



The Grassroots: Community Writing event, held on April 5 and 6, 2002, was once again part of the [Blue Metropolis Literary Festival](#), and was built around the festival theme of the architecture of language. The Centre for Literacy brought together storytellers and writers who have written and published in community-based settings rather than inside institutions, and who have built bridges among verbal, oral, and visual literacies. They included an accomplished writer/musician who collects alphabet songs and oral stories from rural Newfoundland, and a community poet who writes her life; an urban group of young men and women who have experienced and used violence but now write poetry and take photographs that move them in a new direction; two writers who have been homeless and publish a 'zine to reach their brothers on the street to tell their stories from the inside; and a native survivor of residential schooling who writes his way out of despair and tries to bring community members with him. He won the 2001 Canada Post Literacy Award as a learner who has joined the ranks of published writers. Several of them have been adult learners, and all of them are involved in some way with literacy communities in their own settings. In these different contexts, literacy provides the building blocks for further learning and for community engagement.

In 2002, Grassroots coincided with an invitational national Symposium on Museums, Literacy, and the Arts, cosponsored by The Centre for Literacy with the Canadian Museums Association. This brought more than thirty participants from across Canada to discuss the possible ways in which the arts could work collaboratively with literacy organizations to strengthen their respective goals and engage more communitybased involvement. The participants attended Grassroots as an example of this type of linking; some of the readers joined the Museum symposium for part of the weekend discussions.



For the Blue Metropolis reading, we asked the storytellers and writers to choose some selections that reflected the theme of the architecture of language.

## Readers and participants in Grassroots 2002



- Larry Loyie, and Constance Brissenden, *Living Traditions Writing Circle*, B.C.  
(Larry won the 2001 Canada Post Literacy Learner Award)



- Michael Paul Martin and Robert Payne  
Toronto  
(*St. Christopher House Meeting Point*)



Jim Payne

- Carmelita McGrath, poetstoryteller, and Jim Payne, poetsong writer,  
Newfoundland



- A group of writers from Leave Out Violence (LOVE),  
Montreal.

(Source: ONE L.O.V.E. Vol.3 No. 2  
Photo: Beth Babinchak)

• Jennifer Ottaway, whose homeless woman's diary was produced on CBC Radio as "Jennifer's Story," in May 2001. It won a Commonwealth Broadcast Award.

• Open City Productions 2002, a community arts program on the street. They brought canvas and brushes with an open invitation to attendees to record their presence. All the sketches in this section were done by Jennifer Ottaway during the Community Writing event.



**All readings reprinted with permission.**



**Leave Out Violence (L.O.V.E.)** is a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to reducing violence in our communities by building a team of youth spokespeople to communicate a message of non-violence. They offer a photojournalism program, facilitated by professional journalists and photographers, a Leadership Training Program, and publications.

Their educational tools, include “ONE LOVE,” a bi-annual newspaper with a circulation of 50,000, that publishes the work of LOVE youth and is distributed through schools and community networks. *The Courage to Change: A Teen Survival Guide*, their second book, is a teen-to-teen guide on how to deal with the stresses that can lead to violence. The Leadership Training Program helps youth use their experiences to teach others that there are alternatives to violence. They lead workshops and discussions in schools across Canada, creating awareness of youth violence through exhibits of their writing and photographs.

Web: [www.leaveoutviolence.com](http://www.leaveoutviolence.com)

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**Powerlessness**  
by Kimberly Flynn

My arms weak from the fight  
Standing  
Shallow breaths in my chest  
Restless

Wanting to move, take action  
Say brave words  
But instead I stand in silence  
Exhausted  
From the fears, the emotions  
The thoughts  
Of tears that have left me  
Drained  
Of all the power which I  
contained  
Meek, frail  
A shadow, an outline of  
Strength Useless, swaying idly  
With nothing left to say



**Alyssa Kuzmarov** is the Regional Program Director at Leave Out Violence (LOVE) in Montreal. A social worker and writer, Alyssa is completing her first manuscript entitled True Power Within, a memoir depicting her own healing journey.

Nothing of what I used to be  
Remains  
Taken swiftly by your words,  
Your body, your hate  
Every memory of that night  
Leaves me standing  
My arms weak from the fight I  
sway.

**Kimberly Flynn**, 18, is a talented writer and poet. As a youth leader at Leave Out Violence, Kimberly uses her ability to express herself to encourage other youth, in the after-school programs as well as in classrooms, to find their voices. Kimberly's own voice is powerful in its realness and its delicate probing into the workings of the heart.

**Gary Joseph**, 21, has been writing poetry since the age of 12. Gary has learned to release his emotions on paper with a dynamic style and rhythm. At Leave Out Violence, Gary provides an excellent role model for the youth he talks to in classrooms across the city. He openly explores his own issues and is constantly seeking to learn more about himself and others. His poetry reveals his sensitivity as well as his willingness to take risks, face his fears and triumph!



Source: ONE L.O.V.E. Vol.3 No. 2  
Photo: Ian Berard

**Jennifer Ottaway** says: Born in Toronto in 1954 of publisher (plumbing and heating catalogue) father and secretary, homemaker mother, I was the third of four children and enjoyed a happy childhood in Etobicoke, with extended family as neighbours. As the most hyper of the bunch I endured/went to school and continued to a BA in Phys. Ed. I wanted to teach outdoor education but worked as a group leader for Katimavik (federal youth volunteer program), then raised a family and operated two small businesses, house rental and translation. I am still owner (but frozen-out operator) of a Holdings Corporation which owns 3 houses. I have been a massage therapist and hope to continue. I currently live on Ile-D'Orleans and survive (well) as a Frontier College farm labourer-literacy teacher and artist (watercolourist). The future? The sky is the limit... I have started writing a book on my adventures as a homeless person... I know I will be doing some kind of 'mission' work for the rest of my life.

### **Loss by a bullet** by Gary Joseph

I am trying to hold on to some understanding because I know the pain, the sadness, the grave.

I know it hurts inside to know that the one you cared for, lived with, dreamed about, thought about, promised things to, isn't there anymore. You want the person to be

there with you all the way and then they're gone, just by a bullet.

Heartache. Just by a pin drop, they are gone and we will have that pain in us because it is hard to forget, it is hard to leave it alone. You can't expect us to just lie a baby in a box and go ok?

It's sad with me. I still cry about it, waking up at night crying tears remembering those days we had laughing, smiling, crying, hanging out. Even on the bad days, we'd talk about and solve it or just leave it.

Right now I am writing this and inside is my unhappiness. I laugh and talk, but behind that it's all sadness. I know I can't stay sad all life long, but all I have to do is bless you and others that keep me going. I always wondered how come I still have the emotions to go on day by day. I have to close by saying I know you are smiling down on me saying it's ok. I know I will see you someday, but I wonder why life goes this way.



**Michael Paul- Martin** is a Cree poet originally from James Bay in North Ontario. He speaks Cree, and reads /writes Cree syllabics. His first collection of poetry, *She Said Sometimes I Hear Things*, came out in 1996. He is currently illustrating three children's books, slated for publication soon. For a number of years, Michael has been one of the writers/editors of *Street Post* newsletter of Toronto West. He has also worked on scripts for theatre of the oppressed and for a movie. Michael volunteers mainly for the poor. In June 2001, he graduated from the Community Leadership Training program at St. Christopher House of West Toronto where the program dealt with Antioppression and Communication (and Critical Thinking), and Conflict Resolution and Negotiation. In the fall of 2002, after openheart surgery, Michael returned to the North to teach.

**Robert Thomas Payne** was a sailor for ten years. Then he was an actor. At one point he found himself homeless and in need. the drop-ins and soup kitchens of belief that all human beings are subject aspirations and realities, though not the he saw art all around him. Since 1997, St. Christopher House/The Meeting and one of the writers of *The Street*



to homelessness is opening the lines of communication. He can be found wandering the streets of Toronto, or sitting here and there, listening more than talking.

What he saw and heard in Toronto confirmed his to the same frailties, same opportunities. And he has volunteered with Place Drop-In as editor Post. He thinks a solution



**Jim Payne**, from Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland, He has been a professional performing artist and writer for 22 years. A leading performer and collector of Newfoundland traditional music, he is one of the province's most prolific songwriters, working in several genres to create musical mosaics of local life. Jim has directed, composed and performed music for theatre productions, as well as soundtracks for plays, documentaries and videos. He has performed on radio and television in Canada and abroad, and has toured in North America and abroad. Jim has many recording credits, He also owns and operates his own recording label, SingSong Inc., which has fifteen currently available titles, and produces concerts and special events featuring traditional and contemporary music, song, story and dance that reflect the Newfoundland experience. Jim plays guitar, accordion, mandolin, tin whistle and violin, and is a singer, storyteller, actor, writer, stepdancer, and teacher of traditional Newfoundland set and square dances.



Web: [www.singsong.nfld.com](http://www.singsong.nfld.com)

**Carmelita McGrath** is a writer, editor, researcher and educator. She has authored books of poetry, fiction, children's literature, and social history for adult learners. As a member of the Writers Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador/ABE Social History Project writing team, she combined family stories, interviews and archival research to explore the links between oral narratives and documented history. As a workshop facilitator with Educational Planning and Design, she brought creative writing workshop techniques to displaced fishery workers in adult education programs. As contributing co-editor of *Wayfaring, Journeys in Language, Learning and Culture*, she has co-led workshops in which both learners and educators recast themselves as writers to explore their personal experience of language and education. She recently developed *Voice2Voice*, a course for Mount St. Vincent University's Distance Education Program, which explores the intersections of oral and written culture and the ownership of narrative. Her most recent book, a chapbook called *Ghost Poems* (Running the Goat Books & Broad-sides), 2001, delves into the ghost stories of her childhood through the medium of poetry. Her short story collection *Stranger Things Have Happened* (Killick Press), 1999, won the Writers' Alliance/Bennington Gate Newfoundland Book Award for fiction and was shortlisted for the Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award.

MARK THESE DATES April 4-5, 2003

**GRASSROOTS: COMMUNITY WRITING**  
Reading the world, Reading the word

-- *"I believe theatre can speak to the whole population. The role of theatre is to give the community an image of itself. I think of our task as being a kind of 'thinking in*

*public', and thinking in public works most effectively when the whole public, the hoi polloi, is really there. That's why we do our theatre in parks and on the street. We save the best seats for the groundlings."*

– David Anderson, Clay and Paper Theatre

Paolo Freire believed that adult literacy could only be built on a conscious awareness of the social and political realities of the world. For him, there was no separate set of skills to be mastered. Once an awareness or “conscientization” was aroused, he believed, the struggle for social justice would motivate adults to become literate. This concept is not a mainstream practice in North America where literacy is too often reduced to a commodity. Nevertheless, there are a surprising number of programs and organizations that foster innovative ways of connecting the world and the word, through community theatre, photography, music and writing.

This year’s Grassroots: Community Writing event will bring writers and performers from street theatre in Vancouver and Toronto, from adult new writers’ programs, from neighborhood writing alliances, from youth anti-violence programs, and from rural literacy programs to read and share their perspectives on writing and performing as ways of creating and reshaping their worlds.

**Friday, April 4, 2003,  
reading/performing at Blue  
Metropolis**

**Saturday, April 5, 2003,  
workshop at The Centre for  
Literacy  
Watch our web site for details**

Cree writer **Larry Loyie** is a playwright and children’s book author. *Ora Pro Nobis* (Pray for Us), a play about his experiences in residential school in Alberta, has been performed in B.C., Alberta and Ontario. His new book, *As Long as the Rivers Flow*, the story of a boy’s summer learning First Nations traditions, was written with his partner, Constance Brissenden. It became available in the fall of 2002 from Groundwood Books in Toronto. In 1993 Larry started *Living Traditions Writers Group* with Constance, encouraging and teaching creative writing in First Nations Communities.

**Constance Brissenden** (BA, MA) is a longtime freelance writer and creative writing instructor. She has written 8 non-fiction books and hundreds of magazine articles. She teaches creative writing across Canada with Larry.

Web: [www.firstnationswriter.com](http://www.firstnationswriter.com)

[See excerpt from *As Long as the Rivers Flow* ]



**Reclining**  
**by Carmelita McGrath**

When you are young and learn a word  
you want to lie down in it  
Reclining—its languid shape  
suggests to me chaise  
and other things we didn't have to sit on.  
I had an arm tanned and curved  
that ended in a thin brown hand  
that wanted to drape it self, reclining  
on the curve of the old settee  
in the house where I lived briefly as comfort child,  
antidote to my grandfather's lingering death.  
Horsehair, that settee, or straw;  
leather its cover or oilcloth  
and the curve of its back a harp or heart.  
First nights in the house  
the present did not seem  
so distant from the past.  
Granda regaled us with storms  
and squirting and squid,  
dories tossed in the air on the big water, a great  
sea-drama where a boy tore out and ate a live fish's heart  
and was cured of seasickness forever.  
Then the salt, the gales, misleading fog played treachery.  
Words mangled; my grandfather's stories dissolved  
into a storm that went on and on.  
In the back room his bed tossed like a skiff  
And he called for an end  
even if it meant going under.  
Those nights of pain I was away upstairs  
in jungles where jaguars hid in emerald trees,  
where a Pope expired relentlessly in a painting  
and the weird sisters, hag and hag, laid  
their bodies against mine and sucked my breath.  
I was twelve then; one night I ran away  
to home. They sent my younger sister in my stead.



After I thought of reclining in the parlour  
on the old settee but felt  
the weight of my grandfather's death press on me.  
It was there they waked him, in that corner  
Where I'd imagined myself sprawled  
Reading stories in leafy light.  
But this afterimage clung there, as if the air  
had photographed him reclining, chill and quiet.

**Excerpt from:**

**As Long as the Rivers Flow**

**by Larry Loyie with Constance Brissenden**

All day long, good smells came from the house as the family prepared for the gathering. As the guests arrived, Lawrence was surprised that he had so many aunts and uncles and cousins.

"Tell us about the grizzly bear," his cousins begged.

Finally the feast was ready. The table was covered with pots of moose stew and piles of freshbaked breads. Special foods like smoked fish and duck soup were cooked in honor of the elders and storytellers. Lawrence ate until he was stuffed.

After supper, family and guests settled comfortably outside on blankets around the fire. The storytelling began.

Uncle Louis stood up. He was tall and handsome. Everyone knew that he was the best storyteller around. Even the youngest children were quiet.

Uncle Louis stroked his bushy moustache before speaking.

"Once there was a man who walked in the four directions. He went north, south, east and west. He was a brave and seeking person who went from village to village learning all there was to know.

"He learned about new foods and how to cook them. In the prairies, he lived in tepees. In the cold lands, he lived in igloos.

"He saw waves of grass where the buffalo roamed. He tasted salty water where the sun rises and the sun sets. He came to dry lands where the sands were hot."

Lawrence saw himself in Uncle Louis's story, walking every step of the way.

Now it was Aunt Rose's turn. She told about three hunters who surprised a grizzly bear eating their moose.

"The hunters climbed high into the only tree around. It wasn't very big or very strong. It started sagging until they were over the grizzly's head. The bear took a swipe at them, but the hunters were just out of reach. They hung down from that tree like berries thick on a branch. They looked tasty, too."

Aunt Rose turned to Uncle Dave. "Weren't you one of those hunters?" she asked.

"Oh, I was too skinny to tempt the bear," Uncle Dave replied. "But you should have seen my cousin Otamuwin. He was sorry he had eaten so much. The bear was drooling at the sight of him."

Everyone laughed. Grandpa rose and called Lawrence to his side. "This is my grandson. Not many boys his age meet a grizzly bear or care for an owl. From now on, we will call him Oskiniko."

The name meant Young Man. Lawrence stood proudly beside his grandpa. The firelight flickered on Grandpa's gentle face. "This land has always given us what we need to live," he said gravely. "Like they told us long ago, as long as the rivers flow, this land is ours. It is up to all of us to care for it. Now it's your turn, grandchildren. The future is in your hands."

The stories continued long into the night. Lawrence's eyes began to droop. Soon he fell asleep listening to the familiar voices. ...

The day finally arrived. After breakfast, the children dressed in their best clothes. They stood close to Mama and Grandma. Grandpa put his arm around Grandma's shoulders.

A big brown truck with high sides pulled up. Two men got out. They both wore black and looked like giant crows.

"Hurry up," one of them said to the children loudly in English. "It's time to get on the truck."

The children pulled back, terrified of the stranger. Maruk clung to Mama's skirt.

Papa spoke to Lawrence in their own language. "Be brave, Oskiniko. Take care of your younger sister and brothers."

The strange men lifted the crying children one by one on to the truck. Papa watched,

his face angry, his fists clenched.

As the men closed up the back of the truck, Lawrence began to cry, too.

The sides of the truck were high. He couldn't see his family. He couldn't see Ooh-Hoo sitting in a tree. As the truck pulled away, all Lawrence could see was the sky.

*As Long as the Rivers Flow*, by Larry Loyie with Constance Brissenden.

Illustrations by Heather D. Holmlund.

Available from Groundwood Books, 2002.

[www.groundwoodbooks.com](http://www.groundwoodbooks.com)

## **COLORS**

By Sharon F. Warner

The flag of a country is called its colors.

The uniform of a group or gang  
is sometimes referred to as colors.

Our skins in varying shades  
of darker than white  
are colors.

I have some thoughts about colors.

People are showing their colors now,  
Raising, waving, wearing the flag,  
Painting their houses, their cars, their lawns,  
Dressing up and even dyeing their pets  
Red, white, and blue.

Some of these citizens seem to be saying,  
"I'm more American than you are."

Of course I always knew,  
even before they showed their true colors,  
that a lot of people thought  
they were more American than me.

So now, in this time of ultra-conspicuous patriotism,  
I will salute the flag,  
I will pledge allegiance,  
I will even sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" –  
I can actually hit most of the notes –  
But I will not display the colors.

Because I am haunted by the shades of other colors.

The first flag had 13 stars,  
the one that was flying when this nation came to be,  
the one that waved when the Constitution was written.  
The Constitution said that  
Non-white men were equal to 3/5 of a man.  
Women, white or non-,  
were not equal to anything.  
Color me invisible.

I think of later colors:  
The stars and bars of the Confederate flag,  
The flag that represented the states that wanted  
to keep people of color as a source of free labor.  
The Confederacy lost the Civil War,  
but the colors still fly –  
even at government buildings  
in various parts of the South.  
I don't understand that.  
No government buildings  
fly the flags of Germany or Japan  
or any other conquered nation.  
Who really lost the Civil War?  
I know. We did.

The 20th Century saw colors of change.  
The flag of our country was transformed  
From 48 stars to 49, then 50.  
More people of color in Alaska and Hawaii  
became official Americans.  
There are other changes that could be made.  
Puerto Rico could be – some say should be – 51st state.  
But how would we arrange the stars?  
And wouldn't an entire country of brown people  
be maybe too much color for America?

America, America....  
So many wars, so many colors.  
Vietnam-agent orange. The Gulf war – black gold.  
This year, as autumn was approaching,  
men wearing the protective coloration or passengers  
and packing a hidden agenda  
boarded four planes  
and turned them into guided missiles.

Three of the planes found their mark.  
One was diverted when ordinary people  
showed their true colors as heroes.  
The calendar still said summer,  
but fall is what happened  
to the tallest twin towers in our nation.  
The September colors of yellow and red  
were the colors of fire and blood.  
The stars and stripes were flown at half-mast.

Now we are at war,  
not full-scale yet, but war nevertheless,  
with terrorists of color.  
I abhor what these people have done,  
And I know that the President does not want  
us to be seen as pale cowards.  
So now “the rocket’s red glare,  
the bombs bursting in air”  
will be seen in far – distant places.  
Now untold numbers of men and women  
are wearing the colors of camouflage,  
the colors of sand and earth and foliage.  
They are being deployed to places  
where terrorists may be.

The terrorists who wounded our country  
are people of color,  
but they are not like me.  
Many Americans are eager for war,  
for payback, for revenge,  
but I am not like them.  
I love my color,  
I will honor my country’s colors.  
But I want myself and my nation to be known  
for more than the color of blood.

10/8/01

**Sharon Warner** is a dynamic community poet and teacher in Chicago. She read this poem at a public session given by the Neighborhood Writing Alliance during the 2001 Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English held in Chicago. Sharon did not participate in Grassroots 2002 but has been invited for the 2003 event. The Neighborhood Writing Alliance has collaborated with The Centre for Literacy in other community writing events.

