

# THE VOICE

MAGAZINE  
Vol 19 Iss 01 2011-01-07

## *Best of 2010!*

### **Waterlogged**

Your menu on trial

### **Stand By Me**

Survival through the other

### **Religion in Schools?**

Ancient Indian mysteries

*Plus many more of 2010's  
top articles and features . . .*



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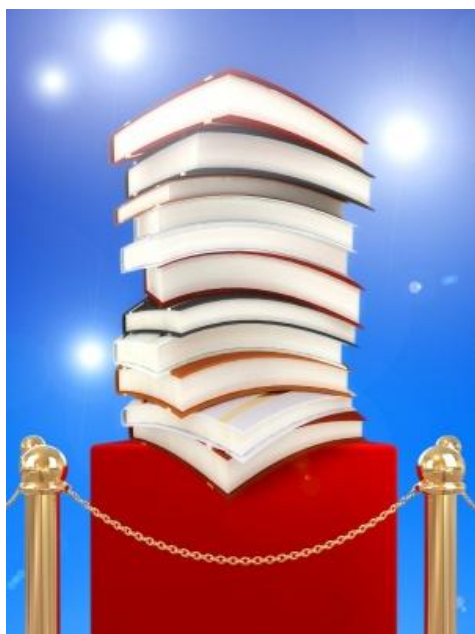
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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We love to hear from you! Send your questions and comments to [voice@voicemagazine.org](mailto:voice@voicemagazine.org), and please indicate if we may publish your letter.



## THE VOICE BEST OF 2010



Happy New Year! We're ringing in 2011 by celebrating what *The Voice Magazine* is all about: outstanding writing and great selection.

As always, the first issue of January highlights some of the best work we've published during the preceding year. It also makes a nice snapshot of *The Voice's* focus. From personal accounts to historical reviews to interviews to analyses of current films, there's truly something for everyone!

For example, we regularly feature thought-provoking commentary on privacy, the Internet, and other topics pertinent to our connected modern world. A good example is Sandra Livingston's "Public Masks, Private Lives," dealing with our two-faced approach to online sharing.

And today's other hot topics, trends, and current events aren't ignored, either. Features, reviews, and interviews often tackle front burner (as well as lesser-known) social issues. Additionally, we

regularly run pieces on environmental topics. This week's "Diet for a Healthy Planet" challenges some of our basic notions about food and drink.

In addition to environmental health, personal health is a regular mainstay in *Voice* fare. Katie D'Souza's "Health Matters" series investigates the hype behind current fads and popular trends in the alternative health field. This week, we've rerun her commentary on the health benefits of a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. And you thought you were breaking your diet!

For those looking for a human interest angle on issues or life, *The Voice's* varied reader base generates stories that are refreshingly unique. For example, AU student Maximilian L. Birkner's Remembrance Day commentary—based on his experiences in Afghanistan—is a moving selection.

For a personal note on the everyday, readers look forward to Hazel Anaka's column "From Where I Sit," which has been a *Voice* feature since 2003. Topics range from the informative to the inspirational to the conversational—or, in the case of this week's piece, to the slightly fantastic.

You'll also enjoy Wanda Waterman St. Louis's interviews with up-and-coming artists, musicians, writers, and philanthropists in our regular "In Conversation With . . ." series. The piece included here highlights Home Routes, a unique initiative in the Canadian folk music world.

For lovers of all things truly artistic, Wanda's regular reviews of uniquely thought-provoking music, poetry, novels, non-fiction, and films are featured in her "Mindful Bard" column. This week, she discusses a thrilling book explaining the psychological and scientific implications of the controversial "third man" factor.

We frequently feature additional reviews, ranging from hard rock albums to biographies to horror films. Tamra Ross's in-depth coverage of the horror film *Splice* is a careful consideration of some of the finer points of the film and of filmmaking in general.

*From personal accounts  
to historical reviews to  
interviews to analyses  
of current films, The  
Voice has something for  
everyone!*

And we publish original fiction works on their own, including short stories and poetry. Jennifer McNeil Bertrand's "Then Beggars Would Ride" is a moving tale of hope and hurt.

For those interested in the story behind the story, S.D. Livingston's column "Write Stuff" focuses on some of the issues facing today's literary—and not-so-literary—world. Her provocative "The Deep" is a wake-up call for all media consumers.

Last, but not least, *The Voice* frequently examines issues of interest to university students—and indeed to all who have a love of learning. This past year, Jason Sullivan's series on various educational eras was informative yet intriguing. His commentary on educational practices in ancient India suggests that the Western models might have a lot to learn from those of long ago.

On a practical front, we've featured student profiles, interviews with campus personalities, and articles on study tactics, student cheating, and more. The selection this week challenges the widely-held notion of a study space as a necessity for successful learning. Who knew?

Each week, *The Voice Magazine* offers a varied selection of unique, intriguing, and entertaining material. But this week, we're putting forward our own picks for best of 2010. Enjoy browsing our annual *Best of the Voice* issue, and be sure to join us as we make 2011 our best year yet!



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## EDITORIAL

Sandra Livingston

### Public Masks, Private Lives

*This editorial originally appeared May 28, 2010, in issue 1821.*

According to the people with something to sell, privacy's a thing of the past. Nobody wants it anymore. If you aren't posting photos of yourself or sending tweets about your personal grooming habits, you're going to be left out.

Left out of what, I'm not sure, unless they mean endless hours scrolling through repetitive news feeds (post this to your status if you care!), or a lucrative deal for your own reality show.

But I'd argue that, when it comes to the things that really matter, people still have a healthy aversion to taking off the public mask and freely sharing their private beliefs and opinions.

It's hardly scientific, but here's a clue: the overwhelming numbers of people who remain anonymous when posting online comments.



You can check it out for yourself. Go to just about any major online news site, choose a story, and scroll down to the comments section. One example is a *Globe and Mail* headline about the latest on the BP oil disaster. Despite the 96 comments that had been posted at the time, only four people had used real names. And only one of those was a full name; the rest just used an initial.

A *New York Times* article on the same subject continued the trend. Of the first 75 comments (there were nearly 150 at that count), only 5 appeared to use genuine full names, although even those could be pseudonyms. All the rest were purely the product of invention—things like HappyHamster67 and MintMaster. (And yes, I made those up, so apologies if that's actually the name on your birth certificate.)



*Social networking: one big cocktail party.*

Which all seems a little confusing. On the one hand, people will go on sites like Facebook and post endlessly about what movie they saw or what colour their bra is. They'll use Twitter to very publicly keep legions of followers updated on what they ate for breakfast.

So why not use your real name when you're commenting on a YouTube video or weighing in on the latest headlines? If we really aren't concerned about privacy, what's the big deal?

The difference, I think, is that all that Facebooking and tweeting and blogging is a lot like playing dress-up. It's not so much about people's real selves—truly tossing privacy to the wind—as it is about trying to trot out our most amusing, witty personas. A giant cocktail party, if you will. Everyone wants to seem interesting and attractive, or at least to be associated with the interesting, attractive people.

The more attention you can attract, the better. Even if that means appearing a little silly and dancing around with a lampshade on your head. But virtual pokes and Farmville chickens don't really matter—and everyone at the party knows it. It's safe to share those things. It's all in the spirit of fun, and it lets us keep our public masks firmly in place.

But ask people to reveal the things that do matter—how they feel about immigration or religion or politics—and everybody suddenly clams up and starts using fake identities. Those are the kinds of topics that attract some of the most heated commentary, and it's rare that you'll find someone willing to openly lay claim to their opinions.



You could argue that Facebook and Twitter users aren't the ones posting comments. But with over 400 million Facebook users and some 100 million on Twitter, odds are good that there's a fair bit of overlap.

So while it's true that social networking sites have created a seismic shift in whether it's socially acceptable to discuss your underwear, it seems we aren't willing to let the mask slip too far after all.

## DIET FOR A HEALTHY PLANET

Christina M. Frey

*This feature originally appeared August 27, 2010, in issue 1834.*

Sustained triple-digit temperatures, no rain, and the resulting death of my azaleas and tomato plants have led me to appreciate water a little more this summer. That's why, when I came across *National Geographic's* [Water Footprint Calculator](#), I was intrigued. I'd had to break out the sprinkler system to keep my lawn alive, so I was curious as to where I ranked on the water consumption scale.

By the time I had reached what I thought was the end of the quiz, I was feeling pretty good about myself. Despite my bad habit of taking long showers, my lawn-watering laziness paid off and I found myself far lower than the average person on the calculator's water consumption scale.

But before I could pat myself on the back, the screen displayed the kicker: "This accounts for only 5% of your water intake."

What?

It's true. When we speak about conserving water, we tend to overly focus on visual results (the ones which culminate in a lower water bill): more efficient showers. No unnecessary lawn watering. Running the dishwasher less frequently.

But in reality, that's just a fraction of our overall water consumption—a drop in the bucket, if you'll forgive the expression.

Not surprisingly, fuel (13 gallons of water are required to produce one gallon of gas) and electricity (the average American uses 670 gallons of water per day through electricity consumption) are major players.

But amazingly, the biggest offender is diet—and we're not talking about the much-maligned bottled water, which requires just three gallons of water for every one gallon produced.

That Quarter Pounder hamburger you picked up at the drive-through window on the way home? It represented a total water consumption of 450 gallons—for the beef patty alone.

Shocked? There's more. Chicken's a little better, but at over 100 gallons for one four-ounce breast, it has a pretty hefty water price tag. And four ounces is just a small piece of meat compared to the large portions to which North Americans have become accustomed.

How about the glass of milk you had for breakfast? To produce one cup of milk, it takes 55 gallons of water—that's 880 cups.

Beans, on the other hand, require less than 50 gallons of water to produce *an entire pound*.

And those who consume neither dairy nor meat use about 600 gallons of water per day less than the average person. 600 gallons per day!

***It takes 450 gallons of water to produce just four ounces of beef.***

***How much water does your menu represent?***

Understandably, a vegan—or even predominantly vegetarian—diet is not for everyone. Some can't live without a burger; when I attempted a vegetarian diet a few months ago, I was happy, but my meat-and-potatoes-loving daughter rebelled. But although we're back on the meat train, my new concerns about the health of my family and our planet have led me to make small dietary modifications to reduce our consumption of animal products.

Reducing your water footprint through diet change sounds intimidating, but in practice it's quite the opposite.

For example, it's easy to take a break from meat for a day. Certain religions—Roman Catholicism for example—have traditionally held Fridays to be meat-free days. And recently, the Meatless Monday campaign, which advocates keeping Mondays vegetarian, has taken off in popularity, with *Time* magazine's recent article just the latest in a series of media acknowledgements.

It's also possible to reduce our animal product intake by serving both meat *and* vegetarian dishes at the table. By all means, grill the steak—but include a bean salad as a side. An additional source of protein at mealtime means that a smaller portion of meat will satisfy.

Finally, another option is to limit the consumption of animal products to one or two meals per day. For example, if you have a big egg-and-bacon breakfast, enjoy a vegetarian soup and salad for lunch. Or, if you know pork chops are on the menu for supper, plan to keep lunch, and possibly breakfast, meat-free.

It's easy to dismiss small changes as having little to no effect, but for every four ounces of beef we avoid in favour of a bean-based dish, we save over 400 gallons of water. At the same time, we'll reap the well-known health benefits of a more vegetarian-based diet.

Happy body, happy planet—who could ask for more?



## Green Light

## News, Tips, and Tricks for a Healthy Planet



Vegetarian, schmegetarian—what am I going to serve for dinner? Good news: there are countless easy recipes that allow you to avoid meat and still enjoy a satisfying and delicious meal.

The Internet is, of course, a goldmine of suggestions for vegetarian and vegan cuisine. There are some good finds on the *Vegetarian Times's* website (the site also includes resources for adopting a vegetarian lifestyle) and FatFree Vegan Kitchen. Kalyn's Kitchen and Whole Foods Market's Recipe Newsletter are not strictly vegetarian, but have many wonderful meat-free recipes.

If a traditional cookbook is more your style, you might enjoy the vegetarian eatery Moosewood Restaurant's cookbooks, Mark Bittman's *How To Cook Everything Vegetarian*, or the ever-popular vegan cookbooks by Donna Klein.

You may also consider traditional Asian, Middle Eastern, African, or South American fare, much of which is vegetarian-friendly.

## REMEMBERING . . . AFGHANISTAN

Maximilian L. Birkner



*This piece originally appeared November 12, 2010, in issue 1845.*

Last year, I celebrated Remembrance Day in Afghanistan, 20,000 km from my home in Vancouver, BC. We got up at five in the morning and left our Forward Operating Base to do a routine patrol, and at noon, when we came back dusty and soaked beneath our body armour, there was a short parade in the vehicle parking lot. Wreaths were laid down near a large Canadian flag made of spray-painted stones on the side of a hill. The poem about Flanders Fields was read, and some short speeches were made. Every soldier stood rock-still in the tan desert uniform, sweat

forming beneath bush caps. My loaded machine gun weighed heavily on its sling.

The next day was very long. Our platoon had been outside the wire for several hours to investigate a suspected roadside bomb when a call came; we had to scramble back in the vehicles to go and help some soldiers at a base five kilometres down the road. It's not unusual to do five kilometres in nine hours in a place like Afghanistan, due to threats and obstacles, but that night we raced, the armoured vehicles lighting up the road with white light, not blacked out the way they usually are. When we got to the site, we found that some soldiers had been wounded and that one of our engineers had lost his foot to a mine and had been evacuated by helicopter to Kandahar Airfield.

I returned from deployment in May after seven months of intense work, several life-and-death scenarios, hilarious raunchy humour, mistrust of certain commanders, and an often subtle but ever-present fear of death. In many ways they were the greatest months of my life so far—hundreds of tiny lessons and several large ones compressed into a very short period. My memories from that time have left in my mind footprints that will likely never leave me.

But every once in a while I sit very still and think quietly about the 13 soldiers who died during my time in-country—and also about the ones who came home permanently wounded (there are many who get very badly hurt but are never written about in the media). A few times over there I remember sitting on my bunk on base, or in the dirt when we were out on extended operations. I remember getting ready to sleep, or having just woken up, and looking very quietly at my feet or hands and seeing their every detail—pores and hairs and tendons and calluses—and thinking about what a beautiful thing an extremity is and how much I would miss one if I lost it.

This year for Remembrance Day, I'm back in Vancouver. I've taken a six-month leave of absence from the Reserves, but will still be wearing my



uniform and the medal from my time in the desert. It's very strange to be called a veteran; the title has always evoked for me, and for many other Canadians, the thought of our grandfathers in their uniforms and the racks of medals from Europe and Korea and certain peacekeeping missions. What we tend to forget is how young many of those people were when they served. The same age, or younger, as the new generation of veterans who are returning from today's battlefields.

*[T]he abstract figures we read about in books . . . were all people too, with lives and families . . . [not] extras in a Hollywood movie.*

In the next few years, Canadians will see a small but significant increase in the number of young men and women whose lives have been affected by modern conflict. While the casualty rates of the war in Afghanistan pale in comparison to those from the wars that were fundamental to the maturation of a young Canada, they are no less significant.

One thing I learned overseas is that people are people, no matter where they come from, why they are in a certain place, or what they believe. There is something very good about seeing an Afghan child laughing, running, and falling and scraping his knee, and seeing the Canadian man ahead of you on patrol, a father of children halfway

around the globe, taking the kid by the hand and helping him up.

I came to understand that the abstract figures we read about in books—those thousands of soldiers who went over the top at Vimy or Passchendaele—they were all people too, with lives and families. Now that the memory has faded, we honour them and talk about the sacrifice they made for King and Country and Duty, as if that was a thing that those soldiers thought about when they were sitting in their soaking wet trenches, wondering if they would survive the day. What we forget so easily when with our good intentions we immortalize them, thinking of them as we think of extras in a Hollywood movie, is that the one thing every one of those soldiers wanted was to come home—to survive the war.

The only way to thank those soldiers properly is to weep for them—to thank their souls sincerely and to take time to think about them, if only for one day in a whole calendar year. Not because they gave their lives, but because they lost them. Because every one of those soldiers who never made it home would have given anything to be here in Canada right now, 80 years old and watching his grandkids grow up.

Think about that on Remembrance Day. Think about the Canadian soldiers who are, at this moment, engaged in situations that the majority of the population cannot come close to imagining: the numbness of a compassionate mind after witnessing death, the fear of bombs beneath the flying dust around their boots, and the feeling of clenching every muscle when the vehicle they're in drives over a culvert in the road.

Think about that. And this week, wherever you are, if you see someone in uniform, or one alone in a crowd, wearing a medal on the breast of a plain, civilian-patterned shirt or blazer—whether they're young and their hair is getting long because they just got out of the army, or they're 80 years old and walking with a cane—go up and thank them. Don't ask too many questions or seek out stories. Just thank them.



## FICTION

Jennifer McNeil Bertrand



## Then Beggars Would Ride

*This fiction piece originally appeared April 23, 2010, in issue 1816.*

“*Lilium* Enchantment,” Val says as she puts a bulb into the hole she has made with her hands and covers it with soil. Val and her mother, Rhea, are planting lilies in the back garden on the Saturday after the long weekend in May. Rhea used to know the Latin names for almost every flower, but now Val has to remember most of them for her.

“Pat the soil, like this,” Val says, showing Rhea how to flatten the soil covering the newly planted bulbs. Two years ago, Rhea planted the bulbs too

deep and the flowers never grew. That was the first sign something was wrong; Rhea always had a green thumb and her garden had always been beautiful.

Rhea gives Val a blank look and then stares at her daughter’s hands as Val pats the soil. Today has been what Val calls a Pollock day, after the print by Jackson Pollock Rhea gave to Val on her 36<sup>th</sup> birthday. On Pollock days, Rhea exists in confusion; she remembers little or nothing and is baffled by even the most routine tasks. On this particular Pollock day, she had put her pants on inside out and her blouse on over her sweater. Val had to help her change, dressing her like a child.

This is the second year Val has been taking care of her mother. Two years of the Game Show Network and neurotic hosts shouting “Double Whammy!” or “C’mon down!” Two years of taking Rhea for short walks transformed into epic journeys by her need to wear, regardless of weather, scarf and toque, winter boots and gloves, and a winter coat with the collar turned up around the neck. Two years of questions: “Who are you? Where am I? What day is it? What month, what year?”

Once in a while, Rhea asks, “Where’s my baby?” Val is an only child and knows the baby her mother is asking about is herself.

*It was on the third night that Rhea noticed the pattern on the pillow sham. Despite having slept on the same sheets for as long as she could remember, perhaps all of her 15 years, she had never really looked at the pattern. The sham was mostly white with a sprawling design of pale green vines. As her father lay down beside her she saw that pale blue flowers dappled the curly green lines.*

*“This is your fault,” her father said, whispering in her ear. He had said the same on the first two nights and, unable to account for her mistake, Rhea nevertheless felt shame burning in her cheeks. Her fault, this pain. Her fault, this degradation.*

*The pillow sham felt cool against the heat of her face and she found herself staring at the delicate blue flowers again, hidden from her all these years and finally revealed, on this night, amidst the confusion of green vines.*

Sometimes Val's father had come into her bedroom at night. She will never forget the sound of his breathing. He made a sort of low grunt each time he exhaled, as if his throat were closing and he were about to choke. In the quiet, early morning hours, there was no escape from the sound.

"Mom, you okay in there?" Val asks, trying to ignore these unwelcome memories. Val and Rhea have been in the public washroom at Zellers for the length of time it has taken the in-store audio system to cycle through five instrumentals, all seeming to feature Kenny G. Shopping for comfortable shoes with Velcro instead of laces has taken twice as long; according to Rhea, all of the shoes were too tight.

"Are you sure you don't need any help?" Val knows her mother will not reply. They have replayed this scene many times before and the outcome is always the same: Rhea locks herself in the toilet and refuses to respond to Val's enquiries until Val finally has to climb under the door into the stall. As Val drops to her hands and knees, she is surprised to hear the lock disengage. Rhea pushes open the door and stands before her daughter, shoulders bent, watery eyes imploring. "My baby is dead," she says. "He killed my baby."

Val feels the sting of threatened tears. She has never shared anything with her mother, and these words confirm suspicions she has always harboured. "You knew," she says, feeling only sadness now. Sometimes there is anger, hot and uncontrollable, bubbling out of her like an overflowing pot left unattended on the stove. Other times there is bitterness and pleasure to be taken from her mother's fear. Now there is only emptiness, lingering hope torn from her, leaving her hollow.

On the night Val's father was taken to the hospital, there was an old man sitting in the waiting room, holding a woman's purse on his lap. Val watched the man sleep with his head dropped onto his chest, repulsed by the trail of saliva glistening on his chin.

Val's father had been on dialysis for years and his kidneys had finally decided to quit. Not soon enough, as far as Val was concerned. The doctor told Val and Rhea that Bill had not suffered much and he was not suffering now that he was in a coma. Val had hoped there would be pain, and consciousness.

Bill's bed was at the end of the hospital room, separated by a thin curtain from a woman who sometimes cried out in her sleep. The life support apparatus reminded Val of her father's breathing, the sucking inhale and laborious exhale.

When Rhea left the room for coffee, Val pulled her chair close to her father's bed and examined the face of the man who had destroyed her. Weak now, old and powerless. "I forgive you," she said, forcing the healing words. She waited for something to happen, a weight lifted off her shoulders. The breathing machine continued its work and Val felt nothing change.

*On her wedding night, Rhea found herself remembering the pillow sham with the blue flowers and twisting vines. Bill held her close as she cried, seeming to understand the reason for her distance although she could not have explained it to him in words. She would never tell him about her father or the baby she had lost and she sensed that he would not resent her secrecy. On that night, she knew that she loved him and that he would be a good husband, a good father. It was what she had always wished for.*

Val stirs custard on the stove while Rhea sits in the den watching another game of questions. She is making what Rhea used to call Banana Hide, custard filled with slices of banana that remain hidden under the skin.

***Rhea looks at her  
daughter, her brow  
drawn down slightly.  
Val feels as if they are  
on the edge of  
something, a revelation,  
an admission.***

When the custard is ready, Val pours some into a dessert bowl and lets it cool on the counter. As she washes the dinner dishes, she watches the skin form on the yellow custard and listens to a contestant tell the game show host that “If wishes were horses” is her final answer.

The custard has cooled by the time Val finishes tidying the kitchen, and she takes the bowl with her into the den. Rhea is still sitting on a chair from the dining room, with a TV table pulled up close to her waist. “Time for dessert,” Val says as she sets the bowl on the table and hands Rhea the spoon. It has not been a Pollock day, so Val does not have to feed her.

As Rhea spoons the custard into her mouth, slurping it like soup, Val feels a heat rising within her. It is that anger, bubbling, making the blood rush to her face. “I can’t forgive you,” Val says and Rhea stops eating the custard, the hand holding her spoon poised midway between the bowl and her mouth. “I can’t forgive you for not making him stop.”

Rhea looks at her daughter, her brow drawn down slightly. Val feels as if they are on the edge of something, a revelation, an admission. If on good days Rhea could remember the names of flowers, perhaps she could remember her daughter’s pain as well.

“He killed my baby,” Rhea says finally. She turns back to the television and brings the spoon to her mouth, slurping the cooled custard.

Val watches her mother eat and, when Rhea has finished her dessert, gets up to close the curtains against the gathering darkness.



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## IN CONVERSATION WITH . . .

**Wanda Waterman St. Louis**

### Home Routes, Part I

*This interview originally appeared June 25, 2010, in issue 1825.*

Home Routes is an exciting, new non-profit initiative creating music events that benefit musicians, consumers, communities, and the earth. Recently, Home Routes volunteer coordinator Ali Hancharyk took the time to answer some questions from Wanda Waterman St. Louis.

Home Routes was the brainchild of our Artistic Director, Mitch Podolak, a veteran of the folk music

community for over 40 years, who founded the Winnipeg and Vancouver Folk Festivals, Winnipeg’s West End Cultural Centre, and the Stan Rogers Festival in Canso, Nova Scotia.



Through speaking with many professional folk music performers across Canada, it became apparent that it was normal for performers to do a cross-country tour and come home in debt rather than actually making a living. There was, and still is, a lack of infrastructure in Canada to support the wealth of incredibly talented acoustic performers. All we wanted to do was increase that infrastructure and provide a circuit of sequential gigs to touring professional acts so that they could take something other than experience and exposure home with them.

What makes Home Routes different is that we connect 12 houses on one circuit so musicians can play 12 intimate house concerts within two weeks. We limit driving distance between locations to four hours, and hosts provide the artist with dinner and sleeping arrangements for the evening of the show. The artist is supplied with a tour book with contact information, dates, and directions so that navigating is easy.

The only cost to the host is their time to spread the word, an extra plate at dinner, and a bed for the artist to rest for the night. The audience pays \$15 per person, all of which goes to the artist. Adding up 12 concerts at 30 people each can generate a decent wage for a folk musician!

The average folk musician makes approximately \$11,000 annual income. On a Home Routes house concert tour, it's normal for the performer to take home half of their annual salary in two weeks. These tours not only give artists money to put bread on the table, but they end up making friends for life with the people they stay with and meet, and it also brings them into communities that don't always get the chance to see live music because of their remote locations.

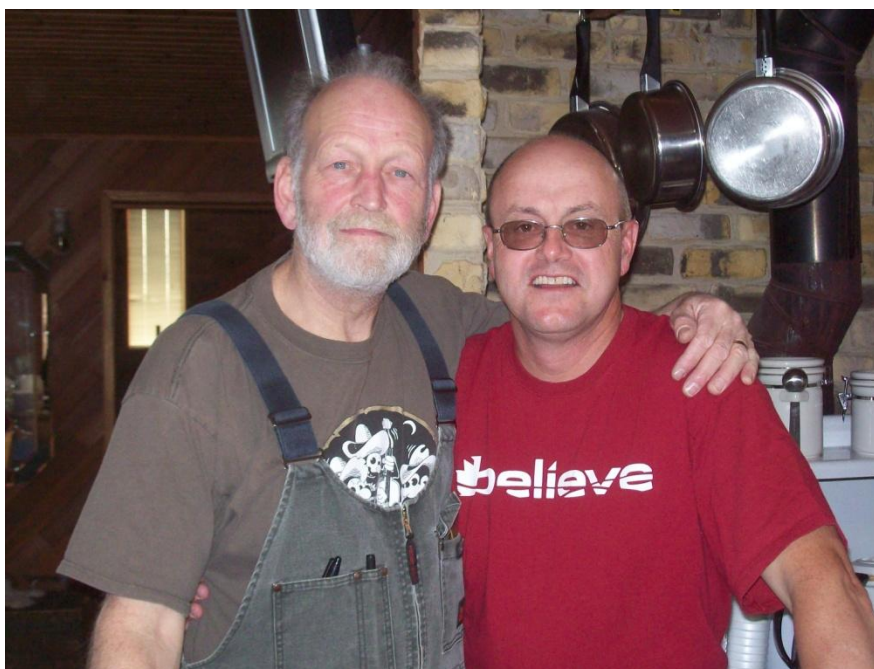
With dinner and accommodations being provided by the presenters, this drastically cuts down on touring costs, which are quite high in Canada because of the great distance between most major cities.

### How I Got Involved

I started working at Home Routes in October as a Volunteer Coordinator through a training program funded by the Government of Manitoba. I have a B.A. in Communications from the University of Winnipeg, as well as a diploma in Creative Communications from Red River College. This led to a job at Manitoba Music, where I jumped headfirst into my career in the music industry—and haven't looked back since.

### Harmonic Planet

Harmonic Planet is a world music series that showcases world music-specific performances. The objective of Harmonic Planet is to musically celebrate and engender cultural solidarity between Canadians from



*Valdy (left) with Tim Cameron, a presenter on the Manitoba Yellow Diamond circuit.*

different backgrounds, and to celebrate the depth of musical wealth that artists from everywhere have brought to Canada. Next season, running for six shows from September 2010 to April 2011, will feature performances from artists all over the globe, bringing people together to share each other's culture.

We also have a French language circuit called Chemin Chez Nous running in Manitoba, with a new second circuit in Saskatchewan that will start in September 2010.

### How's It Working for You?

Home Routes has seen great success since its inception in 2007. Our audiences have been growing steadily; attendance has grown from approximately 10,000 to 16,000 people last season. Artists have finished their tours happy to have met new friends, create direct relationships with their fans, and come home with money in their pockets.

Volunteer hosts have discovered new music, built relationships within their communities, and made connections with the artists in an intimate, personalized setting.

### Tales from the Front

We've sent Torontonians up to northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan with ensuing hilarity. There are tales of taking the Good Lovelies (an all-girl trio) out ice fishing in The Pas, [and] other stories about hosts emerging from squirrel hunting (or pest control, whatever angle you look at it), waking up the performers to gunshots!

In our first year, 2007, we had a late harvest and a lot of the farmers were still in the fields in early October. One of the artists from North Dakota, a farmer named Chuck Suchy, actually went out to the field before his concert and drove a combine to help out!

Hosts sometimes provide their own homegrown opening act, which gives emerging performers time to wet their whistles for live performance in a comfortable setting.

The most heartwarming thing about a Home Routes tour is that it's a part of the folk process, introducing new audiences to the culture and traditions of Canadian folklore. People have the opportunity to hear musicians' stories [and] their unique perspectives on all aspects of Canadian culture and its diversity.



*Jaxon Haldane on the Blueberry circuit in September last season*

*This interview was continued in issue 1826.*



### India: Ancient Educational Practices

*This article originally appeared February 19, 2010, in issue 1807.*

It seems doubtful that any teacher in Canada would deny that an important aspect of education is to mould young people into well-rounded adults. A holistic approach combining practical with interpersonal knowledge is generally espoused by well-meaning educators as well as by parents.

Yet there are many contradictions because we tend to value production, consumption, and truths external to the self more than reflection, perception, and truths found within ourselves. Happiness in Western civilization is often associated with the acquisition of material possessions. We learn that truths are arrived at by particular methods, methods that demand of us as much impartiality as we can muster. Far away and long ago, in ancient India, schools held similar priorities based around education as “a source of illumination giving us a correct lead in the various spheres of life.”

Schools in ancient India were spiritual and isolated, and allowed women access to more positions of power than was common in other cultures. In the realm of science, ancient India was particularly advanced. Indian mathematicians “introduced the zero, the decimal system and the method of multiplication.” The first documented university in the world was in India; it was known as Tashkila. Perhaps most important of all, each student in ancient India was fulfilling a “supreme duty . . . to achieve his expansion into the Absolute, his self-fulfillment, for he is a potential God, a spark of the Divine.”

Indian education was moulded “more by religious than by political, or economic, influences.” The conception of India as a nation, then, has come to comprise “an extra-territorial nationality” based around “the manifestation of the divinity in men.” The fact that in India divinity is inseparable from education meant that in ancient India the teacher-pupil relationship was sacred. In ancient times, a religious ritual known as “Upanayana” involved the teacher “holding the pupil within him as in a womb, impregnate[ing] him with his spirit, and deliver[ing] him in a new birth.”

This procreation metaphor of education must have provided a great sense of belonging to Indian students. They were not merely empty vessels receiving truths or wisdom, they were living personifications of that wisdom and thus played an active role in its creation and procreation. To embody values and truths is so different than to simply read and memorize them; instead of looking to the back of the textbook for answers, one need only look deeper within oneself!

In India, “the forest, not the town, is the fountainhead of all civilization.” Unlike in the Western world, where cities have always been the seats of learning, education in ancient India was thought to require “open space . . . aloofness” and a sense of “wandering through eternity” rather than merely wandering through human civilization.

This apartness from the urban world played a central role in “the two great ancient ages of India, the Vaidic and the Buddhist.” Being separated from the vicissitudes of daily social life allowed truths to more easily be revealed. Ancient treatises such as the “aranyaka” contain in their translation evidence that they either “originated in, or were intended to be studied in, forests.” In ancient India it is said that “the current of civilization that flowed from its forests inundated the whole of India” and in this same way the minds of students felt themselves becoming naturally endowed with knowledge and wisdom. Learning was more of a flow or unfolding of one’s self than by a forced immersion in a pool of “knowledge.”

***In sociological terms, the fact that education in ancient India allowed for greater participation by women and greater connection with nature suggests that the cosmology or world view of Indian society was very different from our own.***

Whereas women only recently were even allowed access to an education in our society, in India “the further back we go, the more satisfactory is found to be the position of women in more spheres than one; and the field of education is most noteworthy among them.” Women were allowed to study even the most sacred Vedic literature and to perform the most sacred religious rights. Many religious hymns of the Rig-Veda were composed by “sage-poetesses.” Even the notion of marriage taught in ancient India was referred to metaphorically, not as a master-servant relationship (“to love and to obey”) but instead in the most natural of terms, consisting of bride and husband “merged like rivers in oceans.” Besides love and marriage, women in ancient India also possessed equality on the battlefield. Many women joined the army and participated in

games with dice and balls. They even participated in chariot races. It was even possible for women to be crowned with the highest spiritual authority: guru status.

Ancient Indian educational institutions were so respected that “Chinese scholars like Fa-Hien or Hiuen Tsang” undertook the long voyage to visit India. “The enthusiasm for Indian wisdom was so intense, the passion for a direct contact with its seats was so strong, that it defied the physical dangers and difficulties which lay so amply in the way of its realization.”

Looking briefly at the accomplishments of Indian medical science, it is no surprise that visitors went to such great lengths to see India. During the 4th century BCE, Alexander the Great’s army of invading Greeks were amazed at how effectively Indian doctors could cure snake bites. Indian medical apprentices were taught circulatory science “on the veins of dead animals” as well as “application of bandages on stuffed human figures and the use of caustics on soft pieces of flesh.” Medical students even performed autopsies to understand the function and processes of the human body. (Meanwhile, in Western Europe autopsies were considered sacrilegious until the last few centuries.) Corpses were “decomposed in water and students were then required to dissect them and visualize the nature of skin, muscles, arteries, bones, internal organs.”

Doctors even invented and administered a vaccine against smallpox, the formula for which a medic named Dununtary was said to receive from God in a dream. The Indians also created the first hospitals. The aforementioned Chinese visitor named Fa-Hien described them as “comfortable” and effective. Hospitals also served as teaching laboratories, culminating in a final exam providing credentials for would-be doctors. Nowhere else in the ancient world was the anatomical knowledge of India



surpassed. India even made advancements in veterinary science; there existed a special field known as Hastyaurveda, “The Science of Prolonging Elephant Life.” Perhaps the veterinary expertise endemic in ancient India should not be surprising considering that according to Hinduism “animals were regarded as a part of the same cosmos as humans” and thus accorded similar respect.

In sociological terms, the fact that education in ancient India allowed for greater participation by women and greater connection with nature suggests that the cosmology or world view of Indian society was very different from our own. The theorist Michel Foucault described how all ways of arriving at truth are essentially human and subjective in origin when he stated that “we can see, then, how vain and idle are all those wearisome discussions as to whether such and such forms of knowledge may be termed truly scientific, and to what conditions they ought to be subjected in order to become so. The ‘sciences of man’ are part of the modern episteme in the same way as chemistry or medicine or any other such science.”

In particular, Indian science and math and the example of the smallpox inoculation being “discovered” by way of a dream sent by God illustrate how the limits of the thinkable were tied to divinity and the sacred in a way that modern science and Western civilization would find incomprehensible. Even the term “discovered” implies truths waiting in the external realm for us to find them. In contrast, science in the West is like a treasure hunt, and the map (scientific methodology) is the key to finding treasure. In ancient India it was possible for treasure to appear out of nothing other than the will of God.

## IN REVIEW

**Tamra Ross**

### Nature, Nurture, and Human Nature: Vincenzo Natali's *Splice*

*This review originally appeared October 15, 2010, in issue 1841.*



*Photo courtesy of eOne Films*

As a horror fan, I've bemoaned the recent spate of huge-scope, quasi-horror flicks that focus too intently on action and external forces. For me, the demarcation line between horror and sci-fi is clear: horror is intimate, often uncomfortably so, while sci-fi is broad and sometimes aloof. Most of the great horror masterpieces (there are many, but anything by Hitchcock, Carpenter's *The Thing*, Clive Barker's films, *Jeepers Creepers*, Cronenberg and Romero's oeuvre, the first *Saw* film, and all but the Will Smith version of *The Last Man on Earth* novella come to mind) are emotional pressure cookers in which characters are tensely bundled in remote places or in literal or metaphorical cages. Monsters may abound—in Romero's work, zombies literally subsume the seething human masses, leaving few survivors—but it is the intimately, sometimes excruciatingly so, examined reactions of a small group of people that drive the story.

Today's horror too often includes car chases, wire fighting, earth-shattering disasters, and military intervention. The massive scope provides well-funded filmmakers with boundless opportunities to show off their effects' prowess, but the films remain wholly unsatisfying to the horror audience.

Canadian director Vincenzo Natali, however, is an old school horror director, even if his films aren't always categorized within the genre. It's in his approach; Natali seems to have learned from the best, and to have created a unique style that is both referential of the past masters and refreshingly unique.

I became a fan of the director with his first feature, *Cube*. The micro-budget surreal horror film was one of the most unique, startling, and stylish films of the late 90s. In *Cube*, a small group of strangers awakens in a nightmarish configuration with only one apparent purpose: to grotesquely kill everyone who tries to escape. How the group coalesces, fractures, and grasps at and rejects each other is the core of the story.

Natali's second release, *Nothing*, is considerably more surreal. The film is more black comedy than horror, but the isolation is more intense, with a focus on only two characters, who literally warp out of the known world to find that their home is the only place that exists. Again, characters startlingly awaken in a world removed from all human, social, and national contexts, where the only salvage is the moral and emotional (in)stability of their own minds.

*You may view Splice as simply a retelling of the Frankenstein myth . . . but Natali's version goes deeper.*

This week, I had the opportunity to preview the DVD release of *Splice*, Natali's latest, and highest-budget, film. From the advertising, I was concerned it would be too similar to *Species*, a more conventional action-horror hybrid (pun intended) that worked, but which has already been imitated many times. *Splice*, however, is co-produced by Guillermo Del Toro, the Spanish director of some of the most brilliant, moving, and surreal horror films of the last 15 years. Fortunately, the input of these two individualistic directors overcame the pressures of the Hollywood machine, and produced a film that retains the intimacy and power of great horror, and, not incidentally, the best of independent Canadian filmmaking.

*Splice* has a slightly larger cast than *Cube* or *Nothing*, but all but the two main characters are peripheral. Isolated by a shared secret, Clive and Elsa—the rock stars of the genetic splicing biz—must come to terms with the responsibilities of having created a hybridized human on a scientific whim. Working outside of scientific ethics and the direction of their sponsors, the two have no moral resources to consult when they

find they are unable to cope with the increasing demands of their growing experiment and the reality that what they have created is not quite, but almost, a human being.



*Vincenzo Natali on the set of Splice.  
Photo courtesy of E1 Entertainment.*

I say almost because Dren, their creation, is as endearingly human as she is naively animal and malignly alien. Her greatest handicap, however, is that she ages to adulthood in a matter of days, gaining what appears to be full adult intelligence, with very little experiential or emotional learning to help her contextualize her world or her role in relation to other intelligent beings. For Elsa and Clive, she is too human to be destroyed, and too monstrous to be released, so their dilemma is how to be humane while protecting humanity and their own very human choices.

You may view *Splice* as simply a retelling of the Frankenstein myth—which it is—but Natali's version goes deeper. Wisely, he's sheared his Dr. Frankenstein into a pair of creators; one of each gender, co-workers, lovers, and business partners, startlingly similar, but always complementing each other emotionally and acting alternately as yin and yang.

Adrien Brody and Sarah Polley have great chemistry in this film, and are convincing as the talented but sheltered team of self-professed science nerds who hide deep insecurities behind a facade of pop culture iconicity (as the film opens, we learn that the pair is featured on the cover of *Wired* magazine). They are each other's only moral compass, yet too similar and confused to be of much assistance when Dren becomes sometimes impossible to classify. Their inner turmoil is influenced as much by each other as by the culminating pressures of the outside world and the rapidly growing creature (child) in their lab.

*Splice is intriguing because there is no black and white . . . the audience is left to judge right and wrong.*

*Splice* is intriguing because there is no black and white. None of the characters are particularly evil or single-purposed, but all have moments of both humanity and scientific or business-like detachment. I liked that these are characters whose motivations I can understand and that the audience is left to judge right and wrong.

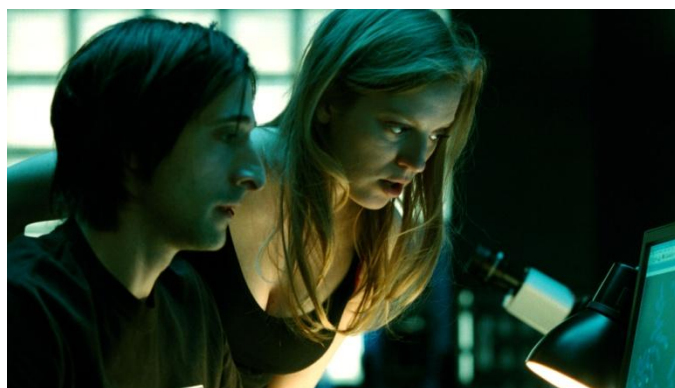
An interesting undercurrent in *Splice* is the legacy of child abuse, revealed through Elsa's vacillation between tender nurturing and crushing, cold-hearted control of her progeny. The nature vs. nurture question follows: is Dren increasingly difficult to control because it is her nature, or is she reacting to the chaos emanating from her panicked, damaged parents?

What is most intriguing for me is that this is one of the few films that questions our illogical fondness for splicing our own genetic material. Collectively, we idealize the act of creating new humans, even if the world has plenty and there are many genetically unrelated children in need of homes. It's something I've often considered and discussed with friends, but Natali takes the concept further by completely confounding the "natural" human procreative process with the scientific one.

The discussion would not be complete, however, without giving due to the film's jaw-dropping effects. But these effects are not obvious mind-blowers that take you out of the story and leave you agape. *Splice* uses technology in a very different way; its effects are so seamless, realistic, and judiciously used that it's easy to believe that its improbable creature exists.

I found *Splice* to be a highly enjoyable film that left me thinking. For fans of Natali, it is a great extension of his work, incorporating a higher budget and spectacular effects without losing the human element for which he is known. I call *Splice* a horror film because of the boundaries that it crosses and the wrenching decisions that the scientists must make concerning their creation (albeit, in the end, a decision is made for them). That said, relative to most modern horror, it's light on the violence and blood and suitable for most mature audiences. Be warned, though: *Splice* does ask you to confront some deep-seated feelings about procreation, children, abortion, and how to determine when something has a right to be called alive, or human.

No, it is not always an easy film to watch. Too often you aren't sure what you feel, or should feel, and there is no tidy resolution. But it is a film to ponder, discuss, argue over, and watch again.



*Adrien Brody & Sarah Polley as Clive & Elsa.  
Photo courtesy of E1 Entertainment.*

## STUDY SPACE

Maxie van Roye



## A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

*This article originally appeared September 17, 2010, in issue 1837.*

Browse the web, and you'll find a plethora of study advice. Make a schedule. Set goals—but reasonable ones. Study for short periods. Schedule in break time. But most of all, create a study space.

Most “experts” describe the ideal study space as having certain characteristics. Like the Hemingway story title, it should be clean, with good lighting. It should be quiet, spacious, and out of the way of most distractions. But the most important characteristic seems to be that it should be consistent.

A consistent study place: a spot dedicated to homework and the like. A place where you know what to expect from yourself, where you enter knowing that you must now focus and leave all distractions behind.

But apparently, consistently studying in one spot may not actually be the best way to study—and psychologists have known it since the 1970s.

A recent [article](#) in *The New York Times* described fascinating psychological research suggesting that, contrary to popular opinion, varying your study location is not only acceptable, it's crucial to a better understanding of the material. It turns upside down much of what I—and many other learners—have believed for decades.

According to scientists, the “brain makes subtle associations between what it is studying and the background sensations it has at the time.” This means that studying the same information in different locations gives the material “more neural scaffolding” in the brain.

As a result, you're less likely to forget what you read—making studying more effective.

Using several alternative study locations makes sense, even from a non-scientific perspective. While working independently, it's easy to get burned out or bored. An occasional change of scenery, whether or not you'd normally consider it conducive to studying or writing, can work wonders to rejuvenate you and re-energize your resolve.

When I first set up my study space, I did it by the rules. I tried minimizing distractions. No internet. Tape on the fridge door. Earphones in, music pumping. But each day, after a while, I would find myself getting up from that hallowed spot and wandering away in search of distractions. The problem wasn't my lack of resolve—it's just that perhaps a certain strain of student claustrophobia had settled in. Even just moving the laptop to the couch would make a world of difference. I'd suddenly be energized and enthusiastic about what I was reading or writing. Now, I've made “musical desks” a regular practice.

For example, after working at my desk most of the day, I become more and more susceptible to distractions. Then, I bring my laptop to my daughter's dance school to continue there while she finishes her class. Although the waiting room is crowded, stuffy, and noisy, for that hour I find myself studying much more efficiently and effectively than I had been doing in my quiet home just a few hours before.

Changing study locations from time to time can help keep you focused and motivated. And according to psychological research, it even helps you retain material better. It may not be the popular solution, but it appears to result in a more successful learning experience.

And who can argue with that?



## HEALTH MATTERS

Katie D'Souza

### How Healthy Is Your Thanksgiving?

*This article originally appeared October 8, 2010, in issue 1840.*

It's October, and Thanksgiving celebrations are right around the corner. Many of us are planning an ample Thanksgiving harvest meal, attempting to balance healthy eating with a feast-like menu. But what is the health rating of a typical Thanksgiving spread?

#### **Red, Red Cranberries**



Make sure you don't forget to include a bowl of cranberries on your Thanksgiving table! Cranberries are significantly high in antioxidants, substances that reduce cellular damage by neutralizing harmful free radicals. In fact, on the ORAC scale, a scale used to compare different foods' antioxidant values, cranberries are listed high at 1750 ORAC per 100 g serving (compare this to oranges, at 750 ORAC, and peaches, at 168 ORAC). In fact, cranberries possess higher antioxidant levels than 19 commonly consumed fruits.

The antioxidants in those red cranberries can also help prevent heart disease. And don't forget that antioxidants also work toward anti-aging, since decreased cellular damage in the body means a healthier-functioning system.

Of course, the majority of the health benefits associated with cranberries come from raw, or possibly lightly cooked, berries. This Thanksgiving, blend raw cranberries with oranges, water, and sugar to create a delicious, healthy cranberry jelly substitute. And feel free to take a second helping; your body will love it.

## Spices and Onions

Cranberries can't claim to be the sole antioxidant on your Thanksgiving table; many spices are antioxidant-rich as well. Those typical "Thanksgiving" spices, like cloves, cinnamon, and sage, pack an antioxidant punch. Be sure to add generous amounts to your pumpkin pie, squash medley, or turkey stuffing.

And while you're preparing that turkey stuffing, make it an onion bonanza. The World Health Organization acknowledges many positive health benefits from onion consumption. Onions can help picky eaters to improve their appetites—but this doesn't mean those with "normal" appetites will be able to eat more turkey! And onion consumption is also beneficial for heart health: namely, they help prevent atherosclerosis (plaque deposits in the arteries) and provide a mild reduction in blood pressure. These benefits are due to the onions' sulphide content (which is in turn partially responsible for onions' characteristic scent).

With your Thanksgiving onions and cranberries, your heart will be all set!

Further, onions are also a source of fructo-oligosaccharides (FOS), a compound that encourages beneficial intestinal bacteria to multiply. The more good bacteria in your intestines, the less chance for pathogenic bacteria to colonize there and cause negative health concerns like flatulence, bloating, constipation, or fatigue.

And use a small amount of butter, not vegetable oil, in your stuffing. Your skin will appreciate the vitamin A that a pinch of butter will give it.

## Turkey

If you're planning on a typical turkey for your Thanksgiving dinner's main course, you may be interested to find that turkey is a highly nutritious meat. Turkey contains several B-vitamins, including thiamine (vitamin B<sub>1</sub>) and vitamin B<sub>6</sub>, as well as potassium and zinc. Additionally, it's extremely low in fat, with only one gram of fat per ounce of white meat.

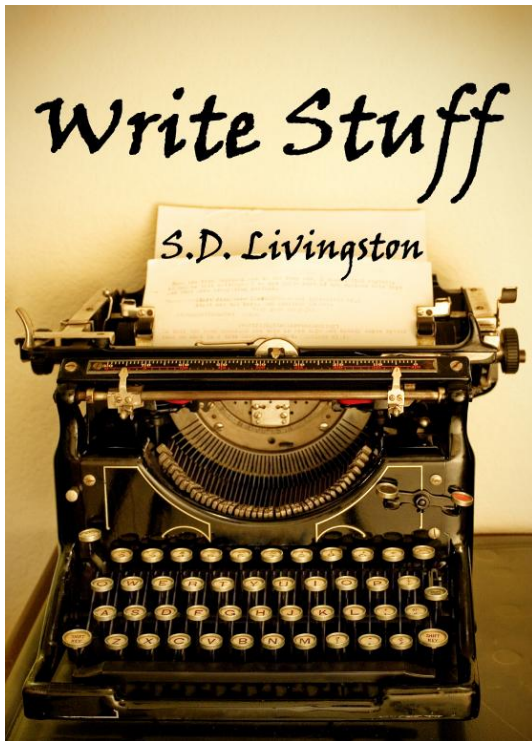
What about the alleged "turkey drowsiness," which refers to the idea that eating your Thanksgiving turkey will make you sleepy? The theory is based on the fact that turkey contains tryptophan, an essential amino acid. Tryptophan is converted to serotonin, which in turn can convert to the neurohormone melatonin, helping promote healthy sleep patterns. However, keep in mind that this theory may not be necessarily true; the levels of tryptophan in turkey are similar to those found in other meats, which do not claim to induce drowsiness.

Your Thanksgiving feast is all set. This year, take advantage of its antioxidant, anti-aging, heart-healthy, and vitamin-friendly benefits!



*Katie D'Souza is an AU graduate and a licensed naturopathic doctor. She currently lives in Ontario.*

*Disclaimer: The information contained in this article is for personal interest only; it is not intended for diagnosis or treatment of any condition. Readers are always encouraged to seek the professional advice of a licensed physician or qualified health care practitioner for personal health or medical conditions.*



## The Deep

*This column originally appeared December 17, 2010, in issue 1850.*

You know that niggling feeling you get when you're sure that you've misplaced something but can't think what it might be? Or that there's something really important you're supposed to remember and it's just outside your mental grasp, flitting like an elusive moth among the sparking synapses of your brain? Well, I've had that feeling for a couple of years now, and I've finally figured out what's wrong.

My attention span is crumbling. And I want it back.

I first noticed this mental fidgetiness when I pulled away from the computer screen one night and tried to read a book. As usual, I'd spent the day editing and fact-checking. I'd clicked, surfed, and ingested thousands of snippets. My eyes had jumped from articles to video ads to links to emails and back again—then rinsed and repeated until the droplets of data merged into one

constant stream.

It was all in a day's work and it was work that I loved, but after eight hours at the desk, it was time to go analogue. I curled up on the couch, opened a book—and that's when I realized something was definitely rotten in Denmark. Or rather, the part of my brain I like to call Denmark; the bits that let me focus on long passages of text and get lost in stories about kings and the play being the thing.

Halfway through a page, my focus started skidding sideways. Two pages in, my attention was still skittering madly and I had no clue what I'd just finished reading. I started again, and that's when I noticed an even more alarming development. My eyes were actually darting to the edges of the book, just off the page. And I realized what they were instinctively seeking: the film trailers and food ads that had played at the periphery of my online attention all day.

Maybe I was just having an off day, but a bit more surfing (ironically) revealed a potential cause. As this *Boston Globe* [review](#) of Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows* notes, "The Internet works on our brains in such a way that we are in danger of losing our capacity for deep, sustained reading and thought — along with all the cognitive benefits."

I'd suspected it, of course, after reading Sven Birkert's *The Gutenberg Elegies* several years before. But the change was insidious, creeping up on me slowly, and Birkert's (and Neil Postman's) ideas had stayed firmly in the realm of the academic until the night I realized I couldn't even focus long enough to read a single page of my favourite author.

Other pieces of the puzzle started falling into place. It had been weeks since I'd tried to focus on a novel—once a beloved pastime I could indulge in for hours. I'd found myself distracted even during a one-hour TV show. Half-hour shows worked better,

*"The Internet works on our brains in such a way that we are in danger of losing our capacity for deep, sustained reading and thought . . ."*

*Wen Stephenson*

and even then I'd start scrolling through the listings during the program. And homework? I was struggling to focus long enough to write an 800-word essay, where just a couple of years ago it had been a comparative breeze to do a 2,000-word paper and get an A.

Something was happening, something purely anecdotal, but I didn't like it one bit.

Other research backs up the notion that our brains can be rewired even into old age, and that the very nature of Internet content is what Carr calls "repetitive, intensive, interactive, addictive." In a recent *New York Times* [article](#), Michael Rich, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and the executive director of the Center on Media and Child Health in Boston, says the consequences are especially worrisome for kids.

"Their brains are rewarded not for staying on task but for jumping to the next thing," he notes. "The worry is we're raising a generation of kids in front of screens whose brains are going to be wired differently."

Thing is, I didn't want to lose my attention span. Hell, I *couldn't* lose it. It had helped me get most of the way through an English degree. It had allowed me to focus on important contracts and wade through income tax returns. It had been the benevolent taskmaster that kept me plodding away long enough to write (and research) books.

The quandary, not surprisingly, was that I love the Internet. Not because there are videos of kittens doing funny things and people smashing their cars into bollards. Well, okay. Maybe I do like it for those things. But only a little bit.

Mostly, I love it because it allows me to research my novels in a way I couldn't possibly do at the library. And because I can access thousands of academic articles for my essays, virtually in an instant. And because it lets me keep in touch with friends and family. All wonderful things.

But it was also taking small bites of my brain every day, its nibbling away at my ability to focus happening slowly, just like a caterpillar patiently, inexorably devouring a leaf thousands of times its size.

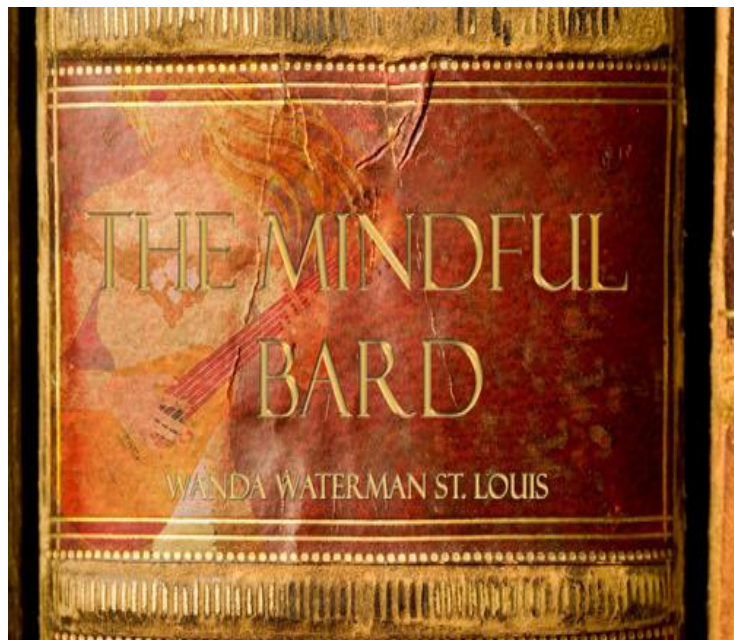
So I started to read. More accurately, I started to read again. Big, long chunks of prose. The type of thing I used to love but found increasingly hard to focus on. For an hour before bed, or during my lunch, or any random time during the day, I turned everything off. No radio, no iPod, no computer. And I read. E-books or paper books, the only rule was that it had to be a sustained narrative flow—and there couldn't be any pop-up windows or email notices to distract me.

It's taken a surprising amount of mental effort to break the constant Internet habit, but it seems to be working. Although the results aren't scientific, after three weeks my brain is settling down. To borrow a phrase from Tracy Seeley's [blog](#), my chattering monkey mind is slowly remembering how to sit quietly for a while. I can feel it regaining the ability to look at things deeply, rather than just darting along the shallow trail of links on the screen.



The effects are visible in myriad ways. It was surprisingly easy to focus during a three-hour exam last week. Sitting through a movie is enjoyable again, not something to be interrupted by occasional dashes to check for new email. My mind seems to be spontaneously making connections again, with flashes of inspiration lighting up when I least expect it.

In fact, I've made so much progress that—hey, there's something new on my Twitter feed . . .



## Books, Music, and Film to Wake Up Your Muse and Help You Change the World

*This article originally appeared January 15, 2010, in issue 1802.*

**Book:** John Geiger, *The Third Man Factor: The Secret to Survival in Extreme Environments* (Penguin Canada 2009).

### Someone is Out There

*“Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman*

*—But who is that on the other side of you?”*

T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land”

The passage above was inspired by Ernest Shackleton’s account of his 1914-16 expedition to the island of South Georgia in the South Atlantic Ocean. His ship having been slowly wrecked by ice, Shackleton had set off with a small group of men to a whaling station at the opposite end of the frozen, mountainous island. During one particularly harrowing stretch Shackleton, starving, exhausted, chilled to the bone, and despairing for his life, saw an extra man in front of him, one more than his companions.

It would be years before Shackleton would be willing to speak openly about this extra man, but as soon as the confession was out of his mouth it was heavily publicized and immediately followed by other accounts from explorers who’d had the same experience. In fact, the other explorers in his team revealed that they too had seen the extra man but had not told anyone because they’d been afraid of being thought mentally unstable. (This may explain why most reports of the third man phenomenon, not counting ancient religious texts, emerged in the 20th century.)

*The Third Man Factor* presents us with a body of detailed anecdotal evidence that while enduring a complex of privations—often including pain, illness, hunger, thirst, extreme cold, monotony, and isolation—many people either see or sense the presence of a person who turns out not to be there at all.

There is an amazing range of common factors in these experiences. For one thing, the visitants nearly always disappear once the perceiver sees that help is coming. They are often the same sex as the perceiver and sometimes appear in the form of a dead loved one. And in many instances, the visitant appears on the perceiver's right and even apes the perceiver's posture and movements.

*The book has amazing insights into human nature, and you can't read it without developing a truly humbling grasp of the profoundly social nature of Homo sapiens.*

Significantly, the degree of warmth and comfort the presence brings increases with the level of danger confronting the perceiver.

The religious often call these apparitions angels, or more specifically, guardian angels, an assumption that raises a host of theological questions. Why, for example, do the presences appear to some and not all, as often to atheists as to believers?

Scientific minds have generally attributed the illusions to delirium brought on by extreme conditions. Trouble is, third man appearances do not share the chaotic, senseless, sometimes malevolent nature common to hallucinations. The presences consistently bring calm and peace, even words of guidance, which in the case of Charles Lindbergh actually guided him safely through a long and heavy bank of fog on his famous flight

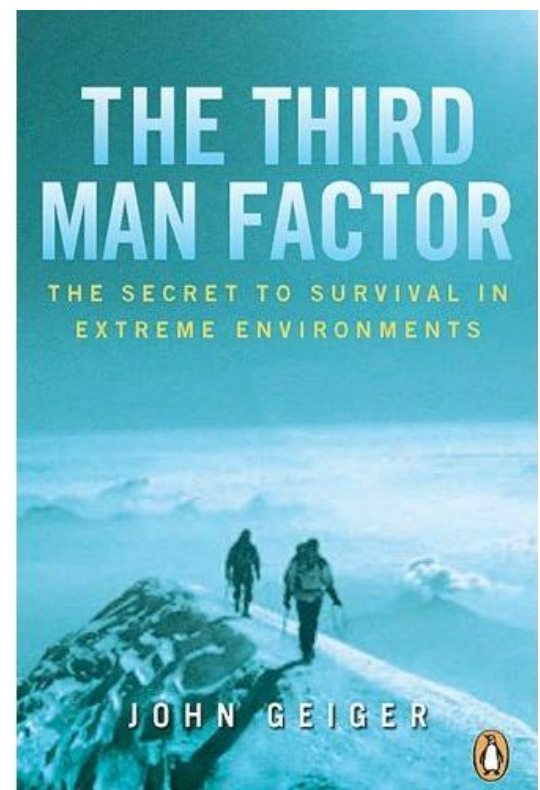
across the Atlantic.

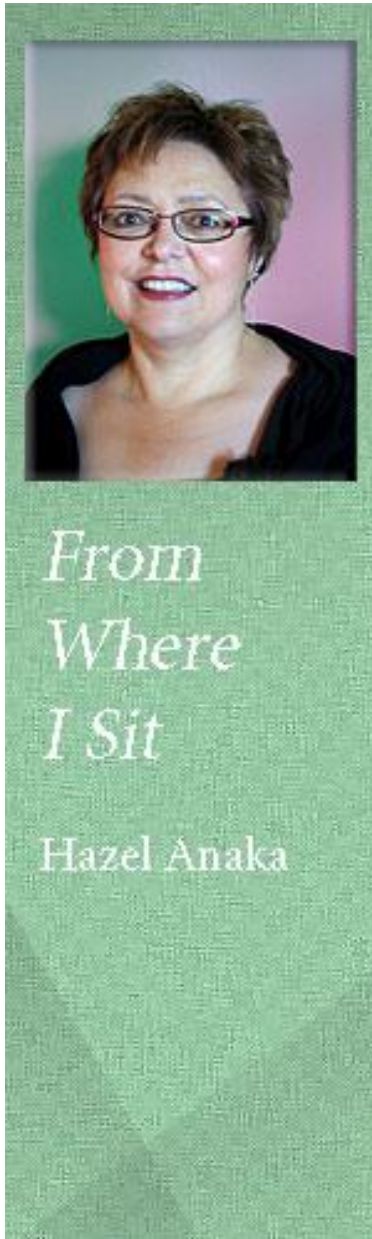
So what causes these apparitions?

I'm not above spoiling an ending, but the research presented at the end of this book is so varied and soul-stirring that I can't do it justice here. I will say that the proposed reason that fascinates me the most has something to do with a primitive brain function called "bicameral mind" by psychologist Julian Jaynes, in which the decision-making process is experienced as something happening outside one's own mind, mouthed by external beings. Hence the soldiers of *The Iliad* heard their personal moment-by-moment decisions coming not from within their own craniums but from the Olympians. It is argued that in times of extreme stress, when multiple stressors are at work, this primitive way of thinking re-emerges.

The book has amazing insights into human nature, and you can't read it without developing a truly humbling grasp of the profoundly social nature of *Homo sapiens*. It would seem that the thing that distinguishes life from death is in fact the company of a loving other. The absence of such an other is a living death, and those able to summon such a presence can survive much.

*The Third Man Factor* manifests seven of The Mindful Bard's criteria for books well worth reading: 1) it is authentic, original, and delightful; 2) it gives me tools enabling me to respond with compassion and efficacy to the suffering around me; 3) it displays an engagement with and compassionate response to suffering; 4) it inspires an awareness of the sanctity of creation; 5) it is about attainment of the true self; 6) it stimulates my mind; and 7) it poses and admirably responds to questions which have a direct bearing on my view of existence.





## What a Story!

*This column originally appeared September 3, 2010, in issue 1835.*

Allow me to retell a story told to us this afternoon by a salesman named Allan.

A quick and dirty analysis reveals a story arc, tension, interesting characters, humour, climax, and resolution. But how much of a story's appeal comes from the teller and the telling?

Impending death was the catalyst for the remembering and the retelling. Does some emotional thing kick in and take us back to the days of oral tradition, where stories were shared across a fire instead of through cyberspace? A time when people had more than 140 characters or emoticons to convey a message. When you sat across from someone and made eye contact. When the storyteller could see your eyes widen or your grin broaden.

Allan told us about his dying cousin. Family and friends are working frantically to finish the bodywork on a Chevy Nova for a final, no-holds-barred, winner-takes-all race to decide once and for all who's got the hotter muscle car—Allan or his cousin. As heartwarming as that is though, it wasn't the main story.

That began something like this.

On a dark February night, when Allan should be walking the dog, he puts him in the car instead and begins cruising down back alleys in the seedier part of town, searching for a car to buy. In the dark, he catches a glimpse of a beat-up, dirty, snow-covered car that might be the coveted 1970 Chevelle SS he desires. He circles the block for another look. He does this two or three more times. He goes home, but can't get the car out of his mind.

After his wife falls asleep, he heads out to look again, this time with a flashlight. He borrows a pen from the 7-11 to write down the VIN number. He leaves his card in the guy's mailbox. *Where did you go last night?* the wife asks. *Oh, no, you don't, you're not buying that car.*

But he can't get the car out of his mind. *Don't even think of coming here without \$8,000 in your hand*, he's told. He manages to lay his hands on \$6,000. A buddy runs a background check on the machine, and it is everything the seller professed it to be.

Allan knows he won't leave without the car.

He tries to play it cool, not let on how badly he wants it. The seller looks like Jesus, but with attitude. The house is cold and poorly lit, the fridge empty. Allan holds out a wad containing \$5,000 in 20s. The seller

swears, but takes the money and says he will buy some pot and his favourite hooker. Oh, and maybe get caught up on the mortgage. He then starts dragging stuff up from the basement—a set of tires and wheels (worth about \$2,000), genuine GM parts, accessories, and more that he threw into the deal.

“But what did the wife do?” I asked.

“Oh, we were already having trouble. The divorce cost me about 30 grand. But that’s not all,” Allan said.

After he got the car completely redone, Allan wanted to go back and show the owner. He headed back to the neighbourhood, but nothing looked right. He wasn’t even sure he had the right street anymore. But a neighbour came out. *Can I help you?* he said. *Yeah, I bought this car, fixed it up, wanted to show the previous owner.*

But no luck. It seems that with all the new-found space in the basement and “seed money,” the seller had turned entrepreneurial, started a grow-op, and gotten busted, and was in jail.

You can’t make a story like this up, from where I sit.



## DID YOU KNOW?



### AU’s New Web-Based Transfer Credit Search Page

Curious as to how your past coursework might transfer for AU credit? Want to find out whether courses at other universities are equivalent to AU courses, or transferable as AU program requirements?

You’ll want to check out AU’s new web-based Transfer Credit Search application, which allows “students to search transfer credit decisions at Athabasca University by both course and program.”

The user-friendly, online application can be used in three ways: to check how courses you’ve taken at another institution would transfer to AU, to check the transferability of programs you’ve taken at another institution, and to “search for AU course equivalents at other institutions.”

For further information, see the Transfer Credit Search [help page](#). Or, to access the application and start searching, click [here](#).

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## THE VOICE

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