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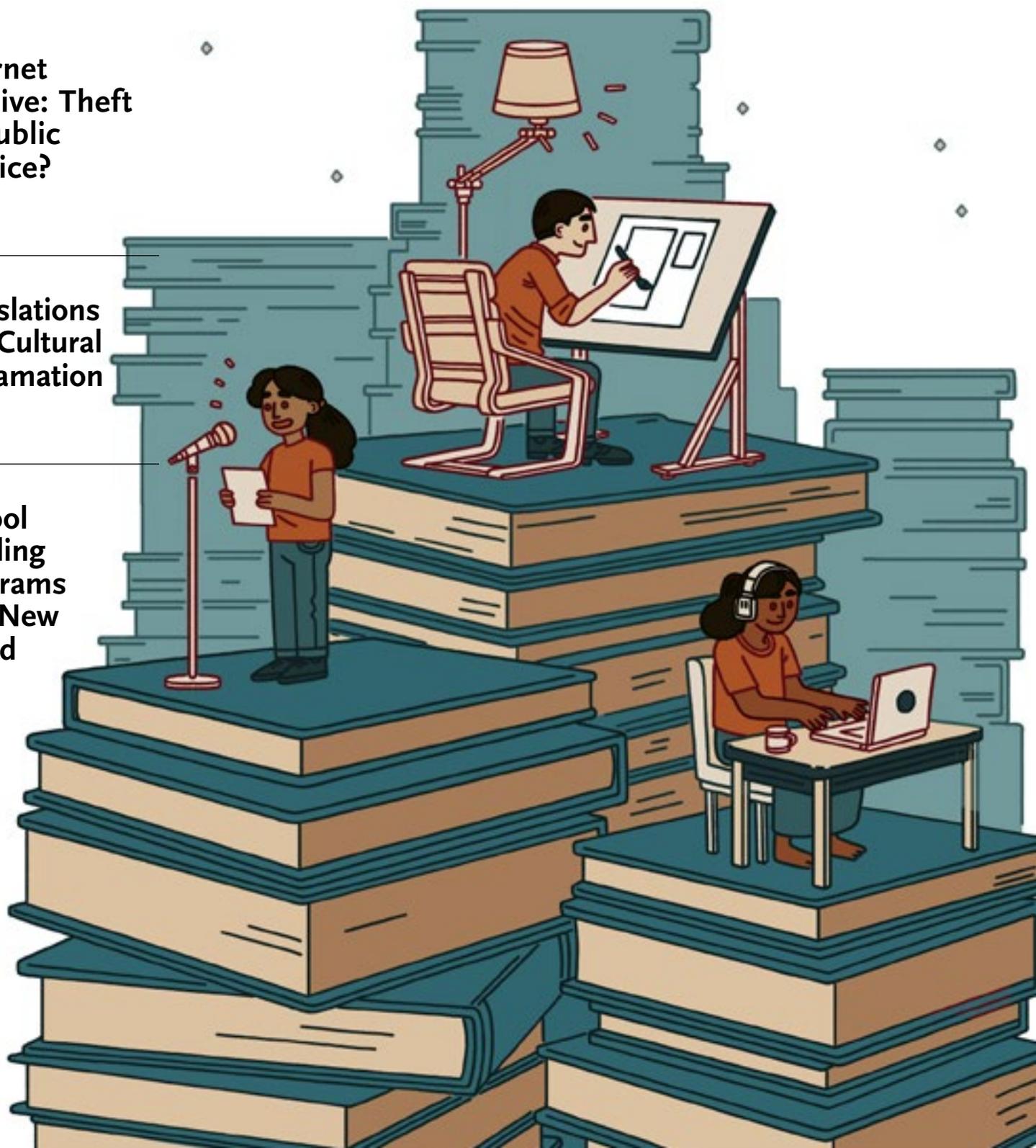
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TWUC NATIONAL OFFICE

Executive Director

John Degen, ext. 221

jdegen@writersunion.ca

Associate Director

Siobhan O'Connor, ext. 222

soconnor@writersunion.ca

Fund Development &

Projects Manager

Gaeby Abrahams, ext. 223

gabraahams@writersunion.ca

Office Administrator

Valerie Laws, ext. 224

info@writersunion.ca

Membership, Equity &

Engagement Coordinator

Jessica Kirk, ext. 226

jkirk@writersunion.ca

Editor Rhonda Kronyk write@writersunion.ca

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Editorial Board Suzanne Alyssa Andrew, Sylvia Gunnery, Dwayne Morgan,
Heather W. Wood

Copyeditor Nancy MacLeod

Write Magazine Advertising Gaeby Abrahams ads@writersunion.ca

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460 Richmond Street West, Suite 600, Toronto, Ontario, M5V 1Y1
T 416-703-8982, F 416-504-9090, info@writersunion.ca, www.writersunion.ca.

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The Void

BY MARY RYKOV



I wake from a lucid dream in which I'm watching another COVID-19 television newscast. I, a daughter of the Holocaust, shudder at the thought of mass graves on Hart Island. Or anywhere.

The sound and visual images are so vivid that I wake relieved to know I'm dreaming. I must be dreaming — I haven't owned a television since the 1990s.

The only regularity to my day occurs each evening as I join from my balcony the neighbourhood chorus of pots and pans. Otherwise, my workweek days are structured around Zoom meetings scheduled with editing clients and writing mentees to whom I extend a COVID-19 Special Offer of three free edit-hours for the duration of the lockdown to encourage them to continue writing through these uncertain times. In addition to résumés and cover letters, I edit a promising children's picture-book text and the first iteration of a doctoral dissertation.

For evening and weekend entertainment, I declutter by repurposing my lifelong fabric stash into surgical masks that I donate to my local hospital. I used to berate myself for each unnecessary purchase from the Textile Museum's annual volunteer auxiliary sale as I'd succumb to colour, texture, print — or a combination of all three. Now I realize some divine plan for my weak will as I cut and sew fabric into colourful masks. If this were the 1940s, I'd be knitting socks.

I pause from editing and sewing and pot-banging only to correct my publisher's final galley for my first book, a poetry collection. Poetry books are the least lucrative of literary

commodities in the best of times. These are not the best of times. I'm all the more grateful that my publisher persists with her Spring 2020 production schedule even in the context of pandemic chaos.

As I write this mid-April, my debut book's spring launch (fingers crossed) will now proceed without the fanfare of a catered live reading and book signing, followed by a celebratory dinner with friends and relatives. I emerge as a writer after the tablecloth was pulled out from below, flipping us into the air, not knowing when or where we'll land. With John Prine felled by COVID-19 and Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'" as earworm, I search for a meaningful metaphor to carry me into future unknowns I can't see or name. Edge of a precipice? Ends of the Earth? Hot air balloon? Outer space? Black hole?

Although my book publishes into unanticipated instability, much remains unchanged. Doesn't every book publish into an unknown void of good reviews, bad reviews, and, worse still, disinterest? A dark void is familiar writing terrain — every blank page replete with mystery, challenge, and opportunity. Negative capability now rachets up a notch. Or two, or more.

How is this plague different from all other plagues? My ancestors endured plagues while fleeing bondage in ancient Egypt. The COVID-19 catastrophe is different because I live through this historic plague that ravages a worldwide desert. With this pandemic, I witness politicians strive to cooperate across divisions even as efforts fail to patch tragic, long-standing holes in the social fabric — our elderly dying alone in crowded, understaffed nursing homes; disease spreading in crowded, understaffed shelters and prisons; government financial relief for some, but no guaranteed income for all — now more visible to more people. Will leaders learn the folly of their health and social service budget cuts? Meanwhile, neighbours share resources, and strangers smile in the streets from the safety of a two-metre distance.

Perhaps Canada took too long to adopt the necessary distancing and closure measures. Or, not. Regardless, some people continue to defy directives, thereby imperilling others and prolonging release from our collective isolation that, as summer draws near, will feel harsher still. Despite that my first book launches into a larger-than-usual void, I'm grateful for unexpected kindness — kindness I witness, experience, and perpetrate — which leads me to believe we will emerge changed for the better from this crisis. I'll watch for such rainbows at the far side of this storm.

For now, back to the void...

María (Mary) Helena Auerbach Rykov is a Puerto Rican-Canadian writer, editor, and educator whose first book launched with Inanna Publications into the Spring 2020 pandemic void. This poetry collection, some conditions apply, celebrates resilience in the face of adversity. More at maryrykov.com.