



ORIGINAL STORIES CREATED BY **HEATHER O'NEILL, SIMON BOULERICE,**
DOMINIQUE DEMERS AND **ERIC DUPONT** FOR THE EXHIBITION

NIGHTS

OF MOONS AND MOLASSES

BY ERIC DUPONT

Every now and then at night, Cook Murphy lets Salvinio out of the hiding place he's fashioned for him under his bunk. He sits him down, feeds him, and changes the bandage on his right ear, telling him for the hundredth time how sorry he is. Salvinio chews furiously on the cod and the molasses cookie, not understanding the English words. Cook had been opening a barrel with an axe, only hours after Mount Corcovado had slipped out of sight, when he'd found the boy inside. A shout. He'd swiftly hidden him in his cabin once he'd finished cleaning up the molasses and blood in the galley.

The moon shines through Cook's porthole as he shows Salvinio an illustration of the dark spots on the moon, his index finger pointing back and forth between the page of the book and the full moon that floods them with light.

"That's the Sea of Tranquility."

Salvinio repeats the words stumbingly. Cook Murphy thinks to himself that he should instead have stolen some books from the captain that would have allowed him to show Salvinio the northern lands where the boat is headed, rather than maps of the moon's seas and the night skies. When he's not talking, Salvinio assumes a placid expression that Cook takes to be anguish, but that is in fact nothing more than astonishment. This white man is taking care of him, giving him food and drink. The beer makes him laugh and eases his nausea. Salvinio goes back to comparing the drawing to the moon. He points at a spot on the page.

"That's the Sea of Rains."

Cook mimes falling rain with his fingers.

"But where I'm taking you, we have the Sea of Snow!"

He guffaws, slapping his stowaway on the shoulder. Every time he touches Salvinio, Cook can't get over how thin he is.

"Here, have a cookie."

From the newspapers of Rio de Janeiro: *Runaway slave. Answers to the name of Salvinio. Reward. But the Robin Company ships are long gone. After unloading three hundred barrels of low-grade Gaspé cod—salty sustenance for the plantation slaves—they set sail with two hundred ninety-nine barrels of molasses and one barrel containing Salvinio, a slave boy from Angola bought two years earlier to wash the docks in the port of Rio.*

For as long as Gaspé cod would be traded for rivers of Brazilian molasses, Cook Murphy would have work on the Robin Company's ships. A sailor had recently teased him, saying he'd have to keep on working long after he was dead and buried to repay his debts to the employer that sold him the food, clothes, tools, and kitchen utensils he wasn't allowed to buy elsewhere, all deducted from his salary. Making sea biscuits comes easier to Cook Murphy than arithmetic. He still doesn't know how he's going to bring Salvinio ashore unnoticed. He's quite sure the captain—a man who knows how to count—would sell him to an American planter if he discovered him. That's why Cook's hiding him. The cook wipes his passenger's skin again with a cloth.

"You're still sticky with molasses."

The cloth tickles. Salvinio usually falls asleep after this nightly wash. Headwinds have forced the ship to anchor in Cape Breton, where Salvinio has caught a cold. He shivers in the glacial October air. Come night, Cook Murphy lies by the feverish boy's side to warm his bunk. Salvinio's finger comes to rest on one of the drawings in the book. The cook is feeling philosophical.

"The Sea of Serenity is in the shape of a heart. It can be crossed in no time. You'll never see it again."

They reach Chaleur Bay in early November. Thick snow falls, enabling Cook Murphy to unload the barrel containing Salvinio without being seen. The light from the fire illuminates Mother Murphy's face as she waits in the log house just feet from the shore. She doesn't bat an eyelid as Salvinio clambors out of the barrel her son has just opened. She asks a single question with her eyes.

"His name? Salvinio, I found him in the molasses."

"We'll call you Freeman."

The old woman gently touches the fugitive's cheek. This is the name she gives to the census takers when they pass through her hamlet in 1861. The boy, still barefoot, stands by the window. The falling snow is reflected in his dark Brazilian eyes, shining with delight. The old woman smiles.

"That's winter. Your new master."

DARKEST DARK

—BY DOMINIQUE DEMERS

Every evening, when Darkest Dark is upon him, Louis-Philippe slowly counts to ten. One: the army of tin soldiers stands to attention. Two: the mangy old dog pricks up his ears. Three: the teddy bear waggles his little paws. Four: the monkey made of rags gathers his courage. Five: the princesses and kings from the big book of fairy tales ready themselves to face the threat.

Six: the window creaks ever so slightly. Seven: Louis-Philippe detects the tiniest movement behind the drapes. Eight: footsteps glide across the floor. Nine: a warm breath—it's absolutely foul—reaches Louis-Philippe, buried beneath the covers. Ten: time stands still and a monstrous sound shatters the silence.

He's right there, so close. The horrible, the dreadful, the nasty, the awful, the terrible Darkest Dark! He moves stealthily, enveloped in shadow.

Sometimes, just for a moment, Louis-Philippe can make out his tall silhouette, his wizard's hat, his shock of white hair, his long coat that brushes the floor, his emaciated hands with hooked fingernails that clutch a pointy branch, as sharp as a sword.

The slightest touch from this fearsome weapon will instantly transform any poor child into a toadster, a revolting, teeming thing—a human head on the scaly body of a frog.

A thousand times before, Louis-Philippe has shrieked in terror, alerting his parents and sending them scrambling to his rescue, ready to fend off Darkest Dark or, better yet, kill him. A thousand times before, his parents have come running, have seen nothing, have lost their temper and left Louis-Philippe alone with the vilest of all the creatures that roam the night.

Darkest Dark is as nasty as he is devious. His ultimate goal might be to transform children into toadsters, but he's equally likely to poke out a doll's eye, snap a brave soldier's arm, or plunge his claws between the pages of a nice big storybook to yank out an elf and swallow him whole.

The fiend slowly makes his way over to the bed, soundless as ever. Only his breath, which reeks of mould and rotten fish, lets the little boy guess his whereabouts. Two more steps and Darkest Dark will be able to reach down through the covers and pierce Louis-Philippe's stomach with his terrible weapon. The child presses his lips together, trying hard not to cry out.

The veil of night is suddenly lifted and the little boy sees Darkest Dark right next to him. His purple pupils gleam menacingly, his nose hair bristles, and his mouth opens to reveal long, grey teeth that could devour a lion.

Louis-Philippe's heart beats hard against his chest. No, that's not it! It's the drum roll from the guards. Down below on the nightstand, the soldiers are aiming the gaping mouths of the cannons at the threat. They're ready to open fire and bombard the enemy when Darkest Dark swats them aside. The soldiers go down like bowling pins.

The odious creature is ready to use the brief lull, the time it takes the soldiers to resume their positions, to lash out at Louis-Philippe. The little boy can already picture himself trapped within the horrible body of a toadster. His parents won't recognize him, his friends will flee, never again will he be able to laugh, run, shout, eat, or have fun.

Fortunately the toys on the shelf aren't done yet. Acting on the advice of the wise old dog, the teddy bear manages to shift the big book of fairy tales and heaves himself to the top. The monkey scales the wall of paper, clambering up onto the teddy bear's shoulders. The bear's legs tremble beneath his companion's weight, but he stands firm.

They've worked hurriedly, motioning to each other in silence so as not to alert Darkest Dark. But despite their precautions, the tall silhouette suddenly whirls around. A diabolical yell shoots out of his cruel mouth.

The monkey gives his all, stretches every sinew. He's so close. If only he were a centimetre taller! He could always jump, of course, but that would mean he might fall to the floor and into enemy hands.

A ghastly whistling sound escapes from Darkest Dark's mouth. The monkey knows that his owner's life—his best friend's life—is in danger. His life and the lives of all his companions, too. His heart his only guide, he leaps into the void.

He's done it! He hits the switch with the very tip of his paw. Light floods the room, chasing the night and Darkest Dark away. The old dog, the little bear, the brave soldiers, and all the characters in the big book of fairy tales have helped the monkey vanquish the enemy.

Louis-Philippe gets up. He gathers together all his friends and brings them into bed with him. Then, at last, he closes his eyes and slips into wondrous dreams.

Translated by Peter McCambridge

STOLE HER HEART

BY HEATHER O'NEILL

Violette sometimes thought about the girl she used to be when she stepped off the train in Montreal in 1936. She had been afraid of everything and everyone. She wore a threadbare coat she had inherited from her grandfather and boots that were too big. She was so ashamed of the way she looked. It never occurred to her that she might possibly be considered beautiful. It wasn't until she arrived in Montreal that anyone had ever called her pretty.

She knew that certain people found nature to be a lovely thing, but for her, the city was the most beautiful sight in the world. She loved all of its details. Perched over the door of the tavern was a gargoyle of a pig's head that grinned at her every time she passed by. Atop the church was a Virgin Mary with a halo of steel stars who looked as though she were suppressing a yawn. The city possessed an absurdity that nature didn't have.

She was waiting tables when she first met Frank. They both had the same shade of blue eyes. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a string of pearls and dropped it into his tea-cup as a tip. They had been together ever since, living in a tiny hotel room on St. Catherine Street. The wallpaper was a beautiful cerulean blue, so it always felt like summer inside. The bedspread was covered with gold roses and the mattress sighed with the ghosts of all the lovers who had shared it before them. The windows were cracked and looked out onto the street filled with nightclubs. When they were naked, their bodies changed colour along with the marquees.

They robbed banks together. Violette would scout the bank a week before to make a detailed plan. No one ever suspected a woman poking around. She had a face that conveyed innocence. And the more crimes she committed, the more innocent she looked. It made her cheeks pink and her smiling eyes a lighter blue. It put a skip in her step.

During the robbery, she pretended to be a regular customer and Frank would take her hostage. She was able to plead and weep and make her whole body shake violently. Frank said he sometimes was so convinced by her performance that he was afraid for a moment he had actually grabbed the wrong woman. Afterwards they would laugh uproariously about it in bed drinking wine, half dressed, in their hotel room.

When she and Frank went to their first nightclub together, the singer onstage wore her hair slicked to the side and was dressed in a white dress made out of silk ribbons. Her voice was as thick and low as syrup. She wasn't explicitly singing about sex, but the way she crooned about staying in bed and looking at the moon sounded so dirty Violette felt a strong desire inside of her. She and Frank went to all the clubs along St. Catherine Street

after that. They spent their money lavishly on martinis and expensive dishes and then had to hold each other as they walked home inebriated. The universe was filled with the constellations of different theatres and restaurants and cabaret halls.

They spent whole afternoons at the movies. Between shows were variety acts. A chimpanzee came out in a tuxedo smoking a cigarette, making them laugh and laugh. Nothing in the newsreels pointed out that life would ever be anything other than fun and opulence. They would remain spoiled children until the day they died, receiving everything their hearts desired.

They always planned to move to some place bigger than the hotel room, but they were very bad with money. Violette walked to the corner store one morning in a \$30 dress that still had the price tag hanging from the bottom of it. She waltzed sleepily through the aisles while other people, dressed for work, were about to start their day. They found Violette beautiful and charming, but they didn't envy her because they knew the life she was leading couldn't last. Being a thief was a suspension of disbelief and, sooner or later, you would be woken up to the reality of the world.

Frank and Violette were at the museum one Sunday when she pointed out a pair of colourful shoes in a painting of a French aristocratic woman. She found the shoes so pretty. They were embroidered with red and purple flowers and had golden heels. Frank had the same pair custom made for her. He wanted to get her things no one else could get for her, that were made just for her. He described them to the cobbler. Frank told the cobbler to leave the toes open to offer a glimpse of Violette's pretty polished toenails. The cobbler covered them in a colourful silk brocade fabric with flowers that looked like starbursts. They were delightful dancing sandals but Violette wore them everywhere, whether she was dancing or not.

During the next robbery, as he was dragging her out of the bank, one of the shoes slipped off and was left behind on the steps. As the detective held the pretty slipper in his hand, he thought a visit to the downtown cobblers would solve the mystery of whom the shoe fit.

THE LIVING PAST

BY SIMON BOULERICE

You just left. You won't spend the night here. You rumbled the sheets, left the bed unmade. I can still see the imprint of your body. Tonight I'm going to sleep with a red-haired ghost.

Some of your hair is still here. Your scent is still here. All over my embroidered pillow.

I gather your hairs one by one to form a slim bouquet that's not unlike dental floss. But dental floss that moves in rather than flushes out.

You're an honest-to-goodness redhead. The roots never lie. Orange from one end to the other. My red isn't natural. I'd be nothing without my drugstore hair dye.

Everything about me is fake: my hair as much as my mismatched clothes.

My friends say I was born at the wrong time. As you know, I sell medieval dresses in a store down in Old Montreal. As I slip on the dreamy dresses for work and tie the lacing, I feel as though I'm finally living in my own skin. I reveal myself best when removed from my own time.

You seemed to think that, too. When you came to the store this morning, you appeared disoriented, your face lost amid your flamboyant shock of red hair. You were looking for a dress to wear to a medieval-themed wedding. You told me you weren't into "all that *Game of Thrones* stuff."

I laughed and handed you a dress to try on without asking your size; it was as though I already knew your body by heart. The dress looked like it had been sewn right onto your skin: you looked sensational. You didn't blush when I complimented you. But you read my palm and predicted I was in for a nice night.

You stole the pen from the counter and wrote your number on my hand.

That same evening—tonight—you came to my apartment that smelled of lemon verbena and cinnamon candles. You ended up in my bedroom all on your own. You seemed more confident than I was. I was intimidated by how you looked, by your red hair that went on forever.

"It looks like one of the smarter cabins on the *Titanic*."
"Before or after it sank?" I laughed.

“Before.”

You stood before the mirror on my red dresser and tried to adjust something in the flames of your hair. They go well together, I thought to myself. Solemnly you touched the vintage items I’ve gradually acquired over the past few years. You looked like you were giving your blessing to everything I had. You caressed my hand mirror, as if judging the pewter more than your own reflection. With your ivory-coloured nail extensions, you ran your fingers along the pearly fine teeth of my comb and I felt a silent music. You helped yourself to my eau de cologne, anointing your wrists. Then you set your sights on my brush, plunging it into your wild mane. It was uncontrollable, just like my desire for you.

I stood frozen before the sensuous performance.

You went over to my bed, drifted toward the nightstand, where Pierre Louÿs’ *The Songs of Bilitis* was waiting. You began leafing through the pages of the collection. You happened upon one of my favourite poems.

“I left the bed as she had left it, unmade and rumped, coverlets awry, so that her body’s print might rest still warm beside my own.

Until the next day I did not go to bathe, I wore no clothes and did not dress my hair, for fear I might erase some sweet caress.

That morning I did not eat, nor yet at dusk, and put no rouge nor powder on my lips, so that her kiss might cling a little longer.

I left the shutters closed, and did not open the door, for fear the memory of the night before might vanish with the wind.” Beautiful.

You closed the book without noticing the words had sent shivers through me. You jingled the hat on my cowboy alarm clock and said it was time for bed. Just like that, you slid between my sheets. I tiptoed over to join you, so as not to disturb my thrilled heart.

We made love as though trying to bring a fire under control: desperately. There was something so fragile within you that shone out from amid my sheets. Then you kissed my cheeks, threw on the clothes from H&M you’d dropped by the foot of the bed, and left like a thief in the night.

You didn’t spend the night: I was shipwrecked.

Now, in the middle of my cabin on the *Titanic*, I try to come to terms with my dizziness, your red dental floss in my sorry hand. I set it down on my dresser, like a precious relic. Then I see a pure stain on my lavender sheets, white as a piano key. It’s a hard fingernail, its artificiality reminding me of my dyed red hair. I scoop it up and slip it into my *Songs of Bilitis*, marking the page of the “Living Past” poem. You didn’t stay—and that’s fine—but now you’ll be a bookmark.

It’s very warm. I refuse to open the window. No fan either. I curl up alongside the memory of your body. On my palm, the clamminess of our sex has wiped away your number. I run a finger along my lifeline. I have no idea what lies in store for me.

Translated by Peter McCambridge. Passages from *The Songs of Bilitis* translated by Alvah C. Bessie.

ERIC DUPONT



Eric Dupont was born in 1970 in Amqui, Quebec. At the age of 16, he left his native Gaspésie for a year of study in Austria. Drawn to the big city, he then lived in Ottawa, Salzburg, Berlin, Toronto and Montreal. Author of *Voleurs de sucre* (*Sugar Thieves*), *La logeuse* and *Bestiaire* (*Life in the Court of Matane*), he has received several literary awards, including the Prix des libraires and the Prix littéraire des collégiens in 2013 for his novel *La fiancée américaine* (*Songs for the Cold of Heart*). The book was also a finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize in 2018. In his latest novel, *La route du lilas*, published in 2018, he invites readers to join him on a horticultural road trip through Austria, Brazil and North America.

His work is known for sudden interventions by the supernatural in the real world. It combines depth with a light tone and sometimes biting humour.

Photo: Justine Latour

DOMINIQUE DEMERS



A writer and lecturer with a PhD in children's literature, Dominique Demers is well known for her award-winning children's books. In 2009-2010 alone, she won four prestigious awards. She received the Prix jeunesse des univers parallèles, the Prix Québec/Wallonie-Bruxelles and the Prix des lecteurs 15-18 ans Radio-Canada/Centre FORA for *La Grande Quête de Jacob Jobin, Tome 1 - L'Élu*. She also won the Prix Raymond-Plante for her outstanding commitment to the world of children's literature. Her first novels for adults, the best-selling *Le Pari* and *Marie-Tempête*, won her thousands of readers. Some of her works have been adapted for film, and her Mlle Charlotte series has sold nearly half a million copies in Quebec and France, not to mention the translations! An eighth title, *Une infirmière du tonnerre*, was added to the popular series in 2018.

Photo: Martine Doyon

HEATHER O'NEILL



Heather O'Neill is a novelist, short story writer and essayist. Her work, which includes *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night* and *Daydreams of Angels*, has been shortlisted for the Governor General's Award for fiction, the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Scotiabank Giller Prize in two consecutive years. She has won CBC Canada Reads, The Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction and the Danuta Gleed Literary Award. Her latest novel is *The Lonely Hearts Hotel*. O'Neill lives in Montreal, where she was born and raised.

Photo: Julie Artacho

SIMON BOULERICE



Trained in writing, dance and theatre, Simon Boulerice is an all-round talent. A radio (*Plus on est de fous, plus on lit!*) and TV columnist (*Formule Diaz* and now *Cette année-là*), he also navigates between acting, directing and writing. He writes plays, poetry and novels for both adults and children. Among his forty titles are the celebrated *Simon a toujours aimé danser* (*Simon always liked to dance*), *Martine à la plage*, *Javotte*, *Edgar Paillettes*, *PIG*, *Les Garçons courent plus vite*, *Florence et Léon* (*Florence & Leon*) and *L'Enfant mascara* (*The Mascara Kid*). His works have been translated into seven languages and have been nominated for the Governor General's Award, the Prix des libraires and the Prix de la critique. At 37, Simon Boulerice still does the splits at least once a day. So far, his bones and muscles are holding up.

Photo: Camille Tellier

NIGHTS 2019/09/26 —
2021/03/07

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