

FICTION

**The Refugium: Canadian authors pay homage to some of the largest trees in the world**

Ten Canadian Authors play "Exquisite Corpse" for Canopy and for the ancient forests of Vancouver Island



ART BY MICHAEL NICOLL YAHGULANAAS

**MARGARET ATWOOD, TERRY FALLIS, SUZANNE BUFFAM, LAURA TRUNKEY, JOHN VAILLANT, MADELEINE THIEN, KAREN SOLIE, EMMA DONOGHUE, ANDREW PYPYER AND ANN-MARIE MACDONALD**  
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Home to some of the largest trees in the world, and a habitat for such threatened species as the marbled murrelet and the northern pygmy owl, Vancouver Island's old-growth forests – immense carbon-storage vaults that now cover only 10 per cent of their original footprint – continue to fall to logging, development and urban growth. The environmental not-for-profit group Canopy, which works with the forest industry's customers and suppliers to protect ancient and endangered forests, has called on the new provincial government to begin steps to conserve Vancouver Island's last stands, in consultation with local First Nations government, using the best available science, traditional knowledge, and community input. To help raise awareness of the cause, Canopy invited 10 Canadian writers to play Exquisite Corpse – a parlour game championed by surrealist artists almost a century ago – in which each participant contributed one passage toward a collaborative work of imagination.

This is the story that emerged.

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**MARGARET ATWOOD** The headless man was wearing an office suit in a tasteful dark blue with a narrow grey stripe.

Beside him was a tin of salmon, a medium-sized axe minus the sheath, a briefcase containing the quarterly report of a well-known forest-product extraction company, and the footprint of a bear. The man's tie was neatly folded in his breast pocket. There was no blood.

There were also no roads anywhere in the vicinity. The two kayakers who came upon the gruesome scene were 20 kilometres from their launch point.

"Crap," said Sally. "This was supposed to be a vacation."

"We don't have to report it," said Vikram. "We could just pretend ..."

"That we didn't see this?" said Sally. "I don't think so."

**TERRY FALLIS** They were standing a respectful distance from their discovery, their kayak beached beside them.

"This is like the opening of an Agatha Christie novel, minus the Cornwall country estate," she said.

"Well, maybe it's a prank. Like maybe it's, you know, a mannequin or something, just meant to scare us," Vikram said, leaning closer. "Maybe it's not real."

"That stench is real enough for me," Sally replied. "Crap."

"How did he get here?" Vikram asked. "What was he doing before he, you know ..."

"Misplaced his head?"

"Well, yeah."

Vikram held onto the hem of Sally's bright yellow Dri-FIT shirt as she led them around to the far side of the beheaded, besuited corpse.

"Look," she said, pointing. "His left hand."

It hadn't been visible from the other side. A white envelope was clenched in bloated fingers.

**SUZANNE BUFFAM** Inside was a single sheet of pale green paper. On one side, neatly hand-printed in dark green ink, was a poem in limping octaves.

"Crap," muttered Sally. "Poetry."

From somewhere deep in the trees, a lone raven croaked back.

" *My Boss is big and I am small; / I slave to keep him rich. / He'd look at me like scum and call / Me something of a – oh come on,*" Sally groaned.

" *My Boss!*" said Vikram. "Robert Service! I wrote a whole chapter about him in my thesis on labour conflict as a site of Oedipal struggle in late-colonial revenge melodrama. Do you think it's a clue?"

A fat raindrop smacked the page, followed swiftly by several more. They looked up. Dark clouds had massed above the trees.

**LAURA TRUNKEY** They turned in unison toward the water. The marine forecast had predicted a storm, but their weather window should have been longer than a couple hours.

"Crap," Sally said, again.

The summer before, they had planned to circumnavigate Vancouver Island when Vikram got appendicitis near Klaskino Inlet and the trip was aborted with less than 120 nautical miles to go. Their intention now was to close the loop – Klaskino south to Tofino. The formidable Brooks Peninsula almost right out of the gate.

But they'd only paddled as far as the East Creek estuary when they'd pulled ashore the first time. It was almost dawn. They'd stood on the swath of razed earth that led from the water's edge to the cut block and stared at the stumps and slash piles, the skidders and loaders, the ancient Sitkas prepped for the next barge. Then, in silence, they'd made a quick retreat.

"I've about had it with Robert Service," Sally said to Vikram, who now had his hand in the corpse's pants pocket. "We passed our clue an hour ago."

**JOHN VAILLANT** Sally was already turning back to their kayak when Vikram said, "Yeah, well I think I found another one. He pulled a drink ticket from the corpse's pocket, followed by a folded invitation to a Liberal Party fundraiser. The address was Pandora Avenue in Victoria.

"Look at this," said Vikram, holding out the red-and-white card.

"Holy crap," said Sally. "Look at the date." She gazed skyward and did the math. "That was, like, 17 hours ago."

"Maybe he didn't actually go," said Vikram.

"How do you explain the drink ticket then?"

"You seriously think a guy dressed like this would go to an event like that – with those people – and not use his drink ticket? That's fucked up."

A low thrum rose from a valley to the west, growing steadily into a hammering roar. Sally and Vikram looked up together just as the dragonfly silhouette of a Sikorsky Skycrane hove into view.

It was so enormous, so profoundly jarring in that peaceful and untrammelled place, that they failed for a moment to register the cable dangling from the helicopter's belly. Then, they saw it.

**MADELEINE THIEN** Perhaps now is an opportune moment to step back, grab hold of this sturdy, swaying cable and be lifted up into its origin. And, come to think of it, we may as well go further, right through the Skycrane, above the canopy of the trees and higher still, and linger for a moment: here.

In the wide open air.

There is a bite of salt to the wind.

From this vantage point, we can see the Brooks Peninsula, whose mountains were so high they stood above the glaciers, thereby avoiding the last ice age. Surviving, they became the region's oldest ecosystem, and a habitat we call the Refugium: an area where the last remnants – of species and organisms that were once widespread – have taken refuge.

The view from here is stunning. Everything you ever thought you were is somehow altered, and the world, though distantly below us, is more profoundly magnified. The serpentine grace of the East Creek and its tributaries, the sapphire blue of the Pacific, the mountains, one called Doom and another Klashkish, and the sweeping descent to the valley, all before you in a single moment. Some of the trees have names, meaning that they have been registered: Staff of the Apostles, Two-Headed Boy. Those trees were young once, hundreds of years ago.

But look over there to the left. In East Creek: two new roads.

Remember the briefcase with the quarterly report? It's still there, too. It may decompose where it fell, buried with its secrets beneath future roads, unless its contents come to light.

**KAREN SOLIE** And contents tend to, don't they Reader? Though this can take a while. The passage of time before an indecency is exposed can be itself an indecency. Meanwhile, damage germinates in the corporate imagination, thrives in the good soil of our self-interest and inertia, spreads across the land, among the people, travels the primary rivers, and then the chinook are gone. When the root is unearthed a lot of things make sense. Like moviegoers exiting a theatre, we realize it all makes sense now.

Few things, however, are as radically present as a Sikorsky Skycrane. The two figures on the beach stare through noise to its anonymous machinery, both of which are lowering. The sky, too, drops a thin rattling rain behaving awkwardly in the downdraft, while at the end of the cable the movements of the empty grappling hook are surprisingly graceful and precise, an extension of the pilot's self-possession, but Sally and Vikram are not thinking metaphorically, their bodies are quivering with the immediate cause and effect of being noticed, and as rain drips from the inquisitive hook onto the sand in front of them, discovering a headless corpse at the water's edge begins to seem like a relatively innocent time in their lives. Sally shouts something neither can hear. Vikram remembers the locked briefcase and a "No" vibrates inside him. "Don't," he thinks, even as he grabs it by its handle and runs with Sally into the undergrowth of the standing forest.

**EMMA DONOGUE** But he's beside them, the headless man, loping along with a grace that surprises Sally and Vikram, even as their minds numb with fright. Running not in pursuit of the hikers, but fleeing by their side as if from a common enemy. Navy blue suit peeling away like bark, skin gleaming out then splitting in turn, flesh the startled orange of fresh-cut wood. The axe he spins and juggles, a weapon turned to a wand, and he chants the old poems like a charm against his masters: *Back to the woods repentant* ... Running for the salmon, for the black bears, for the eagles, the wolves, the orcas, the marbled murrelets, the black-tailed deer, the elk, the goshawks, even the poor, bare, forked animals. For the glimpses, the vistas, the dance of branches, the glide of water, the give of moss underfoot, the embrace of soft trunks, the unseen cedar, the spry

spruce, the furious fir. The headless, heedless man cuts deep into the forest, howling without a mouth: *I've done their desire for a daily hire, and I die like a dog in a ditch.*

**ANDREW PYPER** *It's a dream*, Sally thinks even against the crushing tide of particulars collapsing on her, drowning her, individually confirming themselves as real. *Here! Here! Here!* Each tree, each leaf, each stone. The pain in her knees, the briefcase leaping at the end of Vikram's arm, the running dead man. *Here! Here!* A chorus of the natural and supernatural assuring her this is happening, that versions of this have always happened, despite her and the world's practised blindness to them.

As she runs, she glances to the left, to Vikram. He seems to mouth something to her through his panic, something she can't hear. *Mother?* Sally had never met the woman, and by Vikram's descriptions, she'd had no reason to want to. Is it every man's fate to call out to his mother, no matter how unloved or how far he'd run, in the face of the inexplicable?

But Sally was wrong.

It wasn't *mother* Vikram was shouting, it was *water*.

And it wasn't panic that moved his legs in a comic-book blur, the headless, ruptured man charging along, linebacker-style, next to him. It wasn't merely fear that Vikram felt – that Sally now recognizes she feels herself – but the anticipation of revelation.

It was something not unlike joy.

**ANN-MARIE MACDONALD** The bear is standing upright. The bear's force fans out some 20 feet or so before her or him, and it is this which has slowed and now stills in turn, Sally, Vikram and the headless, skinless man. The three stand, held by the bear's gaze, ever-so-slightly leaning against a palpable half moon of power; between them and the bear, underbrush crackles with static, pine needles glint audibly, and Sally feels the hairs on her arms stir in a way that puts her in mind of a long-ago school trip to the Museum of Science and Technology in Ottawa. Funny, the stuff that crosses one's mind. The bear's eyes are grey. S/he regards them, unsurprised, a tad severe: the woman, the man, and the wood demon ... Sally turns at a sighing sound to see the blue suit with the narrow grey stripe deflate in a puff of sawdust and come to rest on the forest floor. She watches as green finger blades grow up between the threads, moss embraces, fungi feed, a mass of mushrooms emerges in the shape of a man's head, smiling, serene, before it shrivels, folds in on itself, and the whole returns to humus. Crap to crap. This is holy. She has said it aloud. Now Vikram, eyes on the bear, speaks. "Mom?"