

# WRITE

THE MAGAZINE OF  
**THE WRITERS'  
UNION OF  
CANADA**

VOLUME 47 NUMBER 3  
FALL 2019

## The Joys of Writing Short Fiction

8

## The Universal Appeal of Fan Fiction

10

## Remembering Greg Younging

18



# Contents FALL 2019

- 3 Chair's Report
- 5 Writing Rights
- 6 Letter to the Editor

## 7 COMMUNITY CORNER

### WRITER'S BLOT

- 8 Writer's Prompt
- 9 Industry Q & A

### FEATURES

- 10 How Fan Fiction is Rewriting the Rules  
BY AMIE FILKOW
- 14 Writing and Teaching: Two Sides of the Same Coin  
BY TRACEY L. ANDERSON
- 15 Metadata, Codes, Targets, and Time: What Goes into Pre-Publication Marketing for Your Book?  
BY GILLIAN O'REILLY
- 18 Remembering an Indigenous Advocate: Dr. Gregory Younging

### DISPATCHES

- 22 Writing to Inspire Change, not Conflict  
BY MATTHEW THURTON
- 23 Do I Have to Be Inspirational About My Disability to Get Published?  
BY LENE ANDERSEN

### FICTION & POETRY

- 24 Fattoush  
BY JAMAL SAEED
- 25 It Must Have Been  
BY GREG YOUNGING

### MEMBER NEWS & AWARDS

- 26 Announcements
- 26 Awards
- 27 New Members

## 30 NEWS

## 32 IN MEMORIAM

### NATIONAL COUNCIL

Chair  
Anita Daher  
First Vice-Chair  
Rhea Tregobov  
Second Vice-Chair  
Heather Wood  
Treasurer  
Julia Lin  
BC/Yukon Representative  
Caitlin Hicks  
Alberta/NWT/Nunavut Representative  
Gail Sidonie Sobat  
Manitoba/Saskatchewan Representative  
Bruce Rice  
Ontario Representative  
Mia Herrera  
Quebec Representative  
Leila Marshy  
Atlantic Representative  
Chuck Bowie  
Advocates  
Benj Gallander  
Carmen Rodriguez  
Anna Marie Sewell

### TWUC NATIONAL OFFICE

Executive Director  
John Degen, ext. 221  
jdegen@writersunion.ca  
Associate Director  
Siobhan O'Connor, ext. 222  
soconnor@writersunion.ca  
Fund Development & Projects Manager  
Gaeby Abrahams, ext. 223  
gabraahams@writersunion.ca  
Office Administrator  
Valerie Laws, ext. 224  
info@writersunion.ca  
Membership, Equity & Engagement Coordinator  
Jessica Kirk, ext. 226  
jkirk@writersunion.ca

Editor Rhonda Kronyk write@writersunion.ca

Deadline for Winter issue December 10, 2019

Editorial Board Suzanne Alyssa Andrew, Dwayne Morgan, Sylvia Gunnery, Anna Marie Sewell

Copyeditor Nancy MacLeod

Write Magazine Advertising Gaeby Abrahams ads@writersunion.ca

Design soapboxdesign.com

Layout Gaeby Abrahams

Cover Illustration Scot Ritchie scotritchie.com

Views expressed in *Write* do not necessarily reflect those of The Writers' Union of Canada. As a member magazine, *Write* provides space for writers' individual opinions. We welcome a diversity of views and respectful debate in these pages. All submissions are welcome.

Services advertised are not necessarily endorsed by the Union.

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$153 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout Canada.



We acknowledge funding support from the Ontario Arts Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario.



*Write* is produced four times yearly by The Writers' Union of Canada, 460 Richmond Street West, Suite 600, Toronto, Ontario, M5V 1Y1  
T 416.703.8982, F 416.504.9090, info@writersunion.ca, www.writersunion.ca.

© The Writers' Union of Canada, 2019.

The text paper used for this issue contains 100 percent post-consumer fibre, is accredited EcoLogo and Processed Chlorine Free, and is processed in a mill that uses biogas. If you would like to help us save on paper, please contact gabraahams@writersunion.ca or 416-703-8982 ext. 223 to request future online editions of the magazine. Thank you.



---

# Writing Rights

## The More Things Change...

By John Degen



At my very first Writers' Union AGM, in Ottawa in the spring of 2013, I watched from the dais as TWUC leaders and members discussed, debated, and ultimately voted on what seemed at the time to be a massive fundamental change to the Union. Months of study, design, survey, and proposal had gone into the question of whether or not TWUC should accept self-published authors as members. Email and social media discussion leading up to that AGM suggested this was a very contentious issue. The line-ups at the AGM microphones were long, and the discussion heated. I don't think anyone could have confidently predicted the outcome of the vote, which ended up being unanimously in favour of accepting self-publishing as a professional practice.

In that moment, the Union changed. And yet, the work your staff and volunteer leaders do remains the same. We organize professional development opportunities and annual conferences, we publish a variety of communications to the membership to keep you all abreast of industry happenings, we advise on contracts, we work grievances, we go to court when we have to, and we lobby hard and tirelessly for all author's rights. We work to encourage our entire membership to keep going, keep writing and publishing, keep adding to the wealth of literature produced in Canada or by Canadians.

A similar fundamental change to the Union has occurred this year. After much dedicated and detailed work from the Membership Criteria Review Task Force, we have expanded our conditions for acceptance into TWUC. The AGM, and indeed the entire membership (through a special referendum), has voted to make it possible for writers who are still on the path to first book publication to join the Union. A forty-five-year-old tradition of requiring at least one published book from all applicants was, well, renovated somewhat. A single published book still qualifies one for membership in the Union, but our new points-based system means that applicants with various combinations of other professional credits also qualify. The TWUC tent expanded in 2013, and it has expanded again in 2019.

Will this alter how we go about our business? It will not; at least

not in any way that lessens the value of Union membership. In fact, it makes membership in the Union supremely valuable for those now eligible to join, because they can access services such as contract advice in the crucial time before a first publishing agreement is made.

Importantly, both these changes were driven by TWUC's long-established governance process and our respectful dedication to listening to member advocacy. The Union has not changed around you; rather you have changed the Union. You have suggested improvements, researched them, proposed how they might work, and then adopted them.

If only all policy change worked in such a transparent and grassroots manner.

Before the federal election we've just come through, I proposed a change to the way copyright policy is dealt with in Ottawa. I suggested that rather than give the copyright portfolio to the Industry Ministry (as has been the case for many years now, to the great disadvantage of Canadian artists), future governments hand copyright authority to the Department of Canadian Heritage. As it stands, the copyright review process is a bit too murky, and a bit too tilted against artists. Canadian Heritage made many recommendations to the last round of review, all of which were mysteriously ignored.

My proposal to expand and adjust how these reviews happen has now been read around the world, and I'm hearing similar suggestions from some of our international colleagues. From New Zealand, for instance: "If we're going to have a process where culture, creativity, and economics are all valued, we need them at the table."

TWUC has proven to me that fundamental change can happen from the ground up and that it can work to everyone's benefit. We will work with this new Parliament to change the way copyright is dealt with during legislative review. No doubt we'll hear objections from the Industry side that such a change would upset the balance of the law, but we know that *real* balance will only come when artists have final say over our own rights.

---

# Remembering an Indigenous Advocate: Dr. Gregory Younging

*Some people enter our lives and leave an imprint so profound we struggle to regain our footing when they leave. Greg Younging (née Young-Ing) left such an imprint on Canadian publishing when he passed away on May 3, 2019, at the age of fifty-eight. In this special feature, people who knew Greg, worked with him, and learned from him share their memories. His work was like a stone thrown into a pond, and the ripples will be felt for a long time to come.*

## **A SUPERHERO: GREG'S FAMILY**

*Ted Young-Ing had tremendous respect and admiration for his brother. Here he shares excerpts of his eulogy and memoriam which are printed with permission of the Young-Ing family.*

My older brother Greg was a superhero. He had two Master's degrees and a PhD. He released an album with Chuck D from Public Enemy — he was even nominated for a Juno. He has awards too many to mention. He loved his bike and ran triathlons, including five Iron Mans. He loved gadgets and he loved music.

He loved wine. And food. And he loved Penticton.

He was a UBC professor. He was a UN delegate, delegate to the Assembly of First Nations, the Canada Council for the Arts [Aboriginal Peoples Committee on the Arts]. He raised two wonderful daughters, Nimkish and Aisha. He could eat his way through an entire twelve-course Chinese banquet. I always thought of him as invincible.

Greg is a child of many traditions. Our father's family is Chinese; our mother's family is Cree. Our dad was a military man, and Greg was raised in Europe. He never really connected with his heritage as a boy, so when he started university at Carleton I think he found



Greg Younging and Mélanie Joly (then Minister of Canadian Heritage) at the Americas Cultural Summit, May 9, 2018.

a great solace in meeting other Indigenous friends and finally feeling a part of something — the traditions of our people.

Greg loved his work. He did important work, work that touched people and changed lives. Greg helped create a new canon of Indigenous literature. Theytus was the first Native-owned publisher in Canada. At the beginning, Greg and Jeannette used to set up their little card table at Aboriginal conferences. They would try and sell their books to half-interested delegates, and at the time that folding table was the entirety of the Native publishing industry.

Greg's life changed when he agreed to work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He gave years of his life to documenting the history and effects of the residential school system in Canada. Terrible work, but work that had to be done. Greg was horrified by the stories that came out. Traumatized by them. Stories of what happened to strangers he never knew. Stories of what happened to the family that raised him. The blood memory. He finished the work, out of his sense of duty, but he carried the burden

of this blood memory and this trauma for the rest of his life.

In our tradition, we believe that Greg's spirit has been on a four-day journey back to the Creator. As a family, we lit a sacred fire that has been burning for these four days. We prepared a pouch containing supplies and food for his journey. A lot of food — you know how much he loved to eat. On the first night, he travelled to the Sky World. He rested, lit a fire, and ate a meal. On the second night, he travelled to the Star World. That night, we watched from his balcony as the night sky lit up and danced with his energy. The third night, he travelled to the place where the waters are. There, our ancestors met him and greeted him and showed him how to cross the waters. On the final night, the ancestors took him into the dark. They had to leave him, this part of the journey he had to take on his own. Alone, he followed the light through the Dark World, and made his final crossing over into the light and into the love.

Ekosi, Nikosis, your cycling, swimming, and gentle walking in this beautiful territory have ended and you now join the Milky Way to shine on.

---

# Ekosi, Nikosis, your cycling, swimming, and gentle walking in this beautiful territory have ended and you now join the Milky Way to shine on.

## SAFEGUARDING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Greg was a dedicated advocate for protecting Indigenous Knowledge — he was a UN delegate and contributed to discussions about protecting Indigenous cultures. The following excerpts are from Greg’s article, “Indigenous Knowledge and the Intellectual Property Rights System,” from the Fall 2017 issue of *Write*, where he explains how copyright laws prevent Indigenous Peoples from protecting their work.

In Canada, when someone creates a work, it is automatically protected under the Copyright Act so long as the creator is Canadian or is resident here, or in a country which is a signatory to the international conventions to which Canada belongs.

In the process of transporting European institutions into various parts of the world occupied by Indigenous people, the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) system (including copyright) has now been imposed upon Traditional Knowledge (TK) systems. Many issues have arisen in the past ten years regarding problems resulting from the existing IPR system’s apparent inability to protect TK.

The main problems with TK protection in the IPR system are:

1. that expressions of TK often cannot qualify for protection because they are too old and are, therefore, supposedly in the public domain;
2. that the “author” of the material is often not identifiable and there is thus no “rights holder” in the usual sense of the term; and,
3. that TK is owned “collectively” by Indigenous groups for cultural claims and not by individuals or corporations for economic claims.

Under the IPR system, knowledge and creative ideas that are not “protected” are in the public domain (i.e., accessible by the public). Generally, Indigenous peoples have not used IPRs to protect their knowledge, and so TK is often treated as if it is in the public domain — without regard for Customary Laws.

Another key problem for TK is that the IPR system’s concept of the public domain is based on the premise that *the author/creator deserves recognition and compensation for his/her work because it is the product of his/her genius, but that all of society must eventually be able to benefit from that genius.*

This is a problem for Indigenous peoples because Customary Law dictates that certain aspects of TK are not intended for external access or use in any form. Examples of this include sacred ceremonial masks, songs and dances, various forms of shamanic art, sacred stories, prayers, songs and ceremonies. There have been cases of Indigenous people using the IPR system to protect their TK. However, the reality is that there are many more cases of non-Indigenous people using the IPR system to take ownership over TK using copyright, trademark, and especially patents. In some such cases [these copyright laws] created a ridiculous situation whereby Indigenous peoples cannot legally access their own knowledge.

## THE GIFT OF TWENTY-TWO PRINCIPLES

*Glen Rollans, Greg Younging’s publisher at Brush Education, saw the need and potential for Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples after hearing Greg speak about publishing practices.*

In 2014, Greg spoke to a gathering of his fellow book publishers in the Association of Canadian Publishers (ACP). He spoke quietly and firmly about the duty of book publishers to rethink their preconceptions and their practices when working with Indigenous writers and stories. Greg got some pushback from the room after his presentation, along with some support and lots of good questions, and we had a lively discussion about his recommended guidelines. (At that time, he had titled them *Aboriginal Style Guide*, or in some drafts, *The Theytus Style*, and they stretched to about forty pages.) He answered every objection with patience and clarity. After everyone left, Greg and I talked about his work, and I asked if we could work together to develop it as a book.

Over the following years, Greg’s generous and persistent teaching at publisher events changed our thinking and vision as book publishers and gave us both the help and the push we needed to embrace the essential project of reconciliation. At Brush, we were proud and grateful to work with him on his world-changing *Elements of Indigenous Style*, which we published in 2018.

From the beginning, Greg saw *Elements* as a first step, a resource that would change and grow as it absorbed the contributions of the peoples and communities it served. That’s why it’s *Elements*

---

# Authors, editors, publishers, and professors are taking the twenty-two principles Greg articulated for us and using them in their daily practice.

rather than *The Elements*. Greg got to see the early success of the book, but I wish he could see what is happening now. People across North America and even some abroad are teaching and working with his guidance. *Elements* has sparked conversations at conferences and across social media. Authors, editors, publishers, and professors are taking the twenty-two principles Greg articulated for us and using them in their daily practice. During that first conversation about the project, Greg and I both hoped that Canadians would be receptive, but we never imagined that *Elements* would be so influential so quickly.

I am grateful to have known and worked with Greg, and I am continually conscious of my responsibilities when it comes to the legacy he left in *Elements of Indigenous Style*. Greg distinguished himself as a poet, scholar, author, publisher, educator, and activist, and he was much loved as a father, son, brother, uncle, nephew, cousin, and friend. Like all of Greg's friends I will remember him as gentle and generous. I will also remember him as fierce: fierce in his belief, his patience, his intellect, his commitment, and his persistence.

## INSPIRING INDIGENOUS PUBLISHING PROFESSIONALS

*The Indigenous Editors Circle (IEC) is deeply indebted to Greg Younging's guidance. Rachel Taylor, Rhonda Kronyk, and Suzanne Norman reflect on his importance to Indigenous publishing professionals.*

Greg Younging worked tirelessly as an advocate for Indigenous cultural rights — in Canada and internationally. He said, "I always liked to see Indigenous publishing as an extension of Indigenous storytelling, and a continuance of what this storytelling tradition has been for millennia" — and Greg believed that Canadian publishing could become a model for respecting those stories and Indigenous intellectual property rights. He also saw the shortcomings of the industry. Examples abound of texts that don't respect Indigenous stories, realities, or historical truths, and Greg knew that we could do better.

To address those shortcomings, the Indigenous Editors Circle (IEC) was created in 2014 by the Saskatchewan Arts Board under the guidance of Joanne Gerber. Indigenous editors, writers, and publishers came together in Saskatoon, SK, to discuss best practices for editing and publishing manuscripts by and about

Indigenous Peoples. Greg and other faculty developed guiding principles that soon sent ripples out across the industry. In 2017, the Indigenous Editors Association was formed following that year's Circle.

With the support of Indigenous advisors and authors who served as faculty, Greg helped create a program that will bring manuscripts to market in a form that respects the authors and their stories. A driving force behind the IEC, Greg worked tirelessly, lobbying the industry for support. Today, publishers are more routinely reaching out to Indigenous editors to help ensure that stories are published in collaboration with community and in a culturally appropriate way. In the process, Indigenous editors and authors are working more closely with the industry and finding success in their respective fields.

Greg's personal commitment to the IEC inspired Indigenous editors who got the opportunity to spend time with him and the other faculty members at the Circles. His legacy will live on in the hearts, memories, and practice of his friends and colleagues.

## RIPPLES OF RECONCILIATION

Greg Younging never stopped working to uplift Indigenous Peoples and bring their stories to Canadian publishing and the Canadian public. When he first began working at Theytus Books, a mere "trickle," in his words, of Indigenous authors were being published. Today, his work has contributed to a surge of Indigenous stories reaching readers' shelves.

Greg believed that the Canadian publishing industry can play an important role in reconciliation. "Canadian publishers need to acknowledge that they are on a territory that has a long tradition and that, if they are going to publish from that territory, they need to make a connection with the people there, find out a bit about their stories and their history and maybe publish a book or two by them."

Today his words are being taken to heart across the industry — and are being felt across Canada as Canadians read books that follow the principles in *Elements* and rethink how Indigenous stories have been told and read. This is how reconciliation with true allies can ripple across our country.

*Quotes by Greg Younging are from an interview with Natalie Knight. The full interview can be found at [thepeopleandthetext.ca/12May2018](http://thepeopleandthetext.ca/12May2018).*

---

# Dispatches

NOTES ON THE WRITING LIFE

---

TRANSITIONS /

## Writing to Inspire Change, not Conflict

BY MATTHEW THURTON



*During my time at university as a philosophy and economics student and a mixed-race Canadian in my early twenties, I often felt compelled to write about issues that directly affected my friends and family.*

Term papers served as an outlet for my perspectives on topics like discrimination, hate speech, and the history of racism in Canada and America. However, the passion I have for these topics is coupled with the awareness that the mere mention of racism or oppression is often enough to elicit a reproachful groan from more skeptical readers.

The sheer volume of discussion and debate surrounding these issues presents a challenge to writers who try to contend with them. Post-secondary institutions are churning out papers about systemic oppression, privilege, and intersectionality at a dizzying pace. However, these phrases have also become commonplace outside of academic settings, so much so that a great deal of their meaning has been altered or negated. Overuse, and often misuse, has turned certain words that once represented rich and useful concepts into conversation killers.

Words like racism, sexism, privilege, oppression, intersectionality, and feminism are all tempting, and at times necessary, to use when writing about issues related to race and gender. Sadly they can imbue discussions with moralism and vagueness. Bereft of the formal empirical academic writing style where I could justify my word choice with footnotes and references, these contentious terms became difficult to employ at best and, at times, were even counterproductive. In your average article or think piece tackling issues of equality, there is not room to detail the various nuances of terms like “oppression” or “privilege.” As I transition out of academic writing, it has become clear that, for the sake of clarity and precision, the language

writers use to speak about discrimination must change when we leave university. Spreading awareness about the struggles faced by underrepresented groups is crucial, but it would be helpful to rethink the vocabulary we use when discussing these issues.

To offer an example, I recently had a conversation with a close friend about why he didn’t believe white privilege was a legitimate concept. He seemed to take issue with the implication that all white people are privileged; after all, white people are not immune to life’s hardships. I attempted to explain that the term isn’t intended to imply all white people have idyllic, stress-free lives, but it expresses a certain type of burden that only falls on the shoulders of visible minorities. My rebuttal did nothing to move the conversation forward, so I rephrased my point in the form of a story. I described how every time news of a violent crime gets reported, my father, a Trinidadian-Canadian immigrant, always says the same thing: “I hope the person who did it isn’t black.” He is well aware that a criminal act committed by a black person will reinforce certain stereotypes and negative attitudes that target all black people. Typically, this is a concern only visible minorities have to worry about; I consider freedom from being racially profiled a key component of white privilege.

My friend was not entirely convinced, but he was more receptive to my story than he was to other arguments I had made using the word privilege. We were able to move past the word and begin discussing the underlying concept that the word seeks to elucidate. Until this point, altering or abandoning my preferred communication style felt as though I was watering down my argument for the sake of conciliation. Perhaps those who subscribe to a more *tell-it-like-it-is* method of communication might think that’s precisely what I’m advocating. However, even in writing, no one can serve two masters — if your motivation for writing about inequality is to promote understanding and decisive action, it cannot also be to force your word choice and perspective on your audience. When readers get bombarded with jargon, they will be less likely to consider new perspectives. As a writer, sometimes the best way to make a point is to avoid divisive academic terminology altogether and aim for simplicity and clarity.

Sadly, most people in the world encounter some form of sexism, racism, and/or other types of prejudice on a regular basis. It is essential for us to speak and write about these issues if we want to inspire real change. Nonetheless, the way we discuss issues of race, sex, and gender in university is just one of many ways to engage in dialogue about these topics, and it may not be the most effective one if our goal is to inspire readers to critically reflect on these important issues. Before turning to inflammatory buzz words or overly academic rhetoric to sound well informed, I think we can do more to promote equality if we stick to everyday words and sound human.

*Matthew Thurton is a young writer from Toronto and a graduate of Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He received the F. Hilton Page Memorial Prize in 2018 for his honors thesis in Philosophy. His areas of interest include race, ethics, and political theory.*

# Do I Have to Be Inspirational About My Disability to Get Published?

BY LENE ANDERSEN



**It's called inspiration porn: viewing someone as a shining example of humanity solely because of their disability, while in reality, they are living perfectly ordinary lives.**

*If you look for stories about people with disabilities on the shelves of a bookstore, you'll soon realize that we are hard to find.*

But when you do locate a few, you'll start to see that they come in two types: hero, usually nonfiction stories of overcoming limitations, and victim, often in fiction.

It's the madonna-whore dichotomy of disability, a narrow binary stereotype assigned to us by an able-bodied world that tends to consider any disability a fate worse than death. This leaves no room for reality and opportunity. And it's a non-choice for disabled writers with ambitions for publication, but who, in the absence of assigning themselves victim status, may not have a superhero cape fluttering in the wind.

It's exhausting being a narrative device. But do you have a choice when handing over your story to a publisher?

Let's pause for a quick reality check. The publishing industry is, as any other form of entertainment media, in the business of making money. And since we all love a story that makes us feel anything is possible, inspirational books sell like hotcakes. When it comes to assessing whether a story will be marketable, a publisher will look for the unique element — in this case, the disability — and that's when they often trip over cultural stereotypes.

The able-bodied world tends to consider any disability unimaginable, a fate worse than death victimizing the individual. This means that anyone who manages to actually create a life despite a disability — because the accompanying word is always

“despite” — must be a hero. It's called inspiration porn: viewing someone as a shining example of humanity solely because of their disability, while in reality, they are living perfectly ordinary lives.

Even if the person has done something extraordinary — say, started a company or pushed a wheelchair around the world — for them to be presented as inspirational because they did so with a disability (cue swooning) rather than doing this exceptional act while navigating a number of obstacles in a world filled with barriers ... well, then it is inspiration porn, too. And it's so commonplace that I challenge you to find a book in which the person with a disability is just a person, rather than a motivational figure for you, the reader.

But this particular narrative is, and always was, two-dimensional and unimaginative.

The key is for the publisher to get out of the way and make room for the person's own story, in whatever form that is. We are increasingly seeing this in stories by, for instance, racialized and transgender authors, whose authentic voices are sharing their reality. They deserve to be heard, but from a business standpoint they also turn out to be popular.

It's time that those of us who live with disabilities have the space to share our compelling, funny, dramatic, occasionally heroic (but not always), and, most of all, real stories. And as with any liberation movement, we can't do it alone. We need allies outside our own group, such as publishers, authors, and readers who will insist on authentic three-dimensional characters and stories showing the radiant potential of true diversity and inclusion.

Because true stories will always have more power than stereotypes.

*Lene Andersen is a writer, health and disability advocate, wheelchair user, and camera nut. She is the author of several books about living with chronic illness, as well as the award-winning blog The Seated View. Lene lives in Toronto and shares her home with a cat and too many books. You can find Lene on Twitter: @TheSeatedView and Facebook at facebook.com/LeneAndersenwriter.*

---

# Fiction & Poetry

---

## Fattoush

BY JAMAL SAEED



*Similarities to actual events in a house of Duma in Damascus on September 15, 2011 are intentional.*

“Umm Sami, It is Umm Diab (Diab’s mother).

“Yes, I’m speaking from our telephone. It seems to be working again. Last night Diab visited me in a dream. He was wearing a cyan shirt with dark blue and red lines. ‘How is my great mother,’ he asked. Before he died, he used to ask the same question when he wanted me to do something for him. I used to say, ‘Be direct. Tell me what you want.’ But in the dream, I could only say, ‘I will do anything for you. You are the light of my eyes.’ Diab smiled. His was the smile that always stole hearts. ‘I want you to prepare fattoush, Mom. Prepare it with your lovely hands.’ Then, he vanished. When I woke this morning, I looked at his photo. ‘I’ll buy the vegetables and herbs to make fattoush,’ I told him.

“I have just returned from the store. Please come, Umm Sami. Let us prepare and have fattoush together.”

\* \* \*

The two women began preparing the *fattoush* for the young man who had died two months earlier. After dinner, Umm Sami wrote on her Facebook page: My friend made delicious dishes for her son, who was killed. Because of death, he forgot to turn back to his house.

Later, she told Sami, her son, “I helped make fattoush for Diab, who I never met. I know how he was killed and I know his features through his photo.”

\* \* \*

Umm Sami named her son after her brother Sami, who was arrested because of his opposition to the regime and was imprisoned in the Tadmor prison in the early ’80s. She imagined the meeting of the two Samis, her brother and her son. She thought of all the sentences they could be exchanging. About fourteen years after her brother’s arrest, a released prisoner visited

her family to express his deepest condolences because Sami had passed away. He died without a funeral, shroud, known tomb or specific date, so he has no gravestone to put flowers or tears beside, and she had no chance for the last farewell. She tried to remember the last time she had seen him when he was alive.

When Diab was shot, Umm Sami did not know his mother or his family. All she knew was that he was shot because he didn’t obey the order to kneel to the president’s photo. She went to console the mother of the martyr. When she saw photos, she thought that Diab looked like Sami. Many women assumed that Umm Sami was Diab’s sister because she welcomed the women she didn’t know, offered Arabic coffee to them, and sang for Diab. It sounded as if the tenderness of the world was gathered in her song. She asked the women to release their ululations for Diab as if he were a bridegroom about to get married. She spoke about his heroism and ululated and the women responded in kind. Umm Sami felt that Allah himself was listening to their painful celebration. The women came from different places in Damascus to show solidarity and support for the mothers of the many victims of the regime.

\* \* \*

“You taught me that my son did what heroes do, but I know nothing about such things — you help me understand them. You made him alive when the others had buried him,” Umm Diab said. “I love you Umm Sami. My parents didn’t give birth to a sister but you are now my true sister.”

They talked about Diab’s childhood, his teenage years, his shirts, moods, and many other things. They made the fattoush dish and put it on the table. While they ate, they sometimes looked at Diab’s photo on the wall. It seemed as though they were eating on his behalf. “This fattoush is the best. Diab was right to ask you to make it, thank you,” Umm Sami said.

“You are welcome. As you can see, Diab doesn’t eat fattoush with us. I would often make this for him, and then he would disappear with his friends.”

The room became silent for a moment. The women could really feel Diab’s presence. Umm Diab broke the silence: “Umm Sami, you learnt a lot of things in school, you even studied at the university. I didn’t even go to elementary school. Please tell me . . . I mean, is there fattoush in heaven?”

*Jamal Saeed is an Arabic author, editor, visual artist, calligrapher, and translator. He spent about twelve years in prison in Syria as a conscientious prisoner. His short story collection Sun’s Crazy Girl was published in 1993, and he has published short stories, poems, and articles in Arabic newspapers and magazines. Jamal arrived in Canada with his family on December 28, 2016. This is his first story to be published in English.*

**SAVE  
THE  
DATE**

**AGM &  
ONWORDS  
2020**

**MONTREAL  
MAY 28–30**

