

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2013, First-Place Fiction Winner

By Jody Collins
And This Is Haven

There is a method to the colour red. It has something to say, and, more importantly, it has something to do. Whether it is in the form of a flower, an accident on a cutting board, a dress, the aftermath of a fight, or the heated precursor to an argument, when red is in the room there is no denying it. And, ironically, people often go quite red in effort to stop what it says and does. Still, if it is experienced as pooled passion-turned-violence or heard as thundering drums of allied protest, each connected by cause and fury, the red that is there is really there.

As I step through the puddled parking lot and onto the crosswalk, animated by rolling rainwater, my eyes hit the red centre that is the Target retail store. I work to dam the consumerism metaphors that flood my mind with the same fluid pace as the rainwater under my footsteps. Besides, today I am not a target. I am not a consumer. I am a mentor. I am a volunteer for Restorative Justice Victoria, a community-based, victim-centred, criminal justice program that processes first time offenses. With discretion, the Crown Council, arresting officer or organization refers the case to Restorative Justice to offer the offender an opportunity to demonstrate personal responsibility for the offence, to divert proceeding with court prosecution and defense, and to heal the harms and right the wrongs. In this case, Haven, the offender, my mentee, works to take accountability for a crime that impacted the community, Target and an elderly woman named Audrey. This accountability is realized as Haven works to heal and restore individual and community safety and values in a circle process whereby perspectives are shared and an agreement is reach through a consensus between the victim(s), community and offender. If this agreement is not actualized, Haven will face criminal charges with punitive consequences—and a criminal record. This justice process is not a means to a prescriptive, disciplinary end. Actually, it often means brave beginnings.

From the beginning, my mentor role means to offer support to Haven through intake to agreement completion—to be there for the whole story-as-it-happens. This is my role, but my hopes inform a different story: this story. When I first meet Haven—his name a place many of us may never find—he moves me with boundless beauty and terror. His dark hair grows down over his deep eyes. He looks at me only twice in those three hours, but when he does, two dark, severe owls face me from within the thick, twisted branches of hair. It feels as though he is from an epic tale, and I so want him to be the hero I see instead of the scoundrel he thinks himself to be. Although, we don't agree to meet in some forbidden forest, his openness allows us to travel somewhere far and away. I sense he likes taking me with him. As he tells me his history of violence and betrayal, what I know about justice and goodness takes the greatest beating, and he carries us well beyond his sixteen years of age. He reveals his real age as I witness him frighten himself with his own stories. There is no hard copy to read from—yet—with many thanks to the restless spirit of goodness. There are still blank pages for hope. And what about justice? In what form will it finally show up? After he finishes, I tell him that in our

time together—and I hope we have lots of time—that I am confident that we can find a way for him to use his fighting spirit to help, instead of harm, himself and others. This is my hope, I tell him.

On the bus going to Target, I watch Haven pick at the seam of his jeans.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask.

“Nothing. Don’t like the manager.” He refers to the manager at Target.

“What don’t you like about him?”

“He thinks I’m a loser.”

Haven pauses but he wants to say a whole lot more. His finger travels the map of burns on his forearms, each one an unprotected port made easy for looting by modern day pirates.

“You’re nervous about talking to him.”

He moves into the window. “He’s got no clue.”

A sheet of water moves sideways with the wind over the pain of glass and disappears.

“Have you ever had a surprise party?”

The window absorbs his anger and turns it to fog.

“For you,” he adds.

He’s right. I should’ve invited him to be vulnerable.

“No.”

“Don’t have one. They’re the worst.”

He’s inviting me—now.

“Why?”

“Just believe me.”

I can see that Haven was using last night because he is pale and the dark owls, that are his eyes, have turn there backs to the world.

“Ok. I believe you.”

We often believe before we understand so I try not to imagine this party, but I continue speaking to him in my mind as though he is wise to a world most of us can’t or won’t see. *I think we feel nervous because we care.* I know what he cares about. I know what he’s afraid of. When asked, his response to both is an emphatic, and fairly typical but untrue: not much. I have no real idea about what he hopes for, and it feels too dangerous or cruel to ask. This *is* the desolate and forbidden forest. I am afraid that he doesn’t have any hopes. I am afraid this is too true, and that I won’t know what I can do to help to change this truth. *What can I do? How can I give him hope?*

My gaze is bolted to the muddy floor. I pry my eyes away from that neutral space to connect with Haven before we hit Target. We glide to into the bus stop. Our mission is to deliver an apology letter to the manager of Target to formally and actively address accountability and affect on the community. We stop just outside the entrance. I touch his shoulder as the doors shuttle open with too much energy to be of welcome, and we are suddenly within a brilliant and oddly corporeal contrast of red and white. While I stop to wipe my feet on the mat, Haven presses on as though he is still outrunning the downpour—the bottoms of his jeans black-n’-blue with mud and water. I know he just wants to get this over with as soon as possible. The glossy floors glare up at us as Haven’s rubber soled shoes scream across the

slick surface. He's reached men's wear before he looks back for me. I smile as I hurry to catch him. I know now he is feeling nervous because when we walk through crowds, he always seems to know where I am. It seems that he hopes to protect me from what he knows—to shield me from what he sees—about the streets. This is Haven, the protector.

If I were alone, I would shop for safety in familiar items on the shelves. If I were alone, I would quickly forget myself as my imagination diversified to enter the homes of strangers. If I were alone, I would be emptied of personal priorities and filled with a domestic dialogue—the ordinary dispute between needs and wants. I work to adjust my thoughts to our purpose as we wait at the back of the store for the manager, Jason, to meet us. In the ten or so minutes that we stand there, I settle into the scene to watch various individuals simmer in the convention of their selections, to witness a couple's negotiation close on reason over emotion, to surrender to a senior's loneliness poorly mitigated by ritual and red-tag savings. Although, I can practically picture their households, neither Haven nor I are at home with these people. And still, what is within them is within us. I think of a fellow volunteer that likes to close the circle with a quote. Once it was Rumi's words: "Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."

Jason comes at us through aisle seven: bathroom fixtures and shower curtains.

"Thanks for waiting," he says, intending for us to see his long list of uncompleted tasks through his expression.

Haven steps back and I step forward to shake Jason's hand. It's dry but warm. Jason and I go through a quick round of friendly this-and-that gestures.

"You have something for me?" Jason asks.

"Yup." Haven hands him a marked envelope.

Jason accepts it and begins to tear it open.

Haven's face loses all expression. "Look. I'm sorry!" he exclaims.

His shoe squeaks as he pivots, and Haven's gone, out of sight down the next aisle over.

I don't move a muscle, but my heart follows him. I let him go.

Jason says, "I'll call security."

"No, please," I say.

This is security, actually.

"I think you'll be pleased with the letter. Haven put a lot of thought into it."

"Ok," he says.

Jason's not a bad guy—not at all. There's a lot he doesn't understand, like me. And, I'm not so sure he's willing to believe what he can't see.

"I just don't know how he could do what he did."

"I understand," I say, warmly. "I hope the apology letter will help."

"I still don't get it," he says, blushing.

This is a transaction. And I believe Jason will find he got what he paid for.

"I'll call you tomorrow after you've had a chance to read the letter."

"Sure," he says, with some longing. "I thought it would be different."

He wipes his damp hands on his red shirt before he shakes my hand. I imagine Haven outside. Actually, I practically know that he is just outside the entrance waiting for me. I thank Jason for his time and participation. I acknowledge his hopes for a different experience. We often think that this difference exposes and isolates us—like shame—but it can also bring us together as we embrace the uncertainty and vulnerability in being together as best we can—to include difference is to include another. It seems, too, that as we demonstrate hope, we can also feel exposed and isolated if we aren't open to different ways of making sense. In this work, I've realized that sometimes what I can do is simply to sit still with others within their shame, vulnerability, uncertainty and hope—to include my own.

As I pass by the electronics, I hear a song that I hope Haven could hear. I am very familiar with the shocking beauty and terror within synchronicity so I do not judge or question. I do gamble, however. I do look for meaning. And I do try to listen to what is playing.

And as his face lost all expression, he said, 'If you're gonna play the game boy, you've got to learn to play it right. You got to know when to hold 'em. You got to know when to fold 'em. Know when to walk away. And know when to run. You never count your money when you're sitting at the table. There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealing's done.'

On the day of the Restorative Justice Dialogue, the circle process, I remind Haven that the space will include everyone and their stories and perspectives. I go over who will be included: the victims, a representative from the community, the police officer, the facilitators, himself and me. I tell him that he won't be judged. I tell him that he is not what he did, and that this is a safe space to take accountability for what he did. I tell him that this is an opportunity to listen to others, to repair the harm, and to move forward with some new lessons and understanding about his self and others. With this last declaration, he frowns. He is not used to feeling understood.

"I bet the cop will lie and say I am..."

I intervene, "You don't need to defend yourself. Just by walking into that room you are making a bold statement."

He hangs his head.

"I am here for you," I say, and my heart goes into my throat.

"Yeah. *You* are, but..."

"No, 'but'," I say. "We are all on the same side. Well, there are no sides, actually. It's a circle, right?"

"Yeah."

"Are you willing to see what happens?" I ask.

"Yeah." His finger charts out the burns that scar his forearm. I notice he steers clear of the new, red marks.

I make a mental note to give him something to keep his hands busy in the circle.

"Everyone has to be courageous. Even me. And I will tell the others about your courage."

"You will?"

"I will."

Haven pulls his sleeve down. His is ready and willing to go into uncharted territory. This is Haven, the brave hero. I am so honoured to go with him. And I am nervous because I care. It's my first mentor role. I have facilitated many circles, and it seems there's something profound about showing up for Haven as an advocate that intensifies my commitment to activate what is both wonderfully fierce and sensitive in this world of paradox—a world of possibility and inclusivity.

In the circle, after the facilitators go through the introduction phase to set a tone for inclusivity, fairness and respect and establish confidentiality, they ask Haven to share his perspective. The facilitator asks him to tell us what happened. Haven tells us what happened:

I got high with friends behind the movie theatre. One of my friends said something stupid and I left. Then I went into Target and thought about taking some video games, but I didn't because the theft tags are a pain. I went up the escalator but saw an old lady on the main floor so I decided to come right back down. At first, I was just messing around by following her around the store. It was something to do. She went all around the store and I walked behind her. Then she left so I did too. But then in the parking lot, I thought I would grab her purse. I thought that she had a nice car and probably had lots of money so I didn't care. I just grabbed it. I didn't mean to knock you over, he says, directly to her. And, he continues: she held onto the strap. I pulled hard and she fell. Then I ran. But I guess the manager followed me out. He saw me try to take her purse and called the cops. The security guard grabbed me and held me against a car. Then I saw someone pick up the clothes on the ground. The cops showed up and took me away. They arrested me for trying to take her purse and for assault. That's it.

The facilitator pauses. "Were you also charged with theft?"

"Yeah. I took a pair of kids' corduroy overalls." He slouches into the chair.

Then facilitator asks what he was thinking and feeling at the time.

"I told you," he says. "And...part of me wasn't really thinking. I just did it."

"How do you feel now?"

"Horrible." Haven starts to play with his sleeve.

I wonder where the stress ball went. I hand him the pen by his feet. He begins to draw on the palm of his hand.

The facilitator looks at me and I nod to urge him on.

"Who do you think was affected?"

"All of you," he says.

"Can you tell us how so?"

"You guys are all busy and this takes time. Jason is busy and it's his store so he's affected because I caused problems at his store. And Audrey got hurt. I probably scared her too."

"Ok. What are your hopes for this meeting?"

Haven shows us the palm of his hand. It's a red circle—maybe a target? He points to Audrey.

"What is it on your hand that is significant?"

"Nothing. I didn't mean to hurt her. I wouldn't push her down on purpose. I am actually sorry that she fell when I tried to take her purse."

“So you’re saying that by trying to steal her purse, you violated her rights and safety?”

“Yeah. I did.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

“No.” He looks at Audrey. Then his eyes drop to stare at his open hand.

I remind him that he can speak during the open dialogue after everyone has had a chance to share perspectives.

After Jason, Audrey, the police officer and the community member each share their perspectives—to readily corroborate with Haven’s story and express their own hopes and concerns—the open dialogue naturally shifts to gathering ideas to repair the harm. We move onto the last phase to work for consensus and establish agreement terms for meaningful and proportionate restorative justice.

Besides the apology letter, counseling and looking into support for addiction and self-care, Audrey has a set of terms that involves her house hosting a dinner for Haven and me. It isn’t entirely unusual for the victim to involve herself in the agreement, and this suggestion does raise some eyebrows. It seems most everyone is delighted by the idea if only because it’s novel and quite precious. And Haven shows no signs of disagreement to contradict the clarity of his response: “Sure. I’ll go.” This is Haven: simultaneously immediate and what I’d call “a slow reveal”.

On the night of the dinner, along with my usual anxiety about visiting a strange home, I am filled with curiosity and excitement. I hope that this won’t be like a surprise party experience for Haven—or me. More than anything, I hope that no one else’s hopes are dashed—to include my own as they emerge. I was assigned to this case, right after the ten weeks of training, and I was terrified that I might hurt someone in the process of trying to help. Since I tend to think in metaphors, I identify with the sensibility that I am to butter toast with a chainsaw. It seems that my fear produced a metaphor to help me find some practical hope—in order to connect my skills, the chainsaw, to my best intentions and efforts in order to help people—the toast. Basically, this particular metaphor depicts the tension between my hope to help and not cause harm—and tumult or tragedy for toast. At the heart of this tension is the realization of how much I care and hope to do my best for others in this work. And, what’s especially practical about this metaphor is that while I began with a chainsaw, I can empower myself by imagining a more suitable, effective and subtle butter knife. I imagine, now, that I will hold that knife with confidence on this dinner occasion. It is the imagination that transforms what is and what ought to be into what can be.

Haven and I ring the doorbell at Audrey’s house. The night sky is clear. The air is crisp. I fill my lungs. Haven isn’t dressed warm enough, but I think he is also heated by his curiosity. Audrey opens the door and we go inside. I step over a pair of red shoes, and, in a flash, I am remind of the Halloween that I dressed up as The Devil. My mother fashioned me a costume with horns and a long barbed tail. It was a good costume. In the morning as I dressed for school, I watched my sister, a pumpkin, get painted up with orange face paint. When it was my turn, she opted for red shoe polish instead of red paint. With each stroke of her fingers, my excitement diminished and I worked to mask my shame within my new devilish persona. At

school, my tears both exposed and isolated me. I didn't cry because I was upset—I could hide that—it was that the fumes went into my eyes and tears just came out.

Suddenly, I smell a wood fire burning, and am guided away from my memory. I am warmed with this easy familiarity—thank goodness. What I like about Restorative Justice is that by design there is no place to hide only circles of people in which to take safe refuge.

We exchange warm hugs, and Audrey says she wishes to show us around after dinner instead of right now. She insists that Haven and I settle by the fire as she prepares the dinner table.

“Make yourselves at home,” she says.

He looks so well sitting in a comfortable chair in the warm glow of the fire—reframed and restored by a forgiving space and gesture. Haven gazes into the fire. I notice there are no photos of children, but there are many photos of a man who appears to have spent his life with Audrey—her husband, of course. I am about to ask her about them, when she calls us to the table. We enjoy some nice conversation and a spaghetti dinner as per Haven's choice. In my mind, this is justice.

As mentioned, after Haven and I complete the dishes, Audrey offers to show us around the house. She also says that she'd like to take a walk with us to the bus stop. We line up to climb the hardwood stairs and follow her from room to room. We enter the last room on the top floor and right away I notice a change in Haven. He's agitated but so far I can't see why he would be. I consider that maybe he's just been playing along this whole time and is now suddenly fed up with appeasing this old woman. Then I witness both of them walk with purpose into what must be a sewing room. When Audrey turns on the lights, I can see that the room is filled with various department store items—kids clothing and toys, mostly—each one still in its package—some red-tagged. Haven steps closer to it all. His shoulders slump like he might cry. He's put it all together.

I start to work out what is happening in this room, what ought to have been exposed in the restorative justice process and what can be right here in this moment. First, I ask myself: Is Audrey a thief? I disqualify the thought because there is no such thing as a “thief”. Audrey has a habit of stealing children's clothing and toys, but there's more. I wait to be invited into the understanding that each of them knows and shares.

“I thought you caught me,” Audrey says.

“I did,” Haven replies, “but I still wanted your purse.”

He holds up his palm and I expect to see a red target, but there isn't one. He caught her red-handed, but instead of exposing her crime, he surrendered himself willingly—to throw up a white flag. Also, Audrey doesn't have any children. And even if she did, it's clear that these things are not here to be used by anyone. For Haven, there are no surprises here. And this is Haven: no judgment.

“I have one more room I need to show you,” she says.

At this point, I can't imagine what's to come.

We go back downstairs and she takes us directly to the room. The door is closed. She puts her hand on the door. Haven reaches past her for the doorknob and turns it. Audrey's face transforms from anguish to hope as Haven pushes the door open. It is an empty room.

“I can’t go in alone,” she says.

She invited us, in part, so she could finally go into the empty room. I am terrified, but I’m not really sure why. It’s dark inside. No one turns on the light switch. I feel fury form behind my brow bone. Haven invites me to go in first. I step inside where I see a typewriter in a shadow in the back corner of the room. I go closer and can see its boldness and beauty even as the darkness veils its full presence.

“This was the room where he wrote,” Audrey says, her grief seems to be ineffable.

I understand why we are here. I’d believed it was for Haven, and now I can see that our coming here was for Audrey too. We all stand a little lost in this darkness, and I can imagine a special kind of light. It is in this light—in relationship to others—that we are revealed and transformed. This, too, is justice. It is goodness.

At the entryway, Audrey slips on the red shoes. Haven looks at me and surrenders his gaze to me to reveal the owls—a living knowledge—in a story of many hopeful truths to be shared.

“I hope we can do this again,” Haven says. This is Haven, the hero.

I look back at the empty room and feel a fresh force of imagination and hope for the future. A Polish philosopher said, “We don’t surrender to a symbol unless we are carried away by it, and if we are not carried away by it, we don’t surrender to it.” Justice is a symbol of hope. We might be our own corrupt judge and jury, but there’s always hope and goodness to be found with others. And here it is: restorative justice.