

MAKE BELIEVE: TRUTH, FICTION, AND FRICTION

“TRUTH SOUNDS MOST TRUE when it is spoken bespoke.” So says the mendacious parrot-narrator of Gary Barwin’s short story “Adventure Enough for a Bindlestiff Boychik.” The parrot’s words might be said to echo throughout Robert Lake’s story about a young writer who steals her grandmother’s (mostly) true stories and represents them as her own. But the allure of “bespoke”—or tailored—truths is also central to Len Diepeveen’s essay about the way that allegations of fraud constrained debates about the difficulty of modern art. Although Diepeveen is primarily concerned to show us how an influential early-twentieth-century art critic used Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Emperor’s New Clothes” to give “the stark causality of a fable” to the debates, he, too, echoes Barson’s parrot, when he suggests that, for all its seeming simplicity, Andersen’s fable underscores the idea that “naked” truths can be tailored to suit their context. After all, when Andersen’s little boy speaks truth to power, he reveals much more than the Emperor’s nudity; he exposes the cowardice and complicity of the crowds who “make believe,” loudly admiring the one-of-a-kind robes that are said to be visible only to the most discerning viewers.

This idea that even seemingly self-evident truths are difficult to articulate is shared by a number of the scholars and creative writers whose work is gathered here, suggesting that many of us write in order to give shape and voice to discomfiting or surprising truths. But, as Robert Lake reminds us, it is also true that “writing transforms truth into lies.” This observation is pivotal to Jenn Cole’s essay considering how the cries of “hysterical” female psychiatric patients exceeded systems of medical documentation in nineteenth-century France; it is alleged by one of the interviewees in Michael Jacklin’s essay on the ethics of cross-cultural lifewriting; and it is thoroughly scrutinized by Robert Summerby-Murray, who uses oral history and community memory to examine the line between fact and fiction in Charles G.D. Roberts’ writing.

But let’s get back to the parrot: Heather Jessup’s argument for the value of an artistic hoax carried out in a 2011 installation at the Art Gallery

of Ontario recalls the words of the feathered rogue, who memorably compares an unlikely story to “a painting with more colour than the pencil-outline of the actual.” Like Jessup, Alice Brittan suggests that the “pencil-outline of the actual” can be very hard to trace. Brittan’s essay on attentiveness and modern magic also shares something with Roger Nash’s poem describing the “hatless feet” and upside-down eloquence of a head-standing father, because both writers celebrate that which hovers on the edges of the actual and inverts our expectations. As Brittan says, “these fugitive things are the source of all transformation and renewal.” For all their variety, the essays, stories, and poems gathered in this special issue of *The Dalhousie Review* celebrate the potential of “fugitive things” that provoke and puzzle us even as they seduce us to make believe. Just ask the parrot.

Carrie Dawson
Editor