

Judges comments — Short stories

by Mary Howes
Making Friends — 1st Prize

This haunting tale of urban alienation takes the reader to a bedsitting room in Britain where an unemployed Fine Arts graduate student is having trouble getting out of bed and into life. He watches and listens at a remove, aloof from the goings on outside his room "...bouncing from bed to window to record player to bookcase to bathroom to bed like a ball bearing lost in a maze."

A superb attention to detail so integral to a story where so little action takes place lifts this story out of the ordinary into something quite 'other.' The protagonist watches as "...Mrs. Rossiter tills her garden, rips away the withered lavender to make way for wallflowers" and the reader hears the cry of a human wallflower wanting to make his way out of the confines of his own limited world into the openness that lies beyond.

His state of suspended animation is so complete, however, that when he ventures out to the Unemployment Office he sets it up so that he applies for jobs that he can

never get, thus sending himself scuttling back to the bedsit, to monitor the comings and goings of the postman, the dustbin men, the neighbour with a sick cat. A safe haven, however deadening. It is only when he descends to the "dark room in the basement" that he comes alive. Underground, he meets with Barbara, his friend, who listens to him discuss art and music and the state of the world. Barbara is "...a composite of styles...a dangerous collage..." and the art student is desperate to make her break her vow of silence. This is a most compelling and tightly written short story with a touchingly chilling denouement.

The writer is a lover of language and directs us to pay heed to what happens between the tongue and the ear. His story has dramatic contrasts bombarding the reader in every paragraph...between interior/exterior life, upstairs/downstairs, light and dark, reality and fantasy. He shows us just how fine and blurred the lines between opposites can become. And he gives new meaning to the old phrase "A friend in need is a friend indeed."

Comments on the other short stories can be found on pp 11 and 13.

movements and around the top of the hour I had been woken up by a loudening chain of barks from disgruntled neighbourhood dogs. I rest my case.

Torn between sleep and eavesdropping I settled on a compromise, a sort of listening doze arrangement. The conversation centered around Merg. Now, I am never certain about this name for Mrs Rossiter has some kind of accent, maybe Italian or Spanish. Most of the time it sounds like 'Merg' and I incline to think this is short for 'Murgatroyd' but on some days it is nearer 'Morg', but then who would call a cat 'Morgana'? Still, this is the best I can do without entertaining the possibility of 'Morgue'. Out goes the cry at least three times a day, rising, falling, pleading, imperative, like the knocking-off whistle of a coal mine or a blaring fire engine with cockroaches in its sirens.

What I learned was that the cat has bad breath and liver disease, the result of too much dry food at an early age. Only a weekly injection maintains it on the knife edge between life and black pedal-bin liner tossed in a dustbin. Squalid job being a dustman. The tyrannies of domestic refuse: uncapped half-empty bleach containers chuck chloride of lime in your face; get caught by nose at number nine leaping through someone else's dirty books, photographs of fancy tricks to get your kicks at sixty-six; trying to lift a can that won't lift because it's full of ash or bricks or lead piping and finally the nuisance not to mention the shock and putrefying hum of dead cats in bin liners.

So, Mrs Rossiter's cat of ambiguous name has liver disease. Tuesday is usually a bad day for me, something but not very much like Desdemona's divided duty. There is the job centre to consider, then fresh excuses for social security, then the laundry piling up in the corner, this on top of the regular exhaustion of muesli supplies. Anyway, last week, fortified by this piece of tangible information, the fact of the hepatic tribulations of a cat of non-verifiable name, I rose early.

Confident that I had passed through my revelation for the day, that is, the ailing liver of a feline approximately called 'Merg', I settled down with "The Puzzler" and began to solve a few mazes.

"Draw a line to link the Knight with the Damsel."

"Can you help Captain Kirk and the Enterprise out of a black hole?"

"Can you help Mickey find Pluto?"

"Can you connect...?"

I remember I put down my pen and twiddled the radio into FM's more charted regions in search of the Tuesday play. At about 93 KHz I stopped, turned the volume up for a tune I liked: "She comes to me on a summer breeze." For years I had been humming to myself "submarine" instead of "summer breeze," like only a while ago I discovered my favourite TV show as "Candid" and not "Candy Camera." I felt a momentary brotherhood with Andy Warhol, one of my art college heroes, who in "From A to B and Back Again" mistakes "Portraits" for "Pop-Tarts." Why I laughed at this I don't know. At the time I thought Pop-Tarts was a harem of groupies. I am wiser now of course and know they are sort of tarty things you put in a pop-up toaster, although my preference is to eat them straight from the packet.

Let's not get stuck in the past. My top sheet is ripped and my foot is exploring the hole. Perhaps the revelation happened on Monday. Mrs Rossiter and unspecified cat could have advanced their appointment; Tuesday is not play day but the gardening programme.

I will lie here and think some more.

II

Outside, Mrs Rossiter tills her garden, rips away the withered lavender to make way for wallflowers. I watch her often here, behind the window, as she potters backwards and forwards in her faded housecoat, plucking at this and that, disappearing to return with a cup of tea and a fairy cake.

Today I have had to disturb my routine and venture out. A threatening letter from the unemployment benefit people compelled me to pay a visit to the job centre. Full of no-hopers in anoraks as usual, 'Gallini'-boys and lampshades, redundant stockbrokers with hypertension and unemployed social workers in wholefood sweaters.

Slim pickings on the job front, again, as usual. What I am looking for is something

First prize — Short stories

Making Friends

by Neil Scotten

Like a stick of rhubarb, rained on, blown on, plucked, chopped up and boiled with sugar, my life is a series of revelations. Only last week, Thursday, no it must have been Wednesday because the dustbin men came, or then again it could have been Tuesday. Tuesday is when Mrs Rossiter next door takes her cat to the vet for its weekly injection.

It was Tuesday I remember, whilst festering in my bed, deciding whether to get up, hearing her call from the garden below. "Mer-erg. Mer-erg. Merg? Merg!" By canting my head to starboard on the pillow, ear to the open window, about three or four inches of gap, no nearer six because I use a fifteen centimetre rule to prop the sash, I was able to hear Mrs Rossiter conversing with the postman.

That it was the postman and not another,

say one of our modern costermonger figures, peddling double glazing, wall insulation, selling salvation, I deduced partly from circumstantial evidence, partly from intuition. In truth I only got her side of the story, for the other voice, to me an occasional masculine murmur, was blanketed in the passageway between the Rossiter's garage and house. Anyone in the habit of exploring the nether reaches of the FM dial will know what I mean. Here, in the wastes of white noise that lie beyond the bland valleys of light rock, less talk, the stentorian tones of police HQ interrupt, call in vain through the night. "Foxtrot three, proceed to the vicinity of Renoir Crescent. Domestic disturbance at number fifteen. Advise. Over." Then silence. Questions without answers.

I favour the postman theory. The time, 11:22 am, was in keeping with his daily

Canadian Rock History Challenge by Labatt's

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In 1987, Los Angeles was their workplace although they returned to Toronto to finish this, their most recent album. "Contact" was released in 1987, and six singles were released throughout 1987 and 1988 including the title track and a cover of The Ohio Players "Fire."

Researched by D.W. Lawrie

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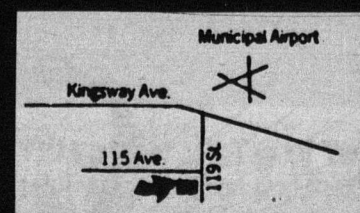


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