



# VERBAL CIGARETTES

by Jonathan Valelly

There's nothing like smoking.

No, I mean it. Few other actions or habits occupy such complex and interesting places in the cultural psyche of our society.

Indeed, most people have an opinion on cigarettes. They are widely known to cause devastating health problems in the long term and are an expensive, addictive habit, which non-smokers are quick to bring up in the face of a puff of smoke.

However, smoking is also inextricably linked to class, disability, and social location in ways that are dangerous to ignore. Many people living in poverty or otherwise on the margins of society smoke, and indeed, it is central to the culture at the Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC), a neighbourhood drop-in centre where I spend a fair bit of time as part of my work with Jumblies offshoot Making Room Community Arts.

In *Long Lost Love*, a story written by Bob Rose, a longtime anti-poverty activist and manager at PARC, he describes the connection he had with a PARC member battling both hopelessness and the stifling conditions of the hospitals where his chronic mental health problems frequently landed him.

Bob writes that he “recognized a familiar solitude in Luke. He saw it when they smoked cigarettes together; how they lived to smoke and loved to be in smoke. The spiral plumes of burning tobacco filled the empty space between them, joining their worlds together”.

After a few years working at PARC and Edmond Place, a supportive housing building operated by PARC, I know this feeling well. The intimate pause and presence that a shared cigarette creates is absolutely unique. Smoking is therefore a staple for building relationships in these places, where lives are rebuilt despite the persistent cultural exclusion and social isolation much of the community faces. It is a ritual at the core of the daily rhythms of these absolutely unique places.

It was with this experience of smoking in mind that I decided to do a project about the topic at Edmond Place, where virtually all residents smoke. After telling this to PARC staff and other community workers in Parkdale, many of them responded by extolling the importance of eliminating smoking in our community and the effectiveness of the arts in creating dialogue around personal health.

While I wasn't opposed to having a conversation about smoking's negative health effects and the financial strain of addiction, I was much more interested in the role cigarettes play inside communities and in the day-to-day life of the people with whom I make art.

Thanks to a Platform A grant through Jumblies and the Toronto Arts Council, Edmond Place residents and I spent several months writing, painting, making, and talking about smoking as a way of reflecting on these questions. We asked how smoking shapes our day, season, year, and life; how it positions us to see and be seen in different ways; how it fits into our experience of social, emotional, and bodily cycles. Themes of gender, public and private spheres, science, political agency, and capitalism emerged suddenly and organically. And throughout, we smoked and smoked.

Our group at Edmond Place is small but diverse. I've learned that traditional free-writing, prompted poems, and theme-based prose aren't always comfortable or generative methods for a group with a wide range of literacy levels and confidence. Thus, many of our poems came through "found" text, such as newspaper articles, 19th century tobacco logs, and the text on cigarette packaging. With these, we used cut-up and black-out techniques to make them our own. Others were composed in list forms describing the world around our little cloud of smoke, and still others came from layered two-dimensional pieces with paintings, transparencies, and text.

As the body of poems we were writing grew and proved even more complex and profound than any of us had anticipated, we realized that the book we wanted to put out couldn't be just any edition. It had to reflect the discoveries we were making. Thus we came up with a way that the book could engage the reader, one poem after the other, with the tactile sensation of cigarettes. The final book was a box shaped like a pack of cigarettes, with each page rolled up into the shape of a smoke.

To celebrate the publication of this book, dubbed *EP Verbal Cigarettes*, we held a literary-salon-style reading at Edmond Place, well attended by residents and staff. After a few poems, folks got to pick up, unroll, and read the book under our smoke-cloud installation, which remains in the Edmond Place lounge up to this day. As folks finished up their smoky barbecue chicken dinner and the reading came to a close, we all gathered outside for—what else?—a celebratory smoke.

The problem is smoke, factory fumes,  
with every soup of blood and body.

400 government scientists say, "it's a tribute, my god."  
Know-how takes a question out of the way.  
Social colony banned all public.

A decade dedicated to a rush  
related to insanity, something heroic, evil, and a disgrace.

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*Robbie Mitchell and Carlyne Sawler*

Women rarely admitted publicly to the First World War providing the watershed in the history of female.

Acceptance of women occurred. Woman, reflected and promoted by etiquette specialists, images of female stars. What women “would” was also hotly debated, “feminine forms” had the added benefit of redrawing boundaries, creating rituals.

While this potential may have put dollar signs, men to ritual, women had other priorities, making choices. Acceptability, women following, raised new issues: Public space, a third element in etiquette and ideology.

I have argued, much of the etiquette—prescriptive spatial metaphor—of middle class and elite women did so itself private and out of sight.

Men—“in public”—changes—etiquette—

New spaces where women may be read as a barometer, female challenge to exclusion from the public ideologies in the formation of etiquette and tenacity.

Indeed, women’s new public roles in the post–First World War era.

Did they approve of women?  
Roman Catholics? Leaders in Montreal?

Practices that were making “female” acceptable, long-established associations between women and the survival of the French Canadian “race,” dangers, women’s ability.

They call on women to free themselves.

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*Sabrina Daranje*

Nobody told me that the boys room  
might be monsters  
coming down smoking.

Kissing cigarettes,  
thoughts all came out,  
feeling drinced,  
bound for deep days.

I will dare, I will, I go first,  
he blew his last blues away  
out in a car before losing me.

Cruisin' glory,  
smoking the 1 day your heart is.

Kiss your smokes.  
Where is the exile room?

Have me.  
Pick me up, boys.  
Push back smoking—  
and love, adventure,  
and Sunday morning  
feeling sad,  
feeling great,  
feeling strange,

finally funky when you smoke.

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