

THE VOICE

MAGAZINE

Vol 20 Iss 37 2012-09-28

A Day Off

Buckle down

Smell of a Soul

A Syrian Kurd speaks

Singers & Standards

Politics, love, and art

Plus:

*From Where I Sit
Click of the Wrist
and much more!*



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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



DAY OFF

Maxie van Roye



I wake up reluctantly, the loud tendrils of my alarm clock penetrating my brain like shards of glass. Wednesday. Wednesday? *Aha!* Today is the day that I get that essay out the door, all 2,000 words of it. It's due at the end of the week, but I've got the day off work and I'm going to get my thoughts together and onto the screen.

Ideas are swirling in my head already. It's going to be a good day, a productive one. I can feel it. I get dressed, see my kid off to school, and, coffee in hand, I head upstairs for my office.

But on the landing I stumble over a box of clothes that's headed to Goodwill. I've passed that box a hundred times in the past week, and I can no longer stand its silent nagging. I pick it up; I'll put it right in the trunk of the car so that I can drop it off the next time I'm in the area.

If I'm already going to make the trip to Goodwill, I might as well make it worth my while. So I take this opportunity to run down to the basement level to sort my daughter's clothes. An hour later, I've got an armful of too-small discards. I add them to the box and pop them in the car, and now I'm ready to tackle that essay. It's only 9:30; I've got hours of work time ahead of me.

Unfortunately, while I was sorting and toting clothes my coffee got cold. I dump it down the sink and put on another pot. It's time to get this thing started!

While it's brewing, I put away the clean dishes from last night. I'm multitasking like a pro here, and I'm not taking any more time away from my writing. Coffee is done. I reach the door of my office and whip open my laptop.

There's a piece of paper lying on top of the keyboard. I peer at it. *Crap, the hydro bill's due today.* Well, that's a priority. I pay it online, and then I pay the three other bills that are due tomorrow. Kill two birds, and all that—this makes me ahead of the game! I open my essay file and type in my title.

The phone rings. It's my daughter's school. *Blah, blah, paperwork, blah blah supposed to send that yesterday.* Okay, also a priority. I fill it out and put it downstairs where her schoolbag goes. I'll pop it in there when she gets home today.

I check my watch. I lost a half hour, but that's okay. I've paid bills and caught myself up on paperwork and sorting. Now I'm ready to roll!

Or maybe not. Where's the stack of research materials I borrowed from the library? I must have left them in the car the other day. I dash downstairs out to the parking lot and locate them on the passenger seat. But what is that smell?

There's a weird odour wafting from the back seat. I gingerly root around back there and discover a half-rotting sandwich shoved under the booster. *God help me, that kid.* I throw the sandwich in the dumpster

and gather into my arms all the other stuff that definitely doesn't belong in the car: two hoodies, an overdue library book, four pencils, two dolls, one shoe (where's the other?), her ballet bag, and a bunch of wrappers.

I stick them in a laundry basket in the entryway of the house. These, at least, aren't my problem.

Now it's 11, and I realize I haven't eaten breakfast. All this running around has made me hungry. I'll have an early lunch and get to work. It should last me until mid-afternoon: a nice, solid chunk of work time. Of course, before I get started I need to run back out to the car to retrieve my research books, which I left there because my arms were too full of little girl paraphernalia.

11:30. I open the first book and type the info into a bibliography. Luckily I've done a bit of the research beforehand, so this should flow well. I write a killer opening paragraph, and launch into my first argument.

The phone rings. It's my best friend. I forgot to return her call two days ago, so I guiltily pick up and explain why, yet again, I can't talk. She's understanding and listens while I complain about this stupid essay and the trouble it's causing me. By the time I'm done whining, I feel a lot better. But now it's nearly 12:30.

I write for a solid half hour. Then I get stuck and find myself on Facebook. Bad decision; I'm not going to let distractions get in the way of productivity today. I decide to get some fresh air. Maybe the mail's come? It hasn't. I fill my water bottle, wipe down the fridge, and head back upstairs. I still can't focus. I collect the trash and bring it out; I'm being efficient here, since I'd have to do this tonight anyway.

1:45. I decide to write the conclusion. That gives me some ideas, so I type a bit more. No, that doesn't sound right. I retype it and then retype it again. I'm editing! That's productive! But it's 2:15, and I still have three pages to go. My daughter will be home at 3. I'm getting nervous. I've got 45 minutes to write three pages, which works out to 15 minutes a page. If a page is max 500 words, that means a hundred words every five minutes. I waste 15 minutes on advanced mathematical calculations. Now the pressure's on. That makes me stuck. She's going to be here in 30 minutes. 25. 20. I have to go to the bathroom.



Fifteen. I'm nervous. Why am I nervous? She's not a baby; I can work while she's home! Maybe I'll make a snack for her now, so I'll have a bit more uninterrupted writing time when she goes out to play.

Ten minutes. Where did the day go? I've gotten a lot accomplished, just not on this essay. I edit a bit. Five minutes. Brain flash! I start madly typing. *Now I'm on a roll!*

Ding dong! She's home. "Mommy can I . . . Mommy I need . . ." *Argh.* 600 words out of 2,000. So much for my essay writing day. Guess I'll be burning the midnight oil . . .

"I've got 45 minutes to write three pages, which works out to 15 minutes a page. If a page is max 500 words, that means a hundred words every five minutes."

IN CONVERSATION

Wanda Waterman



A Syrian Kurd

Part I: The Smell of a Soul

“Human beings are so made that the ones who do the crushing feel nothing; it is the person crushed who feels what is happening. Unless one has placed oneself on the side of the oppressed, to feel with them, one cannot understand.”

Simone Weil

“When a cat wants to eat her kittens, she says they look like mice.”

Kurdish proverb

Moustafa Mala Bozan is a Kurdish poet and musician from the city of Kobany in northern Syria, not far from Aleppo. He’s been corresponding with Wanda Waterman for the last year, during which time he’s been imprisoned, has lived in refugee camps, and has travelled across Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

I’ve written to Moustafa to warn him about some things in this article. I don’t want any surprises. Moustafa has always been a little volatile, and twice our conversations have ended in blasts of choler that left me questioning the man’s mental health and reliability as a witness, even as a witness to his own suffering. I need to know that telling the truth about my opinion of him won’t destroy our friendship. I’m also strongly suggesting that for his safety I use an alias for him. His reply:

“Thank-you if will write something about me, and please you can use my real name . . . Never mind about me, never be worried about this, and please, I won’t ask you to tell something you didn’t find . . . in me and in our conversations. If you think what . . . you write about me is true and real, just do it. I won’t ask you to describe me as an angel, as I’m not. If I will feel offended, I will thank you because you opened my mind about something I didn’t know about . . .”

The first time I read about the Kurds was in *The Anabasis (The Retreat of the 10,000)*, a 5th-century B.C. Greek history by General Xenophon.

The Persian prince Cyrus the Younger had hired the Greek hoplites to aid him in his fight for the throne. He was unfortunately killed just after the Greeks arrived in Persia, so after having come all that way they had to return home. They couldn’t return to Greece using the route they’d come, because they’d fed themselves by killing most of the wild game along the way. Their only choice was to take a rather circuitous and difficult path back through the mountains of what is now Kurdistan, Armenia, Iraq, and Turkey.

One of their many ordeals was fighting hostile mountain tribes, including the Carduchoi, the ancestors of present-day Kurds. Like the Greeks, the Kurds were the enemies of the Persians, but the villagers didn't know this when they spied the army of thousands marching their way. They reacted with all the aggression they could muster, attacking the Greeks with slings and longbows.

Seven days, says Xenophon, spent in traversing the country of the Carduchians had been one long continuous battle, which had cost them more suffering than the whole of their troubles at the hands of the king and Tissaphernes put together.

Xenophon has my sympathy. In my conversations with Moustafa, I must work very hard and be very diplomatic in an effort to get clear answers to my questions. Part of the problem is his limited English, but he gets irked by my attempts to get him to explain in greater detail. He becomes frustrated and accuses me of having no plan and of being ignorant of Syrian politics. At one point he asks me if I need his help with English because I seem to be having trouble understanding his.

Moustafa's abrasiveness aside, the Kurds themselves have my admiration. Like the Irish, the Romanov gypsies, and African Americans, their music and poetry throbs with a longing for serenity and beauty and at the same time a deep knowledge of suffering that renders their longing ever more poignant. From the dawn of their history, the Kurds have been oppressed to varying degrees by whatever mega-power happened to be ruling their environs. This has not yet abated; their genocide by Saddam Hussein is now a matter of historical record, and in Syria they've been brutally targeted by the Assad regime. They are also now inextricably tangled in a web of conflicting loyalties.

For example, Syria now has at least ten Kurdish parties under the umbrella of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a body working toward greater autonomy for Kurdish Syrians. In conflict with the KNC is the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (PKK), or Kurdistan Workers' Party. The PKK is an international socialist Kurdish organization, based in Turkey, that provides protection against armed groups to Syrian Kurdish cities, including Moustafa's Kobany. This is a little ironic considering that the PKK is almost universally believed to be a terrorist organization, having claimed credit for a number of kidnappings, hijackings, and armed assaults in Turkey, Northern Iraq, and Western Europe.



And yet Moustafa is fearless and outspoken. It's clear not only that he's extremely vulnerable, but also that the bullet could come from any direction.

On Thursday I receive the following email from Moustafa:

"Today, my cousin died as a martyr. He was [a] soldier, and my day was so busy and tired. He was 21 years old, just as a flourishing flower, an angel to all of us. Today so many strange things happened to me, without sleeping until noon

"The history of an oppressed people is hidden in the lies and the agreed myth of its conquerors."

Meridel Le Sueur

today. They called us [to tell us that] he died and that his body was in Aleppo and would in some hours be in my city, Kobany.

In this time some of the young, we went to dig a grave. It's not the usual feeling, the usual sense. So strange, digging a hole and I know someone I loved will sleep in this hole. I was helping him, but in so sad a way. When he arrived he had been dead 20 days. There was such a strange smell from his body; I wondered at this smell. Was it body smell or soul smell?"

(To be continued.)

Wanda also penned the poems for the artist book *They Tell My Tale to Children Now to Help Them to be Good*, a collection of meditations on fairy tales, illustrated by artist Susan Malmstrom.

CLICK OF THE WRIST

Punctuate It!

This past week the writing world celebrated National Punctuation Day—but it's not too late to join in the appreciation of the lowly comma, apostrophe, and semicolon. In fact, it's good to review grammatical rules from time to time, since web writing and poor usage can make even savvy writers forget the basics. Click through these links for a timely reminder of usage dos and don'ts.

Purdue OWL

One of the best grammar resources on the web is Purdue University's Online Writing Lab; it has rules, examples, and even practice exercises and tutor help.

How to Use an Apostrophe

Humor cartoonist The Oatmeal weighs in on how (and how not) to use an apostrophe. Be sure to check out his comic on semicolon use, too.

Terribly Write

It's no secret that good usage is becoming more and more difficult to find. But some of these examples are just sad. Visit Terribly Write for a snarky look at errors found in news media outlets that should know better.

Grammanoir

If you're an English nerd, you'll love this noirish tale of grammatical intrigue (really!). It was originally published in honour of National Grammar Day in 2009.



IGNORANCE OF UNEMPLOYED L.A. ACTORS

Wanda Waterman

Ignorance of Unemployed L.A. Actors



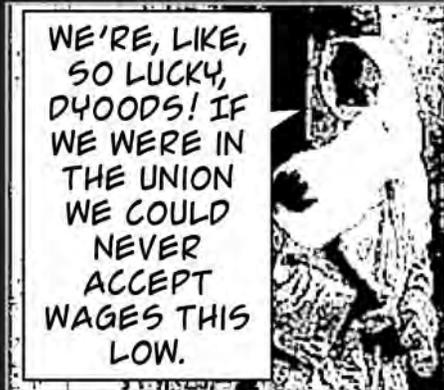
CUT! OK KIDS, HOLD THAT POSE— GOTTA MAKE A TINY ADJUSTMENT TO THE SET.



(SIGH)
WHAT'S THIS FLICK ABOUT, ANYWAY?



THEY TOLD ME IT WAS PORN. BUT HEY, 500 BUCKS IS 500 BUCKS.



WE'RE, LIKE, SO LUCKY, DHOODS! IF WE WERE IN THE UNION WE COULD NEVER ACCEPT WAGES THIS LOW.



YEAH, WELL I'M GETTING SICK OF LIVING IN MY CAR.

I HEAR FILM PRODUCTION IS, LIKE, BOOMING IN EGYPT. WE SHOULD TOTALLY GO, DHOODS.



EGYPT?!

FER SHER! WHY NOT? WHAT COULD GO WRONG?

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY WANDA WATERMAN



Dispatches from the Reno Front

In my first update from the front lines of the war zone known as my kitchen renovation, I blow the drywall dust off my glasses, keyboard, and hands to write this. Lest you're tempted to remind me, I do remember saying I'd gladly live through six months of chaos than wait for the perfect moment to start the work.

And with aching hands and weary body, I reaffirm that vow. My strategy since day one has been to do all I could alone and without complaint. I've tried to anticipate what would come next and be one or more steps ahead of the game.

Long ago, I removed all art and collectibles and packed them away. Then I emptied as many kitchen cupboards as I could so the cabinets on the wall coming down could be removed. I urged Roy to do a little each morning and each night. I couldn't ask for a day of his time, because it's the busiest time of year for farmers. But anyone can squeeze in a few swings of a hammer or cuts of a saw.

My brother-in-law Jim spent a couple of days here deconstructing part of another wall, creating the new doorway and attaching drywall to the living room wall.

Astute readers will ask: *Living room, what the hell? I thought it was a kitchen remodel.* Like every renovation under the sun, the scope of work has grown. You touch one thing and it leads to another. You improve one area, and it makes the rest look shabby by comparison. You find yourself uttering those verboten words: "While we're at it, we might as well . . ."

So now we're redoing the kitchen, replacing all the flooring on the main floor, upgrading the wiring and adding pot lights and outlets where needed, and getting the stippled ceilings scraped and the house painted. In addition, all the interior doors, trim, and baseboards are being replaced. In the long run it'll be more cost-effective than me trying to sand off the 50-year-old red-orange stain and repainting them. I've already been down that path, and it wasn't pretty.

While we haven't uncovered anything worthy of a Mike Holmes intervention, we have shaken our collective heads at some of the things we've seen. Four-inch nails used to hold things together, the odd ungrounded electrical outlet, and even the number of flooring choices we've had in the 25 years we've lived here. Particularly irksome is the shortcut taken by the master contractor who replaced all our windows after a hailstorm a few years ago. Instead of using expanding foam to fill the spaces around the windows, he stuffed in batt insulation.

Because this is my project, I've had to put my pry bar and reciprocating saw where my mouth is. I've taken debris to the landfill. I've swept and vacuumed. I've made miles looking for things I've misplaced. Yet despite the chaos I couldn't be happier, from where I sit.

Hazel Anaka's first novel is Lucky Dog. Visit her [website](#) for more information or follow her on Twitter @anakawrites.

THE MINDFUL BARD

Wanda Waterman



Chico & Rita at piano, Havana late night bar.

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

Film: *Chico & Rita* (Magic Light Pictures 2012)

Directors: Fernando Trueba, Javier Mariscal, Tono Errando

Cast: Bebo Valdés, Idania Valdés, Estrella Morente, Limara Meneses, Eman Xor Oña, Mario Guerra

“All art is political in the sense that it serves someone’s politics.”

August Wilson

How Politics Crush Love and Art

It’s 1948 in Havana. The lovely, dusky Rita is sitting at a table in a nightclub, talking to a music promoter. He’s just offered her a contract enabling her to achieve her dream of taking her singing career to New York.

“I don’t see Chico’s name here,” she says. The promoter assures her that New York is filled with piano players.

“Chico is not just a piano player,” Rita purrs. “Chico is, well—Chico.”

She looks behind her to observe said Chico slumped over the bar. While he’s been angrily observing her discussion with the suited gringo, he’s been drowning his liver in Mojitos. She goes over to give him the good news, but he rebuffs her with a jealous rant and stomps out. She calmly returns to the promoter, who hands her the contract again. She looks at it.

“I still don’t see Chico’s name,” she remarks.

Later she’s sleeping on a bench outside Chico’s apartment, waiting for him to come home. She wakes in time to watch him stumbling up the stairs to his room, supported by his ex-paramour.

Out-of-control emotions confound
communication: between lovers, between



Rita performs, Havana open air club.

musicians and audiences, and between social reformers and those they aim to help. Shakespeare was right—things are not always made clear to those who need to know, and sometimes even the best intentions are misconstrued and met with explosive, even destructive, reactions.



Chico at the piano, Village Vanguard.

Some critics say the characters are not well developed in this movie, but if so it's only because their greater significance lies in their symbolic quality. The animation emerges from a highly developed aesthetic informed by deeply felt awareness of the look and feel of the '40s and '50s in the Americas. There's a dream sequence, for example, that's highly evocative of the era's films and fascination with the emerging drug culture.

Chico & Rita is a kitchen sink sundae for jazz lovers, with “appearances” by Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Cole Porter, Dizzy Gillespie, Woody Herman, Tito Puente, and Chano Pozo, using real recordings of their performances.

Rita and Chico are products of one of the richest hotbeds of musical culture the world has ever known. But the great threat to their love is politics; for one thing, they're victims of possessiveness and entitlement within the territorial confines of their own romance. Additionally, as artists they're forced to be passive recipients of racism and conflicting ideologies. Chico, for example, is tripped up on the one hand by the capitalism that would snatch Rita from him and on the other by the communism that sees jazz as an imperialist genre.

As for Rita, she's become a commercial commodity, and thus the industry is willing to do what it takes to mould and exploit her and drive away the penniless piano player who threatens their investment.

But Rita sees all too clearly the rotten core of the stardom for which she's supposed to be so grateful. She's standing before a rapt audience. She's had a bit too much to drink when she goes out and delivers this address in a slurred Cuban accent:

“There are some things that I don't understand. The life of a black artist is truly amazing! Here I am in this great club, in this beautiful hotel. But I cannot stay in it. I have to sleep in a motel out of town. Anyway, people tell me all the time that I am a star. What do you think? What kind of a star can I be?”



Old Chico, modern day Havana.

Chico & Rita manifests five of the Mindful Bard's criteria for films well worth seeing: 1) it is authentic, original, and delightful; 2) it provides respite from a sick and cruel world, a respite enabling me to renew myself for a return to mindful artistic endeavour; 3) it inspires an awareness of the sanctity of creation; 4) it displays an engagement with and compassionate response to suffering; and 5) it makes me appreciate that life is a complex and rare phenomenon, making living a unique opportunity.

GREEN LIGHT

Driving Diabetes

It's no secret that our automobile-dependent culture spells bad news for the planet. Our gas-guzzling vehicles deplete natural resources and sully the air with toxic gases, and our discarded vehicles frequently end up in landfills, with minimal recycling available.

But the environmental impact isn't the only concern. As *The Atlantic* reports, our health is on the line, too; a new study links a driving-dependent neighbourhood with increased risk of diabetes.

It's logical that "if you have the choice to stroll to school, or the corner store, or even just the nearest bus stop, all those steps add up over time." But now the Toronto-based study, published in *Diabetes Care* recently, offers "hard data" to prove it.

Researchers discovered that "people who lived in less walkable neighborhoods were significantly more likely over time to develop diabetes." The walkability of a given neighbourhood was determined by looking at "population and dwelling density, street connectivity and the availability of nearby retail and service destinations."

The problem was even more significant for immigrants, many of whom are at a higher risk due to "genetic predisposition to diabetes." In fact, new immigrants who lived "in a less walkable neighborhood [were] more than 50 percent more likely to develop diabetes than a long-term resident of Toronto living in one of the most walkable areas, regardless of neighborhood income."

As one of the first studies that concretely links urban growth patterns with health management, it raises significant questions for the future of urban planning.



AUSU UPDATE



AU Students urge candidates to improve university funding

AU students are concerned about the financial health of Athabasca University and the effect of recent news stories on the reputation of the AUSU membership.

A recent CBC report notes that in recent years the university has made a series of reserve draws to cover budget shortfalls, draining the once \$30-million reserve fund.

Tuition and fees at AU, meanwhile, continue to increase despite the concerns of AUSU that education is becoming increasingly unaffordable in Alberta.

“I’m very concerned about AU’s financial situation,” says AUSU President Bethany Tynes. “AU is increasing student fees, observing hiring freezes, denying sabbaticals, delaying projects, and downsizing their offices due to a lack of available funds. We don’t want to see the quality of our education diminish.”

“At the same time,” Tynes continues, “I am confused by AU Board Chair Barry Walker’s comment to the CBC that AU is ‘in a very sound financial position,’ as the concerns we’ve noted do not support the notion that we’re financially sound.”

Chronic underfunding of public post-secondary education is a factor in AU’s financial stress. AU students have lobbied Alberta in recent years to address the shortfall; our members call on the candidates in Alberta’s provincial election to make post-secondary funding a priority in their platforms and to ensure that all Alberta universities are funded equally and sufficiently. Public post-secondary institutions need a reliable, predictable funding model that provides sufficient base operating funds to support a world-class education.

Athabasca University Students' Union is the largest students' union in Alberta, representing nearly 40,000 undergraduates annually.

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This column is provided by AUSU to facilitate communication with its members. The Voice does not write or edit this section; all content has been exclusively and directly provided by AUSU, and any questions or comments about the material should be directed to ausu@ausu.org.

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Classifieds are free for AU students! Contact voice@voicemagazine.org for more information.

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