed minarets of the mosque, the dusty street — even the slimy drain that passed between the houses and the road. He pictured his friends wrapping their arms around him and telling him how they had missed him during his recovery. Instead, they broke into a naughty laugh. Then he looked down at his scruffy, naked legs and stumbled back into his house.

One day while urinating against a mud wall in his house, he took a closer look at his thingy. Without the retractable covering, it looked shiny and pointy, like a newly sharpened pencil. It squirted neat, crisp lines of urine, and he could not resist gazing at it. Holding the penis in his right hand, he began drawing with urine on the mud wall. He drew a bird, but before he could finish its tail and claws the urine supply dried up. He wished he could pass water for hours on end.

On a punishingly hot July afternoon, Imran and his buddies played hide-and-seek in his house, while his family lay enjoying a siesta under a huge awning made from twigs and straw. Then the children decided to hold a peeing match. They drew a line on the ground about a yard from the wall of the goat fold, and lowering their pyjamas, they took positions on the line.

They sucked in their bellies, and on the count of three they released urine jets in an effort to hit the wall. The shiny aqueous arches flew through the hot air, but only a few reached the target. The boys who were unable to spray the wall instead turned their urine pistols on their neighbours, and then the giggling, yelling boys were urinating on one another. When their bladders became empty, they resorted to spitting, and when they could no longer churn out spit missiles, they scooped up handfuls of powdery soil from the ground and fired dirt bombs at each other. Imran’s mother woke and yelled at the children, sending them scurrying to the other side of the house.

The children had a heated discussion to determine the winners of the peeing match. Imran ended the debate by declaring that only the circumcised boys had been able to strike the wall with urine. Then he praised the beauty and utility of circumcised willies.

He gave the uncircumcised boys an alluring pitch about circumcision: “After the operation, your pee-pee will look wonderful. It will squirt out quickly and smoothly, making piddling fun. If anyone is interested in having his willy circumcised, I offer my services for free.” Silence.

But Imran and was persistent, and eventually he and two associates convinced uncircumcised Faizan to let them amputate his prepuce. Imran smuggled a knife out of his kitchen, one boy brought a big pottery dish, and the other boy pilfered dried dates from his neighbour’s rooftop. The other boys in the peeing contest would be spectators.

The guinea pig was led to the barn, where Imran’s family kept their
wheat chaff, farm tools and broken charpoys. The boys seated Faizan on the upturned pottery dish on the pile of wheat chaff. They raised their hands to say a brief prayer, after which dried dates were handed out. They had barely swallowed the dates when Imran's two associates peeled off the guinea pig's pyjamas and held his legs wide apart.

Faizan, who until now had been enjoying everything, suddenly began snivelling, begging them to let him go. The three boys would not relent. Holding the kitchen knife in his right hand, Imran pulled at the boy's prepuce with his left hand, then in one fell swoop guillotined the skin hood of the penis. The sight of the gushing blood and the victim's screams of pain sent the self-proclaimed surgeon, his assistants and the spectators scrambling into the street. The newly circumcised boy sat with his legs spread, blood spurting from his fresh cut and tears streaming down his cheeks. A trickle of blood spilled down the side of the pottery dish to soak the wheat chaff.

For over an hour, the gaggle of terrified kids roamed the streets, trying to formulate a satisfactory answer as to why they had performed the circumcision on Faizan. Finally, they agreed that they would say they had only done so at the boy's request. It wasn't until Imran was standing on his doorstep that he realized he was still holding a little roll of Faizan's foreskin in his hand.

Imran’s family was still enjoying their siesta, so he tiptoed into his house. He made a beeline for the kitchen and put the foreskin in a ceramic bowl. Then he paced the kitchen floor, wondering what to do with it. After a while, he removed the foreskin from the bowl, wrapped it in a piece of paper, and hurried to the bedroom to place it under a tin trunk. He washed his hands and rubbed them on the ground to erase the bloodstains. But then visions of ants feasting on the foreskin set his mind racing. He retrieved it and placed it inside an old book.

A year passed before Imran saw the foreskin again. And when he did, it was tucked inside a folded piece of paper that had slipped out of a book. Imran picked up the paper and unfolded it to reveal the dried foreskin. He quickly refolded the paper and stashed it in a pocket of his school bag.

The next day during recess, Imran gathered his friends and took them to Faizan, who was sitting on the school lawn.

“Faizan, did you lose something?” Imran asked.
“No . . . well . . . let me check.” Faizan fumbled in his pockets.

“Check carefully. It’s an awfully precious thing. Hand over your lunch and I’ll return it to you.” Imran waved the folded paper enticingly.

“I’m not sure . . . well . . . okay.” Faizan handed the lunch to Imran, who asked one of his friends to hold it. The boys crowded around for a better look as Imran unfolded the paper crease by crease until he revealed what looked like a tiny piece of dried date.

The boys clamoured impatiently. “What is it?”

“Ask Faizan — he’s the true owner of this thing.” Imran threw the boys a surreptitious glance, and ten pairs of curious eyes swivelled to Faizan’s face as Imran handed the paper to him.

Faizan examined it. “I don’t know. What is this?”

“It’s very precious,” Imran said. “Smell it.”

Faizan sniffed. “It has no smell.”

“Taste it,” Imran said.

Faizan tentatively nibbled off a tiny piece. He rolled the bland, dry-as-bone fragment across his tongue. “It’s tasteless. What the heck is this thing?”

“It’s your foreskin that we chopped last year!” Imran jumped into the air, yelling with pleasure.

The boys howled with laughter while Faizan sprinted to the tap to rinse his mouth.

At Mom’s Diner, Mom is, in fact, a twenty-four-year-old single man whose averred passion is “less about cooking. For me, the raison d’être of Mom’s Diner is to create an authentic experience.” For Mom, authenticity is a mania, and whether you love his food, hate it, or find it just kind of so-so — and people run the gamut — Mom’s is eerily authentic.

My first time at Mom’s Diner was a brunch meet-up with some old friends. The first thing I noted was that everyone was given a different menu. I found this weird — and annoying, because all of my friends’ menus looked better than mine, particularly Lucy’s, which was full of homemade compotes, scones, eggs Benedict, and a brioche French toast.

My menu had only three items: pancakes, oatmeal, two-egg breakfast. Never having liked oatmeal, and not in the mood for sweet, I got the two-egg breakfast. The meal came with a side of blackened Wonder
Bread, cooled to room temperature, two eggs sunny side up that were shrivelled and firm, and bacon so hard I cut my gums on it.

Looking around at my friends’ breakfasts, I couldn’t help but sulk, and afterwards my friends, surprised, asked if I hadn’t enjoyed my meal. When I said I hadn’t, Lucy said maybe I just got a bad menu. She said there were bound to be some, since everyone got a different menu.

A couple of weeks later, I decided, on a whim, to give Mom’s Diner another try. Lucy and another friend, Younes, were still raving about how much they’d enjoyed their food, so I went for lunch.

The lunch menu was a little bigger. It included two hot dogs with fries, peanut butter sandwiches without the crusts, spaghetti and meatballs, chicken noodle soup, and Kraft Dinner.

I ordered the hot dogs. What I got were two tubes of meat, boiled until swollen, like a fish that’s been floating upside down for a week. The fries looked like McCain Crinkle Cut Superfries. They were clearly oven-baked rather than fried. Half of them were soggy and the other half were burnt.

This mess was twenty-two dollars before the tip, and I decided to complain to my server. I said I had eaten there twice now, and both times I had received overpriced shit. I said I knew everyone got a unique menu, but why were some of them so bad? The server shrugged and said they were sorry I was disappointed. They said they personally had never had a bad meal there, and maybe I should come back and give the dinner menu a try.

I did go back for dinner, with my girlfriend Leila. She hadn’t been to Mom’s yet and really wanted to try it. The place had become so popular that I had to book three weeks out to get a reservation for two.

We were seated at a table by the window with a lovely view of the street, but my menu once again looked pretty bland. I settled on the lasagna and garlic bread, however, after they brought it out to the man at the next table. The lasagna looked rich, meaty and saucy, and the garlic bread was a focaccia made in-house.

The table next to us finished before our meals came up. The man who’d ordered the lasagna insisted the server bring Mom out so he could thank him personally. Mom came out, and the man raved that it was exactly like his mother used to make it, and how, since she’d passed away a year ago, he’d tried over and over to make a lasagna as good as hers, and now, here it was. He said he’d never eat at another restaurant again.

I rubbed my hands together and smiled. Finally, I was going to have a good meal at Mom’s, but then it came. Leila had ordered the shish taouk. It looked okay, which is exactly how Leila described it afterwards. My lasagna, on the other hand, was a congealed mess of noodles doused with what tasted like Cheez Whiz and ketchup, and the garlic bread had a little bit of parsley on it, but no garlic that I could see or taste.

An hour later, when the waiter came by, he looked at my barely touched plate, smiled and said, “Defeated, eh?”

It was my turn to demand to speak to Mom. When Mom came out,
I told him it was the single worst lasagna I had ever had. Mom looked taken aback. He asked if I was sure. I said it was disgusting. I challenged him to taste it. Mom said he tasted everything before it went out, and he agreed that the lasagna I had been served was gross, but he was sure it was authentic.

I glared at Mom and took another bite. I gagged on the cold semblance of a meal, but Mom had been right — it was exactly like my mother used to make it.

I kept going back to Mom’s Diner. I ate everything on the menus offered to me, and everything was awful. There was real butter on the peanut butter sandwich, and the bread was stale; the Kraft Dinner had pancake mix in it as a thickener. I hated every bite, but I couldn’t stop.

After each meal, I’d demand to speak to Mom, and I’d scream at him, and each time, I could see a slight smile on the corner of his lips, and I wanted to kill him.

Then, out of nowhere, Mom’s closed. Apparently, a woman named Eleanor died after she ordered something called A Special Meal Just for Daddy. An autopsy revealed that Eleanor had ingested a lethal dose of strychnine, which was also found in the remains of her final meal.

In the video of Mom’s arrest, you can see that slight smile. When the police ask him if he’s insane, he says he’s not, and he plans to beat the rap. He says he’s always served up authenticity, and if he’s set free, he will continue to do so.

Mom didn’t beat the rap, but Eleanor’s mother was arrested sixteen years after the death of her husband and charged with his murder.

Sometimes I miss Mom’s, but I’ve found a new diner called Pop’s. The food’s not great, but it’s cheap, you can always get a table, and everyone gets the same menu.
CONTRIBUTORS

Ben Coleman is an illustrator working out of Waterloo, Ontario, with his best friend Ralph the yellow Lab.

Kenzi Inouye is an illustrator based in Toronto. Her practice includes painting, ceramics and embroidery. Her work is centred around her sense of humour and love of dad puns.

Habib Mohana was born in Daraban Kalan, Pakistan. He is an assistant professor of English at a government college. Habib writes fiction in English, Urdu and his mother tongue of Saraiki. His short stories have appeared in journals in Canada, China, India, South Africa, the UK and the US.

Jacob Pacey is a National Magazine Award-winning humour writer and advertising copywriter. His work has appeared in McSweeney’s Internet Tendency, The Feathertale Review, The Walrus and others.


Andrew J. Simpson sank his inheritance into the world’s largest collection of monkeys and vintage typewriters. His monkeys have produced two books, Heaven’s Gone to Hell and The Big Picture (both BareBackPress), and sent several stories to Feathertale, each a coded plea for assistance in escaping their life of torment. Thus far, no one has come to their aid.

Christine Tran needs a patch update. Retrievable on other platforms as a PhD student, a gamer, a cult-classic ex-girlfriend, and a fairly decent guitarist.

THE COLLAGES

All images courtesy of the rights-free Collection of the British Library.

PAGE 31:
8. Ibid., 141.
9. Charles Dixon, Fifteen Hundred Miles an Hour [The story of a visit to the planet Mars.] Edited (or rather written) by C. Dixon, etc (London: Bliss, Sands, 1895), 80.
BUDDY, YOU WON’T BELIEVE THE DAY I HAVE HAD. I NEED FRESH PANTS.
Among the very few aspects of Canadian life that have not been touched by COVID-19, surely the most significant is the heap of intellectual dishonesty — the great steaming heap — that lies at the foundation of what we presume to call our culture. At the same time, COVID has left us isolated and alone.

A MID-PANDEMIC COLUMN COMMISSIONED (AND THEN AGGRESSIVELY REJECTED) BY A CANADIAN COTTAGING MAGAZINE (REPURPOSED BY FEATHERTALE WITH MINIMAL ALTERATIONS)

By Charles Wilkins

Illustration by Alannah Astorquiza

Among the very few aspects of Canadian life that have not been touched by COVID-19, surely the most significant is the heap of intellectual dishonesty — the great steaming heap — that lies at the foundation of what we presume to call our culture. At the same time, COVID has left us isolated and alone.
I did not write those sentences; they reached me on Facebook, written by a guy from the University of Winnipeg. But I believe sufficiently in the message that when the editor of a cottaging magazine emailed me and asked if I would consider penning a column on the themes of isolation and survival, I said, “Sure will, Morris! You’ve got it, baby! Is there anywhere in particular you’d like to be kissed?”

I said all of this because, first off, I know that as cottagers — people with options, educations, careers — we would do well, given the pandemic, to internalize a thought or two about human fragility. More pertinently and egotistically, I figured nobody knows more about isolation and survival than I do. As a writer, I have, after all, spent much of the past three hundred dog years by myself in poorly ventilated rooms, on various parts of the planet, taking naps of up to seventeen hours, writing pithy sentences, such as the one you are reading, contemplating exactly the sorts of questions that have haunted inquiring minds since, let us say, the day before yesterday.

I am not talking about questions concerning the meaning or meaningless of life, which are so last week. Or even whether the meaning of life as we know it might be profitably repurposed as single-ply ass-wipe or hand sanitizer, when for so long it has been funnelled directly into the shaping of souls to an improved bottom line and standby flights to the hereafter. No, I am talking about big stuff, big questions — such as, Who’s in the bathroom? And where did yesterday go? And why is it always Wednesday? Or Thursday? — the sort of deep investigations into which I can still sink what used to be my teeth.

Don’t get me wrong — I’m not for a moment saying that by writing for forty-five years I developed any sort of special capacity to do without people. Like most normal figments of the imagination, I cop periodically to an intense moral craving for a good spanking. I am saying, rather, that over the years I have created for myself hundreds of imaginary and marginally psychotic friends, quirky folks, all of whom live rent-free in my head, where the only thing I demand of them is that every second Tuesday they walk en masse over to Anh Dao for a rare beef pho, which they administer to me orally in my high chair.

So the short answer is no, COVID has not seriously affected me. In fact, when I glanced at my news feed the other day, a pop-up appeared, advertising the world’s best balls trimmer. Given that most of my pop-ups feature nutritional anodynes for senility or reverse mortgages atop my existing reverse mortgage, I admit I was flattered. Unfortunately, when I got through to the proprietor, he had just passed away. Luckily, he had refused to accept the result, and said with a little more reverb than one likes to hear in the voices of the living, “I thought you were in long-term care!”

He may even have mentioned survival, which would hardly have been prescient, given that the instinct to keep breathing, even when there is no air left in the room, has been the keynote of my existence,
I knew I was a cliché, the freshly sober individual adopting increasingly fringe hobbies that appear tedious to those who still drink. The dollhouse in the hardware store in no way conveyed power or obsession or artistry at the time of purchase — it was a simple wooden structure with zero frills, no windows, no doors, not even a chimney. I bought twenty other random items with the potential to develop into a hobby at the shopping centre that day, and the dollhouse sat empty and neglected for several weeks. But one night I awoke in the middle of the night while my husband was away on a business trip and began YouTubing demos on constructing tiny furniture. I began scouring flea markets for related treasures, though I decided most items should be handmade, one of a kind.

By the time my husband returned, I had purchased a mini jigsaw and cut windows into each room of the dollhouse, including a skylight in the bedroom. He was astonished, even more so when I took precise

---

DOLLHOUSE

By Laura Clarke
Illustrations by Alannah Astorquiza
measurements and fashioned perfect plastic squares for the window frames. I had always been fun and sloppy and forgetful as an alcoholic and general substance user; everyone was disappointed by my sobriety, not just my husband. I possessed none of the sour energy or penchant for life-ruining drunken mishaps that many in my social group did, including my husband, who had suffered second-degree burns on his thighs while drunkenly cooking sausages naked only six months before.

My husband had expected to see the dollhouse in the garbage after a few weeks. He had never seen me approach anything with such an exacting attitude. I caught him studying my hands, as if he had never noticed them and was now fascinated by what they accomplished, before he commenced a subtle campaign to undermine the relationship between me and the dollhouse (I don’t call it my dollhouse for obvious reasons). I managed to narrow down the source of my husband’s increasingly volatile moodiness to three key factors:

1) He was unsure of how to please me except via sex. When we first started dating, and throughout our relationship and subsequent marriage, one of the primary ways he showed his generosity was through drugs and alcohol. Now his reputation flagged as he stumbled in his attempts to shower me with non-mind-altering gifts. He didn’t understand my taste, but the greater issue was sobriety made me pickier, and he kept forgetting I no longer wore dramatic scarves.

2) I didn’t clean our house anymore; I only cleaned the dollhouse. I performed this duty each morning using a floral-patterned microfibre cloth and a single grey feather.

If you have time to make a coffee table out of popsicle sticks and laminate it with dozens of tiny photos of individual eyes you cut out of different magazines, don’t you have time to do the dishes? my bleary-eyed husband asked one morning while shovelling instant oatmeal into his mouth.

I shrugged. What did he know about being detail-oriented or lovingly creating something with his own hands? He was a big-picture thinker, which meant he had no discernible skills. He wasn’t actually being that sexist when he asked me to do the dishes; I only worked
part-time and he paid for a cleaner (I had trained him to stop saying cleaning lady), so he was talking about doing my own dishes and sometimes his, and sweeping up the old vegetable peels that fell on the tiled floor and shrivelled up slowly over the course of several days, often growing a fine layer a mould. I couldn’t bring myself to clean my home despite the new-found, boundless energy I possessed due to my sobriety. The dollhouse was preventing me. Let me explain: the dollhouse wasn’t distracting me from doing the dishes; the dollhouse did not want me to do the dishes.

3) He was certain the dollhouse was either haunted or would become haunted. He wouldn’t admit this, but I could tell by the way he tried to force his face to remain neutral while gazing upon it. Inevitably, his nostrils would flare and he would suck in his cheeks. His nightmares began soon after the dollhouse entered our lives; he whimpered and twitched like a dog in his sleep. Unfortunately, to a man like my husband, these concerns were unspeakable. He didn’t realize the least of his fears should be whether the dollhouse would become haunted. Do I mean the dollhouse was already haunted? No. The dollhouse was itself.

Something I’ve always loved about my husband, related to his aforementioned generosity, is that he’s free-flowing with compliments. I had been in several relationships where my partner never complimented me; the most they could muster was an occasional I love you. That’s not a compliment. So my husband did compliment the dollhouse. But it would have been better if he hadn’t. It was as though it was sucking his vital life force whenever he commented positively on its living plants in miniature terracotta pots or its stained glass windows (I replaced several clear plastic ones weeks after installing them, deciding they were too plain), or its herringbone-patterned popsicle-stick kitchen floor. Immediately after saying something along the lines of, Wow, that hat rack looks so realistic, how did you even make it? his eyes would begin to water or his leg would jiggle uncontrollably, and he’d be pouring himself a drink.

Two days before Christmas, my husband brought home a gingerbread kit. When he said, We can make this tonight, he meant he could sit at the table drinking whisky and complaining about his colleagues while I cut open the bag of sickly sweet white icing, glued the four brown walls together, and topped them with the precut roof and chimney, all while silently fuming over how he could think this was a worthy outlet for my talents.

You didn’t even ask me how my day was.
Sorry, how was your day? What did you do?

I fetched my mini jigsaw and begun cutting some rudimentary windows into the gingerbread house and piping the frames with icing. I went to work. Then I dollhoused.

It’s looking so great these days, you could make a career path out of it. His leg began to bounce under the table as he watched me crush peppermint candies with the flat edge of a knife and stick large slivers of them into the icing. What is that red stuff supposed to be on those windows?
Broken glass.

Why are the gingerbread house’s windows broken? He tried to keep his voice neutral, but I saw he was making a fist under the table with the hand that wasn’t holding his drink.

I shrugged. Why are you forcing me to make this basic, shitty-ass gingerbread house? I’m just trying to keep things interesting.

What exactly is so “shitty-ass” about this gingerbread house? I thought you would like it. It looks like it’s going to be delicious.
You can’t tell if things are delicious by looking at them.

Was he more frightened or in awe when he glanced up from his phone screen and saw that I had made a tiny gingerbread house that was an exact replica of the larger gingerbread house?
Wow, he said, his eyes darting around the room, his left leg commencing its jiggle.

I said nothing as I stood and triumphantly escorted the tiny gingerbread house to its new home on the dollhouse’s kitchen table, which already contained a papier-mâché turkey on a silver platter.
The impossibly small gingerbread house within the already small dollhouse was a turning point for my husband. He fired the cleaning lady (which he had reverted to calling her), who had never complimented the dollhouse, who raised her eyebrows and smiled in an expression that conveyed the sentiment *Yeah, no shit* when I told her it wasn’t necessary to clean it.

My husband thought I would do laundry eventually, but I began to wash whatever I was planning to wear the next day in the sink while the pile of dirty clothes grew mountainous. This was around the time he tried to convince me to start drinking again. It was of the subtle maybe-you-could-try-having-some-wine-with-dinner-and-see-how-it-goes approach, not the you-should-get-wasted, fuck-your-sobriety variety. I made wine glasses and placed them on the dollhouse kitchen table along with the turkey, the silver platter and the gingerbread house, but I did not start drinking again.

I was adamant that no miniatures should live inside the dollhouse, but my friends had other ideas. I use the term *friends* loosely, since I could no longer stand anyone I knew. Though they showed some basic interest in it as an oddity, nobody understood the dollhouse or my relationship with it. When they caught wind of my new hobby, they gifted me dolls they bought at flea markets, as well as tiny glass animals from their recently deceased grandmothers’ antique collections, and most insultingly, old Polly Pocket figurines and plastic Disney characters from Happy Meals. I tossed them all in a corner of the apartment.

Why are you suddenly pathologically unable to clean up after yourself? my husband asked as I operated a drill bit to construct an island-style sink and mini-bar for the dollhouse. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him pacing back and forth while drinking a large bottle of German beer.

*You're fucking coked out, bud*, I said.

He stood in front of me with his large, sloppy shadow, watching as I ran my finger through the pile of sawdust that had developed on the dollhouse’s white and black tiled bathroom floor. I put my finger in my mouth. Just to taste.

*As opposed to you, who apparently doesn't need drugs or alcohol to be batshit insane,* he said.

I looked directly into his wide and wild eyes; I knew what he was thinking.

*Don't even fucking think of touching this dollhouse or I will divorce you,* I said.

He walked over to the corner where the collection of discarded miniatures was piled, gathered them up and threw them in a cardboard box. I flipped a switch and the dollhouse’s electric lighting shone forth, bathing the entire home in a soft glow. When I say *entire home*, I mean both the dollhouse and the house in which I lived.

I didn’t really care about my husband doing drugs and drinking — his personality was no worse or better as a result, in my opinion —
but he had serious coke dick since upping his intake due to his fear of the dollhouse. I was getting to that age where some of my friends complained about having to fuck their husbands, and to be fair, their husbands weren’t very attractive. I had always had a voracious appetite for my husband’s body, and he only got better-looking as his beard greyed, as his eyes sank with age, as his cheekbones naturally became more defined. He didn’t overdo it on the pecs and biceps like some men in the neighbourhood, who looked like crazed inverted triangles. He didn’t neglect leg day. He didn’t remove all his body hair like some of his friends; he didn’t have too much body hair like some of his other friends. He meticulously attended to this aspect of his appearance, trimming his nostrils and plucking errant hairs between his eyebrows. He buzzed his hair, which only added to his clean, streamlined appearance. He showered several times a day. Before my husband, I had never dated a man whose genitals didn’t smell at least slightly like a sweaty sock.

After a week of enduring his penis wilting inside me, I decided to cover the dollhouse with a piece of yellow silk at night, though I felt guilty hiding its delicate architecture for the sake of an erection. The dollhouse’s domain was the living room, but my husband and I often preferred to have sex there on some combination of the couch, chair and table rather than in the bedroom. I was up late trying to get the showerhead in the claw-foot tub just right when I heard his key in the lock. I quickly threw the silk over the dollhouse and hid the work in progress under a nearby cushion. I witnessed some stiffness leave my husband’s shoulders immediately upon glancing at the covered-up dollhouse. He started chattering about his elaborate dinner with colleagues, about the series of expensive bars he had gone to, how good this new coke was, how one of his colleague’s wives had touched his ass outside while having a smoke.

Is she hot? I asked, standing before him still wearing my goggles.

Yeah, he said, unbuttoning his shirt and taking off his belt. I tried to keep the blow to a minimum tonight and drank a lot of water.

Sweat glistened on his upper lips and in the pits of his light green shirt. I felt myself soften towards him. I had forgotten to turn off the dollhouse’s electric lighting before putting the cloth over it, so a faint glow still issued from within, and certain small shapes were still visible as we had sex in all the usual places.

Goodnight, Lala. Goodnight, dollhouse, he murmured as he was falling asleep on the couch. I went to the bedroom to sleep.

When I wandered out in the morning to make coffee, he had already left for work. The silk cloth had been thrown off the dollhouse and onto the floor. Each morning I peered inside to see if everything was as I had left it. I gasped when I saw a yellow-skinned Lego pirate with stubble and a striped shirt sitting at the kitchen table in my hand-carved chair. I snatched the figurine and threw him in the garbage, which I took outside to the bin. I knew my husband would feel victorious about compelling me to do a household chore, but I didn’t want that pirate anywhere near the dollhouse. Afterwards, I dusted the chair with my feather extra vigorously and installed the showerhead.
of fear. For example, God, you’re so fucking lazy and disgusting while storming around the house and picking up old receipts I had tossed on the living room floor actually meant I am scared of this dollhouse. I’m worried it might be haunted and it’s giving me nightmares. I said nothing when he rehired the cleaner and the house became livable for him again. I could understand my husband’s devotion to a clean house, since I felt that way about the dollhouse.

I guess you could argue that because I was constantly refurbishing and adding new elements to the dollhouse, it was simply an extension of myself, and therefore, I couldn’t have a real relationship with it. I would argue I shaped my husband in the same way: that he was not a fully fleshed out individual until his relationship with me. I would often conjure his body while I was at work, looking forward to his clean scent and perfect amount of body hair. I was no less physically attracted to him than I had ever been. It’s just that his beautiful butt, the way his muscular back dipped into the full roundness of his cheeks, and the way his boxer briefs were always pulled down about one inch so a bit of ass crack was exposed — those thoughts were still there, but they were often replaced with wondering what the dollhouse wanted, what it was feeling, my growing awareness of its desire for me, a desire that mimicked my husband’s. Recently, his touch had gained a certain air of urgency that made him an even better lover. As for the dollhouse, it wasn’t not sexual. I could feel all my energy flowing towards it, and if that happened to include sexual ones, fine, but there were so many others. It surprised me, the expansive nature of my burgeoning relationship with the dollhouse and my blasé attitude towards the sexual aspect of it, since I had always considered sex the most crucial aspect of a romantic relationship. That’s why I married my husband.

So, are you like one of those old dudes who fucks your car now? my husband asked when he stomped in the door. An objectum sexual?

It was clearly a line he had been rehearsing in his head all day while he wrote vague emails and attended meetings to espouse his big-picture ideas. I was lying naked on my stomach, gazing up at the dollhouse as it emanated a soft electric glow, which felt like late autumn sunlight warming my entire body. I rolled my eyes at my husband’s looming shadow blocking my ability to bask in the dollhouse’s light.

What are you even talking about? You’re ridiculous.

Then why are you making a sex face at the dollhouse?

I finally glanced up. He appeared completely sober, but his beard was slightly bushier than usual, his eyes small and tired-looking.

This is not my sex face. I’m just relaxed, I said, flipping over onto my back. That, he said pointing at me accusingly, is your relaxed sex face.

So? I’m not allowed to make sex faces by myself? Have you ever heard of masturbating?

You’re not masturbating. He frowned. I noticed a few hairs poking out of his left nostril when he scrunched up his nose. I don’t know what you’re doing, but it’s definitely sexual.

I’m not touching myself in a sexual way at all. I made a sweeping ges-
ture down the length of my naked body while staring defiantly at him.

*You’re communing with the dollhouse mentally! In a sex way!* He stared at me accusingly, waiting for me to deny it, then stormed over to his antique liquor cart and began clanking his bottles around.

The dollhouse, which didn’t experience feelings of jealousy as we understand them, was of the opinion I should expand my empathy for my husband. It was difficult for the dollhouse and I to relate at times because our senses of temporality and morality were vastly different. When it allowed me to experience its perspective by bathing me in light and exploding colours into my brain via patterns that resembled ink squirts, I thought I finally understood, but it was tough to maintain that state when I was once again fully immersed in my own life. It was easiest for us to meld when I was at home. It’s true that I licked the dollhouse, but only because the tongue is one of the most sensitive areas on the human body, and it was the quickest way to plug into each other’s wavelengths — it was like I could taste and hear and consume and see the dollhouse all at once.

The dollhouse wasn’t exclusively a giver. It wanted things from me too. It yearned for its outer shell to reflect its inner beauty, which was only fair. It was exacting about the materials I should use for each piece of furniture from the very beginning of our relationship, though I didn’t recognize its gentle but firm influence at the time. My husband was flabbergasted at the speed at which my dollhousing skills developed, surpassing those of the YouTubers I originally sought to imitate — but I came to realize it was a collaboration, and my abilities could not have flourished without being guided by the dollhouse’s ideal and unwavering vision of itself.

My husband took me out for dinner the day the dollhouse disappeared. Everywhere we went, due to a combination of my age, propensity for loose clothing and my husband’s paternalistic attitude towards me, people assumed I was pregnant. Servers would smile beatifically while pouring me sparkling water and depositing a steady stream of whisky sodas in front of him.

*Is this a joke?* I demanded when we arrived home and I saw the empty coffee table, my usually steady hands — that could sculpt and hand-paint a set of miniature grapes no bigger than my fingernail — shaking. *Oh my God,* my husband replied somewhat generically, but to his credit, convincingly.

---

**WHY WOULD A WOMAN WHO HAD NEVER BEEN ANYTHING BUT COMPLETELY PROFESSIONAL STEAL A COMPLETELY DECORATIVE AND NON-ESSENTIAL ITEM FROM MY HOME THAT WOULD BE MISSED IMMEDIATELY?**

His immediate declaration that the cleaner — who he had again fired that week as a tired act of vengeance against me — had stolen the dollhouse was suspicious as well as offensive. Why would a woman who had never been anything but completely professional steal a completely decorative and non-essential item from my home that would be missed immediately? Furthermore, the miniature kitchen table had been left behind with its turkey on a silver platter and gingerbread house — an act committed out of pity, which positively reeked of my husband. I curled up on the rug in the spot where the dollhouse’s light would have spilled as I listened to him reel off evidence for his theory while pacing back and forth. Eventually, he went to bed, where he slept soundly, perhaps for the first time in months, in the king-size bed by himself.

The dollhouse’s emanations grew faint over the next several weeks, its colour bursts dim, muted and increasingly grey. I was certain it was far from me, though whether the distance was physical or emotional, I couldn’t tell. I drove around the city, following an explosion
of violet here or a pain in my wrist there. I relentlessly pursued false leads: sneaking into boutique supply closets, knocking on the doors of strangers and peering over their shoulders, digging through dumpsters behind bars. After two weeks of this behaviour — slamming on the brakes whenever I felt a pulsing in my temples, sleeping on the rug each night clutching the miniature gingerbread house, levelling accusations at my husband each time he stumbled in the door — the connection ceased altogether. I felt the invisible soul cord that had joined me to the dollhouse snap in half. Radio silence.

I scoured Kijiji; I knew he would play it cool, so I patiently monitored the site each day. Three weeks to the day the dollhouse disappeared, I spotted an ad under the collectibles subsection: One-of-a-kind hand-made dollhouse. A beautiful gift I unfortunately have no use for. Includes handmade furniture and miniature novelties. No dolls included. $500 or best offer. Attached were four photos of my dollhouse — I had regressed to calling it my dollhouse now that it had been taken from me — none of which did it justice. Despite the shitty quality of the cheap phone camera that had taken the picture, I could pinpoint areas of wear and tear in certain rooms: a herringbone popsicle fragment was missing from the kitchen floor; several of the eyes from the meticulously collaged coffee table were peeling off.

Yet as I clicked obsessively through the photos, a strange vibration ricocheted through the most delicate of my bones, from the tip of my nose cartilage to my Achilles tendon. It was as though despite the crappy photo shoot to which it had been subjected, even though it was just propped up on some paint-spattered, wobbly table to which the photographer had clearly given no second thought, the dollhouse was . . . content. How could the dollhouse, with its impossibly high and specific standards for beauty and its exact blueprint of how it should be presented to the world, be happy where it was?

I went to the stainless-steel fridge and took out a bottle of chilled white wine, which my husband kept in case I ever felt a moment of weakness. As I dialled the number listed, I thought longingly of the miniature stainless-steel fridge I had made, its little ice cube trays in the freezer and shiny eggplants and tomatoes in the crisper and of course, its own bottle of white wine. I took some hesitant sips from the bottle, then increasingly larger gulps as the phone stopped ringing and the cleaner’s voice on the other end of the line told me to leave a message. I disguised my voice, though I wasn’t sure my presence had ever made enough of an impact on her to register, stating I was interested in purchasing the dollhouse. She called me back within the hour and I revealed who I was. She sounded unsurprised to hear from me.

Let’s meet in person, sweetheart, she said.

Her name was Olivia and she had never really taken much notice of the dollhouse, she explained the next day at a coffee shop near her place (I was hoping I could pick up on some faint Rescue me signals from the dollhouse, so I suggested meeting near her). It just wasn’t her thing. Gripping a mug of peppermint tea with her impeccably soft-looking and clean short-nailed hands (she was always wearing rubber gloves while cleaning), she explained that when my husband had let her go the second time, she hadn’t wanted to take the gift he’d offered. She knew I spent all my free time perfecting the dollhouse, but my husband claimed we had separated, and I had left it behind to take off with my lover. (I wondered how he pictured my imaginary lover, since I knew he had to formulate an invisible enemy in his mind. I imagined he pictured him looking like himself.) I knew my husband would get so worked up relaying this fantasy that he would begin to fear it coming true and thus demonstrate a clear-eyed but stoic hurt in his eyes that would be impossible to doubt. The cleaning woman had hesitated but he had insisted, claiming he wanted the dollhouse to go to someone who truly appreciated it rather than sell it. Wouldn’t it make a beautiful gift for one of her granddaughters?

So you gave it to your granddaughter? You didn’t sell it?

I was so eager that she couldn’t meet my eyes and instead stared out the window at the glass and steel towers surrounding us. She had
intended to, she insisted, nervously draining her tea. But something had stopped her that first night, when she plugged in the electric lighting and felt the soft glow wash over her body. At first, she would do this fully clothed — always while her husband was out — but eventually she began to take off her clothes. Each day, she told herself she would bring it to her granddaughter’s house, but she kept putting it off. I understood, didn’t I? That the dollhouse was haunted and making her do these things? I was frustrated with her at this point. If she had felt connected enough to bask in its glow and connect to the emanations of its soul, how could she mistake the feeling of the dollhouse’s individuality and singular will for a basic ghostly presence? How could she mistake being in love with being haunted?

A CENTIPEDE SKITTERED FROM UNDER THE FURNACE TOWARDS ME AND I POUNDED MY FIST ON IT, USING ITS GUTS TO DRAW AN X ON THE MINT-COLOURED SURFACE OF THE LIQUOR CART.

I could feel it calling to me at night while I slept next to my husband. She rubbed her temples. I could feel my mind filling with thoughts I didn’t want to think at this age. I could sense that nothing else would satisfy me soon.

The dollhouse was long gone. A collector passing through town had bought it with cash. Her gently wrinkled face grimaced as she explained she thought she had done me a favour; if my experience of the dollhouse had been the same as hers, she was certain I would be happy to be released from the need and the hunger. Plus, she didn’t know how to reach me since I had run off with another man to a different province. I listened closely to every word and scrutinized each facial expression, seeking to understand how she could occupy the position of the dollhouse’s beloved. Eventually, she had to get to work, and she squeezed my shoulder tenderly as she left me alone in the coffee shop, confirming her hands were indeed as soft as they looked.

_Sorry about your husband_, she said as she left. I just nodded.

I went home and poured myself a glass of white wine. I had always told myself I wasn’t an alcoholic for drinking white wine because of its classy, near-clear appearance. I picked up the bottles of liquor on my husband’s antique cart and smashed them on the kitchen floor, watching the clear and amber liquids explode against the tiles and form multiple brown rivers that coursed towards the hallway. I took out my kit of dollhousing tools from the closet; armed with my tiny scissors, I marched into the bedroom and painstakingly cut little holes in all my husband’s button-down shirts. Then I began to think of other things he loved that I could destroy.

I got down on my hands and knees and started peeling up several tiles from the kitchen floor. A centipede skittered from under the furnace towards me and I pounded my fist on it, using its guts to draw an X on the mint-coloured surface of the liquor cart. I began tossing plates to the alleyway below, then changed course and began smashing them against the white wall. After throwing all my husband’s expensive coffee beans on the floor, I lay on the dark burnished wood table, the only part of the kitchen that wasn’t covered in broken glass. I pulled up the hardware store’s website on my phone with my non-bleeding hand. Looking at the simple wooden dollhouse prototype before me, devoid of any flourishes or personality, I felt a sharp tingle in my wrist, a flash of magenta when I took a deep breath and squeezed my eyes shut. And then a fluttering in my rib cage as I added two to my shopping cart.
A humane and sensible murder, one journalist called it. Almost merciful, another article declared,

though it barely mentioned the old woman. She had nine grandchildren, a small dog, an orderly life. She married once and kept him.

Luminol’s blue glow showed the scene was exactly as it seemed. Blood-spatter patterns on the deck were neat and legible as burgundy ink.

The grave, impossibly deep, was dug in the deceased’s own suburban backyard. The uninsured spouse was never a suspect.

In fact, victim and perpetrator hardly knew each other, but he had always been cruel to animals. One neighbour noted

that his pups died young, so the charges of homicide were no surprise. According to the reporting officer, the accused admitted

to considering arsenic, but used a gun instead. *Quickness is a favour to yourself* — *a gift of minutes.*

At trial, testimony aligned perfectly with prior statements and all twelve witnesses agreed about what they had seen.

After deliberating for several days, the jury returned with a unanimous verdict, which the court clerk read through a veil of tears.

At sentencing, the prosecutor opined at least three times that the convict was likely to repeat themselves.

*We’ve seen this sort of thing before,* he said, though they hadn’t. The convict scoffed: *Once was enough.*

The defence attorney entered a single sheet of paper into evidence. *Bucket List* was the title.

*Kill someone* was the final, stricken bullet point. *See?* the convict said. *I crossed it out.*

During cross-exam, the prosecutor goaded the convict. *You know, there are many dog abusers you have left alive.*

*Well,* the convict replied, *I am just one person.* *I can only do so much.* Spectators nodded along in their seats.

In the end, the judge almost shrugged before meeting the old woman’s eye and letting her off with time served.

By Jade Wallace
M.A. AND PH.D. SPECIALIZATIONS FOR THE LIT MAJOR PURSUING ACADEMIA

By Isabella Wang

All the Cat Poems Ever Written: A Study From T. S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* to Artie Gold’s *Some of the Cat Poems*, and poems in translation.

A Comparative Lit Exploration of Shakespeare in Screenplay *Hamlet* on screen, from Olivier to a queer Bollywood production. Prerequisite studies include a master’s degree in both film production and creative writing.

Reconnaissance Spaces of Print Circulation: Poetic Contemporary Abstractions in Digital Marketplace Print Culture Examining the cultural and digital migration of print circulations on the public screen. Having procured this role following a successful prospectus, your research adviser will pay you to track down the emails of an Internet-obscure but prolifically published affiliate likely on a tenure track.

Unconscious Undercurrents: Anxieties and Psychoanalytic Defences of Small Animals in Global Myths and Legends Swan psychology is an under-represented topic in the field that will likely baffle your supervisors and their supervisors.

Spatial Chimeras: Practices in the Unreality of Political Reverie and Institutional Rest An interdisciplinary study to be proposed before a congregation of deans for joint-major opportunities with cognitive sciences, kinesiology, sociology and creative writing. May combine prerequisites, including SLP 301: Sleeping and Research, where students spend three months sleeping after finishing a semester, and one week drafting a report on how they are finally starting to function like effective community citizens again.
KARL, BRO, WHEN YOU OFFERED ME A RIDE, THIS IS NOT WHAT I HAD IN MIND.
frames) watching someone else implement policies that have nothing to do with your agenda. What’s with that? Where’s the cohesion?

I was barely getting started after my first five years in office. I mean, sure, I was able to accuse most of my internal Party rivals of being responsible for eyebrow-raising sexual misconduct and endemic system-eroding corruption, and had them sentenced to death. And I was able to order our giant state-owned companies to splash cash around really poor countries that hadn’t yet fully absorbed the notion that we are totally a big deal — building village-flooding dams, roads to nowhere, massive empty ports that we can use in times of regional war, that sort of thing. We also turned a bunch of coral reefs in the South China Sea into military bases with full-on runways and stuff. Have you seen them? They’re pretty amazing, though I wouldn’t really want to be posted there — a bit of a career killer being marooned on a sun-seared sandbar that’s almost submerged at high tide. The best part about them was we told everyone we weren’t doing it, but the whole time — we were actually doing it! So funny. But I didn’t want all that to be my legacy, you know? I want those people who happen to be left alive at the end of my tenure to remember me fondly as Xi Dada, not just as Xi Jinping, chairman of this and that, or the new Mao, or whatever they’re calling me these days before they’re rounded up and put in re-education camps.

My second term was all about consolidating the popularity I had accrued at home — I mean, some finger-wagging scrooges might call it violent authoritarianism geared at eliminating any conceivable alternate power centre to the iron grip of a Communist Party that has shifted from uplifting the impoverished and fighting for world revolution to simply trying to stay in power forever — and exporting it around the region and the world so people would come to realize how truly awesome we are. We just wanted to make sure people really knew it, you know? (Speaking of which, why is South Korea so popular? Is it just the K-pop?)

So, as I was saying, basically, if people said bad stuff or did bad stuff to us, we’d push back a little. C’mon, anybody would! And I think it worked. I mean, the Canadians nabbed the daughter of the Huawei founder — a true patriot, that guy, and I use a Huawei phone because it’s so much
better than the iPhone, they’re so good — so we kidnapped a couple of Canadians named Michael. She was under house arrest in one of her mansions, with bodyguards and stuff, while we tossed the Michaels into cells lit with halogen bulbs twenty-four hours a day. But you know, that’s just a sign of the decline of the West, right? This is China’s time. We have mansions now, and you guys are all pale and locked in a Chinese jail.

And don’t get me started on Hong Kong. Jesus, that shit was crazy for a while. They were throwing Molotov cocktails in Central! They literally went from buying Hugo Boss suits and Jimmy Choo heels and Instagramming their Italian dinners to acting like hard-core revolutionary anarchists overnight. It was truly wild to see. Sure, we had told them they had autonomy for fifty years and that we’d try and give them the vote. But we didn’t really want to. Anyway — don’t mess with China is the lesson, for sure. Or we might release another virus! Just kidding.

Okay, let’s talk about the virus a bit. I mean, it really started in a U.S. military facility developing bio-weapons . . . ha ha! Okay, fine. Not even I believe that. Look, privately, I’m pretty torn up about it. I mean, privately, I can tell you — we’re sorry. Lots of deaths. Lots of lives forever altered. When was the last time any of us had a real vacation, am I right? But publicly, damn if I’m going to say something like that and look hella weak in front of 1.4 billion people. But it’s not really our fault. I mean, sure, we have for years permitted a trade in exotic wildlife parts like tiger penises and things (Joe, I’ll send you a separate letter about tiger penises later) and markets selling live wild animals and things. And sure, the first people to alert us to the virus happened to end up dead along with the rest of their families and anybody who shared their WeChat posts. But it’s not like you can blame this whole thing on China’s spotty regulatory record and inability to permit internal checks and balances that stop things from going too far. I mean, you could, but then we would say you’re “meddling in the internal affairs of our sovereign nation and hurting the feelings of 1.4 billion people” — that’s pretty much the standard line on that.

We didn’t let in the World Health Organization investigators for a year, sure, but it’s because we already know how it started. Essentially, there was this guy in Wuhan, at that market — you’ve probably seen footage of it swarming with guys in hazmat suits before we said there was absolutely nothing going on there — who got, let’s say, a little too close to some of the merchandise. I’m not specifically saying there was a Western missionary there named Ryan — aged thirty-four, a bit dejected, kind of lonely because the hard-working and proudly atheistic Chinese nation has no time for this theological baloney — wandering around Wuhan at precisely 10:34 a.m. on November 21, 2019, in a light blue track suit and jazzy-looking Feiyue sneakers. And I’m definitely not specifically clarifying that he may have gotten frisky with something not dissimilar to a pangolin. Or that as he forced himself onto the hapless beast, a puff of prehistoric-looking green vapour emerged and drifted up his nostrils at the first breath. “Ah, there it is,” he said as he absorbed a new yet primeval virus that was destined to change humanity forever.

But anyway, like I said, this is all highly classified stuff. And when Australia asked about the origins of the virus, we definitely, definitely let them have it — punitive tariffs, lots of nasty names, you know, banned their coal and wine and stuff. But it was all because we were trying to protect you guys from the harsh truth that you had brought it on yourselves through decadence and decline, rather than the pedestrian explanation of the weak-kneed enforcement of municipal health regulations.

It’s been a pretty fun two terms. So why stop there? I know, I know. It’s pretty “African dictator” to do the old thing where you eradicate the constitutional prohibition on serving more than two terms and then go for that good old third term. But if the third term is fun too, then I’m just not sure what I’ll do. I could always retire and write a memoir — I can assure you 100 per cent that it will be a bestseller and sell pretty close to 1.4 billion copies. But I’m not sure what I’d do with my spare time. I’d make a really bad back-seat driver, for sure. Turn right! Slow down! Enslave that ethnic minority! Jail that human-rights lawyer! That sort of thing. Speaking of which, I’ve got to get back to work — I just saw something on WeChat I didn’t like the looks of. I hope the rest of your term goes well. Good luck with those pesky midterm elections — ha ha, sorry, sorry, I just couldn’t help it!

— Your friend, Xi
Dear Oprah,

Do you remember *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne? You know, that book you went all gaga about years ago and recommended to everyone? The one about how if you think about eating a cookie long enough, the universe will eventually bend and you’ll end up eating a cookie?

You said it completely changed your life. Well, now it has completely changed my life too! Understatement — it has *revolutionized* my life!

I use *The Secret* all the time, but I don’t tell anyone because people might think I’m a flake. I use it to find groceries, pair my socks — I even use it to sweeten my breath. When I can’t find a parking space at the mall, I just close my eyes and think about how much I’d really like to park my Magic Wagon near the elevator, and boom — a spot opens right up.

But I have to come clean about something kind of upsetting: I used *The Secret* recently to get out of my daily commute and, well, I think I kind of screwed up the world. For ten years I biked to work, nearly ten miles each way, through blizzards, heat waves, windstorms. One day in March 2020, there was a thunderstorm with gale-force winds from the east. They are usually from the west, you know, but I swear to God, it was just pounding me right in the face like a firehose.

All this nastiness got to me, and I was fantasizing about not having to bike to work anymore. I just wanted to sit at home, warm and naked, watching TV in a mask and not worrying about the commute, my boss, the whole thing.

I was so wet by the time I got to work that my bones were making a squishing noise from inside my body. Pure misery. I even burped up some storm water. Raunchy! I didn’t bother locking up my bike. I just leaned it against a pole, walked into my office, closed my eyes, and I totally visualized it, Oprah: “Man, that’s it. Finito! I am never putting myself through that again.”

And then . . . yep, the pandemic. I did that. As my kids would say, “Whoopsie.”

— Scott

Sirloin

By Amy Kenny

Parrots, as a rule, are dicks: loud, aggressive, disobedient. The one my Uncle Dale stole when he left the navy was no exception, if you ask me, but you’d probably get a different story from him. In what was likely a case of projection, he said Sirloin (named for his favourite meal) didn’t want to be on that ship anymore, and so he brought the red-and-blue bird back up north when he became a draft dodger in the sixties.

It was a short-sighted plan, but they made it work. Parrots aren’t exactly built for the Yukon, so Dale had to carry her around inside his shirt all winter to keep her warm. As thanks, Sirloin threw up her dinner at least once a week, which he’d read was a sign of affection. In return, he’d let her out the sliding door of his place in summer, then sit on the deck and watch her fly the empty shores of Jake Lake, where he lived.
She didn’t even acknowledge most other people, except for the one time she clawed my ankle to shit because Dale said she was jealous of me, but she obeyed him like a yellow Lab. He’d call her name and she’d return, wings spread like an ink blot to slow her descent toward the cabin he’d built up like a beehive, adding legal closets on all sides after initially being denied the permit for a full-sized house.

I remember Walter, the bylaw officer and Dale’s only neighbour for miles, came out once to investigate when he was building it, asking why Dale needed so many closets when he always wore the same grey shirt.

“My name is Dwayne,” he said, his eyes off the lake, where Sirloin was circling. Later, he sledged out the closet walls.

Anyway, another rule about parrots, if you care: they basically live forever. But not this one, though it wasn’t her fault. Nothing to do with diet or exercise. One day Walter mistook her for a pheasant and shot her, if you can believe that. Dale was just me and him at the funeral. Sirloin was wrapped like a babushka in a grey shirt of Dale’s (he had more than one in the closet he hadn’t sledged out) and cradled in a plywood coffin.

“Sirloin, we didn’t always see eye to eye,” Dale said. (That was news to me.) “You had a strong personality, but I respected you for that. You didn’t deserve this.”

He lifted the bottle of rum and said, “Absent friends,” then took a drink, his lips ripped and raw from the bugle. The wind whistled over the tops of the empty liquor bottles lining the dock. Above us, pine trees pulled like cotton candy toward the sky.

Later, we bombed water down the road with the water-haul tank Dale kept in his truck, dumping it at the bend in Walter’s driveway. When Walter drove his truck out the next day to hunt, he fishtailed into a ditch and broke his collarbone. That seemed to satisfy Dale, who was convinced Sirloin had taken a bullet for his bylaw infraction.

You’d think, living so far north, sheer survival instinct would’ve kept Dale civil — you always needed a neighbour to dig you out of a ditch, or watch your wood stove, or lend you their snow machine, or simply try not to shoot you when you were hunting — but no. If he’d married, it might have been different, but he only ever proposed. She was with the Women’s Royal Canadian Naval Service — the Wrens. They were on leave, lying in the lake during a summer storm, watching from just below the surface of the water as lightning moved like bioluminescence overhead.

“Listen,” he said when they surfaced. “Listen. Take this ring. There’s safety in numbers.”

And he lifted his hands, gnarled as nests, overturned like treasure chests, showing nothing — showing there was no ring. That’s not very romantic, so you might think she said no, but you’d be wrong. She put her hands in his and that would have been that, but for the fact she died shortly after. It might not surprise you to learn that people who lie in lakes during lightning storms have a rather short life expectancy.

Anyway. After that, Dale left the navy and moved up here with Sirloin.
I was passing through the main square of a village, selling pelts so I could feed all the children I have at home, when a man tried to stick his hand up my skirt. Without hesitation I slapped him in the face, and that’s when he screamed, “Witch! Witch!”

Before I knew it, all the villagers had descended on me. A man, carrying a copy of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, yelled to the villagers, “What should we do with her?”

Someone in the mob shouted, “Tie a huge rock to her leg and throw her in the river, and if she floats, then she’s not a witch.”

Someone else cried, “No! We did that to the last one, and it seems like it’s a bit of a flawed system.”

So someone else hollered, “Let’s chop off her hands,” to which someone else shrieked, “Gross!”

Finally, an agreement was made when another person suggested, “Let’s burn her. We haven’t done that in a while.”

The crowd cheered enthusiastically, and I sighed. They set up a stake in the square and tied me to it, ripping the front of my dress so my nipples were practically hanging out all over the place.

The man carrying the *Malleus Maleficarum* yelled to the crowd, “I’ve got an idea: let’s wait till night falls. It will look better and we can roast marshmallows after.”

I sighed again as they left me waiting. The villagers went back to whatever they’d been doing, and for the most part I was left alone until a guy walked by and said, “Hey, sweetheart.”

I exhaled sharply and said, “Could you maybe let me go?”

He smiled and asked, “What do I get out of it?”

I sighed once more and said, “I have many children at home to feed.”

He shook his head.

“I’ll give you all my pelts,” I said.

He shook his head again and then pointed at his crotch.

I was getting tired of all the sighing, but let out another one anyway before I said, “Forget it.”

All the villagers came back at dusk with their bags of marshmallows and roasting sticks. I’d had a nap in the meantime, and dreamt that I was floating on a wonderfully fluffy white cloud and getting a foot massage from God while angels sang Ella Fitzgerald songs to me.

The man carrying the *Malleus Maleficarum* did the honours of lighting the fire beneath my feet. I couldn’t help myself and sighed again. All this waiting was getting on my tits. When the fire reached my toes, the flames suddenly leapt away, spread out like the wings of a colossal angel, and engulfed all the villagers save the children. The aroma of charred flesh and marshmallows filled the square as the roasting villagers screamed and writhed in an excruciating agony that I could only imagine must have sucked big time.

Gobbets of blackened flesh swirled all around me, burning the rope binding me to the pole. I was finally free to go.

As I rounded up the children to take home to meet their new family, I said to myself, “If I had a nickel for every time that happened, I’d be rich.”

Then I sighed one last time.
Richard Van Camp has written twenty-six books in twenty-six years. The Tlicho Dene writer’s oeuvre includes novels, short-story collections, graphic novels and children’s books. A storyteller in many forms, his work has been adapted to film, and he was also a cultural consultant on CBC TV’s *North of 60*.

Van Camp, who now lives in Edmonton with his wife and son, is originally from Fort Smith, a town on the Slave River in the southern region of the Northwest Territories known in the Dene language as Denendeh — “the land of the people.” He is one of the founders of the NorthWords Writers Festival, a four-day literary event that takes place in Yellowknife every June. Van Camp has taught university courses, mentored hordes of creators, and is currently working on four books at once. He often wakes at four o’clock in the morning to get stories out of his head and onto the page.

“It’s a very sweet way to start my day,” he says.
JUST THE FACTS

BEST KNOWN FOR: *The Lesser Blessed*, a novel set in the Northwest Territories that was made into a film in 2012, and his children's books, including *Little You* and *We Sang You Home.*

FAVOURITE COMFORT FOOD: Pizza.

SOMETHING THAT ALWAYS MAKES YOU LAUGH: TikTok videos that my giggle gang send me every day.

WHEN YOU FEEL MOST CREATIVE: First thing in the morning.

BEST ADVICE YOU’VE EVER RECEIVED: Writing is rewriting.

LAST GOOGLE SEARCH: Loon bones for stabbing.

SOMETHING YOU NEVER LEAVE HOME WITHOUT: My phone.

FAVOURITE BOOK THAT ISN’T ONE OF YOURS: *Indiscretion* by Charles Dubow [a modern love story about a wealthy couple]. I think about it all the time.

JUST THE ANSWERS

FEATHERTALE: What compelled you to start writing?

RICHARD VAN CAMP: I realized when I was nineteen that, as a lifelong reader, no one was telling our story as Northerners in the way I saw things and felt things. So I decided to write a story [*The Lesser Blessed*] that I would like to read, and I promised myself not to hold back.

FT: What does that mean to you, to not hold back?

RVC: I wanted to explore what it’s like being a second-generation residential school survivor and what it’s like to be a child of the eighties. I was going to tackle what it’s like when you’re from a small town and a hometown hero takes their own life. I wanted to showcase the beauty of our community and our culture as Fort Smith townies and expose the horror of the uranium mines in the Northwest Territories — the uranium leaking from Port Radium and Rayrock Mine is killing us.

I also wanted to spoil you with Fort Smith charm with stories like “Show Me Yours” [about addiction and reuniting with an old love], “The Power of Secrets” [about secrets we share and ones we don’t] and “Grandpa/Ehtsi” [about language preservation between generations]. I love how modern-day medicine power is still alive in my stories, and I wanted to showcase Northerners going for treatment and coming home stronger, like in “My Fifth Step.” I also wanted to be funny and I wanted to be touching.

FT: On all of your social media accounts, website bios, you say right away you’re Dene from Fort Smith. Why is it important to you that people know that?

RVC: I’m Fort Smith on two legs. The stories I tell are almost always about Fort Smith. It’s my heartland, my best memories. I call there all the time to get my accent and strut back. I am so grateful to have been born and raised in such a beautiful part of the Northwest Territories. I love the feeling of community. There are folks there who have known me my entire life.

FT: I read in another interview that you were a volunteer shuttle bus driver in Fort Smith. How did that come about?

RVC: When I graduated from high school, I realized that I was one of the very few nineteen-year-olds in town. All my friends had left for college, trade school, university. I realized that I needed to understand what it meant to be a Northerner, a Fort Smither, a Tlicho Dene. I decided to volunteer as the Handi-Bus driver in my community, and it was the best thing I ever could have done because I was welcomed even
deeper into my community. I was welcomed into many homes, many feasts, many stories. It really was the smartest anything I could have done, and I urge everyone reading this to volunteer your time with the elderly. We are here to serve, help, protect, mentor, be there for each other. I think I became wise beyond my years from the teachings and stories I learned and listened to during this time.

FT: Twenty-six books in twenty-six years. How are you so prolific?
RVC: I’m always working on something, and I’m lucky to have twelve publishers who want to work with me.

FT: What are you working on at the moment?
RVC: I’m working on book two of The Spirit of Denendeh [a three-part mystery series graphic novel]. It’s called As I Enfold You in Petals and is being illustrated by the great Scott Henderson, published by Highwater Press. It is about a birthday party where, if you can amaze the host, Benny the Bank, you receive twenty thousand dollars. Half the town shows up each year and, so far, no one has amazed Benny, until now. Out next year in full colour.

I LOVE COLLABORATING WITH VISIONARIES.
I LOVE CHEERLEADING, ADDING INSIGHTS,
BUT MOSTLY I JUST LOVE SEEING HOW
THINGS HAPPEN AND WHY THEY HAPPEN.

FT: What has been the biggest influence on your career?
RVC: I’m an avid reader, listener, watcher, note taker, but it would be music. I write to music. I am swooned by music. I become weak and dizzy when I discover that perfect song to write to. Galaxies have been born because of the music I adore.

FT: What kind of music do you listen to while you write?
RVC: I switch it up for each story so as not to cross-blur myself.

FT: What’s the best advice you’ve received as a creator?
RVC: One of the greatest pieces of advice I have ever received was from publisher Harriet Rohmer of Children’s Book Press, who told me that collaborating is a dance of trust, and that you have to get out of the way and trust the artist you are working on to do their best work. It’s their story too now. I’ve never forgotten that.

To work with artists like Julie Flett, Christopher Shy, Scott Henderson, George Littlechild — it’s all so wonderful. Every day is like Christmas for me when I see their concept art, the thumbnails, the design. I was clearly born to work with others.

Now amplify that with a movie — you have lighting, sound, actors, set design. It is magic to see your work adapted for the big screen. It’s inspiring to think that someone was so taken with one of your stories that they’re going to dedicate a year or years of their life to gathering the resources to take a story I imagined to a whole new level. I’m so grateful to everyone who’s created something from my work. I love it all.

FT: Your most famous and also your first novel, The Lesser Blessed, was written in 1996 and continues to sell copies. It’s a coming-of-age story and also about friendship and abuse and love living in a small town. What was it like to see The Lesser Blessed become a film sixteen years later?
RVC: To see Anita Doron’s adaptation with First Generation Films with my family and producers and the actors in the audience at TIFF was one of the most exciting anything of my life, and I am in awe of what Anita did with the film, grateful. I love collaborating with visionaries. I love cheerleading, adding insights, but mostly I just love seeing how things happen and why they happen.

FT: You are also a teacher and a mentor. What’s something you wish all your students knew?
RVC: I wish they knew how much they inspired me. They’re hungry and that energy is contagious. I want to be as hungry as they are, and that they inspire me more than they will ever know.
**FT:** What do you hope your students and mentees learn from you?

**RVC:** When you have abundance, you want abundance in others. I love cheerleading and mentoring and answering questions and getting superb writers that much closer to agents and/or publishers. I hope writers and storytellers can look back and say, “RVC was a mentor and only wanted the best for me and my work and my family.” That is the ultimate compliment because I’ve been mentored by so many superb writers and storytellers. I think my list grows daily of those who’ve influenced me.

**FT:** How did you come to work on *North of 60*?

**RVC:** I was hired as a writer trainee and realized that I was the only Northerner on set who was born and raised in the North. It was such a huge opportunity for me to see how a TV series is made. The series was shot in Bragg Creek, Alberta, and every episode is on YouTube.

I became one of the cultural consultants for a few seasons. It was really one of the first times that Canadians, and international viewers, were able to see Indigenous actors at their very finest, dealing with real issues. It was a golden time for so many and it influenced how I crafted *The Lesser Blessed*, my first novel.

In *North of 60*, the producers invented a fake community, Lynx River. This was a get-out-of-jail-free card, because this way Northern viewers could let their guards down and enjoy the show. This was not about their community or their leadership or their families. It was a show representing life in the North.

I realized that if I invented a fake community, I could explore tough issues like suicide, mental health, addictions, betrayal, and readers could let their guards down and sense that the community was an amalgamation of many Northern communities all stuffed into one.

**FT:** A lot of creative people struggle to share their stories with an audience. Is that ever challenging for you?

**RVC:** I think great writing is about being vulnerable and honouring that the story is the boss. When I look back at my books, I can see what I was going through at the time in my life, and that these were the arrows of light that lit my way through.

**FT:** In *Gather* [Van Camp’s most recent book, about the power of storytelling], you tell your mom’s story of being taken away to residential school. What was it like to interview your mom about this experience?

**RVC:** I didn’t think I could ever love her more than I already did. You know she beat cancer, and for me to hear what her childhood was like and her teen years were like, my heart actually bloomed with pride for her, and it still does every day.

**FT:** Why was it important for you to tell her story?

**RVC:** My mother and my uncles were all taken. Think of the hundred thousand kids that were taken. And now think of the kids that didn’t make it home. Think about how quiet the communities were without the laughter of children. I can’t imagine it — I can’t.

And so, I wanted to illuminate why Canada is the way it is. I’ve always said that residential schools will always be the soul in Canada’s bones, and I mean that we are still in the shadow of those residential schools, and the world needs to understand, Canadians need to understand, other Indigenous communities need to understand, that what our parents went through is really unforgivable. But we’re here and we’re people of incredible dignity, people of incredible forgiveness.

I’m in awe of my mother’s courage, my uncles’ courage, because they all went, and that was really important to me. So go out there and you get those stories that you’ve always wanted. If there’s a story that you’re worried the world is going to forget, go out there and get it. If there’s a recipe that you’re worried the world is going to forget — or a song or a name or a teaching or a children’s story. Use this time. Don’t you dare hold back your love, and you go out there and you get it with permission and you honour the storytellers — because you owe them. Really honour them for their knowledge and their teachings, because the world needs it. The world needs their good medicine.
By Jess Nicol
Illustration by Karam Bajwa

Hale Cotton Company est. 1881    Hale Rope Company est. 1950

William Hale 1894-1955 (president 1924-1950)
Gary Hale 1968-present (president, CEO 2015-present)

Gary knew, as much as anyone, that the Internet is a dangerous place. Its limits, unknown. Its powers, unmatched. But what he didn’t know was how many web pages are dedicated to instructing desperate people how to hang themselves. And not just with any ropes — with his ropes.

Gary Hale, son of the recently deceased Wallace Hale, grandson of the late George J. Hale, and great-grandson of the rather late William Hale, was the newly appointed president and CEO of Hale Ropes — “Strength, durability and homespun trust. Doing one Hale of a job since 1880” — a still-thriving outfit with six plants and fourteen retail partners across the country.

Founded in 1881 in Hamilton, Ontario, as the Hale Cotton Company by William Hale’s father and uncle, the establishment grew and diversified into cloths, yarns, cordage and textiles, with numerous factories nationwide. In 1950, eighteen years before Gary’s birth, William and George sold much of the company for a hefty profit and chose to refocus on one lucrative product that was also closest to their hearts: ropes.

Gary, now in charge of running a whole business legacy, still loved the pleasure of making rope. As a child, he toured the home factory with his grandfather nearly every Friday evening. The combing machines whirred to a close, the compressors stopped compressing, and the workers checked out at the time clock. Gary and his grandfather stood at the door, shaking the hands of the labourers and wishing them well on their weekend pursuits, as George’s assistant passed out paycheques.

“Hard labour, this,” Gary’s grandfather would say. “These men earn every penny they make, Gary.” And they’d walk together up the clean and wide cement stairwell to George’s office, a small, plainly furnished room that overlooked the factory floor.

Gary had pieces of different fibres to twist, twirl and knot while his grandfather, and later his father, wrapped up their week’s dealings on the phone. The strands came together and were undone, the braids calming Gary, winding and unwinding in his grasp. They seemed to move of their own accord, with a kind of magic that animated Gary’s hands, inspired his fingers’ dips and digs. He was amazed at how much stronger the pieces were woven together than on their own.

With a break to eat their bologna sandwiches — Gary’s with no mayo, George’s with no mustard — the two could sit together like this for hours. Twisting, untwisting. Transferring raw materials from Chicago. Winding, unwinding. Providing a comprehensive outline of workers’ compensation and pension plans. Tying, untying. Debating how to best “deal with” the union. Looping, unlooping. Talking dollar amounts needed to stop an environmental review.
Gary became so adept at fibre combinations and weaving techniques that one of the company’s most successful contemporary weaves — a nylon-blend, solid-weave variation nicknamed “the bean sprout” — was based upon his childhood play. As he grew familiar with the fabrics, Gary also became familiar with George’s and Wallace’s tasks as he listened to their phone calls, week after week. Unfortunately, Gary did not easily pick up the skills needed for communicating, advertising, and corporate dealings in general. He could handle a length of rope for hours on end, but would sweat profusely with a phone cord dangling from his clammy, clasped fist. Greeting workers and clients was fine, but discussions of methods to improve productivity or investigate falsified time cards made Gary pace back and forth in the office. He did what he was asked with a smile on his face, but Gary was more of a hands-on type, a rope guy through and through.

As a young man, Gary was asked to head the efforts for a new ad campaign. George had officially turned Hale Ropes over to his son Wallace, and both men felt Gary should take on more responsibility. The 1990s had opened with Hale Ropes in a profitable position, but sales seemed to plateau. The Hale men knew the key to increasing sales and popularity was advertising. Although fairly successful in all the roping markets, the company was selling least to farmers in the Prairies and mariners in Atlantic Canada. Gary’s job was to target these two groups to further increase general purpose and nautical rope sales.

Raised in southern Ontario, Gary had little experience with either geographic location, and knew the areas only by their roping needs and the regional stereotypes he’d grown up laughing about, but he wanted to make his father proud. After weeks of late nights and early meetings, Gary unveiled a new logo to his father and grandfather: an insignia of a bare-breasted mermaid, wrapped in a nylon double braid and wearing a Stetson, riding (sidesaddle) an elongated chestnut stallion, which she appeared to be reining in with a basic cotton multi-coloured.


He breathed heavily and perspired at the front of the room while the faces around the conference table remained empty, silent. The team decided to go another way. Gary was not asked again to help with the development of ad strategies.

When Wallace retired to sail across the Mediterranean and settle in France like he’d always dreamed of, Gary took over the operations of the family business. He resisted the title of CEO, since his father still mentored him through correspondence, and instead retained his more comfortable title of factory manager. For five years, Gary eased slowly into business ownership. Then, his father died suddenly in a fishing accident — he’d been demonstrating a better sailing knot to the Spanish crew when
the boat’s boom (handled by a sailor-in-training) swung around and sent him overboard with a knock to the head — in the Gulf of Lion, and Gary was left as the last Hale standing, president and CEO.

Gary sat in front of his computer. The window, open to allow fresh air in amongst his books, permitted the sweet aroma from the bakery down the street to mingle with that of Gary’s freshly pressed coffee. With the Saturday Times folded beside the keyboard and his elderly basset hound Waggles by his feet, Gary’s morning had begun quite comfortably.

To prepare for a stockholders’ meeting Monday morning, Gary had decided to do some research over the weekend to better familiarize himself with Hale Ropes’ online presence and popularity amongst younger generations — millennials, Gen Z and the like. His business managers were pushing a new website and updated online ordering processes, something his father and grandfather had never been interested in. Gary began with basic probing — Hale Rope Company — and expanded his search terms from there. He jotted down tidbits of information he found fascinating — such as which retailers appeared at the top of the results, and how many people named Haley Ropes were on LinkedIn — on a lined memo pad.

Hale Ropes was not the leading supplier for military ropes, and Gary knew this, but he could not remember which corporation held that position. Canacord Industries? Albert Dunstrum Textiles? He started to type most popular rope for military in the search box and stopped. The first suggestion that appeared in the autofill was most popular rope for dogs, but the second caused Gary to pause: most popular rope for hanging yourself.

Gary sat and, as Waggles snored under the table, he stared at the cursor, his hand poised on the mouse. He was not generally a curious person. Gary did not like intentionally encountering negativity. In the newspaper, he read terrible stories from time to time (impossible to avoid), and dwelled on particularly tragic victims and survivors for days afterward. He was unable to watch scary television shows or movies with sad endings because they prevented him from sleeping. Gary would simply rather not know. And yet, Gary’s index finger moved the mouse and pressed down.

For the next forty-six minutes, Gary clicked on links and followed paths that secured the knowledge that the Hale Rope Company, his company, was manufacturing the most popular ropes for self-induced hangings. A specific rope did not appear to be favoured — there were blogs touting a standard nylon braid, discussion boards recommending a lightweight three-strand polymer blend, a poll insisting that polyester with the soft multiplex skin was the way to go — but, rather, the brand itself. These people, these customers, had chosen a manufacturer they could rely upon. Hale Ropes: strength, durability and homespun trust. And, in death, trust they did. One Hale of a job.

Gary could not move. Many of the sources he’d read were recent, but some dated back to the early aughts. How many of these people had used his ropes? He watched a video from 2009 in which a preteen boy demonstrated the best ways to tie a noose and then recited the Hale slogan at the end of the clip.

Gary stared at one of the framed photos on his desk. It featured him as a child, his father and his grandfather, all playing tug-of-war with a large cotton shipping rope on the ground floor of the home factory — the one Gary still worked at. The same rope still hung in the factory, coiled on hooks in the wall, one of the many displays that had been maintained for years.

Hale ropes, Gary’s ropes, were made out of quality materials and tested constantly for tensile strength, flexibility, and temperature and element resistance. These ropes were effective in hauling ships through rough waters (fresh and salt), pulling freight up steep inclines in any weather, and keeping beloved pets close to their owners. According to the Internet, they were also efficiently breaking necks and cutting off oxygen to a rather high number of cerebra in North America.

Gary was torn. How could he, in good conscience, support the well-made products he had admired and manipulated for a lifetime? He would have to make a change, sabotage the quality and reputation of the
Hale Rope Company. He knew ropes like no other. Surely, if he retired some of the oldest members of staff with decent packages, he could manipulate the production in his own factory. Make the ropes brittle, less likely to withstand force.

Gary had visions of people screaming as tug lines snapped; fishermen without catches to sell; construction loads tumbling; sled dogs breaking free, leaving their passengers stranded, their goods undelivered; children falling off swing sets, bones in their tiny arms snapping. What was he thinking? He could not let the loyal clientele suffer. He could not be responsible for the consequences of a faulty product.

But bodies were swinging from rafters, perhaps even now, this very moment, as Gary’s coffee cooled in its stoneware mug. Last moments lived, loved ones left behind. Strength. Durability.

How could he allow the ropes to be made if they might eventually be wrapped around the necks of desperate teens, men with no way out, women leaping towards a new life? How could he project sales, shake the hands of the people he employed as they left for the weekend, watch the machines whir, if the nylon-cotton-poly blend were to one day tighten across a pulsating jugular, warm flesh about to — no.

He could not. He would not. Gary, extricating his foot from Waggle's drooling cheek, got up, went down the hall to his supply closet and retrieved a box of rope. He carried it back to the office, set it on the desk in front of the tug-of-war photo. He removed a piece of Hale rope. He tied an adjustable hitch. He undid it. He tied a noose (as directed by the boy in the video). He undid the noose. Gary tied a monkey’s fist. He tied a noose. Sailor’s knot. Noose. Wagoner’s hitch. Noose. Common whipping. Noose.

Gary sat down and placed the noose in front of him on the desk. He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and let out a slow breath. Waggle slapped Gary’s shin with a lazy tail. Laughter from the park across the street floated through the window.

*Put it out of your head, Gary,* he thought. *After all, you’re a hands-on rope man and you’re the last Hale standing — president and CEO. Let someone else untangle this knot.*

*SAY WHEN*

By Kenzi Inouye
Karam Bajwa is an illustrator and software developer. He likes keeping the TV volume at even numbers and dislikes it when midway through using urinal facilities the auto-flush comes on in full force.

Scott Colby is a writer, editor and family man whose secret is that he uses The Secret to get his writing published.

Kenzi Inouye is an illustrator based in Toronto. Her practice includes painting, ceramics and embroidery. Her work is centred around her sense of humour and love of dad puns.

Amy Kenny is a Whitehorse-based writer whose work has appeared in Room, The Antigonish Review, The Humber Literary Review and Hazlitt. She works as a freelance writer and has an MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia.

Elyse Martin is a vibrant and loud illustrator obsessed with all things slimy and grimy. She strives for shocking yet intoxicating imagery — bright colours that will burn your corneas and melt your mind.

Jess Nicol is a Calgary-based writer, editor and teacher. Her work can be found online at Propeller and McSweeney’s Internet Tendency.

Ambika Thompson has been published in such places as The Fiddlehead, Joyland, Electric Literature and Fanzine. She lives in Berlin and has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Guelph.

PHIL, BUDDY,
I JUST NEED A RIDE TO THE BEER STORE, THEN GET BACK TO MY RACE.
I LOVE CATS!!!

CONTENTS

COVER ART BY PETE RYAN

THINGS I SAW FROM MY WINDOW DURING THE PANDEMIC
Mundane sightings during lockdown times
By Brett Popplewell 4

I DON’T KNOW HOW TO SWIM OR BIRDSONG
A bird-brained fish deciphers its reality
By Greg Santos 5

SOMEWHERE
An elegy on entropy
By Greg Santos 6

A PERSON OF PASSION
A rhino horns his way up the corporate ladder
By Michelle Kaeser 7

ANXIOUS ASTROLOGY: FOURTH WAVE EDITION
Fearless predictions for fearful times
By Madame Kate Barss 15

PROUST QUESTIONNAIRE: CHARLES
The titillating revelations of a prince
By David Millen 28

I HOPE YOUR DAY IS A LUCKY ONE
No rabbit’s foot necessary
By Kenzi Inouye 29

CONTRIBUTORS
Biographical nonsense 30

THE COLLAGES

All images courtesy of the rights-free Collection of the British Library.

PAGE 2:
1. Cherry Cheeks and Roses (In verse.)
   (London; New York: E. P. Dutton; Ernest Nister, 1890), 22.
4. Ibid., 218.
7. Ibid., 277.
8. Ibid., 315.
9. Tommy Toddles, Tommy Toddles’s Comic Almanak, for all’t foaks e Leeds (e t’ Worl’d an raand abaght (for 1862, 1863-69, 1870-74) ... Be Tommy Toddles, Esquear (Leeds: J. Heaton, 1862), 199.
THINGS I SAW FROM MY WINDOW DURING THE PANDEMIC

By Brett Popplewell

A fox
A rabbit
The remains of a rabbit
A crow
A fox
The remains of a crow
A plastic bag drifting on the breeze
A plastic bag caught on a fence post
The moon
The sun
The moon and the sun at the same time
A raccoon
A fox
An urban turf war
A fox hiding under a shrub
A raccoon biding its time atop a shed
Darkness
A man eating yogurt out of a plastic tub
My reflection

I DON’T KNOW HOW TO SWIM OR BIRDSONG

By Greg Santos

The sparrows in my backyard haven’t found the seeds my wife put out.
It’s been a long week — or has it been a year?

We are hesitant to wade into new habitats.
Scared to fluff out our wings,
dive without fear into that deep drop in our guts.

The cave of unknowing that beckons us to swim the great ocean blue.

I’ve forgotten my scuba gear, again.
The bioluminescence bobbing in the distance — it’s an anglerfish lying in wait.

I’m mixing things up; I realize too late:
Gosh, I’m no bird at all.
Just a tiny, bewildered flying fish.
By Greg Santos

Somewhere loneliness weeps
and blows its nose into a handkerchief.

Somewhere a figment of my imagination
helps a woman shrug on her faux fur coat.

Somewhere a letter meant for someone else
brings a stranger joy.

Somewhere a forlorn lighthouse
stands abandoned by its keeper.

Somewhere a bowl of porridge
has been cinnamoned and sugared too thoroughly.

Despite all the attention,
it is still so desperately lonely.

A PERSON OF PASSION

By Michelle Kaefer
Illustrations by Maria José Arias

“Five years I’ve been at this office,” said my co-worker Mary, as she reached the peak of one of her impassioned rants. “No raises? No promotions? Am I not a good worker, Jim?”

“Among the best,” I said.

“Am I not passionate about the work?”

Mary, in fact, was the most passionate accountant I’d ever met. Over work lunches and happy-hour drinks, she could go on and on about the divine order of financial statements. At a Christmas party last year, she had recited a poem about the beauties of the double-entry book keeping system.

“Nobody’s more passionate than you,” I said.

“Yeah, Jim, I’ve got passion all right. Passion up the yingyang.” She’d had a few cocktails at lunch, which made her passion soar. “But I’ve got this crappy salary and no self-respect.” Mary was swivelling her desk chair so aggressively that hair fell from her messy ponytail. Finally, she spun the chair toward the boss’s door. “That’s it! I’m going in there, and I’m going to get what’s mine.”
trying to categorize a tricky expense, he’d sit back in his chair and tap his horn, the way a man might stroke his chin.

“So, Steve,” I said one day as he tackled a Subway sandwich. He always ate lunch at his desk. “How’d you get this job?”

The rhino looked up, a piece of lettuce stuck to his chin. “Conservation program,” he said tersely, then dove back into the foot-long. But my eyes stayed on him and soon he sighed, put the sandwich down and turned to me. “Poachers,” he said, tapping a hoof against his horn. “The number-one cause of rhino death is poaching.”

“For humans, it’s heart disease.” I gave this some thought, then declared, “I guess yours is worse.”

“It is what it is,” he said with a shrug. “Back home, we have a saying: a rhino is born with a horn on his head and a target on his back.” He snorted a short, sad laugh, then added, “Conservationists have tried everything: harsher poaching laws, airlifting us to refuges, implanting us with trackers. But . . .”

“Poachers gonna poach.”

“You got it.” The rhino shifted in his chair, the hinges squeaking ominously under his weight. “One day some conservationists hit on the idea of removing us from the situation. They set up this program to teach us marketable skills — like data entry and basic accounting — and to integrate us into new environments. So here I am.”

“They give you that shirt and tie too?”

The rhino adjusted his Windsor knot and smiled. “Pretty sharp, huh?”

“A conservation program!” Mary shrieked from the pet food aisle of the supermarket where she’d been hired as a stock clerk.

“That’s what he said.”

“But what does a rhino know about accounting?” She jammed sacks of cat food into a stuffed bottom shelf, her face flushed from the effort and her hair pasted to her forehead. “Does he even care about accounting?”

“I don’t think so, no. But he’s a cheap worker, paid bottom dollar.”
“So was I! That was the problem! And so are you, aren’t you?”
“I am, yes.”
“You let them walk all over you, Jim,” she said as the store manager approached her about a protein shake spill one aisle over. “Honestly, where’s your self-respect?”

It turned out the rhino knew enough about accounting to get through tax season. I helped him out here and there, held his hand through a few tough returns, but he got the hang of things soon enough and cranked out more than a hundred returns before Tax Day.

“One hundred and three returns!” Feldenkirk said, clapping the rhino’s back during our post-season staff meeting. “An office record, Steve.” The rhino nodded modestly and looked at the floor.

“You even beat Jim’s record of ninety-seven from three years ago,” Feldenkirk said as he turned to me. “Watch out, Jimbo — he’s coming for you.”

“You let a rhino outpace you!” Mary exclaimed.

We were in a pawn shop, where she was hawking a few things to make rent. She’d lost her job at the supermarket and seemed short on prospects.

“You let a rhino outpace you!” Mary exclaimed. “To be fair, he had the easiest returns.”

“Outworked by a rhino,” she went on, like she hadn’t heard me. “I can’t believe that. Seriously, Jim, where’s your self-respect?” Then she started haggling with the pawnbroker over her great-grandmother’s necklace.

“I helped him with a bunch of those returns, you know,” I said. “He’d have managed half as many without me. I’ve sort of taken him under my wing.”

“Is that right?”

“Of course. That rhino’s had a rough life. Always hounded by poachers. Can you imagine that?”

Mary stopped on the sidewalk to count her cash. “No. No, I can’t. All I worry about is heart disease.”

“The rhino needs guidance. He asks me dozens — hundreds — of questions a day. Especially now that we’re into corporate year-ends.”

“Well, sure, corporate year-ends can be tricky little buggers.” Mary stuffed the banknotes into her pocket. “Does this rhino even know double-entry bookkeeping?”

“Sure.”

THE RHINO’S NAME WAS STEVE AND HE TURNED OUT TO BE AN OKAY GUY. HE SPENT MOST OF THE DAY HUNCHED OVER HIS COMPUTER, TRYING NOT TO TAKE UP TOO MUCH SPACE.

“But does he know it? Does he recognize its majesty?” She scratched the side of her head; she seemed not to have brushed her hair — or teeth — in days. “Does he know that Goethe once said the double-entry bookkeeping system is ‘among the finest inventions of the human mind’? Does he, Jim?”

“I dunno.” She shook her head. “You’d better let me come in and explain it to him. Maybe I can instill some passion in that rhino.”

A few days later, while Feldenkirk was at a conference, Mary came to the office, her hair nicely styled, makeup dabbed on her face. From the other side of the office, Joan and Gary came over to say hello and, when they heard why Mary had come, to spectate her passionate tutorial.

“The most important thing to realize about double-entry bookkeeping,” Mary began, “is that it’s magnificent.”

“Uh-huh,” said the rhino, keeping his eyes on his monitor.

“So agile, yet so robust.”
“Got it.”

“All of human commerce can be held within this simple system of debits and credits.”

The rhino frowned at me. “Is there a point to this person, Jim?”

Mary stepped right between us and barked at Steve, “What do you know about Luca Pacioli?”

“Uh . . . nothing.”

“Pacioli was the father of accounting. A fifteenth-century Italian monk. He was also” — and here she laid a hand on the rhino’s massive shoulder and shook him excitedly — “a great pal of da Vinci’s! Doesn’t that make perfect sense?” She clapped her hands in delight. “Great minds always find each other!”

“Who’s da Vinci?” Steve asked. “Another accountant?”


“Never heard of him.”

“What about Goethe? They teach you about Goethe?”

“What’s a Goethe? Is that a tax form?”

Mary smacked her palms on the desk, and the rhino’s oversized keyboard rattled. “No, he’s a writer! German.”

“I knew a German once. A poacher. Probably not the same guy.”

“No! Not the same guy!” Mary scrunched her nose and threw her head back.

As I watched her gaze plaintively at the ceiling, I was reminded of the time she got hammered and confessed that she often daydreamed about Goethe, da Vinci and Pacioli palling around in the afterlife, discoursing about art, science and the meaning of life. I knew that in her imaginings she was right there with them. But instead, she was here in this office with a rhinoceros.

With her eyes shut and her head still pitched backward, Mary whispered, “Double-entry bookkeeping is a testament to the human spirit.” A tear leaked from her closed right eye. “It contains a holy harmony. It’s among humanity’s greatest achievements. Like a stirring painting or a moving poem, it has launched us one step closer to the divine.”

The rhino turned to her and said, “Look, lady, I don’t really care about holy harmonies or human achievements. I just care about not being shot in the flank and having my horn sawn off, you know? So I just want to sit here and pump out these corporate year-ends.”

Mary slammed back a Scotch and threw the empty tumbler into a cardboard box in her living room. She was being evicted at the end of the week.

“That rhino has no passion for accounting!” she cried. Her face was tear-stained, her makeup smeared. Her hair had shaken loose as she paced furiously.

“Not a lick,” I said.

“Didn’t even know da Vinci! Never heard of Goethe!” She paused to stare at a framed photograph of Goethe on the wall. She brushed her fingertips against his cheek and choked back a sob. Then she resumed ranting. “It’s an outrage! A goddamn outrage! What does a rhino know
about the human spirit?”
“Not much.”
“And you,” she said, stabbing a finger into my chest. “You agree to work with someone like this? Honest to God, Jim, where’s your self-respect?”
Then she threw back another Scotch and passed out between the cardboard boxes on the floor.

◊◊◊

A few months later, I heard Mary had died of a heart attack. When I arrived at work, I went straight into Feldenkirk’s office to pass along the news. But instead of Feldenkirk, I was greeted by the rhino.
“I’ve been promoted!” Steve said from behind the big wooden desk.
What could I say? I congratulated the guy, then told him about Mary and asked for funeral leave.
“Ooh, no can-do, Jim,” he said, flattening his red tie. “We need you here, crunching those numbers.” Then he explained the upcoming pay cuts. “But you know,” he said, putting a hoof on my shoulder and ushering me toward the door, “your friend Mary was right about one thing. There’s a holy harmony to this business, isn’t there? Work hard, get promoted. A debit and a credit, huh?”
He laughed lightly, then pushed me out of his office.

◊◊◊

At the rhino’s old desk, which was Mary’s old desk, now sat a bird with a broken wing who pecked at her keyboard all day long. Joan and Gary from the other side of the office had been replaced by a pair of stray cats.
As I sat at my desk, listening to the pecking and the mewling that had supplanted lively office chatter, I thought about poor, dead Mary. I imagined her in the afterlife, seated at a table with Goethe and da Vinci, spending eternity in passionate dialogue.
Better off dead, I decided, because down here, in this office, there was no place left for a person of passion. ☁
This autumn, a scratch strikes your throat, then turns to a light cough. Is it seasonal allergies from the late-blooming ragweed and goldenrod? Or is the other thing — the big, scary breakthrough-case thing? Once upon a time, pre-2020, you remember, people used to get colds. You’ll agonize and agonize, but you won’t be able to relax until you’re sitting in the hard plastic folding chair at the testing site, your mask pulled down to your chin. A large cotton swab is forced up your nose into the recesses of your brain. Oh brave archer, your eyes will water as the arrow of the swab is withdrawn and sealed into the bull’s eye of a thin capped tube.

For you especially, my earthy goat, it’s been a hard two years. The world is now online, and there’s no outside to temper that quiet ambition as you work and work and then work some more. This tendency comes to a crisis point in the grid-like prison of a Zoom meeting. You’ll try to participate, let your ideas flow into the conversation, but you’ll be met with only silence. You’ll question if you spoke at all. Throughout the meeting, no matter how many suggestions you put forward, issues and contingencies you raise, no one seems to hear you. Again and again, you’ll speak — and still you’re overlooked, unremarked upon. You’ll feel your horns burn in embarrassment and confusion. There is a part of you, dear Capricorn, that worries you are not enough. It’s why you’ve trained yourself to compensate through diligently working yourself to the hoofs. You want the reassurance from others that you are listened to, that your contributions matter, have impact. As the Zoom meeting zooms, you’ll ask yourself if your work is valuable. What do you really provide? Finally, once again you’ll attempt to speak up, and once again, no one seems to respond. That is, until the kind voice of your colleague (probably a Cancer) calls out to you, “Hey, I think you’re on mute.”
There’s a gregarious energy coming from the eleventh house bringing you an invitation to an actual house party, my sweet water bearer of good times. However, the invite is unclear about whether the party is indoors or out. Do you go? You play it off as eternally independent, but truthfully there’s nothing you love more than a crowd to stand out from. When you ask the host about the location, the answer is ambiguous. Everyone can do whatever they are “comfortable with.” Oh Aquarius, you know better than anyone how a gathering erodes your inhibitions. How even if you promise yourself that you’ll stay on the porch the whole evening, you can imagine what might happen as the sun recedes and you start to shiver. How tempting the lights and warmth will look through the windows, how you’ll gradually make your way inside. It will feel so good to temporarily suspend your knowledge of the risks of indoor gatherings and let yourself be enfolded into the overstuffed room, bodies anchovied together. You tell yourself you’ll stay six feet from everyone, but soon this promise relaxes into dancing. You’ll love the feel of other humans moving together. It’s so pleasurable, but no matter how much you try to ignore it, a niggling part of your brain will wonder if it’s worth it.

PISCES
You will wash your hands, you will wash your hands, you will wash your hands, you will wash your hands, you will wash your hands, you will wash your hands. Your skin is chapped and cracked and peeling, but you will wash your hands. If twenty seconds with your hands under the water is good, why not two minutes? Why not twenty? You will wash your hands, you will wash your hands, you will wash your hands. Your days will be spent in front of the tap, the warm water spilling over your fingers. Your palms are open; you are safe.
Scorpio in your eighth house brings a time of possibility and possible confusion. This fall, your workplace announces a return to the office. “Okay,” you think, “that will be an adjustment.” Then senior leadership says, “No, wait — we’ll continue virtually.” Then a week later, a “hybrid model” is announced, in which half the staff works mornings in the office, then commutes home for virtual WFH afternoons. Then, it is declared, “Just kidding! You’re all working in the office all of the time, always, forever.” Then, “No, wait — we have no idea. Stay tuned.” Then, “Why aren’t you in the office?” Then, “Why aren’t you at home?” All in all, my sweet ram, you’ll have no idea where you are or where you are supposed to be, and maybe now is a good time to embrace being lost.

You’ve always appreciated the finer things in life, even though you know capitalism is, pardon the pun, bullshit. This transit sees you moving into your most materialistic instincts. While things are open, you’re soaking it in, going to every store. You’re an Earth sign, so you’re filling your abode with fancy plants: a striped alocasia with lily-pad leaves, a ponytail-shaped palm, some stringy, dangling succulents. You’ll buy a perfect pot to match each. There are such thrills to be found in a new sweater, new sneakers, a new plush bath mat. Oh, the ecstasy of no longer being limited to the essentials! You’ll go for coffee at your favourite patio. As you sip the skyscraper-high latte foam, you’ll try to ignore the small voice scratching questions into the back of your mind: How long can this last? When will we be locked down?
You’re an expert in multiples and dualities, and so you recognize there probably won’t be just a fourth wave. Will there be a fifth wave? What about a sixth? A seventh? An eighth wave? A hundredth? A thousandth wave in which your imaginary grandchildren (coincidentally twins) never leave the homepod and you tell them stories of days before our Amazon and Zoom overlords? You’ll tell them about when you used to casually wrap your arms around someone else. But they aren’t listening to you, old Gemini — they’re distracted by their portable holograms. But you remember. You remember. You remember.

Tiny crab, hard shell on the outside, but there is much in store for your tender underbelly. Someone, a casual acquaintance perhaps, will ask you for a hug, and you will have to ask yourself so much in the short span of a second. You know your pincers are meant to grab, to feel and touch and comfort, but still, you’ll need to assess. How long have you known the hug seeker? Are they vaccinated or do they look like someone who might refuse? They are not wearing a Hugs Over Masks shirt, but sometimes these things aren’t advertised. Is there any way to know? You’ll feel the claw of obligatory social pressure to wrap your bodies together in an embrace. Will their cheek rest against yours? Will you feel their breath, hot and moist against your neck?
My Virgo, my innocent one, if only all were so conscientious. Neptune’s wayward orbit brings chaos to your organization — your bookshelves organized pleasingly by spine colour, the letters on your label maker worn and shadowed from use, your inbox always a lovely, symmetrical zero. This season, you’ll find yourself in the deli aisle at the grocery store. A loud woman demanding porchetta will stand too close to you while you wait. You’ll shift away, but she’ll move closer again, closing the gap between you. When you look back at her, you’ll realize her mask has slipped threateningly beneath her nose — droplets, droplets, droplets as she receives her ham. As you wait for your order to be prepared, you’ll notice the woman remove her mask completely, shove it beneath her chin, and begin to munch on the ham straight from the deli wrapper, little bits of meat stuck like floss to her lips. Shy one, we both know you won’t say anything in the moment, but as you exit the store, you’ll sanitize three times with the thick, gluey alcohol from the automated dispenser and wonder if you’ll ever feel clean again.

Leo

Leo the amorous lion, the lover, ruler of the fifth house, romance blows in for you this autumn like leaves in a windstorm, swirling their way across the pavement. All this to say, you will meet someone, perhaps online. Maybe their messages, their gentle banter will woo you to a blanket spread across the grass in a park. It’s still warm, the mane of the sun sinks into the sky, a bottle of juicy red wine, tiny plastic cups. The twilight and cicadas will seduce you, and then your lover’s lips on yours, the flick of a tongue against your teeth. Oh! The euphoria! After the kiss, you’ll laugh. What a release after the last two years. How much life to still be found. Leo, my entertainer. You’ll make a joke like a good lover does, something teasing like, “You’re not an anti-vaxxer, are you?” Oh kitten, how the laughter will fade into the awkward silence that follows. Your lover holds you close, softly whispers in your ear, “Well, actually, the term we prefer is individuals for vaccine choice.”
Libra the equalizer, weighing and balancing every choice, every decision. At times this makes you wishy-washy, never more so than right now. You’ve been envisioning a trip for so long, through all the lockdowns. This was your escape. Envisioning a beach — specifically, your birthday on a beach! Toes in ocean, skin glittering with heat and sand. But should you go? Should you book a trip right now? Can you? Do you have to isolate before your flight or upon your return? Is it even morally responsible to fly? To go away? Oh Libra, so many thoughts resting on the heavy shoulders of your scales.

SCORPIO

You can’t stop looking at all the masks on the ground: disposable blue, black, pink. My sweet scorpion, it stings how you recognize that they must cover the world over. You’re remembering the sun in summer, the bright alien-red furnace of it through the smoke from forest fires. It feels surreal, like sci-fi, but it’s also the most real thing you’ve ever known. Our weather, our climate is changing. Evidence is everywhere and you’re just one small arachnid, miniature and powerless. All has not ended, though. Remember, you are still here: to witness, to survive. Even at the finish, there is still joy to be found.
What is your idea of perfect happiness? Food, friendship, and little rolls in the hay with Camilla. What is your greatest fear? There are those days when I wake up in the morning and put on my track pants and runners and think, Jesus Christ, now what? What is the quality you most like in a woman? Obedience comes to mind, but I also like a very firm chest, long legs, small feet, and a fully unshaved body. What is the quality you most like in a man? Intelligence, a strong jawline, and the ability to look dashing in a kilt while on a trampoline. What is the trait you most deplore in yourself? I hate being ignored. I think this stems from Mummy not knowing who, or what, I was when I joined her in the library before bed. How would you like to die? Watching Coronation Street in bed while wearing my coronation crown, with Camilla nibbling at my ear. Nibbling at anything, really. What do you consider your greatest achievement? My work to save the monarchy from extinction. Papa was extinct for years and sadly had to be propped up in the months before he died. When and where were you happiest? I threw a boomerang while on tour in Australia a few years ago. Magnificent setting. Though I do now live in constant fear. What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery? Prince Andrew. What do you most dislike? The poor. What is your greatest extravagance? I use environmentally friendly cellulose toilet paper, as well a water-based bottom wash that soothes irritation and contains no preservatives or perfumes. These are expensive but are dissolvable and don’t clog one’s drain.
CONTRIBUTORS

Maria José Arias is a Colombian-born art director and illustrator based in Toronto. She enjoys working with bold colours and patterns, and seeks to bring the brightness of her hometown to her work.

Madame Kate Barss is a writer and amateur astrologer living in Toronto. Her horoscopes are very, very real.

Kenzi Inouye is an illustrator based in Toronto. Her practice includes painting, ceramics and embroidery. Her work is centred around her sense of humour and love of dad puns.

Michelle Kaeser is a fiction and essay writer whose work has appeared in publications across Canada. Her first novel, The Towers of Babylon (Freehand Books), was published in 2019.

David Millen writes weird emails to Feathertale editors that sometimes make just enough sense to merit publication. He lives among elderly people in Ottawa.

Pete Ryan is an illustrator and global-warming alarmist. He enjoys fantasy gardening and all dogs over twenty-five pounds.

Greg Santos is a lifelong potato-chip and pro-wrestling aficionado. He is the editor-in-chief of carte blanche and lives in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal with his wife and two children. His most recent book is Ghost Face (DC Books).

THE COLLAGES

All images courtesy of the rights-free Collection of the British Library.

PAGE 31:
11. William Brown Macdougall and

John Keats, Isabella, or The Pot of Basil ... Illustrated and decorated by W. B. Macdougall (London: Kegan Paul, 1898), 37.