



Byline

COMFORT

NOVEMBER 2021

Contents

—

4

“Flute”

Poem by J.S. MacKay

5

Upcoming Events

6

“My Gramma Loves Ice Cream”

Poem by Louise Rachlis

7

Book Launch News

9

“Return to Pine Street”

Poem by Louise Chivers

10

National Capital Writing Contest News

11

“The Gentleman Hermit”

Short Story by Russell Wardell



At Home

BY ARLENE SMITH

When I listen to well-established authors speak at writing conferences of other events, I envy how at home they are with their craft.

I don't often experience that kind of comfort with my own creative writing. Doubt and fear intrude on my work. What if people read this and think I'm bonkers? Who is going to care about this? And what is a transitive verb again?

But then, I sifted through the submissions for this edition. I relaxed into my chair. My breath slowed. I closed my eyes and ruminated for a moment or two on what the creators wrote about. They shared light insights into the people who allowed them to be themselves. They remembered places that freed them from doubts and fears. Their work honoured friends, family and places that made them feel at home.

I am certain that the well-established authors I listen to have struggled with doubts and fears. But they practiced and persisted. With a cup of tea by a fire and the support of people who allowed them to be themselves, they wrote until they felt at home with their work.

I hope that when you read the poems and stories in this edition, you will relax into your chair, close your eyes and ruminate. I hope the words trigger an idea that sends you to your laptop or notebook to write. With a cup of tea by a fire and the support of people who allow you to be yourself, I hope you write until you feel at home.



Flute

BY JS MACKAY

—*"I am the hole in a flute . . . —Hafiz*

The wind blows, tentative at first
Gentle lullabies for a new life
"I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles"
First steps
Ink wells in school desks,
Hopscotch and hide-and-seek.

The breath wafts, bright youthful notes
Transcending Great Depression
"We Sure Got Hard Times Now"
Never enough
Hand-me-downs
Sweets a treasured treat

The wind gusts, stronger and unbending
Rising above war
"Wish Me Luck As You Wave Me Goodbye"
War bonds
Silk stockings painted on
Evenings by the radio

The breath carries, steady and assured
Young wife and mother
"Teach Your Children"
Scraped knees
Hands on feverish foreheads
Love disguised as irritation

The wind slows, a sombre requiem
A loss far too young
"Paint It Black"
Tears fall
I heard the news
Hugs shared through hurt

The breath renews, harmonious and healing
The first laugh after
"A Brand New Day"
Comforts shared
Scars fade
Looking to the future

The breath moves, celebrating and dancing
Life not defined by age
"Never Grow Old"
Vivid grace
A flute
Through which Spirit blows.

UPCOMING EVENTS

VIRTUAL HOLIDAY DROP-IN AND AGM

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2021

7:00 P.M. TO 8:30 P.M.

VIA ZOOM

Pour your favourite beverage and
join us.

Share a piece of your winter or holiday-themed
writing—a poem or a (very short) story.
We will also take some time to discuss the
business of the branch.

WRITING POETRY FOR CHILDREN

TUESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2022

7:00 P.M. TO 8:30 P.M.

VIA ZOOM

Warning! There will be silliness. Please bring
your expansive child's mind.

Bowman Wilker will talk about the difficulties
of publishing children's poetry and then
explain why you should do it anyway.

You will learn practical techniques and practice
stretching your mind in ways that will inform
your other writing.

My Gramma

By Louise Rachlis

My Gramma loves ice-cream,
It always makes her smile.
She could be eating Chinese food,
But that isn't quite her style.

Gramma eats a bit of rice,
and sips a little soup.
But that cannot compare at all
to vanilla, double scoop.

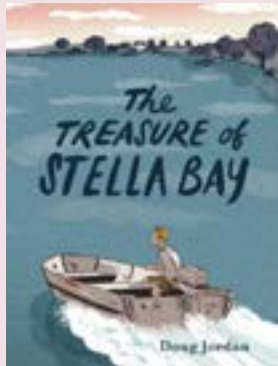
Yes, it is the ice cream
That is very very nice.
She eats it all - and licks the bowl,
still that doesn't quite suffice.

The server brings another dish,
and then again another.
You might think that strange, but then
You do not know Grandmother.

Loves



Ice Cream



The Treasure of Stella Bay

By Doug Jordan

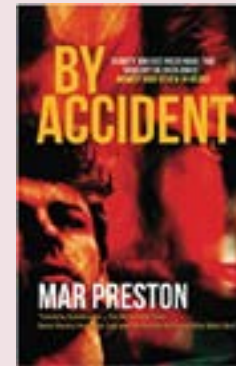
[Find out more](#)

It's 1961. 11-year-old Alex, going on 12, a bit shy, and a little bit anxious, has just moved with his family to the tiny village of Stella on bucolic Amherst Island. Father, Professor Jorgenson, and mother, Victoria, seek a pastoral and gentler life, but Alex was just fine with growing up in Kingston. Now he has to start all over with new friends, new school, new everything. Luckily for him he is self-reliant, resilient, and curious. He doesn't know what leadership is but somehow he attracts followers. And this leads to adventures and discoveries. Anyone who was twelve in the 1960s, or even in the 1980s, or 2000s, will recognize themselves in this book, because the questions and encounters Alex faces are the same for every generation. Who hasn't built a fort to get away from the adults in their worlds? Who hasn't struggled with the uncertainties of that first love? Who hasn't wondered about some mystery from the past?

Published: July 26, 2021

BUY

BOOK LAUNCH NEWS



By Accident

By Mar Preston

[Find out more](#)

You can get away with almost anything if you're rich, beautiful, and famous in Santa Monica. Once in a blue moon, a good-guy cop can change that.

One drug-frenzied night, superstar actor Derek Logan accidentally kills his undocumented nanny. But Logan doesn't figure on homicide detective Dave Mason getting a visit from the nanny's frantic, photogenic, and media-savvy brother from Guatemala. The Hollywood studio fixer can't make this one go away. The actor and his wife barricade themselves on their estate in Santa Monica with their six-year-old twins and livestream pleas to their fans, asking them to storm the house and rescue them from police. It's a star-spangled, social-media catastrophe starring warring spouses. Justice prevails, but not before Detective Mason and his social justice warrior girlfriend are dragged down a dirty trail of power, privilege, and perversion.

Published: September 15, 2021

BUY

BOOK LAUNCH NEWS



Bricolage, A Gathering of Centos

By A. Garnett Weiss

[Find out more](#)

These 62 poems consist of lines or partial lines drawn from anthologies or individual collections featuring the work of poets living or passed, Canadian or International. The lines in each cento, unaltered from their sources apart from adjustments for reasons of punctuation or syntax, create a new and original poem, independent in meaning and form from the source material. The book acknowledges fully the source of each line.

Published: September 23, 2021

BUY

SEND US YOUR NEWS

Do you have a new book?

Have you had a short story or a poem published?

Are you presenting a training session or interesting talk?

Let us know.

[Byline](#)



RETURN TO PINE STREET

By Louise Chivers

If I could touch the ground where my father stood,
Where he grew the flowers that he loved,
I would hurry back as fast as I could,
I couldn't get there soon enough.

If I could smell the cake my mother baked,
In the kitchen where we always sat,
Long after meals that she would make,
Just to converse about this and that.

If I could go back and see the spot,
Where my sister and I both grew,
Where we slept and where we fought,
And then made up like siblings do.

If I could listen to records for just one day,
In the basement with my friends,
And play the games we used to play,
I would want it to never end.

I've lived a lifetime where I've roamed,
Though other places have been fine,
There is no place that feels like home
Quite like the home I had on Pine.

The 35th Annual NATIONAL CAPITAL WRITING CONTEST

opens December 1, 2021
and will be accepting entries until
March 21, 2022 at 11:59 PM.

The contest is open to all Canadian citizens or landed immigrants living in Canada.

Awards Night will take place on Tuesday, June 14, 2022, with cash awards for
1st, 2nd and 3rd placements (\$300, \$200, \$100)
and three honourable mentions for each category.

Entry Fees: Poetry: \$5 per single poem; Short Story: \$15 per single story.

Name or other identifiers must not appear anywhere on the story or poem as entries will be blind judged.
Judges' decisions are final. No entries will be returned.

For multiple entries, each must be accompanied by its entry fee and separate cover.

Short Story: maximum 2,500 words, unpublished, in English
Poetry: maximum 60 lines including title and blank lines, unpublished, in English. No Haiku.

Electronic entries: ncwc-ncr@canadianauthors.org

Watch for details and/or guidelines on

[Facebook](#)

[Canadian Authors Association – National Capital Region](#)

[Twitter](#)

Presented with the support of Mill Street Books, Almonte, ON and the Canadian Authors Association – NCR



The Gentleman Hermit

A SHORT STORY

BY RUSSELL WARDELL

At the age of fifty-five he stopped working. Based on the advertising campaigns of investment firms he thought this might be seen by others as a great success story, a nod to his financial acumen, but it was not.

Older folk, of whom he knew many, said, “You’re too young to retire.” Peers regarded the move with suspicion and seemed to read into it an implicit judgement of their own life choices. Family and friends said, “Maybe you’ll pick up some other work.” By which they meant one of the classic semi-retirement jobs: garage shuttle service driver, Walmart greeter, or fast-food restaurant cashier.

His response to these suggestions was always the same, “If I wanted to work I wouldn’t have retired.”

At the age of fifty-six he sold his home, a modest century house, nicely remodelled, a home many thought he loved. He sold most of his possessions, but not in order to travel the world as some suggested. No, he sold off the house and contents and moved into a simple apartment in a complex filled with other retirees, all of whom happened to be, on average, twenty-five years his senior.

Many of his fellow tenants, having been compelled by concerned children to leave their homes somewhat against

their wills, found the presence of someone who was voluntarily choosing such a life confusing at best.

He lived a solitary life in this new community. He did not golf or play bridge or complain about the government of the day, leaving him little in common with his co-tenants.

What he did was read. The staff at the local library grew accustomed to his punctual, structured visits. Each Wednesday morning at precisely ten-thirty he would arrive and begin a thorough search of the shelves, even crawling on hands and knees to scan the lowest levels in case an essential text had been hidden there, a victim of alphabetical filing.

The books he checked out included Man Booker Prize winning novels and the occasional Richard Sharpe adventure, all of the Massey Lectures, whatever had been recommended by Eleanor Wachtel, and poetry—Seamus Heaney, Robyn Sarah, Michael Crummey. (In truth he understood little of the poetry but liked a good turn of phrase and strongly supported the art form.) He read the classics—Melville, Austin, Poe; social commentary, political history, and spiritual self-help. He read compulsively, obsessively, as though his life depended upon it. *continued on page 12*

continued from page 11

His reading started to shape him so strongly that in rare instances in conversation all he could do was offer quotations.

He understood, from reading *A Guide Book for Retirement* that such single-mindedness was not ideal, and he told himself that he would break the habit someday. But for now he believed the words of the various authors were his greatest hope, for he read with purpose, a goal always before him. He read in the hope that he might fall in love with humanity.

In his final years of work he had seethed. The sound of another human voice had been enough to tense his body, meetings had been events which required breath control and silent mantras. He had come to believe that should he remain in the office until the normal retirement age of sixty-five, he would be a cantankerous old man. This was a fate he would do anything to avoid. What troubled him about humanity was nothing unique or radical—the failure to deal with climate change, global economic injustice, and the gap between stated values and lived practice. And to be clear, he saw his own guilt in each of these human failings, self-loathing was very much a part of his diagnosis: cantankerousness. And so he sought a radical conversion, a shift from loathing to love, and he sought it in the books of his local library.

A steady diet of literature, insightful essays, and reflective poetry did lead to a shift in perspective. Increasingly his spirit calmed as he came to see the human condition as one in which the individual pursuit of a good and decent life somehow became destructive when practiced *en masse*.

He saw that many noble souls had striven for some sort of corporate salvation and some had even seemed, ever so slightly, to bend the arc of history toward justice, but a few minutes of conversation with virtually anyone in a shop or on the street or in the lobby of the apartment was enough to make him fear that such a progressive view of history was illusory.

At the age of fifty-nine he started to embrace the term “gentleman hermit” as a self-description. A modern monastic life held great appeal. He could love humanity from afar, he just couldn’t maintain that love up close.

“At the age of fifty-nine he started to embrace the term “gentleman hermit” as a self-description. A modern monastic life held great appeal. He could love humanity from afar, he just couldn’t maintain that love up close.”

He started to order his groceries online, he automated every interaction possible, he even stopped spending time at the library. Instead of searching the shelves he would scan the collection online and have his stack of books waiting for pick up at the circulation desk. The most he had to say to the librarian after that was, “Thank you.”

One of the times he felt closest to humanity was during his evening walk. He would wait for the streetlights to come on, and then he would stroll slowly through the neighbourhood catching glimpses of life through windows.

continued on page 13

continued from page 12

The sight of a couple making dinner or of a child playing street hockey gave him such contentment that he felt immeasurably grateful for having pushed back his inner curmudgeon. On the other hand, the sight of a sixty-inch flat screen TV, colours dancing into the night, viewers frozen, slack-jawed before the images, made him wonder how humanity had made it this far.

He was not completely cut off. His family and friends continued to write, to email, to call. In fact, he had a daughter living out on the west coast, they FaceTimed weekly and she told him about her successes, challenges, and new romances. He had become a great listener but when asked about himself he tended to offer stock phrases. “Everything is smooth here, routine. I’m fine.”

Eventually she started pushing for more detail and when he finally described his new life to her she said, “Dad, it sounds like you’re stalking humanity. You cannot love someone or something from afar. Love is messy, up close, and personal. Get a grip.”

“You cannot love someone or something from afar. Love is messy, up close, and personal.. ”

He was taken aback by the harsh critique of his peaceful existence, but she, and perhaps she alone, had the power to make him re-evaluate.

She took to giving him weekly assignments, and in their calls she would grade his work. The first week it was “Say hello to at least one person each day.” By week three it had progressed to “Have a five-minute conversation with

someone.” The day after she had assigned that, he phoned her. She told him that he had to talk to someone new and gently hung up. On week eight it was time to go big. She told him that he had to volunteer somewhere. She wanted him to get out and connect with people at least once a week.

He resisted. She was insistent.

And so it was that he found himself back at the library at ten-thirty on a Wednesday morning. The librarian on duty was surprised to see him. She had not received an online order from him and so had no stack of books waiting.

“I’m sorry” she said, “maybe we missed your email.”

“No,” he responded. “I’m not here for books, I was wondering ... I mean is it possible ... are there things you need done around here, things for volunteers ... I’d like to volunteer. Actually that’s not true, my daughter is making me volunteer but if I have to I’d like it to be here.”

It was not the smoothest of requests but eventually he was given a form and after a brief interview with the volunteer coordinator he was given an assignment: shelf reader. He was to scan the entire collection and make sure all materials were in proper order. He loved it.

He perfected a look of intense focus that deterred patrons from speaking to him, and yet the task was simple enough that he easily studied each library user’s literary preferences. He knew which men loved romances, yet claimed to be picking them up for their spouse. He knew which teenagers were reading Kafka and Camus and felt a great empathy for their angst. He knew the women who searched the diet and nutrition section with such compulsion that their loved ones should be concerned.

continued on page 14

continued from page 13

He knew the reading preferences of the lonely, the grieving, the aged and he undertook a mission to serve them all. Instead of keeping the collection in perfect order he started moving works into the paths of patrons. Self-compassion books started to appear amidst the diet section. Margaret Atwood's graphic novels were found beside Kafka. Harlequin Romances were tucked in amongst Louis L'Amour westerns.

At first the librarians thought he had become the worst volunteer ever, that something inside him had snapped. For when he first came on things had been perfect, but now only they could find half of the collection. They were going to take action, but at the monthly staff meeting the CEO reported circulation numbers up 15 percent. Patrons were leaving perfect 5.0 ratings on Google with comments like, "My library knows what I need before I do."

The CEO said to them, "Whatever you're doing, keep it up." And so the staff decided to let it play out.

Soon after, he started taping little recipe cards to the shelves with the kind of notes you find on the back of wine bottles. "This book pairs beautifully with a winter storm." Or, "This is best read aloud." And, "This story has notes of dry humour and sarcastic wit ... Please consume in moderation."

He was enjoying himself more than he had thought possible. The reading preferences of humanity had softened his judgement, nudged him toward compassion, and made him hope for love.

But in their weekly call his daughter continued to ask, "Who have you spoken to?" And the answer was still, "No one."

Of course, some of the library patrons knew who was shaping their reading habits. They could tell that he preferred anonymity, so they gave him space and silence.

But one day as he was inserting a volume of Quaker writings into the war history section, a voice broke the silence. "Don't you think that's a little too... directive?"

He turned to see a man looking at the books through thick-lensed glasses. He was unfamiliar but had two books in hand—one by Andre Alexis, another by Madeleine Thien. Without waiting for a reply this stranger continued, "I would have gone with Timothy Findley or Sebastian Barry; the horror of war but less confrontational."

"I try to stay within genres," he said.

"Ah," said the stranger, "then perhaps Satish Kumar or even Virginia Woolf?"

And so his personal mission became a collaboration. He introduced the change to his daughter with the nervous excitement of a young child's first show and tell.

"His name is Richard. He has a decent grasp of the humanities but needs work on Eastern European authors. He thinks we should get the library to give us part of the acquisitions budget so that we can be more proactive."

When he turned sixty the library hosted a surprise birthday party for him. Twenty-three people attended, and while he could not name them all, he knew exactly what they were reading in the moment.

Just before the cake was cut he was given a gift, a book entitled *Humans of New York: Stories*. Four hundred and twenty-eight pages of photographs of people with brief quotations, the ramblings of humanity, some whimsical, some profound, some ridiculous.

continued on page 15

continued from page 14

Richard suggested they put it in the history section, beside Kumar and Woolf.

By the time the party wound down, the streetlights had come on. In the early evening darkness he walked back towards his apartment, book tucked under his arm. Through the windows of homes he could see people preparing supper, some children doing homework, others playing video games. With each he wondered what words they would offer, given the chance, these humans of the Ottawa Valley. When he got back to his apartment he stood for a moment before his own library, a small collection of which he was quite proud. It was organized by genre — contemporary literature, classical, poetry, short story— but the gift under his arm belonged in none of current categories.

And so with a calm smile on his face he began a new section—romance, for the love of humanity.



[Byline](#)

is published by the
National Capital Region Branch
of the
Canadian Authors Association.

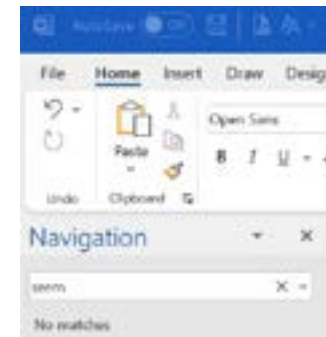
[Contact](#) us with your news or story ideas.

Read our [archived issues](#).

QUICK MANUSCRIPT CHECK

How many times does the word “seem” or “seemed” appear in your work?

Press Ctrl + F in Microsoft Word to reveal your Navigation Pane.



Search the word and see how many times it appears. Go through them one by one and see how many you can make disappear.

Do the same for other troublesome words: just, very, felt, really, actually, etc.