

A SECOND COMING



*Canadian  
Migration  
Fiction*

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Fiction*



edited by  
DONALD F. MULCAHY



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Donald F. Mulcahy, editor

Michael Mirolla, general editor

David Moratto, cover and interior design

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*To all who braved the unknown  
to make this amazing place, Canada, their home;  
to all who tried but failed to do so;  
to any who lost their lives in the process  
of trying to become Canadians;  
to my wife, Iris; to Lynne, Angela and Paul;  
and to Brennan, Alyse and Hayley, whose very identities  
are, in part, attributable to immigration.*

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# Introduction



The book you see here is really only half a book. The original migration anthology consisted of a mix of fact and fiction, a choice my dear wife had warned me might turn out to be an awkward formula. Later, acting on the advice of the publishers, I separated fact from fiction and created two books—a factual anthology of essays, memoirs and creative non-fiction, and this fictional one. Although the initial intention was to create a *literary* anthology of works by established immigrant writers, the project's mandate soon morphed from strictly literary to all-inclusive, an outcome that was dictated not only by the collection's ongoing need for more writers, but also by the assorted variety of writers who showed an interest in participating. I eventually concluded that a more diverse roster of writers might well be seen as reflecting the diversity in Canadian society; might even be considered a metaphor of sorts for our complex multicultural population and its varied voices. Canadians are, after all, as varied as pebbles on a beach.

I had not wanted to destroy the original 60-writer format, but it ultimately became a publishing necessity. Then, later, I suspected that perhaps the most interesting, most creative, and perhaps the most appealing works to readers might well be those of writers



who chose to fictionalize the emigration/immigration experience. After all, isn't it easier to recall and relate real events than to have to create them, from scratch so to speak, in one's imagination? As someone familiar with both genres, I happen to believe that it is.

Providing Canada and the emigration/immigration themes were dominant, the actual subject matter in these stories was left to the author. The fact that there will always be plenty of stories related to the act of relocating to another country is a given. The journey is never easy; no guarantees are offered. But to get such a promising new start as Canada offers can be much like being born all over again, a little like experiencing a second coming perhaps—hence the title of this book.

If you're anything like me, you probably hate long introductions. Books are meant to be read and enjoyed, not to be pontificated over, endlessly. So, let's get this intro over with.

I am immensely and everlastingly grateful to all the participants herein who submitted their creations to this anthology. Writing, to them, as to me, must surely be a labour of love. This is their book.

And I will be forever indebted to Michael Mirolla and Connie McParland, and to Guernica's editors and staff, who made a book of quality out of a somewhat raw manuscript. And I must thank Susan Ouriou for her invaluable translations from French.

I am grateful, as always, to my patient and loving wife Iris, not only for her primary editing of the text, and all my writing in fact, but for her unflinching forbearance in light of becoming, not so much a golf widow, as a virtual 'literary widow'.

My immeasurable thanks to all involved for making this book possible.

—Don Mulcahy

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# Strange Meeting



Saros Cowasjee



DEPARTURE LOUNGES EVERYWHERE are alike in their monotony, and Toronto's airport is no exception: rows and rows of plastic seats, and bare walls. Rarely a painting or a picture but always two toilet doors: one for men, the other for women.

A door flew open. Two middle-aged women emerged pushing a man out and shouting at him at the same time. His back was towards me, but I could make out from his faded white turban and hybrid English-Indian clothes that he was a countryman of mine.

"This is Ladies. Do you understand?" one of the women cried yet again.

The man shook his head in negation.

"You don't go in here. You go there," the other said with exasperation, shoving him towards the door marked Men.

The man staggered, but regained his balance. On seeing the people in the lounge staring at him, he seemed to feel he owed them an explanation. Putting his forefingers to his mouth and subsequently to his ears, he raised his hands and gestured as if to signify that he was both deaf and dumb.

"But you are not blind, are you?" the angrier of the two said. "Can't you see that that's for women?"

The man, ignoring her but sensing some sympathy from the crowd, pointed again to his mouth and ears and shook his hands in despair.

A hushed silence followed. The two women quietly went back to their seats. The man returned to his place in the far corner of the room from where he looked steadily at me, his gaze never faltering. It was the sort of look Indians reserve for one another when they meet in a country other than their own; a look crying out for recognition: "I, too, am from India. Don't you see?"

I did. He was, as I could see, a farmer from north India—his tall, gaunt frame and his odd attire spoke for him. But what was he doing in Canada? Visiting a son or daughter? My curiosity was aroused; I wanted to know more about him.

The plane was only half full. When it was airborne I had no difficulty abandoning my seat in the middle-row of the aircraft and taking the empty one next to this strange man. But how was I to converse with him? I was thinking up some sign language when he turned to me and whispered in Punjabi: "Where are you going?"

"To London—no, Delhi," I blurted.

"I am also going to Delhi," he said calmly.

I did not know what to say. I had been preparing myself for an encounter with a deaf-mute. I felt like someone who had got on the wrong bus and all that mattered was to get off somehow at the next stop. I looked around to see where I could move to—not an easy choice with so many empty seats to pick from. Just then a stewardess appeared pushing a trolley, and gave us a sideways glance.

"Scotch," the deaf-mute said.

"Same," I said.

The stewardess placed two miniature scotch bottles and a tumbler of ice on each of our tables. Moving to another seat with the drinks would not be easy. Besides, the fellow had done me no harm. The fact that he could speak now seemed an attractive proposition. I poured myself a drink, and asked: "What do you do in Delhi?"

"I am from Ludhiana district. I farm."

"On a visit?"

"I came to see my son, Rahul. He has settled in Amrika."

"In Canada," I reminded him foolishly, unable to suppress the teacher in me.

"It is the same—Germany or Vilayat (England) or Amrika. It is not our country."

"What does your son do?" I asked him to change the subject. Talk about where one belongs always leaves me uncomfortable.

"He farms, too. I tell him the earth is the same, everywhere—that he should return and work the soil from which he sprang. But he speaks English, and he has married a *mem*. She is white as the palm of my hand." He opened his hands and I was surprised how white they were.

The conversation provided me an opportunity to ask him if he understood English, and how he ever got into a ladies' toilet. He said he knew a few English words, but that sufficed, since his daughter-in-law was a good woman even though she did not speak his language.

"She calls me by my first name, Randhir, and I don't like that. But it is my name so where is the harm!"

"But how did you converse with her?" I asked.

"I didn't. 'Good morning, goodnight, thank you, yes, no, tomorrow, goodbye' is all the English I know. But what more does one need to know?"

I told him that, had he known a little more, he would have had less trouble with those women. He agreed, and confessed that his son had instructed him to act deaf and dumb if he ever got into difficulty.

"He should have told me to act the blind as well," he added. "The way those *memies* pushed me. As if I were a buffalo."

"Was there nothing on the doors? A picture of a man or woman?" I asked.

exchange addresses in London while we waited to catch our plane for Delhi.

“Would there be time enough for that?” he inquired.

At Heathrow airport I lost him. It had not occurred to me to find out what flight he was taking from London. I searched for him frantically throughout the terminal building, and hurried to catch my own British Airways flight only at the final announcement. The Air India flight to Delhi had been cancelled and several of its passengers transferred to our flight.

The departure lounge was filled to capacity, but the old man was not there. However, I felt certain he would show up and so I waited for him. The passengers began to board the plane, and soon I was alone between rows and rows of empty seats and the bare walls and the two doors standing side by side in seeming fraternity.

Could he be hiding behind one of those doors? I asked myself. It was a flippant thought, totally unworthy of the friendship he had offered me. I hurried up the ramp leading to my aircraft, trying hard not to think of him.

# The Guitar



Cyril Dabydeen



NIGHT ONCE MORE, and the house rumbled and shook as another truck lumbered past, not far from the Voyageur Colonial Bus Terminal on Lyon Street; the house an anachronism among adjacent ones forming a row that was part of a block of slum dwellings; the bare walls of my room, mouldy paint, plaster cracking. Closing my eyes and being awfully tired, I wondered why I'd decided to come and live here, where the first "Room for Rent" sign caught my attention. A musty smell floated up in the semi-darkness. An occasional cough and moan, then guitar strains, funereal-sounding, coming from another room. The sensation of having travelled far was still with me.

\*\*\*

Morning light filtered in, and I rubbed my eyes. I was finally glad to be here, but peeled plaster on the walls kept coming at me. Slowly I opened the door. From the room opposite me, a door flung open and a voice jabbered at me. Polish-sounding, or some other European tongue?

Then the door slammed shut again, and *he* disappeared inside.

Last night's whimpers, moans ... guitar-strains, once more. *Yeah, welcome.* To Ottawa. The Prime Minister's residence on Sussex Drive being not far away, and the Parliament Buildings, where they passed the Immigration Laws. Oh, I gingerly walked down the stairs.

A cackle. Laughter. An older man with a paunch moved about in the kitchen, beaming when he saw me. Maybe he wanted company. "Ah, laddie," he sang, extending a trunk-like arm, "you're new here. Jake's the name." Maybe in his seventies he was ... quite unlike the one upstairs in the room opposite mine.

"Did you hear the guitarist last night, eh?" he asked.

He twisted his lips and pointed to the attic. I asked about the Pole, whoever he was, upstairs. "Take no notice o' him, lad," he said. "Harmless as a butterfly he is."

He laughed, his body convulsing. "I've been around here long enough to know." He wheezed hard. "Being born in Ottawa an' all I am." He stabbed a finger at me. "Where you from, eh?"

Not waiting for an answer, Jake went on about "them days." The Depression, see ... so long ago. "I've slept in worse places," he hurried to tell me. And he'd travelled across Canada, criss-crossing to Edmonton, Calgary, then again to St. John's, Sydney, Halifax. His Depression train kept going. In Thunder Bay he'd stared up at the Sleeping Giant, Nanabijou, and looked across at the Native reservation close to Mount McKay. "Indians, they're some lazy ... ah, but I don't blame them." Maybe Jake didn't believe what he kept saying, or making up, as he furrowed his brows.

"Lake Superior in me, as I kept going across Canada," he went on, now taking me to Whitehorse and Alaska, then along the TransCanada Highway again. Oh, back to Winnipeg, Saskatoon, across the prairie ... as I kept going with him. Jake ambled around the kitchen; and next he was in a huge wilderness park in northern Ontario, where he'd lived in bush camps and planted trees. He lowered his voice for dramatic effect. Indeed, he'd fallen into muskeg, and millions of blackflies, mosquitoes attacked him. "It's true, mark my words."



But I didn't believe Jake any longer. Guitar strains coming from the attic? Jake moaned. "I'll die in this city, not in Toronto, eh?" He made a face. "Yeah, in Toronto, there where you'll find people packed like sardines in a can. See them in the subway, tramcar, everywhere, on Yonge Street, Spadina, Jarvis." He laughed.

The one upstairs ... the Pole ... would he come down now?

"Lad, when they put me in the ground I'll still be kicking an' screaming, fighting to get out." Jake laughed again.

My turn to laugh then, his willing-unwilling audience.

It was back to the Depression. "In Sudbury I was a bartender, a barber, doing every job you could think of." Jake breathed deeply and he grew florid. He started coughing. I handed him a glass of water. He gulped it. "Lad, I'm ready to meet my Maker, Catholic as I am. But I will not make it easy for Him." His fleshy mouth creased with a smile, and he made a sign of the cross. Then suddenly: "Have you met him?"

"Who?"

"The one upstairs, playing that ... *thing*? He came in yesterday morning, without saying a word. Played all night long. It's driving the other one upstairs crazy, yeah." *The Pole*?

Jake dipped into his milky-white soup, a bulbous drip on his nose.

Fate brought me here, I thought.

Jake eyed me warily. "You know what that does to an old man's nerves, eh?" He banged a spoon against the table. Ah, now someone was coming down the stairs, and Jake stood rigid.

The Pole's face bore a distinct stubble, like a thousand ants crawling over his mouth, chin, and neck. He didn't make eye contact. He sat down at the kitchen table, then got up and hurried back upstairs.

"You've got to trust some people sometime," Jake growled.

The Depression train stopped moving; the window almost shuttered, but light crept in. Jake eyed me. *Will you?*

Will I what?

\*\*\*

I heard him leaving the room in the attic and coming down; yeah, I kept following his guitar strains. Tall, pimply at the ridge of his nose he was, and dressed in faded blue jeans. “Nice guitar-playing,” I lied, trying to be sociable. Jake’s mood had infected me.

Earl, he said his name was. He shook his head.

“You been playing long?” I asked.

“I just got outa prison, man,” he murmured.

The guitar’s strains, a wail.

“I did time, for ...”

*What?*

“We all have to, sooner or later.”

*Do time?*

“I was in for stealing, man.” As he ate, cornflakes smeared his chin.

Earl’s footsteps almost throbbed as he hurried back up the stairs to the attic. *You’ve got to trust some people.* Jake’s words; the Depression train rolling across Canada. *Why am I here?* I would get accustomed to the rooming house before long, I figured. But not to the Prime Minister’s residence on Sussex Drive ...

I looked through the scarred window at the bus terminal across the street, with vehicles going and coming. I was a transient of sorts, I allowed myself to think. Like Earl, the guitar-player ... or the Pole in the room opposite mine? Coughs, loud wheezes, all night long, are what I would keep hearing.

Jake: “So you’ve finally met him?”

I told him about Earl being in prison.

“It figures, that type,” Jake said. “During the Depression it was bad, but there were always honest people around. It’s a shame, he’s so young. Steer clear away o’ the likes of him. He’ll come to no good, lad.”

Police coming to the house that night, banging against the doors, I imagined. *Looking for Earl?* “Leave him alone,” I cried to the police. Oh, the Pole tramping down the stairs, crying “Murder!”

More trucks lumbered by. And did the landlord say the Pole had threatened to jump off the top of the Empire State Building in New York? The police shaking their heads. *You’ve got to trust ... some people.*

Jake again: “Don’t mind me lad, but see, the guitar’s really driving me crazy.” It was my bad luck to be here, I thought.

Oddly, the guitar sounds began to sound familiar.

From the top of the stairs Jake called out: “You must keep an old man company, lad. Don’t leave, I mean.”

*Leave?*

\*\*\*

A knock on my door, and Earl shoved his guitar before me.

“Want to buy it?”

The guitar was greyish-white with distinctive studs and sequins, like diamond beads pimply the sides; embroidered-looking. Maybe it came from Las Vegas and might have once been owned by Chet Atkins.

“Go on—take it,” Earl insisted.

“I don’t ...”

“Don’t what?”

“I don’t know how to play.”

“You’ll soon learn.”

“I ...”

“You been listening to me, I know. And him upstairs.” He meant Jake; his eyes crinkled.

The guitar’s design, and signs, symbols, on the well-formed handle.

Jake should see it now, I thought.

# Nick's Choice



Venera Fazio



“WHAT IS IT, Nick? Do you want something? Are you in pain?” Giselle slides her chair closer to the hospice bed. She encloses her husband’s hand between both of hers. “For a moment there, you looked sad.”

“Sicily,” Nick replies. “My parents ... my brother Franco.”

“Oh,” she murmurs, “never mind. It’s best to think about something more cheerful. Are you in pain? Shall I call the nurse?”

“No. Just tired. Sleepy. You can go home now.” He doesn’t have the strength for conversation. When he next opens his eyes, his wife is not there but the faint scent of roses, her perfume, lingers.

Nick is dying of an unspecified runaway cancer. He drifts in and out of sleep according to a strict schedule of morphine injections. Often, when he is awake, deceased friends and family appear to him in vivid hallucinations. At this moment, he sees his father. “I am sorry I let you down, papa. You saved my life. It was your idea for me to work as a baker in the army. By baking bread, I stayed out of harm’s way. I wasn’t sent to the front. I wasn’t captured by the Germans. I didn’t suffer like Franco.” Nick’s father gazes back at him with a kindly expression.

The day Franco came home from the war, Nick and his parents

were inside their house enjoying a lunch of pasta with a sauce made of fresh tomatoes and basil. From an open window, they heard shouts of “Franco, Franco.” The shouts echoed both joy and sorrow. When he and his parents rushed out to the street, they understood their neighbours’ mixed greetings. The Franco they embraced was a skeleton of the Franco who had left home. They were shocked to see how emaciated he was. His head was too big for his body. They had heard Franco was a prisoner in a German agricultural labour camp. Once inside, their mother wept as she encouraged Franco to “*mangia* at least a few spoonfuls of pasta and swallow a drop of wine.”

After a number of months of rest and their mother’s nutritious cooking Franco was strong enough to join Nick and their father in tending their olive grove and vineyard. But Nick wished he was baking bread instead of pruning vines. He missed the scent of fermenting yeast and the relaxing rhythm of kneading dough until shiny and smooth. By intuition and sense of smell, he knew when the loaves were ready. As he mixed the simple ingredients of flour, water, yeast and salt, he felt the satisfaction of creating life-sustaining food. The loaves he baked in the army were dense and nourishing, made of hard wheat that was sometimes mixed with rye. In Canada he would make a lighter version, in the French rather than Italian tradition.

Lying in bed, now, Nick recalls the evening he mentioned to his family he wanted to be a baker. He had spent the day harvesting olives with his father and brother. Franco and his father worked in tandem, one shaking the tree branches, the other scooping olives into sacks. They often spoke only to each other, leaving Nick out of the conversation. He feels as bitter now as he was all those years ago. *It was just like before the war. Franco, Franco, numero uno.* On the rare occasion, when a meal included meat, their mother served his brother the largest portion. Whenever Franco asked, she prepared for him *fravioli*, the sweet ricotta cheese turnovers that he

liked so much. She never seemed to notice what Nick liked to eat. Before his brother was drafted into the army, their father and Franco left Nick, despite his pleas, behind at home to help his mother while they went out hunting for rabbits in the woods just beyond the village. Not for the first time, he thinks: *My birth was just an afterthought.*

“How can you work as a baker?” his mother exclaimed as she passed him a bowl of pasta and bean soup flavoured with garlic and fennel. “There is still a shortage of flour in the village. Even if you move to Messina, we have no money to help you open your own place. Besides, Messina is still in shambles from the war. *Figghiu*, don’t be ridiculous. Your father needs your help to put food on our table. Franco is not well yet.”

After his return from the German labour camp, Franco often woke up in the middle of the night, agitated. Their mother patiently lumbered down to the kitchen to prepare a mixture of valerian roots or sometimes a concoction made from sweet basil. She used oregano oil to heal the whip scars on his back. During the day, his father stayed close to his oldest son. He often had to smooth relations between the villagers and Franco. His brother, once the type who would bring a bowl of milk to a stray cat, was now prone to angry outbursts, quick to engage in fist fights. Nick feels a rush of sympathy for his brother: *Franco, what did the Germans do to you? You never told me. There were many times I saw your eyes darken with pain and terror.*

\*\*\*

Nick obeyed his mother and worked alongside his father and brother. At the same time, he did not allow himself to be discouraged. He waited for another opportunity to mention bread-making.

In the years following the war, 1947 and 1948, one by one, Nick’s friends abandoned the village for factory work in Germany or for

better job prospects in Canada, Australia or Argentina. He, too, longed to leave. To console his parents, he assured them: "I just want to earn enough money to open a bakery. I will be back." Seeing how determined he was, his father promised: "I will write *cuginu* Carlo in Canada. He will look after you."

Cousin Carlo agreed to sponsor Nick, assuring him of a job and a home. The morning Nick left, he attended Mass. With the words, "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost," Padre Felice blessed him, sprinkled him with holy water and then added: "May God keep you safe on your journey and reward you with a good life." His family and friends walked with him from the church to the town square where the bus was waiting to take him to the port of Messina. At the last minute, relatives pressed upon him parting gifts of hard boiled eggs and provolone cheese for the journey. He remembers the taste of salt in his parents' tears as he kissed their cheeks; the firmness of his brother's embrace.

\*\*\*

"I am sorry, Mamma and Papa, I did not keep my promise," Nick says to the vision of his parents. They appear before him, frozen in his memory, as captured by the last photograph they had sent him, a few years before they died. Both are dressed in their Sunday best. His father wears a dark suit and white shirt. He is a frail version of his former self. There is no evidence of the barrel-chested, muscular parent of Nick's youth. A hunchbacked Domenico leans heavily forward on his cane. His mother wears a dark dress with a lace collar and the large gold hoop earrings she had purchased with cash he had sent her from Canada. Despite the thinness of her hair, she wore it as she always had, pulled severely back, braided and twisted into a bun. The lines on her face are deep enough to be scars. His parents appear broken-hearted. Or are his feelings of guilt towards his brother and parents playing tricks on his imagination?

# Acknowledgments



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**Licia Canton's** story, *The Motorcycle*, was previously published in Italy, in the Italian literary journal, *Rivista lunaspecie*.

**Saros Cowasjee's** *Strange Meeting* was read on CBC Radio and was published in *Indian Literature* (New Delhi: Vol. XLVI. No.2) in 2002. It is included in his volume of short stories called *Strange Meeting and Other Stories* (Vision Books, New Delhi, 2006).

**Caterina Edwards' Identity** was previously published in *Alberta Views* magazine, Sept/Oct. 2003 edition, and it appears here with permission from the author.

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