

Worlds beautiful and dangerous

AMY REISWIG

Yasuko Thanh writes stories about normal people in extreme situations.



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I know how to make a poultice from the powdered marrow of tiger bones or the roughest part of a bear paw, how to pound it smooth until the sinews are supple." These Vietnamese healer-woman's words remarkably represent the powers and process executed by good writers: making potent compounds from unexpected elements. In that regard, it stands as an apt artist's statement for the person who put them to paper: Victoria writer Yasuko Thanh.

This month, Thanh celebrates the launch of her debut short-story collection, *Floating Like the Dead* (April 2012, Emblem Editions, an imprint of McClelland & Stewart), and it is a blend of the supple and the sharp. Recently graduated with an MFA from UVic, Thanh won

the Journey Prize in 2009, and she's been a finalist for the Future Generations Millennium Prize, the Hudson Prize, and the David Adams Richards Prize.

Having interviewed Thanh before, for her personal essay in *Walk Myself Home: an Anthology to end Violence Against Women* (Harbour, December 2010), I know that underneath today's buttoned-up poodle sweater are tattoos across her chest and down her upper arms. I also know she has led an unconventional life while growing up here in Victoria and then travelling and living in Mexico, Latin America and Germany. But this Sunday morning in the spacious, retro-decorated living room of the Cadboro Bay house she shares with her husband and two daughters, Thanh seems perfectly placed in what is outwardly a very conventional domestic dream.

This comfort with contrast is part of what makes Thanh's fiction so striking. While some writers rely on style to reflect subject, Thanh takes the opposite approach. "I had come to UVic's writing program with a large portfolio," the petite Thanh tells me, legs curled under her on the red rug, "but it was mostly episodic, fragmented narrative." Admiring of writers like Michael Turner and William Burroughs and work like John Gould's *Kilter: 55 Fictions* ("It's like getting a sliver in your foot," she says of Gould's book: "It just stays in there"), it took one exercise to change everything. "[Writer and UVic instructor] Steven Price—who I can't say enough good things about—gave each of us an assignment based on weaknesses or habits he saw in our work. My challenge," Thanh laughs, "was to write a chronological, linear narrative." It worked. The resulting story, now the title story of this collection, became the Journey Prize-winner. Thanh admits that "In a way, that story shaped everything that I've written after."

In these nine stories, each between 15 and 30 pages, structurally conventional and exceptionally controlled prose contains characters whose lives are anything but: a young man on death row for murder in the 1940s; a woman caught up in her lover's border-town bank robbery and hostage-taking; a couple dealing drugs out of their resort in Mexico; a woman in Vietnam, married when barely older than a schoolgirl, betrayed by her husband; a gay Vancouver man watching his lover slowly die; the last Chinese lepers living out their exile on our own D'Arcy Island in the 1920s.

These are stories of fear, loss, identity and foreignness—foreignness with other cultures, other people, your environment, your own self and your own choices. Thanh creates and considers normal people in situations of extremity, and she tells me about her interest in "how circumstances create the people we are and wish we could become, a curiosity around issues of resiliency. It puzzles me," she says. "I have a lot of friends who—not because they weren't good or strong—went under. I don't think it's a character thing, and I don't think it's a morally superior or inferior thing either. In the book, everyone is at a different stage in their ability to make those choices."

The various settings and times allow her to examine existence from many angles. What choice is there, for example, once confined to a leper colony? She finds it, and places it like a small jewel within a lovely scene of loss—loss so simply, subtly delineated: "He shuffled past the

Springing into shape—without pain

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crops, which had spoiled before the men with their waning appetites had been able to eat them, and the pigs rooting in the waste. He nodded to Ge Shou, who sat among the pigs. He passed the plot of land they'd

cleared of birch trees two years ago for an apple orchard."

And she asks, indirectly, what choices we have when it comes to corrosive love when, in one character's experience, it comes "barreling through her with a hurricane force that left her feeling uprooted," and another says: "For him, I would slip a noose slowly around my own neck and give him the chance to save me."

"That was my experience of love before I met Hank," Thanh says quietly. "I didn't even believe in it

as a concept, which is why it was so strange that it happened to me." Her shy smile erupts into unabashed joy when she talks about rockabilly musician husband, Hank Engel (Thanh herself plays in the all-girl band Jukebox Jezebel). That good, true love "is what provides the undertone of hope in the book," she acknowledges, what allows one woman, not wanting to part from her lover going to war, to say: "I don't want to wait. Look how goddamn beautiful everything is." Thanh's work and the worlds she creates are beautiful—beautiful and dangerous, the lake full of piranhas.

And like the Vietnamese healer in her book, Thanh has the ability to manipulate and transform what might seem dangerous, to take individual raw elements and, through knowledge and skill, make something more powerful. Thanh's healer says, "I know how the grafted branch of a peach tree tips its soul into the cut made by the gardener's knife and spills its soul into the wound, driven by the simple yearning to become part of a greater life"—a greater life that Thanh's fiction also lets us enter.



Writer and musician Amy Reiswig works by day (and sometimes into the night) as an editor for the provincial government. Besides her monthly gig in *Focus*, her writing has appeared in *Quill & Quire*, *The Malahat Review* and *The Walrus*.

Apriil hath put a spirit of youth in everything" wrote William Shakespeare. As wonderful as that sounds, you may not feel quite as youthful as you would like when you hit the running trail for the first time after a winter hiatus. Enter: Triangle Healing. "We've got some great products to support people's desire to achieve optimum health," says Diane Regan, Triangle's owner and health diva. "It's what we're all about."

A good place to start is to introduce ASEA into your daily regime to increase your natural energy, performance, endurance and recovery. Guaranteed.

Whether this is the year that you're finally running the TC 10K, or you just want to kick up your step a little on your stroll through Mount Doug, Triangle can help keep you pain- and injury-free. "If you're injured or sick, then you're not out there doing what you love, so it's important to be smart about it," says a very experienced Regan.

Supporting your feet is something that Regan is passionate about. "Treat your feet right and they will treat you right," she explains. And it's easy at Triangle Healing with the revolutionary Barefoot Science System. Unlike increasingly expensive orthotics, the Barefoot Science system isn't designed to artificially support your feet, rather it actually strengthens the weakened muscles that support the foot and gets them back into shape. Healthy feet can make for pain-free feet—and hips, knees and backs. "Healthy feet are really fundamental to all movement," explains Regan.

Phiten is another name that is synonymous with pain-free exercise. Choose from a wide selection of Titanium necklaces, bracelets, power sleeves, body supports and socks. Your elbows, knees and ankles will thank you for the Aqua-Titanium micro spheres that help avoid and ease tension and joint pain.

"Warming up those muscles and joints before you put them to task is imperative in avoiding injuries," warns Regan, "but the warm-up doesn't have to be complicated—and it should be fun." The Bellicon Rebounder is a fun way to warm-up every muscle in your body. You can get into shape indoors while the weather is catching up to your desire to be outdoors. Another great indoor option is to shake it up with the T-Zone Vibration system. Just 10 minutes with the T-Zone will give you the same benefits as a one-hour workout.

And, if you've pushed it too hard, it's great to come home to a deep-tissue therapeutic body massage. The amazing PowerFingers™ ProMassager home unit enlists three sets of massage heads (soft medium and firm) and 10 digital speeds to deliver 30 choices of percussion massage—and it weighs less than three pounds.

At the end of the day, why not finish it off by slipping into a soothing hot sauna? Radiant Health Saunas provide deep heat therapy through their infrared systems, bringing relief and healing to muscle and soft tissue. The increased blood circulation delivers oxygen-rich blood to strained, and sore muscles, so they recover faster—and get you back out there sooner. Happy trails!



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