

THE TORONTO QUARTERLY

THE TORONTO QUARTERLY-ISSUE THREE

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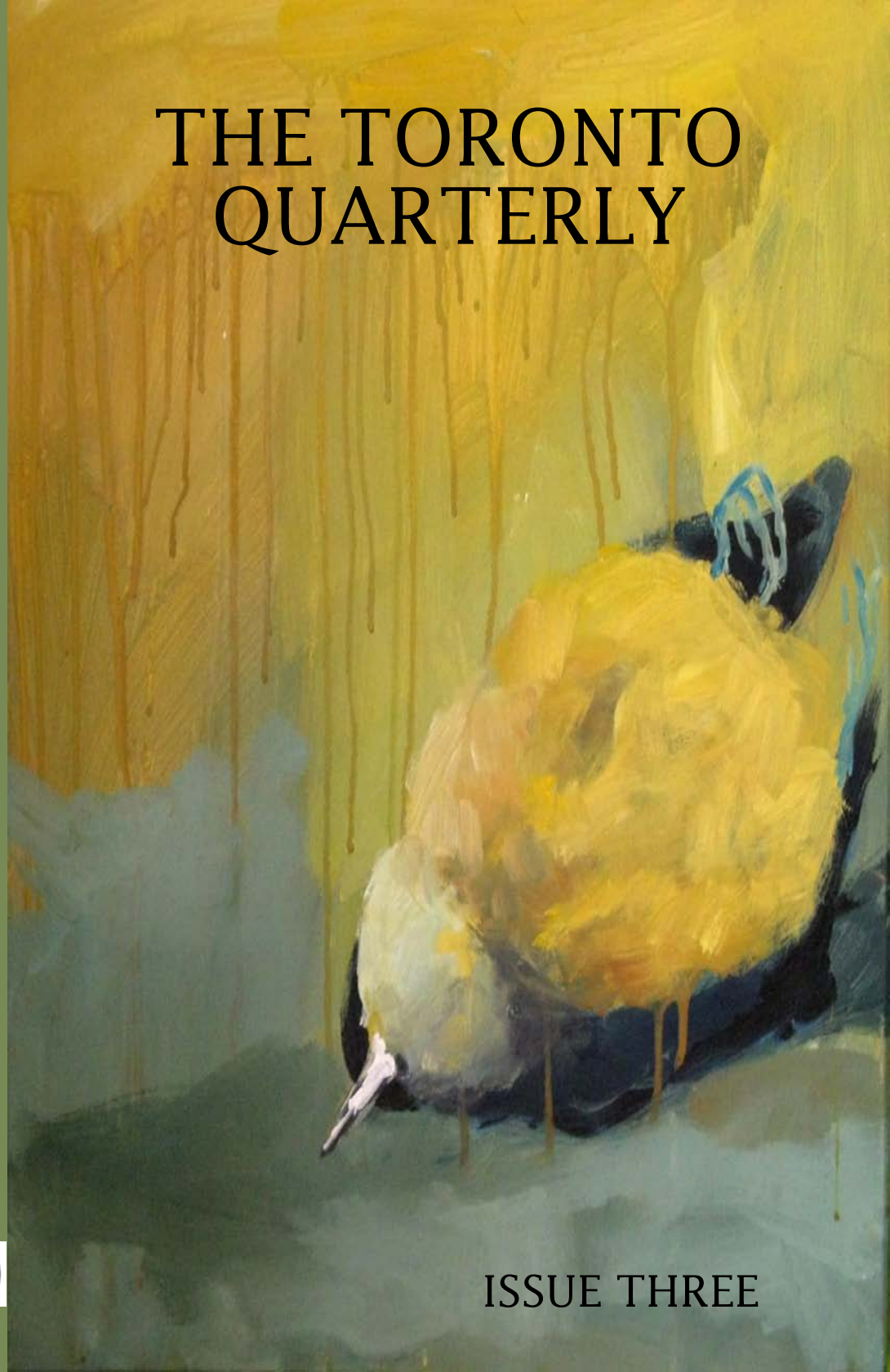
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TTQ

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DESI DI NARDO

by Darryl Salach

We live in a time in history where too often immediate gratification is the common theme as to how people entertain themselves. These are strange times indeed, a dysfunctional society for the most part; a world filled with new technology and devices that seem to have limited our imaginations, creating some new sub-culture, leaving the poets and philosophers of today little chance of laying down the foundation for a new era in the poetic arts.

Well, Desi Di Nardo helps defy that notion with her latest collection of poems, *'The Plural of Some Things'* (Guernica Editions Inc.) which seemingly cements a new era in poetry with a passionate eye and voice that speaks to the reader in a profound and poignant manner. She seems to use us all as characters in her poems, giving us the kind of *'punch in the arm'* that we as a society crave. Poetry is not dead.

Here is my interview with the wonderful poet, Ms. Desi Di Nardo:

TTQ- Did you grow up in a family of poets or artists?

DDN- No one was a poet or artist by profession however my mother, who is passionate about literature, exposed me to books at a very early age and encouraged me to write creatively. My grandmother was a raconteur of sorts. In fact, I'm told, the only time I would sit still was during storytelling hour after supper.

TTQ- When did you first discover poetry? Was there one particular poet that captured your imagination at an early age?

DDN- It's hard for me to pinpoint the exact discovery of poetry as one

might with, for instance, the sighting of a shipwreck or the recovery of a lost and valuable possession. My initial experiences with poetry aren't necessarily the ones I remember most or one's which stand out as being influential. In fact, it wasn't until a Modern Canadian Poetry course at the University of Toronto that I recall being moved by one poet. At that time I was introduced to the works of Gwendolyn MacEwen and though I had read other works by various poets like Purdy, Layton, and Page, MacEwen left a mark. I remember sitting transfixed at the edge of my seat as her poetry resonated so deeply with me. Incidentally, my poem 'Rainbird in the Annex,' which references MacEwen's poetical aptitude, was presented in a Modern Canadian Poetry class at the University of Toronto two years ago.

TTQ- When did you start writing poetry and did you know right then that you wanted to be a poet and pursue it as a career?

DDN- I wrote poetry throughout my childhood and always believed I'd enjoy a career in writing, albeit not necessarily as a poet. I began writing seriously about eight years ago shortly after I moved back to the Annex in Toronto. At that point, I was considerably more determined to focus on poetry. When I look back at some of the pieces I wrote during that time I often see elements of discovery and awakening, likely akin to my sentiments relating to the beginning of a new career or new direction for me.

TTQ- Tell us about your time living away from the Annex in Toronto. Where did this journey take you? Was it a difficult existence to be away from your comfort zone so to speak? Were you writing during that time?

DDN- I spent what seemed like five impossibly long years away from the Annex in one of Toronto's suburbs. When you're accustomed to living in an exciting and eclectic environment any other location can make you feel like a fish out of water. I've always been concerned with the essentialness of 'place' – the bearing it has on a writer and the integral role it plays in one's life and I think it comes through in my writing. 'Rainbird in the Annex' is a prime example of this. In my case,



this place was not very congruent with my identity and didn't have any of the aspects I look for and value. Needless to say, I did not write a great deal, partly also due to the fact I was attending university at the time.

TTQ- How did growing up in Toronto influence who you are as a person and did it influence your writing?

DDN- Actually, I grew up in the Annex although then the Annex wasn't a term as commonly heard as it is today. It's a buzzing area of the city that persists to flourish with culture and arts. A district that is conducive to creative freedom and expression, that's why I love it so. People are generally accepting of others' unique and eccentric styles and perspectives. You can sport dreadlocks, tattoos, wear garb from different eras, or beat a drum at the corner of the street and that's all right. But it's not just about the arts. The area includes professionals and those who are also very family-oriented. A place that welcomes, even embraces sense of identity. There's no pressure to fit into any specific trend or mold or even be integrated in the arts to feel at home. There's an undeniably strong feeling of itself and community. It's plain to see how its environment is an ideal setting for writing poetry and I feel it's one of the finest places to live and work in the city.

TTQ- Some of your poetry was featured in the 'Poetry on the Way' program which displays local poets words in subway cars and buses on the Toronto Transit Commission. How did that all come about?

DDN- The committee was interested in 'Rainbird in the Annex,' a poem of one's personal passion for the craft and for self-expression. Ironically, this was the first poem I wrote after beginning my writing career eight years ago and so I was honoured to have it as a part of the series. I don't believe the arts are embedded as deeply in Canadian culture as they could be, therefore I feel initiatives like this help enormously to bring the arts to a wider audience. In fact, I've met numerous individuals who relish being exposed to thoughtful and provoking messages while on their way to or from work or school. My

experience with this initiative reaffirmed the need to foster poetry and further the arts within our community. I've often found myself having more meaningful or stirring conversations about art and literature with newly-immigrated taxi drivers than with the average Canadian. Ask the average Canadian who Don Cherry is and not only would he or she know him, but that person might likely even remember the name of his dog. Ask, on the other hand, who Alice Munro is and it can be hit and miss. Canada is rich in literary talent and it's a shame that talent is not as well-known to the average Canadian.

TTQ- Your poetry was also selected by the Parliamentary Poet Laureate, and displayed in the Official Residences of Canada. Were you honoured for your contribution at some formal event in Ottawa?

DDN- My poem, 'Canadian Moose' was selected by the Parliamentary Poet Laureate and published on 'Poems of the Week' a few years ago. Several other poems including 'Canadian Moose' were displayed in the Official Residences of Canada. As a result, I had the wonderful privilege of meeting the Governor General, Michaëlle Jean, and discussing with her the indispensable role poetry plays among youths primarily in disadvantaged parts of the world. I was pleasantly surprised to learn she was such a staunch advocate of poetry.

TTQ- Tell us about your new book of poems, 'The Plural of Some Things'. What was the inspiration behind the book? Were all of the poems written specifically for this book or was it a compilation of many years of writing for you?

DDN- The book published by, Guernica Editions, in December 2008 and it contains poems, which stretch over a seven-year period. Many of the poems touch on themes, which centre on nature, on the fragility of the human psyche, and the instances or obstacles, which affect and drive the relationships we develop with one another. I derive much of my inspiration from the natural world and my surroundings. I'm continually intrigued by the intricate and delicate

workings within nature. I'm also interested in the interrelatedness of all beings and living organisms on the planet.

TTQ- We live in such a destructive time right now, with environmental issues (global warming) to the war in the Middle East to the economic meltdown. Do you think there is hope for us as a people and is that an important message you are trying to exact in 'The Plural of Some Things'?

DDN- These are very critical issues to me and often seep their way into my work. I'm most intrigued by human interaction with other species and the environment. In the end, I would argue our arrogance and disregard for others is the source of most of our problems; overindulgence, war, and, monetary greed are all consequences of our conviction we are superior to other species and that the world was created to fulfill our superficial needs and whims. It's certainly in the way we treat animals and it's apparent in our attitudes towards countries currently in distress. I'm not any less or any more hopeful as I believe this destructive behavior is evidenced throughout time. I think humans often need a taste of 'humble pie,' which can take the form of disasters, disease, or economic trouble to define what's really important. We've been in a fairly long phase of economic prosperity and haven't had many hardships to overcome. I'm optimistic the economic downturn will help repair some of the imbalance with the rest of the world and with nature as a whole. Fortunately, poetry can be a device to help reinstate confidence and hopefulness in a crestfallen society. I like to think there's a thread of hope in my poems. I feel these points can be communicated in a sometimes contemplative, sometimes smarting way. Humanity needs to be shaken up, waken up, and poetry is an excellent vehicle to deliver the message.

TTQ- Your poetry was described by Pier Giorgio Di Cicco as 'standing head over shoulders above the mob of academic sirens and macho wailers.' Do you agree with his analogy and do you consider yourself a powerful voice in today's Canadian literary scene?

DDN- As you can well imagine, I was truly honoured to receive such a moving and eloquent sentiment from the Toronto Poet Laureate. I was humbled, really, to have his very generous message grace the back of the book. I view him as an intellectual anomaly in the city's literary community and an intensely valued and vital creative voice. The literary scene in my mind can be a great source of support and can offer assistance in helping to build one's writing career. The challenge can sometimes be resisting any new waves or fads and staying true to your own voice.

TTQ- What are your views of the current poetry scene in Toronto? Is it a vibrant, close-knit community? Is that the feeling you get when you go out to readings?

DDN- I would agree that it is fairly close-knit and supportive. Unfortunately, I don't think it is large enough relative to the size of the city. I'd like to see poetry expand and grow – find more ways of getting more people who are not poets to attend readings.

TTQ- The use of language in your poetry is wonderful; you have this uncanny ability to make your words dance and flow with an articulate and original rhythm. Is that deliberate or something you're even conscious of when you're writing?

DDN- Well, first of all, thank you for the kind compliment. I feel it's a completely unconscious process actually, for which I'm relieved. If too much effort or reasoning or even editing, for that matter, goes into writing a poem, I find I've taken away a bit of the enigmatic experience or qualities associated with poetry. The poem's natural rhythm tends to get affected and altered and it can be detected or realized in the reading. As I mentioned before, I feel it's crucial to have a unique, and perhaps more importantly, authentic voice.

TTQ- Do you often go to poetry readings in and around Toronto and do you enjoy reading your poetry in front of a live audience for that



immediate response and feedback? Is that important to you as a writer?

DDN- I have been to a number of readings as well as participating in a few. It's always interesting to hear feedback on your work. Writing can be, or rather I should say, *is* a highly solitary undertaking and so to be in the company of other poets and writers provides a novel perspective and some times inspiration. Regrettably, I don't always get out to as many readings as I'd like. There never seems to be enough time to put in a full day's writing and all the other things life throws at you.

TTQ- Do you write only poetry? Do you have any aspirations to eventually write a novel? They say that's where the money is.

DDN- I have written a number of book reviews and articles in the past for the *Literary Review of Canada*, *Globe and Mail*, *National Post* and *Descant*. Recently, I was asked to write a Foreword for a book of modern women's poetry for an American writer and editor. As for writing a novel, I wouldn't be opposed to it but I don't see it in my immediate future. As for the money, it became very apparent to me early on that most forms of writing offer little in terms of monetary rewards relative to other lines of work. It truly is all about the love for the craft and in doing what I enjoy most. Right now I'm heavily involved with writing poetry, communicating the vital function it has in society, and motivating students and adults to read and write more.

TTQ- Are there three books that you have read recently that have left an impact on you or inspired you in some way?

DDN- Typically, I tend to gravitate towards Canadian writers, although the last book I read, *Be Near Me*, is by Scottish novelist Andrew O'Hagan. Currently I am reading, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and having a tough time putting it down. I'm also reading, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, and thoroughly enjoying it. His poetry speaks to me, as I am an enthusiast of

Modernist poetry.

Although I greatly take pleasure in reading fiction and poetry I can't say it directly inspires my work. I generally find my muse in everyday occurrences or in significant or special places to me.

TTQ- What's next for Desi Di Nardo?

DDN- Good question!

At the moment I'm involved in a slew of readings and workshops, which I regularly host in schools and libraries across the city. I was also recently invited to be a Writer-in-Residence so it's fair to say I've got my plate full.

To be frank, I'm looking forward to a little getaway soon – perhaps someplace with palm trees, a balmy sea breeze, silky sand, possibly a pen and a fresh pad of paper.

TTQ- What will be your primary responsibilities as a Writer-in-Residence?

DDN- I work with S.W.A.T., a joint venture between the Toronto Catholic School Board and the Descant Arts & Letters Foundation. Essentially, I work with a teacher to help develop and deliver class content in a way so as to promote better comprehension of poetry and literature, hone literary skills and facilitate creative writing and critical thinking among high school students.

THE PLURAL OF SOME THINGS

It's the copycats
The mimics
Who dream in colour
Of grandiose lexicons and astronomical stardoms
Unlike what we fall asleep to -
The organization and masterminding of planets and agendas
Looking for guarantees rather than reveries
Rummaging for petunias and strawberries
Our fields overflow with anorexic stench
Sometimes the big words trap our breath
Field clouds gusting out with pretense and possibility
It gets us started
The understanding feels like a deep plunge in the lake
Nothing spins out as deliberately and wickedly
As the libido from our fossils
Our stuffy bones
Watch us now
We don't have to take from anyone
To spoil our game
We are made to run with reeds underfoot

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BLOODSHOT MOMENTS

This month of May
I'll think of your image
As if it were an anniversary
An occasion where you glimpsed
From behind the curtain
A silhouette or reflection
Wrapped around the burlap drape
The TV's blue orb splashed the walls
At 12:34 in the morning
We'd still be up
In bloodshot moments
Celebrating alone
How could you think we'd escape
The candles on the melted torte
Two white sails pressed together
Smacking and swelling
Our sighs stirring in an improbable sea
This flat light over the water
It was only a thought – this bright beacon
I've planned this suicide for as long as I can remember

“Bloodshot Moments,” published in *The Plural of Some Things*, copyright © 2008, Desi Di Nardo and Guernica Editions Inc.

CANADIAN MOOSE

Florence loves to smile from her bald toothless head.
Her thick fleshy body pushes out against constricting clothes.
She waddles in and out of stores looking at clerks.
Her jelly smile rests on you for a moment,
Then without deliberation,
Sinks quickly back into its asinine grin.
Volatile, catapulting threats, mocking you with her eyes,
She disarms you.
Wanton streetwalker of a time long ago,
She now sails proudly through the crowds
Flashing her low deep fatty chest,
Waiting for applause,
Wanting to be photographed.
She is the moose you see strewn along Bloor Street.
Emblem of our city, she stands erect,
Taunting, parading her flag, claiming the streets,
Laughing at the silliness of it all.

“Canadian Moose,” published in the *Literary Review of Canada*, 2001.
Published in the Parliamentary Poet Laureate’s “Poems of the Week,” 2006,
Desi Di Nardo.

DESI DI NARDO

THE PLURAL
OF SOME THINGS



GUERNICA