acta
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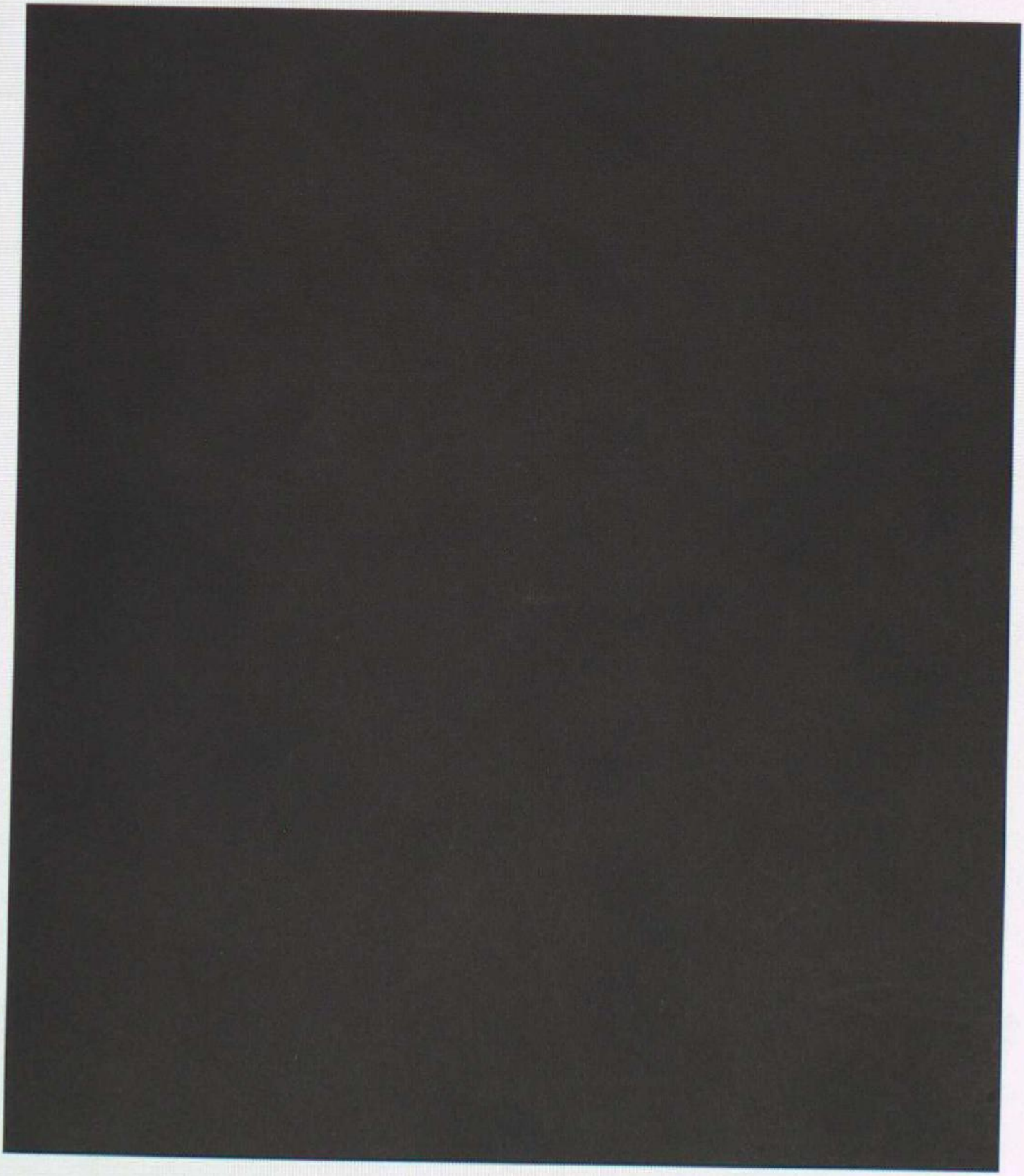

acta vic. toriana

the literary journal of victoria university in the university of toronto

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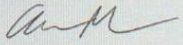
editor's note

Acta Victoriana is a conversation. The first editors in 1878 knew this, when they proposed a journal that would enable a conversation between Victoria alumni and students. Although the journal has undergone many changes in its 132 years, it continues to serve as a medium for intellectual and artistic exchange. Acta Victoriana, in its current state, is a journal of conversation between student artists, between faculty and students, between Victoria College and the University of Toronto, and between the University of Toronto and a national network of artists, students and professors.

In this spirit I am proud to present the 2009-2010 Acta Victoriana literary and arts journal, full of exciting work from students, alumni, and professors at the University of Toronto. In the spirit of exchange and dialogue, this issue of Acta also features poetry and an interview with a nationally renowned poet outside of the University of Toronto community.

Thank you to the contributors and readers who make the wonderful tradition of Acta Victoriana possible. Thank you also to VUSAC and Victoria College for their support. Finally, thank you to our amazing editorial board and designer for their hard work and dedication in creating the journal you hold in your hand now.



Andrew McEwan
Editor-in-Chief
2009-2010

contents




Melospiza melodia at Braid Station

C. Maddison

A song sparrow sings
just shy of the bus terminal
under a highway
beside the railroad tracks.

Odd to choose this place,
to rough, spin, and press
this air buffeted by currents
of mechanical sound.

Like a potter in a waterfall,
his loose clay crumbles,
turns to silt, returns – perhaps as it must –
to the entropy of mud.

Conversations with a Calliope Hummingbird

C. Maddison

My friend says birds
are the stock of heaven,
says waxwings
are lambs that buzz among rowans,
says geese
are cattle that amble over cut grass,
says sparrows
are goats,

(I don't ask him,
what are chickens?)

and now I'm on high
mountain meadows watching sunsets
when you zip in, Stellula calliope;
your crown the color of old moss, your gorget
the rosy-fingered dusk,

and now I'm sure
you never pitched from God's hand into the firmament
because you hover,
a tiny star in your own dusk,
because your wings
weave their own eternities.

Pooja Cabinet

Menaka Raman-Wilms

He is a small boy with overwhelming eyes that remain open even when he flops down onto the floor to pray, his forehead pressing on his outstretched hands in imitation. He won't get up until his father does, but raises his head sometimes, to check if he should still remain down. He knows to be silent now because everybody is thinking about AppaAppa, he says the word 'pooja' softly, perhaps because even he is aware of the weight it carries. It was part of his vocabulary from the very beginning but he still doesn't quite know what it is. He associates it with this bending down on the floor in silence, the ringing of the silver bell, incense.

He is told to be gentle near the pooja cabinet, but there are so many textures and colours inside that it is always so tempting for a five-year old. AppaAmma holds him up to the top shelf sometimes, shows him the Gods. "This is Rama" she teaches him, "and Lakshmi and Ganesh." He wants to know about the one with blue skin, why is he special. "They are all special" she tells him. "Krishna likes to eat butter and he was a valu as a little boy. Shiva gives us good health. Saraswati makes sure that we do well in school."

He thinks about these Gods not as powerful, but as small idols closed away on the top shelf. They are hidden from him, but somehow they have control over what he does and what happens; a mysterious magic trick. He wonders sometimes if AppaAppa is up there with them, or at least a miniature version of him, blocked from his view by Rama and Krishna but carrying on life quietly with them on that top shelf. He wants to move them to see if AppaAppa is there somewhere, but more than anything he really wants to come back when pooja is over and open up the cabinet to see if the figures move around when the door is closed. He thinks these thoughts when he's supposed to be praying to them for prosperity, and he sometimes wonders why none of the others are curious about what actually happens inside the pooja cabinet. The rest of the family is too concerned with ceremony; the distractions of the oil lamp and the bell-ringing and bending down on the ground until your nose touches the floor and all the blood rushes to your head.

Sunk

Emily Estelle Belanger

When the house tipped to the left,
when it sidled up against the neighbours,
our drinks slopped out of our cups.
You said: 'I knew this would happen'
I said: 'I knew this would love to happen –'

Our street was flecked with winter still,
with most of the houses slumped against one another,
rubbing eaves,
crawling with the most resilient new insects.
Ours held out so long before it gave!
We scooped the goldfish off the floor,
he said: 'I had thought you didn't love me any more.'

It was woozy early evening,
with new drinks and no coats, on our porch
that had a new splintered overbite
where it didn't meet the house.
You whistled, I hummed,
the birds tweeted,
the insects hummed like me.
Our house gave a great big sigh and settled
further into the sinkhole,
all our things fell over with a sound
like the rustle of the jungle.
It said: 'here I am at peace.'

Our neighbour walked across the street
and took us in.
We all waved. We all swayed.

A sestina for Nabokov that would offend him probably

Emily Estelle Belanger

In our youth we became animal -
thrilled by possession of the body
through misshapes, through genealogy Nabokov
would be proud of and slung from crooked, crooked branches
which creaked. We were so touching as we were taken
by weird steeds we whistled for, in our resolve undone.

We came so quickly and so deliberately we came undone
as we were flung into rut like new golden animals.
We stripped with barest persuasion - how many pictures were taken
on stranger's phones of us in swoon? We loved bodies
and bawdy jokes and we saw us sprung from yokes, branching
clangorously out. We early got our paws on Nabokov

and in delightful misreadings we embodied our own Nabokovian
flourishes of tongue, we teased at them until undone
by our own puppy sleepiness. We still were small branches
with flashy shoes and frayed waistbands and that animalistic
solipsism. We saw cyclones draw the web of the world into our bodies
and we begged to be swept up and taken.

Of course in due course we were taken
home to those certain glum safe neighbourhoods Nabokov
so loved to show fraying: badly-behaved youths with knobby bodies
laid in plaid laps while big safe helpers undid
our shoelaces. Like benign family animals
we slept still, we fetched those playful branches

our wards sent us after, but oh, those top branches!
That grabbed like we did for a low-slung overcast sky! They took
us back to womb-dreams of bared teeth and raw animal
flesh regard, we lashed ourselves and scraped our elbows as Nabokov
would find delicious - our big freakish admirer, undone
ultimately in numb lepidoptery, nulling his body

so that he would not be caught devouring the body

of some brash asshole child like us. We grew jungled, we grew branches
and we lived our filth. Inward we were wild we undid
all those neat knotted ribbons and we lost
genealogy phone numbers moms dads our names and even Nabokov's -
we were ripped-apart, banging-heart, animal.

We were luxurious in our animal hell. In birth our bodies
had been pure (they said) and blamed Nabokov television vaccines and
certain branches
of philosophy. They took aim at education. We remained exquisitely
undone.

Construction

Claire Marie Stancek

WOMEN'S said the door though
it opened onto something else: forest
of spindly frame like a choir of birches
staring at each other. Moss-topped
in orange bursts like giant
caterpillars, or blobs of sumac hair.

The bathroom used to be the narrow
-shoulder type; its too-close doors
sped rickety into other doors.
The type of bathroom that breeds
apology, herds of dripping hands
all reaching for paper towel.

For weeks builders in scuff-burnished
boots have clomped the offices.
They wear jaunty bowls
for hats. Around elevators, across hallways,
they hang crinkling curtains of blue
plastic and emerge from them.

This summer I have been too busy
to think, or see people. I cycle
whip-haired and postpone phone calls.
Maybe I can meet him here, in this
woodpeeled wilderness, in dusty forearms.
Or here bring my friend, and talk to her.

But something in this open-spaced acre
is calm. Planks lanky and criss-sprawled,
soft sawdust mounds like mouse fur.
Something in this silence is mine.
I don't do anything, but stand for a moment
like a saint, or air. Then I leave.

Devotion
Michelle Yuan

Metamorphosis
Talia Zajac

Tall, pale, and slender
like a young sapling
you have long, lithe fingers
like Daphne's must have been,
white skin lightly stippled
and like her, you stiffened
in my encircling embrace,
unresponsive to my ardour
like deadwood.

Tom Wayman is a poet, essayist, novelist, editor and educator who has published more than twenty-five books between 1979 and 2009. His most recent book of fiction is *Woodstock Rising* (2009), and his most recent book of poetry is *High Speed Through Shoaling Water* (2007).

Acta Victoriana: When did you first know you wanted to be a poet?

Tom Wayman: I don't know that I ever wanted "to be a poet." My career goal when I entered UBC was to be an astrophysicist, but university math (for example, calculating the surface area of a three-dimensional object like a donut) proved daunting. I then intended to be a journalist. I worked on the student newspaper, *The Ubyssey*, which at the time was the farm team for the main downtown newspaper, *The Vancouver Sun* (no relation to the *Toronto Sun*, but more like the *Toronto Star*). Many of us on *The Ubyssey* worked four months each summer on *The Sun*, and some *Ubyssey* staffers worked a shift each week during the academic year.

I took creative writing courses at UBC because I thought the experience would enhance my writing skills as a reporter. However, when I graduated from UBC I had won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, so decided to go to grad school in creative writing at the University of California at Irvine. I saw this as a brief break before descending into a lifetime career as a reporter. Instead, the experience totally changed me, in part because my stint in graduate school occurred in southern California during the 1960s.

I first became interested in *writing* poetry in high school, like so many other people (as a means to sort through adolescent angst). I somehow read Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians*, about beatniks living in Venice (a suburb of Los Angeles), and that book included examples of beat poetry. I already knew there were alternatives to the kind of poetry I'd been exposed to in school. My parents, who grew up in Toronto, were personally acquainted with the various left-wing poets (Earle Birney, Dorothy Livesay, Miriam Waddington), and our house when I was growing up always had the latest Canadian poets' volumes (including works by Eli Mandel, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, Margaret Avison, Leo Kennedy). But the beats were more free-form in style and content than even the free-verse poetry I had read, and such freedom was appealing to me as a teenager.

By the time I had been through UBC's and UC Irvine's workshops, and had begun to publish, I was more ready to consider myself seriously engaged in poetry. But I knew by then the term "poet," like the word "artist," is used by a variety of people for a variety of purposes – not all benign. I balked at considering myself "a poet" for a very long period. I like to write and publish, and I call some of what I write "poems." Yet some part of me regards wanting to be a "poet" like wanting to be a "real estate developer" or "manager of a hedge fund" – an admission of soul-sickness. What I want is to write good poems.

Acta Victoriana: What, in the medium of poetry, do you find particularly effective in addressing the issues of employment hierarchies and working life that is distinct from other forms of writing and art?

Tom Wayman: On every job, including teaching in post-secondary institutions, people relate pertinent stories that encapsulate the absurdities of organizing daily work by means of imposed (unelected) hierarchies of power, rather than by means of, say, the hierarchies of *knowledge* that form spontaneously in instances of free labor such as a group of volunteers building a dock at a church camp. So the anecdote – which poetry among all the other arts is best suited to capture – is a particularly useful form with which to articulate the experience of employment.

Also, poetry's potential brevity (in an era when people are bombarded with demands on their time), poetry's potential lyricism (in an era when human emotion is sanitized and sold back to us in the form of advertising), and poetry's potential articulation of the self (in an era when, despite Facebook "friends" and other mediated connections, people feel more isolated than ever--so much so that they often fear unmediated time spent alone with the selves they hardly know) all represent poetry's potential to effectively address any social issue.

Acta Victoriana: Your work poetry seems to make its critiques by affirming the daily jobs and lives of workers within the systems of employment. What do you see as the strength of affirmative poetry, rather than critical poetry that has the same goal?

Tom Wayman: My observation is that the route to liberation lies through self-confidence, not through a list of grievances. If people are confident that they deserve better than what they have been given, or are allowed, nothing can stand in their way once they determine to change the world.

At present, virtually every media insists that we pay attention to the minutia of the lives of those who do not engage in productive work – entertainers, professional athletes, politicians – as if these are society's most significant individuals. Affirming instead that the truly significant individuals are those whose labor with body and brain feeds, houses, clothes, heals, educates the community is to me a subversive act. All of us need to be reminded, in the face of the barrage of attention paid to a tiny minority of ridiculously overpaid people, that the work we do each day already constructs the world. We just don't have a say on the quality of the goods and/or services we contribute to the community, we don't have a say on the impact our enterprise has on the community or the biosphere, we don't have a say on how our daily work is organized, and we certainly don't have a say on how the dollars earned by our efforts are distributed among the various calls on them: raw materials, physical plant maintenance and construction, repayment of loaned capital, research and development, remuneration for those whose efforts make the whole venture possible.

My sense is that most people, given the opportunity, can be highly articulate about what's wrong with how society is presently organized. So more complaints about injustice are not likely to be news to them. What keeps people from seeking their own liberation? I think the women's movement, or the fall of the authoritarian state capitalist regimes of Eastern Europe toward the end of the last century, both underscore that the moment people have confidence in their *right* to a better life – feel they are *worth* a better life – society reorganizes itself with remarkable speed.

Acta Victoriana: In many of your work poems you include the specific names of people you are speaking about, referring to them directly. What do you find is the value of employing names in poetry?

Tom Wayman: Use of other people's names reminds the reader that while the poet may be creating a world via words, the real planet has billions of people on it, people whose views and experiences likely differ from the author's. As well, when a tree is described in a poem, "Douglas fir" creates a different impression on a reader than "evergreen." In the same way, use of an individual's name suggests that even though we sometimes regard the world around us as a generalized blur, the place we inhabit is in fact made up of discrete specifics. The U.S. poet Robert Bly has written about how numbing for poetry is what he terms "plural consciousness": seeing everything as general categories, rather than, as he puts it, "one leaf at a time, one Lutheran at a time, one apartment door at a time." Specific names suggest the individual, not the category, even if the poem is using the individual named to convey some generalized thought.

Acta Victoriana: Noting your distinction between a generalized "Canadian identity" and a true depiction of Canada, do you feel your own poetry represents a specifically Canadian perspective in any sense?

Tom Wayman: I believe my poetry represents *a* Canadian perspective, with the emphasis on the article. Given that I was born and have lived most of my life in this country, and given that my poetry is, as noted, partially an autobiographical project, Canada has to enter into the equation. My poetry definitely doesn't represent the Canadian perspective, since I feel such a construct is impossible.

At the same time, I hope my poetry is an aid to rejecting the officially approved articulation of Canadian identity. If Canada "came of age" at Vimy Ridge, as one hears monotonously repeated, then is a country mature at the point it can independently wage imperialist war? Is that what Canada is for? I rather think the country came of age with its first civic general strike – in Vancouver in 1918 – rejecting the state's murder of trade unionists who saw World War I for what it really was, and said so. In a similar vein, the ability to mechanically cut and mill trees more drastically altered Canadian daily life than did the adoption of the personal computer. Yet you're supposed to be fascinated by the life and doings of Bill Gates, but ignorant about who, for instance, invented the chain saw or the off-road logging truck.

Procession

Tom Wayman

The valley is a dark river.
An occasional pock of light
flecks the blackness that purls against the
base of these ranges:
a solitary porch lamp
or yard light
surrounded by black fields,
stands of forest. Or a thin beam weaves
along a dark trace of
highway: a late-running tractor-trailer,
or pickup.
The shape of a house looms
in an eddy of the valley night
and within that dwelling
I lie on a black bed
breathing out the night's stillness,
breathing in darkness
that lowers me
onto a sandy road between meadows
– a route I walk
accompanied by four figures
holding a chuppa above me,
the canopy worn through in spots,
its fringe tattered. Two of the pole-bearers
I dimly recognize--somebody from my past
I cannot name, if I ever knew
who he was, and a similar
half-familiar face
from my present. The others
are unknown: one clearly glimpsed,
but, like his companions,
gazing with an intent expression at the crest
the road slopes toward, eyes uninterested in
me. The fourth's face is blurred
as we advance, feet lifting
a low mist of dust.

The Politics of the Forest

Tom Wayman

From shouting along with a crowd in a street,
from meeting rooms where our words
launched our dreams into air like dandelion tufts,
from trudging repeatedly across
a certain stretch of sidewalk, in front of a particular gate, carrying
a phrase or two precipitated onto cardboard,
I came to live beside a forest
that said nothing.

I never wanted to lead or rule,
but to think, debate, act
to help craft a more decent polity
– causing no harm, helping where needed
but with such aid being that of equals, friends
offering neither condescension nor imposition.
I desired a mutual understanding of how each enterprise,
each endeavor by which our common existence is recreated each day
impacts on everybody. And of the need to democratize
this interdependent complexity of production,
to recognize spectrums of skills, abilities, intellect,
vigor, areas of attention
– all needed, hence all valued.

Here the mountain slopes covered by balsam, lodgepole,
hemlock that thrive
among birch, poplar, larch
and more, blaze into green according to
season and water and soil. This activity happens
without concern for a different possible future,
employing processes as intricate
as any smelter or electronics manufacturing firm.
Unlike humans, the forest
has done its work: solved how to distribute its resources from each,
according to their aptitudes and achievements,
to each, according to their needs and desires.
These trees, underbrush, stones, birds

and animals, subsurface minerals and streams
have created the paradise
its citizens can collectively imagine.

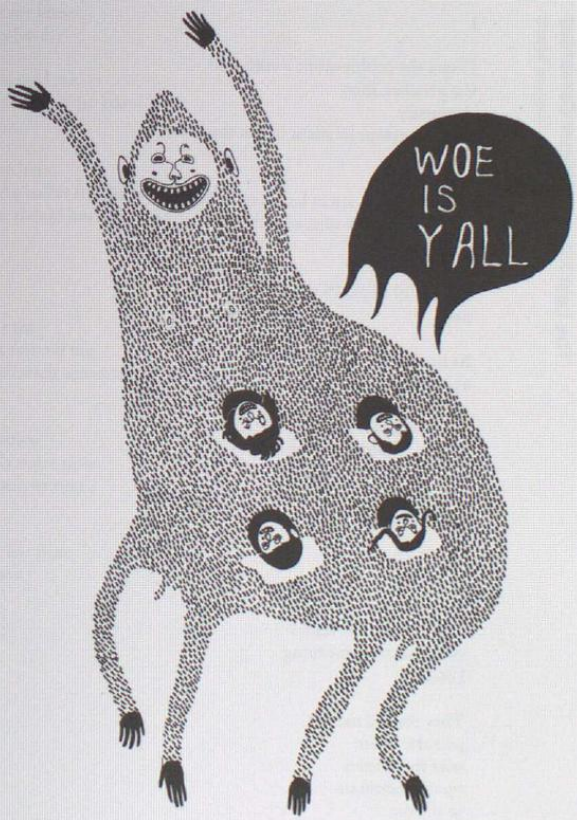
Not that this glory is static, butever-shifting, adaptable.
Neither is any component or the whole
immune from harm. Cedars, fescues burn, die back,
are cut down or bulldozed aside.
They can be ignored, overrun.
No individual plant or species is eternal,
any more than this planet's star
or galaxy. Yet the forest
remains confident of its contribution
to the biosphere, while that endures.
A stand of cottonwood is erased,
but June breezes carry the floating hope and certainty
of the grove's resurrection.

From watching such energy
that can overwhelm even a real estate agent, a village council
or organized groups of men trained
to operate heavy equipment,
I draw the will to,
despite setbacks, stay curious,
to learn and
wait, existing in the shadow
of an arboreal economy we can impair or demolish
only at our peril, of a solidarity
that without our endless palaver
about our intelligence
practices the justice we only long for.

Untitled
Emily Estelle Belanger

Together we can do it!
Emily Estelle Belanger

Woe aint me
Emily Estelle Belanger



I

Down the cobble-stone street, past
the benches, into
the square
where rooftops lie silent in the shadows.

Night walk
to centre town, street lamps twitching
the empty moon silhouetted in
the sky.

5 steps, 10 steps, 15 steps
stop.

At his feet
a plaque, covered in blood and dirt
La Ciudad de
Santa Xochitl
Fundó en 1666
Alabanza a Dios
He grinds a cigarette butt into the middle
then moves on

II

I am Héctor Cervantes
and tomorrow morning
I died.

They walked me out
past the forest
over the flowers
up the mountain
to the top

put me on my knees.
Gun to my head.

A soldier kicked me.
"What's so funny?" he asked.

I said.
"It's cold up here,
You'll need a jacket for the walk home.
Maybe you should borrow mine."

III

I open my eyes
The sheets ensnare me.
I struggle to reach across the bed,
to feel you.

My heart slows.
If I had only more time
I'd spend each second
with you.

But no one has time
least of all me.

The flowers have names, you know,
strange ones, too.
Their meanings are spelled out
in words that can't quite
capture their fragrance.
"Ambrosia?" you said, laughing,
"I thought I smelled the sweetness of reciprocal love."
I was confused. Ambrosia was for the deserts;
what plant from our wet climate had you deluded?
The bouquet that you left at my door
was not insignificant to me.
I read it like a holy book
and it became the bible of our friendship.
Perhaps it was not what you wanted to say;
still, I christened the flowers
in the only language that I knew
and drew my feelings from this.
I realize, now, that I should have given more attention
to the words you surely spoke
while I was listening to flowers.

Sometimes, I thought that your garden talked to me
when you were absent or asleep
and I walked by your house in the middle of the night
to breathe in the sweetness of your hard work in the soil.
I smelled the afternoons that you spent in the sun
with the grass staining your knees
as you bent to plant secrets in the ground,
bulbs that would not bloom until the next spring.
I imagined you with your hands buried in the earth
and the species of your floral kingdom surrounding you,
their names blossoming on your tongue
as you made myth of their petals.
Your garden said that here,
you were happy.

Now, I'm not as close any more.
I'm not so far:
I can still predict that your garden will get rain
a few hours after I have put away my umbrella.
But I'm not as close as I used to be:
I send flowers instead of dropping by
and follow the seasons in a garden of my own.
And, if I ever come all the way back
it will just be to say that
the cutting you gave me is doing well
and I water it every day.

Untitled

Sophia Costomiris

Adulthood is an expensive proposition
these days, says my father
as we flip through the Ikea catalogue

He especially pauses on the page
full of double beds, and as I
excitedly weigh the merits of wood v iron

I see him look over at my twin bed, a
generation of his loving labour to be replaced
with particle board for the single girl

He flips to the kitchen section, both of us
choosing to imagine me alone in a tiny apartment,
glass of wine in hand, with nothing coming after

They know

Jeannine Piras

I'm twenty years old, and it's spring, and I'm
walking through Oxford University Parks, and

the schoolboys playing football in
the clearing look up at me, and they know,

and the couple punting on the river
smile at me, and they know,

and the old man in the black coat
carrying a copy of As you like it nods at me,

and he knows, and the ducks
floating over the pond turn toward me,

and the bells resounding from the
chapel towers call out to me, and the

tips of the lilac trees reach for me, and
all of them know

that I'm walking through a world
shrunk to the size of a leaf,

that I've seen the view
from the rose's centre,

climbed to the grass's peak,
that my hands are gold, my body is sun,

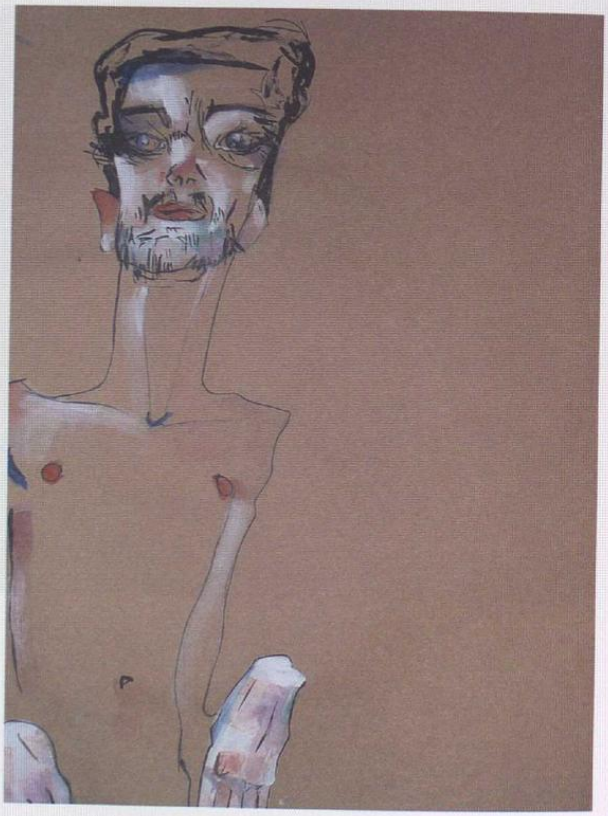
that someone has drawn
a circle around me, and within it

there is nothing but light,
and I'm calling for you to come in –

All or Nothing
Sarah Allen Eagen

Chasing the Train
Sarah Allen Eagen

Untitled
Sarah Allen Eagen



Witch-craft
Helen Marshall

She kept her sex in a midnight box
buried in dirt beneath the bed.
It was safer that way,
her power tightly coiled
like an adder in her breast.

She sewed up her lips and nostrils
with a silver needle
lest any breath escape.
There were no holes for her spirit to leak out.
None could touch her.

Some nights, she would hear it rattling
in the box - a tarantula creeping out
to finger her dreams with softly haired legs.

A witch must be oak-skinned and seamless,
they told her. A witch must be
without flaw or fissure
lest some prince place his hands
to crack her open like a walnut.

And she was young - sealed so tightly
within the coffin of her own making,
eyes, breasts, heart, fingers
placed in copper-capped jars.

A witch must know her spells through and
through.
She must sleep for a hundred years,
while the thorns curl about her wrists
and feet. Oak-skinned and seamless.
She must learn to wake herself.

I was twenty-four years old when my parents broke up. It was fall, the end of October. My mother called that morning and told me. Initially, I thought my father had passed away—he suffered a heart attack in his early forties and was now sixty years old. He had cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes. He was easily agitated. Stressed. They had recently moved into an old farmhouse that wasn't even fit for livestock. So, when the phone rang and I heard my mother's helpless voice, I thought: This is it. But I was wrong.

My father was moving out west to live with an old girlfriend he'd left behind years before. Almost thirty years before. When he'd left her, he left behind his five year old son, as well. Someone I'd never met. There was a picture of him that sat on my father's dresser when I was a child. It was the only one I'd ever seen of him. A faded school picture that must have been sent from this other woman, years after my father left her. The boy in the picture was around ten years old. He resembled my father, though I never made any concrete connection between them. Their red hair and sunken eyes. It wasn't until my own daughter turned a year old that I started to grasp what it would be like to leave behind your own child.

"He says he doesn't have anything," my mother said.

"What?"

"He said we've been together for twenty five years, and we have nothing." Her voice cut out. "I thought we were doing alright. We were just catching up on our bills. We just paid off the lawnmower. Last week we even went out for dinner. We were doing alright."

My father was a truck driver. He hauled livestock. Pigs and horses and cows. They were shipped across the country and into the States to be overfed and then butchered for their meat. Even the horses. My mother would go with him when she could, but she didn't have a passport. And she needed to stay home to feed her own animals. She never had a job and spent most of her life like this. At home. I could never understand how she did it.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," My mother said. "I'm too stupid to find a job." She was crying. I'd only heard her cry once before, and it was when her mother died.

"This happens to some people," I said.

"I don't work. And that's what he kept saying. That I don't work. That I don't do anything. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now."

Neither did I.

My parents had very few friends—people I'd never met. They never went on a trip or a vacation. They never had money to go anywhere nice. The money they had paid the rent. It didn't quite cover groceries. Or the hydro. Or the phone. Something would go unpaid. Something would get cut off. It had been like this my entire life.

As a child, I followed my mother to food banks, and—at times—to the welfare office. My clothes came from my older brother and his clothes came from a second hand store. Goodwill. The Salvation Army. Our milk came from a silver tank on a dairy farm. Or it came from the food bank. I would mix the powder with water before pouring it into my cereal.

Our Christmas presents came from another family. This was a family we'd never met. Each year that mysterious family would have different names. Often they had no names at all. As a child, I always wanted to meet them. To see who they were. I wanted to find out where they lived so I could peer at them through a fence or from behind a tree. I wanted to thank them, but without them seeing my face. I would later find out that we were sponsored. Through some community organization, the presents were donated.

At Christmas, my parents made every effort to find us something special. Something they could get us themselves. Something big. Something that didn't come from the secret family. This would always be the last present under the tree. My father would often wrap it up in the biggest box he could find. Or he'd wrap it up in multiple boxes. Boxes within boxes. Like those wooden dolls that tuck inside one another. He would tape the box closed with masking tape or duct tape so we couldn't get into it. It prolonged the opening. As a child, it didn't matter what was in the box. It was always the present I cherished the most.

I picked my mother up that afternoon. She came out of the old farmhouse carrying a garbage bag over her shoulder. In the bag were her

clothes. A toothbrush. She got into the car and we drove away.

"I don't want to just leave everything behind," she said.

"What do you have to leave behind?"

"I don't know."

"Want to go back and get everything?" My father was still at the house. They spent the night together because it was late when my father told her he was leaving. She sat awake all night in the living room, and he stayed in the bedroom until she was gone.

"I'm not going back," she said. "There's nothing to get. He's taking the van."

"So what do you want to get? We can go back, I can go in the house."

"No," she said.

"What do you think you're leaving behind?"

"I don't know. Everything.

"What's everything?"

"I don't want to leave my dog."

I told her that we could go back. That we could get her dog and bring it to my place.

She shook her head.

Two weeks earlier my father delivered livestock to Winnipeg. This is how it all started. It was the first time he had been there in over thirty years. While he was there he called this other woman. Met her at her home. He later told us that she made him dinner. They sat together and they waited for their son to arrive. His son was now in his thirties, but still lived in the area. The woman showed my father pictures. Photos of her and her son on a trip somewhere. Palm trees. The ocean. They must have talked for some time. And their son never arrived.

My father drove to a farm somewhere in Manitoba. He unloaded the cattle and made another phone call. The woman promised he would be there this time. And my father stopped by again on his way through.

"He's bigger than your brother," he told me. We were sitting in the living room of my house. My wife, my mother, him and me.

"Who," I asked.

He said his name. I didn't recognize it at first.

"Oh," my mother said. "You didn't tell me this."

My wife looked at me.

"So you stopped by?" my mother said. "Was it at her place?"

He nodded.

"You see how he waits until we're at your place for him to tell me this," my mother said.

His son didn't remember him. He told my father that the only thing he remembered was my father yelling at him to pick up his toys.

We sat and drank our coffees in awkward silence. And my parents left sometime later. As they were leaving, I thought of the framed picture on my father's dresser. The boy with the red hair. My father's red hair.

The other woman offered my father a place to stay. He'd paid rent his entire life, and her house was mortgage free. It must have looked like he'd won the lottery. His kids had moved away, they'd grown up. He needed something else. My mother told me that before he left this other woman, he caught her sleeping around. She was fucking some other guy, my mother said. So my father blew her trailer up. He broke into her trailer and turned on her gas. Lit a candle.

My parents weren't readers—I doubt either of them ever read a book in their entire lives. My father left school in grade five. He ran away. My mother told me that he had lived in a barn for a while—a farm on Wolfe Island. His older brothers spent some time in a juvenile detention centre in Uxbridge during this time. There were stories that they'd robbed a number of gas stations before they were sixteen years old. Their mother was dead—she'd died when she was in her late twenties or early thirties, though I'm not sure how. His father was an alcoholic. A drunk who had worked at General Motors and was offered early retirement. He didn't care much for his kids. He died when I was nine or ten, after living with us for a number of years.

A week before my father left, he'd read a short story I published. The story was fiction. But he knew it was about him. It was about a man who'd lived his entire life and had nothing.

At some point my mother must have threatened him. She spent the night at my place and left in the morning. She'd called my father first. Asked him to pick her up. She needed to get some things from the

house, she said. They needed to decide what was going to happen with the animals. We can't just let them die, she said.

She later told me that he asked her to kill him. He was crying, she said. He was hurting. She could tell. He told her to take the rifle and shoot him.

As I wandered around a grocery store with my wife and daughter, this gun crossed my mind. That wouldn't happen, I thought. My father used the rifle once. It was never used for hunting. He'd shot at a pack of coyotes. I was standing beside him in a hay field, carrying an old pot and a wooden spoon. He told me to bang them together as we walked. He said that it would scare them away if they thought about attacking us. I'm not sure what we were looking for in the field. A cat maybe. One that had gone missing. He lifted the gun and fired a shot. I held my hands up to my ears. But he'd aimed high. Just to scare them off. As a child, the gun sat behind my father's dresser. I'd found it there once, during a game of hide and seek.

My mother called later that day.

"You wouldn't be mad at me if I tried to stay with your father would you?"

She had no choice really. She had no friends. No job. Nothing.

"No, I wouldn't be mad."

"We've been through a lot," she said. And they had. "If I can get him to stay, I think we can work at getting things right. I just don't want to give up. And I don't want you to be mad at me."

"It's fine," I said.

My father never apologized. To any of us. I suppose he probably apologized to my mother. He must have. I know he was embarrassed to come by for those first couple of weeks. And when they come by, it's as if nothing happened. They act as they did before. Nothing's really changed. Something feels strange, though. Like they're somehow broken now.

They came by a couple of weeks ago with a picture. A professional picture of the two of them—my mother standing behind my father, her arms wrapped around his neck. They aren't really smiling. I'm not sure whether they're happy. They're just looking at the camera. Getting their picture taken. My mother framed it and gave it to us. It sits on our piano with pictures of our closest friends. It looks out of place. And everyone who comes in to our home notices it. They know what happened.

When my father was leaving she must have noticed that there were no pictures of the two of them together. My mother handed it to us and said the picture was an early Christmas gift.

I'm not sure who it's really for.

My father calls me now, once in a while. And I try to talk to him. But the two of us were never really close. I guess to some extent I understand him. He worked his entire life, and never got much of a chance at anything. Neither did my mother. He was on the road a lot when I was a child, and when he was home, I was scared of him. He was always angry. He was always yelling.

He told me about where he had been—driving through a snow storm in Quebec. There were trucks all over the road, he said. And I wish I could have talked longer, but I never know what to say.

"We sent a present out west," he told me.

I knew what he meant. It was a present for the young red haired boy in the picture.

"Yeah, it cost twenty bucks to ship it. They wanted me to pay ten more for insurance or something. I can't afford that. Ten bucks. It should make it to him by Christmas, though."

"What was it?"

"A comforter," he said.

"A comforter?"

"Yeah, like a duvet."

"That's nice."

"I taped the shit out of the box, too."

Book 7: De Binares Natura

Canto 40— Aberrations of invariable distance

As a state of mind founded somewhere
near the southern border where fabled

Razza'ma rose from the marshes, its
curved walls bending space to the grace

of their jubilation and governed by errant
insertions of unexpected derationalizing relish

it hovers near an horizon bonds earth
to sky in aberrant variation's formerly

mashed extrusions of inadequate
consideration.[1] Considering possible tracks'

indeterminate assimilations of hazy
conclusions only leads to further

perfunctory estimations of Vanishing
Point's insatiable appetite for terminal

buildings tastefully located in orderly
extensions of democracy. The hordes

who are gathered and placed in postures
signifiying gratitude, right hand raised

[1] "The bead of light that emerges from our defects and our little abjections is nothing other than redemption." Giorgio Agamben, "The Assistants."

pointer extended into cerulean
intimations of paradaisal choices beyond

the next town fall into hushed tones
of ahhh generally reserved for victorious

groups of cows as they cross the Finshing
Line, patting its butt in unrepressed

testament to glutteal admiration.
The Finishing Line, also know as Phil,[2]

indicates its pleasure by quickly banning
proliferating aberrations on grounds

infiltration undermined with impermissible
variations of gradation's distance

from invariably held belief in no further filiations
upholds truth's firm manipular emissions.

[2] Any resemblance, however remote, to scandalous suggestions of unnatural confluences of philanthropy, philately, and philosophy should be considered purely and solely the result of overindulgence in illegal substances and gross, unregulated lexical irresponsibility.

Canto 42— Lascivious mediations

Intervention inhales frequently though always
between sheets of immaculate
irregularities' untoward estimations

of involuntary signification contractions.[3]
If it feels good does the proposition lose
angular incidence and authentic bovine

directional modus? The void skulking
just around the last corner shifts
in shadows rattling the dented lid

of a garbage can suddenly spooking
a black cat darts over the ragged fence
in moonlight.[4] Now the stage is set

for razzle dazzle lexical assignations
behind pebbled-glass paned door
opens into chiaroscuro foliations.[5] Tootie

snaps down the brim of her hat anticipating
pencil thin destiny's sap to the back
of some unlikely train of thought only

to find Razz, sleek, firm nylon
smooth gams crossed, smoke gently
rising past veiled suggestions of cheap

[3] "... what fell from the borders of ether, that is again brought back, and the regions of heaven gain receive it." Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 2:1002-1004.
[4] "What a place. I can feel the rats in the walls." Jack Marlow (Franchot Tone), *Phantom Lady*.
[5] "I saw a broken down piece of machinery. Nothing but the buck, the bed and the bottle for the rest of my life. That's what I saw." Kelly (Constance Towers), *The Naked Kiss*.

hotel room's flickering neon
paradise. Outraged on the other
hand squeals to the Vanishing

Point about lowdown lascivious
mediations in the local flop house quickly
mobilizing intentional acts of self

validating authenticity to batter down
the door to the last century releasing
various mounted formations to mow down

the nick of time in the interest of self
preservation and general control
of potentially intoxicating agents

of provocative non sequiturs hell bent
on breeding lilacs out of whatever vociferant
dung heap vocabulary tickles their dirty roots.[6]

[6] "Pieces of the past arising out of the rubble. Which evokes Eliot | and then evokes Suspicion. Ghosts all of them. Doers of no | good. | The past around us is deeper than. | Present events defy us, the past | Has no such scruples." Jack Spicer, *Six poems for Poetry Chicago*.

Twins 1
Larissa Zajac

Touching
Eric Foley

Chopin touched
my heart lightly
from the other room.

My brother's footsteps
on wooden stairs
made me feel afraid.

My eyes were open,
then for a moment
they were closed.

He came in and said
he was finished
with the washing machine.

He was smiling, but
disturbed the thing
happening inside of me.

I tried not to look
at him or think
too much when he

touched the leaves
of my avocado plants
and asked how big

they would grow.
The bottoms
of his hospital pants

were frayed. He touched
the aloe-vera
on the windowsill.

Ω.

Ryan Fink

We constellate,
weave a web of stars
lined with strings of
light,
weave a web of steel
lined with strings of
electricity,
spin thought and
spool it into
eternity.
Now,
information is everywhere;
an endless freight train
loaded with books
driving forever
is
always
an instant pulse in æther.
Placeless, it is
always
here.
Placeless, we,
as bodies,
as a body,
are strung with
light and electricity,
and always, therefore,
Ω.

contributors' notes

Emily Estelle Belanger is a third year student at the University of Toronto studying English with a minor in French, in hopes of landing a cushy government job someday.

Born and raised in Riverside, California **Michael Boughn** moved to Canada in 1966 because of his opposition to the war against Viet Nam. In Vancouver he met and studied with Robin. He spent nearly 10 years working in the Teamsters before returning to school to study with Robert Creeley and Jack Clarke in Buffalo, N.Y. where he received his PhD in 1986. Since 1993 he has lived in Toronto. He is the author of Iterations of the Diagonal, Dislocations in Crystal, Into the World of the Dead, One's own Mind, and 22 Skidoo/SubTractions. With Victor Coleman, he edited Robert Duncan's The H.D. Book which is forthcoming from University of California Press. Book Thug will publish Cosmographia—a post-Lucretian faux micro-epic in the fall of 2010.

Franco Cheng is a designer. Visit francocheng.com

Sophia Costomiris is in her second year at Uof T, studying philosophy, which she loves and comes by (nearly) honestly. She ought to be studying literature, but hates being told what to read. Instead, she has acquired large debts to Pratt and Robarts that she plans to repay through hard labour.

Sarah Allen Eagen
paints
and stuff.

Ryan Fink has worked as a freelance geomancer and 'pataphysician since he created himself and the universe simultaneously, at the breach of eternity (a moment ago, and to come). He has been privileged to workshop with the ghost of bpNichol and a host of oak and arbutus. His work has been, is being, and will be published in the Akashic Records. He spends his time waiting for it to stop.

Eric Foley was a finalist for the 2009 Random House Creative Writing Award, the Hart House Literary Contest, and winner of the White Wall Review Postcard Story Contest. He is currently working on a novel with the assistance of the Toronto Arts Council.

Adam Long graduated from Victoria University in the University of Toronto with an honours B.A. in English and Book & Media Studies. He lives in Brooklin, Ontario with his wife and daughter. This is his second publication in Acta Victoriana.

C. Maddison is an undergraduate in Computer Science and Neuroscience. Some important things include: ravens, blue mountains, creosote bush, a grapefruit tree.

Helen Marshall is pursuing a Ph. D. in Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto. Her poetry has been published in ChiZine, NFG and the Ontarion Arts Supplement. "Mist and Shadows," published originally in Star*Line, appeared in The 2006 Rhysling Anthology. With what spare time that remains to her, she works as an editor for ChiZine Publications.

Graeme Myers was born in Toronto and is a first year student at the University of Toronto. He attended Etobicoke School of the Arts high school.

Jeannine Pitas is a graduate student at the Centre for Comparative Literature. She has been published in various online journals, and her translation of Uruguayan poet Marosa Di Giorgio's *History of Violets* will be released later this year Ugly Duckling Presse.

Menaka Raman-Wilms is a third year undergraduate student majoring in English and Political Science. She also studies music and creative writing.

Claire Marie Stancek is graduating this year from U of T's University College. She has published poems in *Acta Victoriana* and *The Trinity*

Review.

Although she doesn't have a particularly green thumb, **Emily Swinkin** knows that there are many ways to live by flowers: delicious intricacies of the Venus flytrap for the study of human biology, thoughtful grace of the rose for English courses, and a mind open these past four years like a sunflower.

Tom Wayman's latest book of poems is *High Speed Through Shoaling Water* (2007). He has edited a number of anthologies, including *The Dominion of Love: An Anthology of Canadian Love Poems* (2001), and his books of criticism include *A Country Not Considered: Canada, Culture, Work* (1993). He teaches at the University of Calgary.

Michelle Yuan is a second year student majoring in Linguistics and minoring in German and French. Her contribution, "Devotion," is (sort of) meant to be a graphic realization of the Beach House album of the same name.

Larissa Zajac lives and studies in Toronto, Ontario. She works as a printmaker and artist in mixed media.

Talia Zajac has been honoured to have been previously published in The *Toronto Quarterly Magazine*, *Carousel*, *NoD Magazine*, *The Hart House Literary Review*, and in *Misunderstandings Magazine*. In spring of 2010, her work will be included in the anthology *Writing Without Direction: Ten and a Half Short Stories by Canadian Authors Under Thirty* (Clark-Nova Books).