



Hart House Review



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## Featured Contributors

**Lauren Kirshner** graduated from the University of Toronto's Masters of English in the field of creative writing in 2007. Her creative non-fiction piece, "Twenty Poems for Claudia" appears in *I Live Here* (Pantheon, 2008). Her debut novel, *Where We Have to Go*, will be published by McClelland & Stewart in June 2009. **Mia Kirshner** is an actress and co-author of *I Live Here*.

*The interview with Lauren and Mia Kirshner can be found on page 59. Selections from Lauren's "Twenty Poems for Claudia" begins on page 63.*

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**Ronna Bloom** has published three books of poetry. Her most recent collection, *Public Works*, (Pedlar Press, 2004) was shortlisted for The Pat Lowther Award. She works as a teacher of poetry and prose writing and as a psychotherapist. Her poetry has been translated into Spanish and Bangla, recorded for the CNIB, and broadcast on CBC Radio. She has led writing workshops across Canada and abroad, and is currently Poet in Community at the University of Toronto. Ronna's fourth book, *Permiso*, (Pedlar Press) is out in Spring 2009.

*Selected poems from Ronna Bloom's upcoming book, Permiso, begins on page 65.*

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**Priscila Uppal** is a Toronto poet and fiction writer born in Ottawa, 1974. Among her publications are five collections of poetry with Exile Editions, and two critically-acclaimed novels including *To Whom It May Concern* (2009); both published with Doubleday Canada. Her work has been published internationally and in many languages, and she appeared on the 2007 shortlist for the Griffin Prize for Excellence in Poetry. Forthcoming in 2010 are a selected poetry collection, *Successful Tragedies*, from Bloodaxe Books (U.K.), and a new poetry collection, *Traumatology*, from Exile Editions. She is an alumni of the University of Toronto and York University, where she is currently a professor of English. She also sits on the Board of Directors at the Toronto Arts Council.

*Selected poems from Priscila Uppal's upcoming poetry collection, Traumatology, begins on page 67.*

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**Davida Nemeroff** was born in Montreal (b. 1981). When she was nineteen she left to attend Ryerson University, School of Image Arts in Toronto. After graduating, she bummed around the city photographing local bands and doing editorial work for Canadian magazines. Two years ago she left Toronto for the Big Apple to get her MFA Visual Arts at Columbia University. She finishes this May. Davida Nemeroff is represented by Katharine Mulherin Contemporary Art Projects in Toronto.

*Davida Nemeroff's statement and selected photography begins on page 72.*

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# Interview: Lauren and Mia Kirshner

BY ERNEST PANG, MACY SIU, AND CHRISTINE YAO

The Toronto sisters discuss their recent collaboration, *I Live Here*—a print documentary that gives voice to victims of humanitarian crises in four areas of the world, as well as their views on the printed page, and the city's arts scene.

*Mia, how did you introduce Lauren to this project—in “Twenty Poems for Claudia”, it is suggested that Lauren received a box of items related to Claudia through the mail; how did you procure and select these items for Lauren?*

**MK:** I spent some time in Juarez Mexico with Claudia's family collecting first person accounts and ephemera. This was before I knew that Lauren would be working on the project. But when I approached Lauren, I innately felt her writing style would lend itself toward what I hoped the story would be about. I gave her the information I had collected in Juarez. She took it from there.

*Lauren, can you tell us about the fragments of the real Claudia?*

**LK:** There were photographs of Juarez and of the outlying areas, zones of concrete gray, where the sky is huge. There were pages from Claudia's high school notebooks; interviews; her notes in her handwriting; photos of Claudia with her friends; autopsy reports; maps. I had already begun my own research into Juarez. But compared to the secondary sources I'd been using, these objects were fiercely real. They brought perspective to my journey into Claudia's world.

*What kinds of tensions or harmonies between did you encounter through the collaborative process of making I Live Here?*

**MK:** I had three collaborators, Paul Shoebridge, Mike Simons and James MacKinnon, who are all extremely talented artists and I learned a lot from them. I think

through my work with them I became a better artist and writer. When you work on something over seven years you're not going to agree on everything. Sometimes collaboration has conflict in it. Lauren's piece, “Twenty Poems for Claudia”, went through a number of drafts until it reached the version that met her vision and ours. Ultimately, the collaboration made the piece as strong as it is.

*Lauren, how did you use your artistic license to represent her story in “Twenty Poems for Claudia”?*

**LK:** This was my first experience with writing creative non-fiction and I was asking myself ethical questions. Who was I to be writing about a woman whose language I don't speak? Whose street I've never walked on? I decided to take all of these fragments and sew them together. Only I would show my work. The result is the conversation style of the piece. My artistic license ended up being about permission—permission to insert my own process into the narrative. It became a conversation about writing life as much as it did a story about life.

*Do the quotations stem from interviews as a direct source, or are they a product of the creative process?*

**LK:** They're real.

*I Live Here is an art object. Can you tell us about the production and publication that went into creating its complex pastiche? Is there any difference between the original conception of the book and the final product?*

**MK:** When I started the book I knew I wanted it to look like an intimate journal. It took so long to make because we were trying to find a form that would reflect the intimacy of the stories and not betray those voices. Each page went through a minimum of ten revisions and the same can be said for the writing. Many people volunteered their times to make the book happen. Joe Sacco, Phoebe Glockener. All of these people were working toward the common goal of expressing untold stories.

*I Live Here is also an interdisciplinary work combining art, writing, and politics among other things—how do you think all of these mediums work together to create the book as a whole?*

**LK:** The mediums reflect the diversity of voices. Just one voice is made up of so many parts. The form hopefully reflects this.

**MK:** I think the book is political as a result of the subjects we covered, but the book is not about politics. It's a book about how, although we are geographically far from the people in this book, our basic desires remain the same.

*The global scope of I Live Here is contrasted with the specificity of "Here" in the title. What does the titular phrase mean to you personally and also in relation to the project? Why is the word "Here" struck out visually on the cover?*

**LK:** Most of the people represented in the book have moved many times during their lives, often forcibly. Some don't know where their next "here" will be. To be able to say "I Live"—to assert one's identity in spite of so much uncertainty—is a declaration of power. The stories are about this instinct.

**MK:** The phrase "I Live" is a testimonial to the

survival of these people in the book. The homes were taken away but they subsisted, which is the ultimate form of victory.

*I Live Here plays with the boundaries of reality and fiction. Mia, how does the combination of fiction and fact impact truth in the work as a whole?*

**MK:** All of the creative non-fiction is based on material about the subjects. So it's grounded in their versions of the truth. We chose to use creative non-fiction to give the reader different doorways to explore this subject through.

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*Will the people you encountered in Malawi, Chechnya, Burma, and Mexico have a chance to look at the finished product of I Live Here? If some already have, what kind of response have you received?*

**MK:** A girl we wrote about in the Malawi section has read the book. She wrote me a letter and was very touched by the representation. As a side note, she'll be our local facilitator for our creative writing program. That's one of the things I'm most proud of in this book. That I'm able to give back to the people who shared their stories for this book.

*What do you think about the notion of the "death of the book" in an age of digital media?*

**LK:** For me, the experience of reading at a computer for an extended period of time

or with a hand-held device is passive. The sense of touch and play is gone. To really enter a book, its story, you need to hold weight in your hands. I like the smell of old newsprint pages. I like walking into bookstores and seeing the tables stacked with new books. On hearing of the “death of the book” I know some people might say, “Well, it’s just the physical form we’re talking about, so don’t worry. Digital makes it more convenient and accessible.” But really it doesn’t. Most people in the world don’t own computers or Kindles. This is also an equity issue.

**MK:** That’s a devastating concept. Losing the romance of book stores, passing on a favourite book to a friend—that would be a great loss. I really don’t like the Kindle and am totally against it. I worry about what such devices will do to the book industry. The publishing industry is really hurting right now. I think it’s extremely important to continue to buy books from local independent bookstores and to support emerging voices.

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*Do the two of you have any personal writing rituals that you use?*

**LK:** I usually write in pencil and if I can find those old-fashioned pads of yellow lined paper, I’m happy. But I’m really not that picky. Usually I just use whatever I find at the corner store or shoved in the back of my drawer. I write in my bedroom. I have a big window that faces the streetcar tracks and I like to listen to the sound of the wheels.

**MK:** I write everything in longhand and only when I have some semblance of what I’m trying to say do I go to the computer. I like using cheap notebooks.

*You were both raised as Torontonians—what do you think of Toronto as a creative and cultural space? Are there any notable memories of Toronto that coincide with your artistic careers?*

**LK:** I fell in love with reading in Toronto, and started going to used bookstores when I was about fourteen. There was one downtown where I would buy books for a quarter each. The place was this beautiful dump. I got my first Graham Greene novel there... Garcia Lorca... volume of Al Purdy. The store is gone now... it’s been replaced by a condominium.

**MK:** Toronto was where I began as an actress. It’s where my roots are. I remember spending weekends at Wychwood library devouring books. I love Kensington Market and its multiculturalism. I think all of these little puzzle pieces influence how I approach my work.

*Lauren, you were published in the 2006 issue of the Hart House Review. How do you feel HHR has helped you in your burgeoning literary career? Do you have any thoughts about HHR as a platform for emerging writers?*

**LK:** I was twenty-one when the *Hart House Review* took my poem and it was really my first publication in a literary journal. I was delighted. And very flattered to be published alongside such excellent writers. I had read and admired the writing in the *Review* since my first year of university. You know, being published in the *HHR* was one of those moments when I thought, “Hmm, maybe this writing thing can work after all.” That was my moment of possibility. ■

## "Twenty Poems for Claudia" (excerpt)

LAUREN KIRSHNER

*I Live Here* (Pantheon Books, 2008)

It is hours past dusk, and a white-painted bus snakes through a town that is falling asleep. A girl, twenty years old and a little stooped, sits near the front, watching the road. She passes Wal-Marts, Blockbusters, shopping malls, black-tinted cars, girls with waxed eyebrows and brown lipstick. Men sniffing glue from brown paper bags, eleven-year-olds still in their checkered school uniforms. In the distance, huge factories puff the odor of metal and fire. A sign on a clothing store: *SÍ SE PUEDE*. Yes, you can. On \$55 US dollars a week, you can buy half a pair of blue Guess sneakers or a beige denim jumper and white blouse with stripes. You can buy nine Big Mac meals or just a little less than one pair of American jeans with Broncos on the label, made right here in Ciudad Juárez, the city of missing women. You can buy a swatch of fake, plum-red hair and pay the beautician on Avenida Juárez to take up her half-moon needle and sew it in. You can buy the hair of a beauty. *Sí se puede*. It can be done.

People call it the cotton field—some long ago memory, because there is no cotton here. There is a filmy yellow sun air shattered earth. In some places, that buried earth is littered with crushed gasoline car women's shoes, empty chip bags, broken Budweiser bottles. There is so much waste that it is hard to see the ground.

*"We found out through the radio. We turned the TV on and they were broadcasting live. The neighbors heard, too, and since they knew what was going on they came to the house."*

*"They were pulling the bodies out of the irrigation canal. And we kept on seeing eight body bags. And they wouldn't give us any information."*

Claudia, I've written your story five times and scrapped every one of them. I was trying to explain things that I had no way of knowing. Now I know what the problem was. I was thinking of myself instead of you. How I wanted things to make sense, to find logic in the fragments. Your story is not logical. Your story will never be finished.

You are an object out of four hundred others, one that no one wants to touch.

*"And we went to this house near the Lear plant. We broke into the house and there was blood on the wall and girls' soiled underwear on the floor. And there were some cops riding by. We showed them the missing poster. And they told us to mind our own business."*

Claudia, we were born in the same year. When you started working a forty-five hour week, I was in high school cutting pictures of Kurt Cobain out of *Kerrang!* magazine, pasting them onto the cover of my agenda. I was in the washroom with an eyeliner pencil and a compact of powder trying to cover it all up. You were coming home so tired, maybe smelling like the exhaust from the bus that took you into and out of the maquiladora factory zone. Maybe you sat with your best friend Idet, drinking coffee with condensed milk. Or maybe you made your favorite dinner, enchiladas with extra cheese. Maybe you sat twisting the laces of your blue Guess sneakers and dreaming of transformation.

Claudia, it's been four months, your life sitting in my closet. Am I any closer to knowing what it feels like to start assembling electrical cables from the age of fifteen? To kneel in front of a statue of the Virgin and promise to be pious? Me, with the blue eyes and the bagful of Barbies in my basement? Your life in my closet, Claudia. It hasn't felt right from the start.

*"When she turned fifteen we made her a small cake and she was happy. She wanted something bigger but her family didn't have the money. She started making plans to find a job. We altered her papers and she got what she wanted—a job in a factory."*

Lear Corporation is a manufacturer of automotive interiors. Factory #173 is housed in three sprawling buildings in the maquiladora zone. Busses let the workers off two blocks from the entrance and everyone walks in their blue smocks or coveralls. At the age of fifteen, Claudia joined the procession. She would forget about Jorge in his inexpensive casket. She would forget her *quinceñera* because there was nothing to remember.

There is no sense in waiting for someone else to organize your party. If you want a beautiful life, you must work for it.

Claudia, you picked up your coat to go. Your sister Mayela asked if you could bring her a burger, and you said she'd have to wait until Friday, when you would get your check. You had missed a bus and would have to run. So much in a life is ordinary.

*"That day she came to work exactly two or three minutes late. She was really tired. Her eyes were red and puffy, like she'd been crying. I think since she was late she was running or walking faster. She got there at the same time I was leaving with some friends. My shift was over. I said hi and asked her, 'What's up, Clau?'"*

*She answered, 'What's up?'*

*I told her they were not going to let her work because she was late.*

*She said, 'No?'*

*I asked the guard to let her in because, in the end, it was only, like, two or three minutes. He told her he couldn't but he would ask the people inside.*

*I was, like, 'She's only three minutes late!'*

*And he said, 'No! I'll tell them she's here.'*

*Then I told her I'd see her around, and she said, 'Cool.' And she just stayed there waiting to be let in to work."*

Idet stayed up all night for you, Claudia. Your best friend. Maybe she was thinking of the time when you were seven years old and you and Gema slipped away from your grandfather and disappeared. Gema who now lives across the border in Texas. That time, the police brought you back, two scared, hungry, sun-struck kids.

A person vanishes from sight and all that remains are memories. Your sister Mayela remembers the secretive ways you showed affection. How you hugged and kissed her daughters only if you thought that no one was looking, how her daughter Carla could always fall asleep if you were in the bed beside her. Your sudden disappearance reminded Mayela how strong you were. How you could keep everything bottled up inside.