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The Fieldstone Review



Escapism



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About The Fieldstone

The Fieldstone Review is an annual literary journal published digitally by graduate students in the English department at the University of Saskatchewan.

Established in 2006, the FSR has published poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and literary reviews by authors from Canada and abroad.

The editorial staff all graciously volunteer their time in the production of each publication. The Fieldstone Review gratefully acknowledges the support of the University of Saskatchewan Department of English, the Humanities and Fine Arts Digital Research Centre, the Humanities Research Unit, the College of Arts and Science, the Graduate Students' Association, and the English Course Council.

Please find us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to keep up to date with calls for submissions and new issues!

Editor's Desk: Plastic Identities and Escapisms

by Ian Moy and Shane Farris

Any string of ideas related to the state of the world at this point will doubtless sound like conversations being had by all of us in our everyday lives. The past few years have been a struggle for all and more than that for a great number of us. We would like to thank you for your patience as we bring you two issues that suffered from delays and wish you all care and safety as we begin a new year.

When we first met to discuss themes, Plastic Identities seemed like a reasonable topic considering our place in relation to climate change and the struggles of the planet, and perhaps the proliferation of non-renewable materials. As time went on and submissions piled up, we realized how important that theme was becoming to our daily lives; lives many of us had to live virtually as an avatar on someone else's screen instead of in person as flesh and blood.

Plastic Identities brings stories and poems about belonging, reflecting on a life lived from multiple perspectives, sharing stories through generations, the challenges of being known by a fading name on a credit card, stories and poems with a depth and resonance we have failed to capture in this brief and terribly general summary. The words in this issue are confronting and to look beyond is to see more of them and yourself in a world that teeters precariously. A challenge, certainly, but a rebirth upon reflection swathed in our personal truths.

With thanks to our various editors: Megan Solberg, Kai Monk-McKenzie, Richelle Gaudet, Michelle Kent, and Dara Gerbrandt, their dedication and commitment in an uncertain time allowed us to compile a fantastic collection of writing.

Though it has taken far longer than we anticipated, Escapisms began as an exercise in finding points of light in a dark time but became a more natural successor to the previous issue than we could have imagined, and we've combined what would have been two issues into one issue with two parts as a result. Where once we considered our place in a

manufactured world, we now begin to see the impact of that world on its people and the desires of those who search for meaning and ways through. We wondered at the outset if this might be a heavier, more sombre issue than we've had in the past and thank goodness for our authors to realize that reality in ways that encourage us to keep reading and rediscover our passions.

In Escapisms we find literal escapes of couples running away for a weekend armed with disinfectant wipes, poems that demand our attention and consider what we are (and what we have) and what we are not (and what we do not), a drive through Portland that changes with each reading, and a list of ways to follow local guidelines while understanding the importance of subversion for survival in silence. The vulnerability and openness with which these writers engage with their subjects in times like these provides for us readers those escapes that they themselves might be searching for.

Our editing team of Delane Just, Amanda Burrows, Jillian Baker, Nicole Jacobson, and Dara Gerbrandt brought to light a collection shaded in tones of darkness, poems and stories that give voice to those emotions we've been struggling with in the face of a global pandemic.

To our readers in both issues, without you this never would have been completed. For your time, effort, and your discerning taste, thank you.

There are two pieces to highlight in these issues, and those are "Prelude and Fugue" by Diane Callahan and "SURVIVAL MANUAL FOR A MEMEBR OF THE ECCLESIA BILLINGS, MONTANA, 1969-71" by Melanie Reitzel, the winners of the Fieldstone Review's \$100 literary prize! Congratulations to you both, and thank you for your superb contributions.

We could not be more grateful to those who helped us reach this conclusion. It is with pride and joy we bring to you Plastic Identities and Escapisms.

Shane and Ian,
Editors-in-Chief



Editorial Team

Editors-in-Chief: Ian Moy and Shane Farris

Fiction Editor: Delane Just

Poetry Editor: Amanda Burrows

Nonfiction Editor: Jillian Baker

Copy Editor: Nicole Jacobson

Web Editor: Dara Gerbrandt

FICTION

I Saw Your Mother Running Naked Through Mayfield Park

by Jenny Flores

The phone rings, shattering the silence I've become accustomed to, half an hour before my alarm is set to go off. "Molly," the voice coming from the receiver says, "Molly, we've got a problem over here." My heart races, afraid and angry, still too asleep to defend or even explain whatever I'd been caught doing. I clear my throat and struggle to free my legs from the blanket ropes twisted around my calves. Her voice bites at my ears, commands, I can tell from the tone, though my brain has yet to create words from the noise.

"Hold on a minute," I say. "Do you know what time it is?" I swing my feet off the side of the bed onto the painfully cold floor. I must have drunk until I collapsed, forgetting to turn on the floor heater. I stumble into the kitchen and grab a beer.

She should have called my sister, she told me, but apparently the phone company will not give out an unlisted number regardless of the emergency. Obviously, I'm the last person she would call for help if she had any other choice. Unoffended, I nod and take a swig. "Well," she says, "I found your number taped to the fridge. The Lord has spoken, I said to myself. And now I'm talking to you. *Trying* to talk to you, I should say." Even though this was not her nature, to interfere in the delicate situations of others, she really had no other option. Certainly, I could understand at least that, she snarks at me. Certainly, I could look up from my life to help someone who needed me. I popped open my second beer and consider whether or not that was true. I consider who in the hell would put themselves in the position of needing me.

I drain my bottle and say, "Your voice sounds familiar."

"Well, it should."

"Lady, it's early. I appreciate you need some kind of help, but for the love of Christ, I can't place you."

She clears her throat and we listen to each other breathe.

"It's Vera."

"Vera." I close my eyes and her face floats around in my brain. First, the thin lips pulled back over her teeth when the occasion called for a smile. Her eyes,

slate-blue and always slitting at us. Yes, that's the voice that called us mongrels. That threw our soccer ball away when it rolled into her yard. That watched us wither.

Apparently, the trouble started a few days ago. She would have called immediately, but she couldn't be sure of what she saw. And, of course, she was running errands at the time. She couldn't be expected to put her life on hold to fix a neighbor's problem after all. Especially now, with all the riffraff moving in. "It used to be such a nice place to live."

I lived in that neighborhood, across the street from Vera, with my sister and Mom until I was old enough to escape. I never once thought of it as a nice place to live. My dad left us there to fend for ourselves. My sister left two years before I could. No one stayed if they could get out.

"So, how can I help you, Vera?" I grab a dish towel and wrap it around my icy feet and then light the burners to warm the kitchen. A third beer would warm me right up, but three beers is drinking. And I don't drink in the morning.

"I already told you, Molly. You still don't listen."

"You said we have a situation. You haven't said what it is."

"There's a situation with your mother, Molly."

Of course there is. "No kidding?" Our entire childhood was filled with maternal situations. To my recollection, this was the first situation Vera decided to intervene in. I open the fridge and stare at the orange juice. Vera sucks in a deep breath and exhales slowly, clearly disappointed in the person I've become. I decide against the juice and grab a beer. Hell with it, I think, I'm drinking.

"I know you and your sister had your troubles growing up. But your mom did everything she could for you girls. Don't you think you should do something for her now that she needs you?"

"Why don't you tell me what's going on, Vera?"

"I saw your mom running naked through Mayfield Park. There, I said it." She pauses, waits for my response. "I would have called sooner, but I wasn't sure at first that it was even her."

"Oh, yeah?" I don't know why she isn't crystal clear on what she saw. Who else would it have been? "That definitely sounds like something she'd do, you know, on an off day."

“An off day? This morning she was sitting in her front yard, naked as a jay bird. Of course, I ran right over and got her back inside.”

“Okay. Well, thank you.”

“You and your sister need to do something about this—about your mother and that house—sooner rather than later.”

“Thanks for calling, Vera. I’ll see what I can do.”

* * *

Vera Johnson hangs up not knowing what she has done to my day. Three beers in, I know I can’t call my sister. I crawl back into bed after flipping on the floor heater and pull the quilt up over my head. Behind this, I know I’m going to lose my job. Eighteen months on a landscaping crew, my longest period of continuous employment since, well, ever. But I should’ve been fired two weeks ago after receiving my third write-up. I would have been fired if I hadn’t slept with my supervisor in exchange for a second chance. I don’t care. I am tired and thinking about calling my sister is exhausting. The idea I might have to see my mother is a weight pinning me to my bed. Work is the least of my worries.

Too drunk to call my sister but not drunk enough to get Vera’s voice out of my head, I try to decipher where Mom was in her crazy cycle based on the tidbits gleaned from Vera. She rarely succumbed to public nudity when I was small. Overdoing it was more her style. Boas and long, flowing skirts with bracelets stacked from wrist to elbow for a simple trip to the grocery store. Once, she wore a tutu over a catsuit and stiletto thigh-high boots to my sister’s band recital. When we woke up the next morning, the band instructor was in Mom’s robe, eating Lucky Charms at our breakfast table. My sister dropped the class and we developed an interest in any subject taught by women. That wasn’t always a sure-fire way to keep them from spending the night, but it was our only option. Until we graduated. Or dropped out. Or started sleeping with teachers ourselves.

My sister could not hide her anger or embarrassment when things like this happened. She never learned to say *it is what it is*, even with all the practice we got. She couldn’t see how Mom fed on it, like a vampire only satisfied by virgin blood. She hated me for not caring, never understanding how much I did care. I just learned to control the rise of colour in my face. To act like an exposed nipple was the most natural thing in the world.

“Son of a bitch,” I scream into my pillow. “Please, Jesus, please, just let me fall asleep.”

I close my eyes and force myself to take slow, measured breaths. The one useful thing I learned from my court-appointed counsellor. I wonder if my sister has to walk through a metal detector before she sees her shrink. I laugh out loud at the thought.

Propped up on my pillow, I do some mental math. Two beers in the fridge and a 12-pack on the cabinet.

If I call my sister now, she'll get weird about my drinking. It won't matter that I'm not drunk. I don't have to be slurring my words. She'll know—she always knows—and denying it is always rewarded with a quip about denial being the greatest drug.

If I put on coffee, put the 12-pack in the fridge, and take a shower, I'll be able to call. And call my boss to let him know I don't need anything bad enough to sleep with the likes of him again. By then, the beer will be cold and I can get down to the business of forgetting how this day started.

If I had a drinking problem, I would drink hot beer. I don't. I'm very particular. I also don't drink any old beer that happens to be on sale. A true alcoholic will drink anything. Of course, if I was to go out with friends, I would drink whatever they offered. I'm not rude. But who are we kidding? I've long since burned through the last of my friends.

She does not answer the phone the first time I call. I imagine her staring at the screen, the face she makes when she recognizes the number. I dial again.

"Emma," I say after the beep. "Emma, it's me. Molly. Your sister. There's a problem. Call me."

"Well, that wasn't so hard, now, was it?" I say to an empty room.

I answer the phone on the first ring. Overeager, true to form. "I prefer texting," is what she says first, then pauses. "You're still on a landline?" She laughs, unable to believe in a life without internet, cable, a tracking device voluntarily carried at all times. "Well, go ahead. What's the problem?"

"Good to hear from you, too, Emma."

"Molly, the last time you called me you were in jail. Needing bail. Needing a place to stay. But, okay, good to hear from you."

I tell her there are no hard feelings on my end.

“I had my own problems, Molly. My marriage. My work. I couldn’t help you then and I probably can’t help you now.”

I hear music in the background and her fingertips clicking away at her keyboard. She is multi-tasking me, working on something important while deciding on the reasons she can’t help me.

“Don’t worry, Emma. It’s not me. It’s Mom.”

“Her doctor calls me when there’s a problem, so why don’t you just tell me what you need.”

Another sound, a rattling, interrupts our conversation. The sound is familiar, so familiar it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Aspirin. Yes, Mom carried a bottle of Bayer in her pocket. She rarely took one. Rattling the bottle soothed her. And warned us a storm was coming.

“You got a headache, Ems?” I ask. I hold the receiver to my chest and open the fridge. As quietly as I can, I grab a beer and ease the door shut.

“Yeah,” she says. “Yeah, I suddenly got a headache. Just like you suddenly got thirsty.”

“Fair enough.”

“What’s going on. Just tell me.”

I tell her about Vera’s call. I tell her about Mom’s public nudity. About the condition of the house. I tell her everything I know and she listens. Without interrupting. Without sucking her teeth or clicking her tongue. Even her keyboard is silent.

I don’t tell her I was well on my way to drunk before eight in the morning. Or how I dreaded having to interrupt her stable, productive life. I don’t tell her I had to call—not because I missed her, worried, or even wondered about her. But because I have no idea what to do and, even if I did, I’m ill-equipped to do it.

She knows all of that and, to her credit, she doesn’t say any of it out loud either. She comes up with a plan on the spot. She will call Mom’s doctor. Get her admitted for a psych evaluation. She’ll go to the house, clean it up, smooth Vera’s ruffled feathers. She is silent when I offer to meet her at Mom’s. Except for the rattle of her pill bottle. Then she says okay and I swear I can hear her smile.

* * *

I park on the street because Emma is parked in the middle of Mom's driveway when I get there. Dealer tags taped to the back window, she probably doesn't want my hoopty breathing the same air as her new ride. She steps out of her car and I hear her lock it and set the alarm. I grab some Rubbermaids from my back seat and notice my sister is armed with boxes of trash bags. She has never formed a sentimental attachment to anything.

"Nice car," I say.

"I have to have it for work," she replies, eyeing my car. "Appearances matter, Molly."

"What you see is what you get with me," I say. "I'm broke and my car doesn't say anything different."

She shrugs. "Anyway, thanks for coming." We stand and stare at each other, awkwardly holding the bins and bags we brought to clean up this part of our lives. It's not the first time we underestimated the life force that was to be sucked out of us.

The walk to the front door is labored like walking through a wall of wet cement to get to a place we didn't want to be in the first place. "Well," I say, finding the spare key under the empty planter, "let's see what we've got. Vera said it was horrible."

Emma snorted. "I don't remember her intervening when we were little."

"She sure called me up like I owed her money. Not at all embarrassed to ask for my help."

Emma drops her trash bags into a Rubbermaid and we push the door open wide enough to squeeze through. "Good God," she says, pulling her sweater over her mouth and nose. "What is that smell?"

"Let's get these boxes pushed back so we can leave the door open."

She looks at me, shocked, but nods when she gags on another breath. "I guess so. Who's going to see? Vera?"

Nothing has changed since we were little—she's still worried about what people think. About her. About me and Mom. About how me and Mom reflect on her. "Everyone on this block already knows she's crazy," I say. "And they all know you're the daughter who dodged the crazy gene."

“Thanks.”

“No problem.”

It wasn't exactly meant to be hurtful, but it wasn't a compliment either. We've never been close enough to read each other, the way sisters do, but always kept each other at arm's length. Any private joke between us, an eye roll or giggling in bed at night, would send Mom spiraling. Jealous, but always with wringing hands and imploring eyes: *I just wish you and your sister were closer.*

We walk down the hall, single-file and silent. The house and, by extension, Mom, is in such a state we can't think of what to say. Scared and ashamed, I think about the boxes piling up in my house.

“Go ahead,” I say. “I'm going to start in her bedroom.” The room was strictly off-limits to us as children, and I shudder to consider the secrets I might discover.

“Yeah, okay.”

I toss a bin toward the bed, unable to walk through the room with it in my arms. My sister navigates her way through mountains of boxes, newspapers, and magazines, heading toward the kitchen. God only knows what she is going to find in there. Not a lot of food, if our childhood is anything to go on. When we were in middle school, Mom decided to breed dogs. Instead of keeping them in the backyard—she was sure the neighbors would become jealous and turn her in—the refrigerator was moved out of the kitchen to make room for the cages. Emma and I walked the dogs, fed and watered them, and cleaned their cages, which wasn't too bad when we had five dogs. But then three of the five had litters. Twenty-three dogs were a lot on top of keeping up in class and trying to get to school without smelling like dog piss and shit. We couldn't afford their food and we couldn't take them to the vet. We knew the dog business was over when we were spending more time digging holes in the backyard than we did walking them.

“How is it out there?” I yell down the hallway. “It looks like a rainbow shit all over the place in here.”

I listen so carefully for her reply, I realize I'm holding my breath “Ems? Are you okay out there?”

“I'm here,” she says. “I'm okay. I'm in the dining room.”

“I don't know what it looks like in the dining room, but this room says Mom is

not getting out in seventy-two hours.” She’d made piles of clothes, bedspreads, sheets, towels, knickknacks, food wrappers, and other mysterious something-or-others across the bedroom floor. Random collections meticulously divided by colour. Cheerfully assorted bright, colourful piles of crap. “What in the hell,” I mutter to myself.

My sister hollers from the dining room. “It doesn’t look like the rainbow ever made it into this room.”

* * *

Dad didn’t tell us he was leaving until he pulled a U-Haul into the driveway. Emma and I stood in the front yard, watching him direct a moving crew around Mom’s shrill protests over every stick of furniture. Truth was just about everything belonged to him and we all knew it. Eventually, she gave up and joined us in the front yard. She shook her head when we looked up at her and shushed us before we could even open our mouths.

We waited for him to make the block, pull into the driveway, and say, “Gotcha!” but that never happened. “Well, no wonder he didn’t turn around,” Mom said, crinkling her nose. “Two ragamuffins. Good Lord, when’s the last time the two of you had a bath?” She asked what colour popsicle we wanted. Red and purple, we told her. She brought us each a green one and told us to stay outside.

We stood in the same place in the front yard and stared at Vera staring at us. As soon as she saw the U-Haul pull in, she found urgent business to tend to in her flower garden. She took her gardening gloves off and clapped them together then slid them into her back pocket. She crooked her finger at us, and we walked toward her, green juice dripping down our chins to our shirts. When we were in the middle of the road, she pointed and said, “Well, you two did it this time, didn’t you? Drove your daddy away.” She picked up her loppers and snapped them at us, cackling as we dropped our popsicles on the asphalt and ran back home.

The walls, after years of smoking, had perfect outlines of every piece of furniture we once had. It reminded me of the chalk drawings of murder victims. Emma and I eyed each other warily when Mom started walking faster, muttering under her breath, rubbing her hands together. We’d seen that before and knew it could go either way.

“I like it,” she finally said. “I like the empty feel of it. Modern. We’ve got to get rid of more.”

Emma and I whispered to each other, wondering in the safety of Mom’s occasional absences why Dad left. Of course, Mom had her moods. That was

nothing new. Why would he leave now? Did we do something? “Don’t ask Mom,” Emma warned. “Just shut up about it. Let it go.”

“Your dad has mental problems,” Mom said when I ignored Emma’s advice and asked.

“What kind of mental problems?” I pressed.

She made a face and said, “The crazy kind. Now let’s get to work.”

She directed us to remove every item in the house that had a piece of tape stuck to it. We helped her carry a lifetime of memories to the curb without question or complaint. Then she pointed to our room. “Not our bed,” we pleaded, as she stripped the mattress and threw the sheets on the floor.

“We’re all in this together,” she said, looking hard at us with dark, shiny eyes. “We didn’t ask to be abandoned by your father, but here we are, and we’re going to make the best of it.”

She was breathing fast and her hand kept time on her thigh to music only she could hear. Emma and I nodded, grabbed the edge of the mattress and slid them down the hall and out to the curb.

“Make a sign,” Mom said. “Free to a good home. Really big, so everyone can see. Sharing our good fortune, that’s what we’re doing.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked. “Me and Emma, we can’t do everything. We’ve got homework. We’ve got school tomorrow.”

“I’m tired,” Mom said. “And I work twice as hard as you and your sister. Once the sign is made,” she waved her hands dismissively, “I don’t give a shit what you guys do.”

“Come on, Ems,” I said, grabbing the markers from her backpack.

We knew we weren’t going to school. Not the next day, maybe not for weeks. She was in no shape to be left alone.

She hadn’t slept or eaten for days. When we said we were hungry, she handed us a box of cereal. “No milk,” she shrugged, “but there’s Coke or water.”

She slept on her bedroom floor for three days. When she woke up, she looked at us like we were strangers. She dragged us from room to room, pointing out the empty spaces where our furniture used to be. “How could you let us get robbed?”

she accused.

Emma turned away before Mom could see her cry. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” I yelled.

“Go get our stuff!” she screamed when we reminded her that we had put it all out on the curb, “and put it right back where you found it!”

It was too late. What the neighborhood lookie-looers hadn’t grabbed, the city hauled off.

“Well,” she said, once she had accepted that we hadn’t been robbed and that most of what we owned was in the city dump, “I guess we get to start from scratch.”

And that’s what we did. She took us out of school for a solid week. We hit every thrift store in our town and the town over, and it didn’t take long to fill our house back up. “Even better than before your dad left us,” she’d say every time she walked into a room.

I was her favorite then. I loved digging through the bins at secondhand stores and flea markets, even jumping out of the car she’d screech to a stop to look through a promising dumpster. While my sister would hide behind clothing racks, trying to make herself invisible, Mom and I had fun searching for the perfect treasure, haggling for the best price. The trouble seems to be Mom never stopped shopping. The trouble is that I fill my house with the same fervor.

* * *

I smell the dining room before I stick my head through the doorway to check on Emma. I am shocked—yes, after everything I’ve been through with Mom, shocked—at what I see. Piles, like in her bedroom, but no rainbow. A pile of eggshells. Of take-out containers. A large rectangular puzzle formed from chicken bones.

The Christmas tree is set up in front of the bay window, as it was every Christmas of my childhood. Instead of our handmade ornaments, family photos hang by a string from every branch. Altered family memories or maybe not altered at all in her mind. Maybe she saw us—me, Emma, Dad—with black teeth and devil-red eyes. With filth spilling out of our mouths. Foul and evil. Sometimes I look in the mirror and what stares back is no less disturbing.

“Christ,” I mutter. “Are you ready for a break?”

She stands up and wipes her shaky hands on her jeans. She hasn’t filled a trash

bag yet.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here.”

We sit in silence on the porch. “What a mess,” I finally say. “I had no idea.”

“I knew,” she says under her breath. She turns to look at me, pushing stray strands of hair behind her ears, letting the sun glint off her silver hoops.

“What are you talking about? How could you have known?”

“She’s been sending me care packages. The last one was weird.”

“How weird?”

She ignores the question. “I should have checked on her. Should have called you, at least.”

I shrug. “I’m here now.”

She smiles and nods then looks away. I fight against the desire to yank her perfect hair out of her head, to dig my dirty nails into her delicate skin. Is her beauty the reason Mom likes her so much more than she likes me? Is it because she survived our childhood with no noticeable defects in appearance or character? Why her? When I would have done anything? When I’ve done so much already? The secrets I’ve held. The secrets I hold to this day that could destroy her. Destroy all of us. “I wonder why she never reached out to me,” I say.

Pity is what I see in Emma’s eyes, and my mouth sours with this morning’s beer.

* * *

We hear her hollering at us and look in the direction of her voice. Emma stiffens.

Vera is standing on her lawn. She is in the same house dress I remember from when I was little. Green with white flowers embroidered around the hem, snap buttons down the front. Her pale skin is made a harsh white by the bright red lipstick, framing her small pointy teeth. Her voice is as brash as ever, surprisingly strong for such an old woman. Strong enough to carry itself across the street and slam without mercy into our ears. And the words still biting ugly. “Girl,” she calls out to us, even though she knows our names. Girl, though we are women now. Girl. Even though anyone who made it out of Mom’s care alive deserves the dignity of a name.

Before I know what’s happening, Emma is on her feet. Running. Towards Vera.

Years of hate and hurt pouring off of her. Emma, the girl who lived her life avoiding conflict, might kill Vera in broad daylight. Vera does not know enough to be afraid and hobbles out to meet her in the middle of the road. Somehow, breaking through stunned paralysis, I run to Emma's side.

Vera's words stop making sense and simply bounce around in my brain. Emma holds up her hand to quiet Vera's babbling, but the noise goes on and on. I turn to Emma in shock when I hear her tell Vera to just shut the fuck up. Vera looks like someone slapped her in the face. "That's right," Emma screams, "a mongrel told you to shut the fuck up. Call the police, go ahead. You're about twenty years too late to make a difference."

I step between them and catch Emma's arm before she topples Vera. I tell Vera to go home and I pull Emma into my arms. She holds it together until Vera shouts from the safety of her porch, "Once trash, always trash." As soon as we hear the door slam behind her, Emma erupts into great, heaving sobs. It's not the first time she's cried like this, but it's the first time she's done it in my arms. "Goddamn, Emma," is what I say. "Goddamn, I think we could be friends."

* * *

You want me to say everything is fine now. I've lied before so it would be easy for me to give you what you want if that's what you really want. The trouble is that I don't believe the lies I tell myself anymore. That makes the lies you want to hear less believable. So, let's end on the truth.

Emma and I agreed to sign commitment papers. Mom's not coming home for a while. And when she does come home, it won't be to the same house she left. That one is being sold. Neither of us have enough strength of character to fix our broken childhood. So, we're letting it all go—the house, the trash, the memories. Well, we're going to try to let go of the memories.

"Stop taking so many damn aspirin," I told her before we went our separate ways. Puzzled, she told me she hadn't had an aspirin since she was a kid. "You have an aspirin bottle. Like Mom. You shake it when you are upset." I was surprised, then horrified, when she told me she had a prescription for oxy. And friends who would spot her pills when she ran out.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. "You drink beer."

That's true and I was desperate for one at that point. "It's not the same."

"It's not different."

"I'm just surprised someone like you..."

“I came out of the same wretched womb you did.”

Wretched womb. *This* was Mom’s favourite?

She walked me to my car and said, “We should do this again.” She shook her bottle and laughed. “Well, not this. God, no, not this. We should get together again.” She searched my face. “I mean, we’re adults now. We can get to know each other without Mom.” As she walked to the driveway, she pointed at the brand-new car and admitted, “I can’t afford this.” She laughed again and promised to call me. “It’ll be fun. You’ll like me. You’ll see.”

She has not called.

I don’t know what she did when she got home, but I got drunk. And then I slept for two days.

I worried I was one naked run from becoming my mother.

I took a shower. I put fresh sheets on the bed. Three loads of laundry, washed, folded, and put away made me feel slightly better.

And today? Right now? I open the fridge and look at the beer, but I do not take one out. You want me to say I don’t drink anymore, that I am a recovering alcoholic. I would, except I’m not lying to you.

If Emma would have called, I would have asked her to come over. That’s what I tell myself. I would have said, “Brace yourself,” and I would have asked her to bring trash bags. But she did not call me and I do not call her. Maybe this is the kind of thing you have to do alone.

Instead of calling Emma, I call Mom. “It’s me, Mom. Molly,” I have to say my name because the fog of psychotropics doesn’t let her recognize my voice. “How are you doing?”

“Get me out of here,” she whispers. “I can’t do anything in here. Every minute of the day is theirs. I made an ashtray, Molly. I don’t smoke. An ashtray.” She stops talking long enough to hum a song she thinks I might remember. “I used to sing that song to you when you were little. You’re my favourite, Molly. Get me out of here.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I lie. She is in the middle of another lullaby when I hang up.



I know she only said I'm her favourite so that I'd spring her from the hospital, but it still feels good. I stack the last of the boxes in my front yard and call Goodwill. "Come pick it all up," I tell them, and they seem genuinely happy to get my trash. Before they arrive, I take another look in the fridge. Hell with it, I think. I'm drinking.

Three Women / Three Women Blues

by Timothy Parrish

L,

it was a crazy long drive to that endless night in seattle, from redding to eugene
you were sleeping in my lap, dreaming of jack that night at wamu, me stroking
your hair and you moaning you were like three women looking for a pair,
somehow we made neptune before the show, i found blind willie mctell on
brooklyn avenue, he's playing now where i lie alone but for rose thorns cutting my
lips, you said you knew that record and mentioned white jack's tribute called three
women blues, smiling at me like creation was a game show and you were its host,
you touched the jacket and the music started like your finger was a stylus, i'm
overcome by that deathless georgia voice humming words i'll never understand,
slaves in chains revolting against their masters rose up before me, and then the
crazy mad hard magnetic violence in your eyes, baby, heads on pikes like it never
happened in this country of george floyd choking under some dumb cop's knee
but happened every time you came to me on your knees wherever we happened
to be, you were so wild and fun and full of bile that when i bit into you i had to
swallow the throw-up in my mouth just to kiss you again, sometimes i didn't since
you told me you liked my taste on your tongue, i was the one crawling in that
seattle record store, your head nowhere near my pike since you had swallowed it
on the road, i'm dying for lack of your breath, waiting for you to return it to me,
this coveted record in my hands as you coo, that's me, babe, i'm all three women
doncha know, moving your two hands' three fingers from your cheek to your
thrapple, as if you were finger-painting yourself, tracing now the flawless curves
of your breasts where my head almost never rested, your fingers coming together
at your tits' points, a quick violent twist sketched in your nipples like they had just
suddenly bloomed, and then your magic fingers pushed outward as if you had
just plucked them for me, rose petals you carelessly tossed at my eyes, they found
my mouth instead, i craved your flowers' taste, there's no word in this language
for the shade of your skin, it's more of a sound, a gurgling throat drowning when
it's thirsty, you make it on me wherever you capture me at my desk, on park
benches, in the driver's seat helpless in the slow-moving portland traffic and i'm
stroking your neck like its beautiful colour will permeate my hands and make
every object i touch a marvel of the universe, i'm the yellow, you sang, and i'm the
brown too, as for the third colour, you said it was the black of your neil young
shirt, you'd wear it after the show, in our lay lady lay bed, showing me again the
colours of your mind that was just my desire unhinged, only i was the lady you
were laying, my pike was forever yours, i couldn't take it back from your head if i
wanted to, i didn't even try that afternoon on brooklyn avenue where neptune still
stands despite the plague reaching out to touch what you had drawn on the

canvas of skin, your petals grinding my teeth, forget these boring record stores, you said, let's follow jack, he's in portland tomorrow, that's when I noticed him on the wall, supervising the store from that slightly ripped poster and singing about the colours your hair happened to wear that week, red-blond-brunette, a different one each day, i prefer your natural black, say, man, squealed jack, if you really want to rock her, i'll put on blakey's witch doctor, that motherfucker was saying, in his voice of pure appropriation, i felt myself sinking into someone else's hell and knew no one could sing the blues like blind willie mctell, on my knees feeding on you feeding on me, your head again lending me my pike, i wasn't revolting in this place more public than keller fountain park had been, your fresh nipples keeping my hands steady, the taste of flowers famishes me, the clerk started to holler for the cops through the window, somehow they were never far when you were near, but jack's voice stifled his scream, not mine, from the wall he put your pink phone in the clerk's hand, its camera eye had been activated by your rectum always winking in the open air, your panties your knee pads, you sure know how to pack for a trip, and it's jack's three women coming through the store's exceptional speakers, you had it put it on when you touched blind willie, the soundtrack for the movie the clerk was filming with your phone, he looks like jack too, sitting on the counter so calm above his california gal going down on me slow, taking us in through your nether eye, and you're talking out of the side of her mouth, saying we'll do this again in portland, babe, then reno, all the way to nashville, let's make ernest tubb's record store, it's the best, jack says, you're coming baby, like it or not, jack screams from the wall, and you pant the same words in my ears, jack and you in stereo, i'm always coming between you two, it's ok, you're voice never sounded sweeter singing i'm like three women in one, ask jack, i don't have to, i'm watching you now, you put your movie on my phone, it's like you have three mouths, how come jack always gets two for my one, there's no off switch for these dreams of you, variegated colours of your lay, lady, lay mind in our lay, lady, lay bed, blues like chains wrapped around my head.

Uncle Jack and Sunfall Sam

by Jeffrey Ihlenfeldt

Two hundred and fifty bottles of Granny Dot's Sunrise Syrup complete with the dreamlike logo—the split-rail fence, the crowing rooster, the cheerful farmer's wife, the sun rising and smiling and spinning like a pinwheel above green mountains—shifted against Cal's back as the freight train lurched forward. The faint odour of propane and exhaust filtered into the boxcar from the loading dock and his stomach churned.

While Cal imagined people in this world thankful for maple syrup, he wasn't one of them. He may have been odd in that way, but he imagined that suburban mothers flipping hotcakes on griddles for their children on Sunday mornings and pouring syrup, glossy and thick over links of pan-fried sausage, never thought of their lives and the lives of their families as anything but sweet—a dreamlike sweetness—sugar maples and mountain roads and whispering streams. He doubted they could distinguish their fantasies from the truth. He doubted that they thought about the gears and the belts and the grease-caked cogs necessary to make their family breakfasts possible. He doubted that they imagined the shipping pallets, the steel vats, the drums of corn syrup, the 60-pound sacks of thickeners and gums, or the bins of powders, all maple- or blueberry- or strawberry-smelling. He doubted that they saw the moguls and the belts and the paddles and the blenders, the millers and the mixers, the fillers and the sealers. But he'd seen it all and the aroma of maple distillate was permanently embedded in the membranes of his nostrils until the scent of maple persisted with every breath.

He propped up his bag in the corner of the railcar. Everything he needed, he thought: a couple of changes of clothes, extra socks, three bottles of water. Nothing to remind him of the past. There was the paycheck in the side pouch, the last one from Granny Dot. But he would cash that soon enough in Albany or Burlington. That would be the end of that. Nothing left to remind him of his old life.

The Penguins logo was scuffed clean off at the edges and only "Pitts" was legible, but that had happened long before the railcar, long before he had made plans (such as they were) to head north. Lately, he had been drawn toward snow and sugar maples, despite his aversion to syrup, and away from the factory and the friends who worked the mills and the lines and the fill stations at the opposite end of the plant.

He checked the route that he had pulled up from the shipping office on the notes scrawled across his pad even though he had checked it before boarding. The last thing he wanted was to be riding the rails east, trapped by the sea—the ocean at

his back, the bay at his chest—not that he knew much about either. He knew about rivers, though, and he knew about barges and freight cars and loading docks. He'd had his fill of the iron odour of the Monongahela and the housing renewal projects that expanded the boundaries of his neighborhood except that they were all signs of job security—the transplanted families, their pancakes, the mandatory overtime, the graveyard shifts. None of this mattered to him anymore or wouldn't matter at the end of the line.

“You ought to be thanking your lucky stars,” Pete would say as he loaded the first of the night's shipment. And he would say it again when Cal complained about the stacking and the palleting and the sickly smell of corn and maple. “Count your blessings,” his mother would say. But Cal didn't count blessings or thank stars or anyone else for the staging platform and the rows of shipping crates.

“I know guys who'd give their right arm for 60 hours,” Pete would say as he pushed his thinning hair back under his cap and slid his forks under the next pallet.

Cal hadn't sacrificed his right arm, but there was the half-finger of his left hand, cut clean off at the first joint by the broken coupling of a pump hose. It ended up swirling round and round the stainless-steel hopper like a machine bearing, leaving thin streaks of raspberry coloring in the syrup as it floated before drifting down and finally being sucked inside the quart fill nozzle. There was syrup all over the place that day, a virtual blood bath for the company's daily production numbers and lost-time accidents.

Cal flexed his fingers. He rubbed the scarred tip of his pinky with his thumb. He drew his cotton jacket around his chest and stared through the open door of the moving railcar. The city lights streaked the blackness as the train picked up speed. The railbed and ties below flickered and blurred. The stars and half-moon remained fixed in the heavens and, for a moment, Cal seemed fixed too, standing still, only him and the stars and the moon.

He pulled his bag up into the corner and rested his back against the cushion of shirts and pants stuffed inside, brushing the dust from the cuffs of his jeans and his grey sneakers. Now that he looked at the canvas sides and the worn rubber around his shoes, it struck him as silly to be wearing sneakers to hop rails. Woody Guthrie wouldn't have been wearing sneakers, he imagined. He would have had brown leather boots—something he could lace up, something for support, something that would last. He couldn't imagine the likes of riders he had read about—Slim Bobby and Sunfall Sam—pulling themselves from one car to another wearing Chuck Taylors. His jeans, on the other hand, seemed to work but, from what little he'd read about migratory life, he guessed everybody rode the rails in what they had and what he had was sneakers.

He slept uneasily during the night and into the pre-dawn darkness, but he couldn't judge the quality of his sleep in any case unless he took the time to count his dreams. He recalled one dream of his mother catching bus 58 to the health centre and then to the Shop & Save for bread and toilet paper. It was his job to drive her to the bus-stop on his way to work. He might have driven her the whole way, but their schedules never seemed to match up with his odd shifts and frequent overtime. She made the trip twice a week though and, in his dream, he could see her climbing the steps and slipping her transit token into the slot. He watched her drop into the hard plastic seat just behind the etched partition separating the driver from the riders. He could have been thinking rather than dreaming since he had memorized the ritual and knew it all by heart. The undercurrent of squealing steel and creaking planks droned on, the pitch and volume changing with the speed of the engine and the curve of the track.

"Think my life is over," he would tell his mother each time he pulled on his work shoes and vest.

"You've been claiming that for years," his mother would say and laugh with a thin snicker.

"Go ahead and laugh," he would tell her. "Thirty and my life is nearly over."

His mother couldn't seem to grasp his sorrow as earnest as he was. Understandably, she had her own sorrows but, at 72, she was still able to roll out of bed and onto her feet each morning and climb the station stairway and haul groceries from Westerly St. to Haddam. Maybe that was why she had no sympathy reserved for her son— young, able-bodied, employed. Life can seem short for some people and forever for others despite their trials. Cal wasn't sure which was preferable, but his mother tended to count off the years over cups of decaf and plates of vanilla wafers as though they were the measure of all things.

Cal nudged his back against the pallet and closed his eyes. He never felt that comfortable comparing lives with anyone. Yet, he couldn't help imagining what was going through her mind at that moment, her surprise when he failed to show up at the station. Or at the apartment the next day or the day after. She was a long way from poverty, but it would be his brother's job to see that she didn't end up there now that Cal was gone. He was sure Jim was just as capable as he was in dealing with her needs even though Jim had never had the chance to prove it one way or the other. Still, guilt was tough to shake, and that's what Cal really felt when he thought about his mother and his brother, when he dreamed about her daily travails and the medical costs and the grocery bills. These images were much too reasoned to be a dream, his guilt much too real. Hell, it wasn't his fault, though. He had his own life to live and, if he decided to spend it hopping trains, nobody had the right to question it, not Jim and not his mother.

He opened his eyes as the train began to slow and finally stop. Outside, he heard the scuffle of gravel and he wedged himself into the space between the single pallet and the wall of the car. At the door, the sound stopped. Cal peered over the pallet as a man pulled himself into the railcar—one hand grasping the frame, one leg pushing against the threshold. There was the slap of flesh on steel. There was the scraping of soles on sheet metal. The thump of footsteps on floorboards. A sharp groan followed by slow breath.

Cal couldn't feel air in his lungs or in his nostrils—it was as if he'd stopped breathing all together. He had to be miles past the loading dock, but it could have been a rail worker. At the factory, he and Pete would slip into a car now and then when nothing would keep their eyes from closing and their heads from bobbing at three in the morning. But this couldn't have been Pete. He was back at the dock or smoking and wondering where Cal was, a good ten miles back, which might as well have been 500.

Once inside, the man knelt on the floor and grunted. Cal curled tightly between the floor and the stacked pallet. The man's breathing slowed to the cadence of the wheels. As the train picked up speed, Cal could no longer hear the breathing and he relaxed into his corner against his bag of clothes.

"I don't mind sharing the car," came the voice from the other side of Granny Dot's Sunrise Syrup and Cal stiffened.

"Nothing wrong with caution," the voice said. "If it is caution," he went on. "Long trip to be rolled up in such a small space."

"Then you understand if I stay here?" Cal finally replied and his dry throat clicked as he spoke.

"If it's caution, sure," the voice said. "As long as it ain't fear. One works for you. The other don't."

Cal slowly unwedged himself and his bag from the corner. The man sat at the opposite wall of the car, his arms wrapped around his drawn-up knees. The passing light from the nearby road lit up the man's stubbled face and his mustache flared out from his lips. His wiry hair settled at the collar of his dark denim jacket, which seemed too large for his lanky form. He stretched his legs forward, scraping the heels of his well-worn boots—the pull-on kind, with no laces for support, as Cal imagined seasoned travelers would wear. Still, they made him suddenly self-conscious about his own shoes.

"Where you headed?" the man asked.

Before Cal could answer, the man pulled his legs in and stood up against the wall of the railcar. He bent at the waist and reached his palms nearly to the floor. Then he stretched upward, and Cal was startled by his height as his fingertips nearly grazed the ceiling.

“Vermont,” Cal said, and the man eased back to the floor and sat with his back straight against the wall.

“What’s in Vermont?” he asked.

Cal couldn’t think of a damn thing that would draw him to Vermont, although he’d seen plenty of photos of winters and autumns in the Green Mountains. Once, he got a postcard from his cousin who had spent a week with his wife in Stowe devouring hot chocolate and maple creams. Cal imagined something less civilized than ski lifts and lodges when he pictured Vermont. Camps and hamlets and mountain roads. He might have been thinking of New Hampshire. He’d never been there either.

The car slowed, and the breeze swirled and blew through the open door. The steel wheels thumped as they approached a grade crossing. They rolled past a pickup at the crossroad behind the gate, and a dog stood in the truck bed barking at the flashing red light and the clanging bell. As the train picked up speed again, the dark returned.

“Maybe not Vermont. New England, for sure,” Cal said.

The man asked Cal what was in New England, but Cal couldn’t answer that either.

“I’ve never been to New England... what’s your name?”

“Cal.”

“Never been to New England, Cal. You can call me Uncle Jack. And use that name if you need to. Everybody knows me,” he said and lifted his chin. The ends of his mustache stood out even further from his narrow nose. He straightened his spine, then he relaxed and smiled.

“Never been to New England,” he went on. “I like the warmer climes myself. Give me a week in sunny Florida any time. Tell you this much, if you’re heading north, Cleveland’s not a half-bad yard to make connections. Not that I’ve ever switched there myself, but I’ve heard. Vermont, though? Not much work up there this time of year. Even fewer trains, but what do I know about Vermont? Never been there. Anyway, if you’re heading north, Cleveland is a good yard for

switching over, then you'd be crossing toward Buffalo. Stay away from New York City. You don't want to end up there."

"I've never been to New York," Cal said, and he pulled his notepad from his pocket and flipped through his planned route.

"I'd have guessed as much," Uncle Jack said, and he pulled out a square of colored cloth and wiped out his nostrils. He stuffed it back into his pocket and smoothed his mustache into place.

"Notes are okay for beginners" he said as he watched Cal page through his pad. "But you need to know these things by heart pretty quick. Can I see?" he asked and stretched out his long arm.

Cal placed the pad in his hand, and Uncle Jack studied the pages. His expression changed so frequently that Cal had a difficult time separating the genuine from the pose.

"Take this," he said as he poked his caked nail at one of the pages.

"Heading north is all well and good. But you can't end up in New York. Not on your life. You never want to end up there unless you want to spend a week tracing spur lines and dodging yard workers. Too many possibilities in New York. It'll drive you nuts. Then you'd end up in Nebraska or Iowa or some other God-forsaken place."

He handed the notepad back. Cal stuffed it into the side pouch of his bag.

"That thing's gonna weigh you down," Uncle Jack told him as he pointed to the bag.

Cal draped his arm across the zipper. He closed his eyes for a moment but resisted drifting back into dreams. From the scars on his boots and the scars on Jack's hands, he was sure he had done his share of labor. And while that didn't confirm his knowledge of rails, it was certain he had spent more years gripping iron than Cal had. His eyes closed but he forced them open.

"How long you been doing this?" Cal asked.

"Let's see. I'm 48 even though I don't look it," he said, and he groomed his mustache with his cracked fingers before brushing his hair roughly against his scalp. "Five years?" he said, but his voice rose as if it were a question.

"Where are you headed?"

Uncle Jack didn't answer and, instead, went on to tell Cal about his life in more detail than Cal needed. There was his mother and father who still lived in Clay City, Indiana. There was his wife, Alice, although he referred to her as "little Alice" (namely, he said, because of her height in proportion to his) even though she hated it. He told him about his son, Jack Jr., who ran away from home at the age of 12 and kept right on running away no matter how many times they hauled him back home.

Then, barely taking a breath, he said, "How 'bout you?"

"No family to speak of," Cal said but, in the telling, he instantly thought about his mother and his brother who, before long, would pick up their routine right where they left off, driving to the 58 bus-stop, toting bread from the Shop & Save and medication from the health centre. Soon enough, Cal would be an afterthought but the idea comforted him.

Cal leaned back against the wall of the car. The tremor of the tracks rippled up his spine. He tried to imagine what it would feel like once they really got moving, once the clatter of the car through the countryside jolted his back and his neck. He could have asked Uncle Jack, but he didn't. Why should he have faith in this stranger? He had no reason to believe that his story about his jobs, about the family he left in Indiana, was the whole truth. He just figured there might be more to it, maybe more than even a seasoned traveler like Jack was willing to tell. He didn't ask him about eventualities, and he didn't tell him the truth of his own story.

"I'm not sure how good a hobo you'd be," Uncle Jack said.

"You think I want to be a hobo?" Cal asked, puffing himself up. "I don't remember saying I wanted to be like you. Follow in your footsteps? I don't even know you. And even if I did, you might be surprised how quick I can pick things up," Cal told him.

Jack squinted and cocked his head.

"Don't get all riled up. You could be right, but it's not a question of learning as much as temperament. I can see yours as clear as day. It's one thing to figure out the grip of a handrail or the stride past a coupling or across an open frame car. Hell, if that was all there was to it, everybody would be hopping trains. But it's temperament. That, and commitment."

"I managed to survive this place," Cal said and rapped his fist on the crate beside him. "That's got to say something about temperament."

“Well, I’ll be! So, that’s where you came from,” Jack said and then grinned. He looked at the scaly flesh of his own palm. He flicked his finger over a newly forming callus. “Maybe it does say something about you,” he said. “But who’s loading those boxes now? And what’s that tell you about commitment?”

“A man can only take so much before he questions his own sanity, which is as bad as it gets. They’d have had to kill me to make it worse. And even then, I doubt it would be.”

“Maybe,” Jack said. “At the end of the day, it’s all about what got you through that one day and then through the months and years. Nobody can judge that. That’s the truth of it all. And I’m not talking about the paycheck. Anybody can get money. That’s an easy one. I can get money just sitting here. I’m talking about survival. Body and soul. And what helps you to survive. I have a notion you survived by spending most of your time up here,” he said and tapped his finger on his forehead. He brushed back the stands of hair that had drooped over his eyebrows.

“This ain’t a dreamer’s life,” he went on. “You gotta be out there, not in here,” he said and tapped the same spot on his head. “It’s watching, touching, waiting... not dreaming. It’s physical, not metaphysical. That’s the truth of it all.”

“Then what’s the payoff?” Cal asked. “What’s the payoff for you?”

“It’s the rails more than the train,” he said. “My wife told me that I couldn’t commit to anything. But she didn’t know about rails back then. It’s not like sailing the ocean, where an unlucky wind blows you this way or that. Or a plane rerouting to Australia by way of Alaska. It ain’t even like a car at a crossroad with maps and gadgets to let you know which way not to turn. It’s two rails. That’s all. Forward or back. Just two rails. Step right up. Make your choice. Then you’re on for the long haul. That’s commitment.” He stared into the darkness. “Unless you jump,” he added and chuckled. “There’s always that.”

Jumping was something Cal hadn’t considered. But wasn’t that what he had done? Jumped? He had stuffed railcars with pancake syrup for longer than Uncle Jack had ridden them. He had pictured himself just where he was: his back pressed against a boxcar wall, his worldly possessions—some clothes, shoes, a notepad, a pen, some water, one last paycheck—whatever valuables he could stuff into the old hockey bag his father had bought him at their last game together. Home opener with Montreal, he remembered. This was a fresh start, he thought. Then he realized that starting something meant there was some destination and, beyond a half-formed rail route scrawled on a pocket notepad, he had no destination to speak of.

“Think Woody Guthrie jumped?” Cal asked.

“Who?” Uncle Jack said, his eyes partly open.

“Woody Guthrie. You know. Riding rails. Writing songs. 'Goin' Down the Road.” He tapped his Chuck Taylors on the car floor. “Sooo long, it's been good to know ya,” he softly sang.

“Sure thing,” Jack said, then burst out laughing. “Woody Guthrie?” he said, and his eye lids drifted, and his breath slowed. “Never knew him, but I know who you mean. So long, it's good to know ya,” he murmured, his eyes closing as he sang.

“You wouldn't have known him. He was before your time. Anyway, I imagine he jumped once or twice, in between riding and dreaming up songs.”

Before long, Jack's eyes were closed. So much for vigilance, Cal thought. So much for watching and not dreaming. Jack's long legs stretched nearly halfway across the floor, and his boot heels vibrated lightly as the train picked up speed. His mustache drooped over the corners of his mouth and fixed his smile into a sad expression that Cal hadn't noticed before dusk.

Cal's eyes began to close, too. Through ten years of practice on graveyard shifts in factories and loading docks, he had to fight the need to sleep and the need to dream on the job. Now, free from the pallets and the drums of corn syrup, he saw no reason not to sleep and to dream. His dreams conjured campfires and rail yards. He saw Pete yanking empty pallets and stacking new crates. And then it was his brother loading the shipment, but now they were porcelain vases rolling along conveyors and accumulating on tables. Often, one would chip or crack or shatter, but Jim would pack the chipped vases and the shards. He would seal the cartons and ship them off to some suburban housewife in Greensboro or Dayton.

In his dreams, he saw his mother placing carnations in vases on her kitchen table and water would seep from hairline cracks and pool onto the veneer. And she would bundle the carnations and take them with her as she boarded the 58 bus and dropped her token and took her seat. But there were no seats, only floors, and she would stretch her aching legs across the cold floor and hold her carnations against her chest and the fragrance would mask the propane and exhaust from outside. Cal would try to sit beside her, try to press his leg along hers but, each time he moved, she was in a more distant spot. And when he would shift across the floor toward her, she would be distant again. Then he could not see her at all. Nor could he smell the fragrance of the flowers, though she had left them behind scattered across the floor. There was only the odor of propane and exhaust, and his stomach began to churn.

Daylight flooded the car, and he squeezed his eyelids shut and rubbed his belly. His sneakers shuddered against the floor and his stretched legs gently rocked.

“Time to wake up, Uncle Jack,” he mumbled as he squinted into the sunlight. “Time to be vigilant.”

But Uncle Jack was already awake. Cal could make out his tall form in the doorway surrounded by the splintered rays of sun. He might have been part of Granny Dot’s logo—a farmer smiling at the break of dawn, getting ready to feed the chickens or turn out the cows. But when Cal stood up and shaded his eyes, he saw his bag hanging from Uncle Jack’s shoulder.

“What’s the idea?” Cal called out as he stepped across the trembling boards.

Uncle Jack gripped the door frame.

“I told you. This thing’s gonna weigh you down,” he said.

“That’s everything I own,” Cal shouted. “Give it here.”

Uncle Jack looked toward the opening and stared ahead into the wind to the front of the train. He shrugged Cal’s bag from his shoulder.

“It’ll weigh you down too,” Cal said, hoping that his reasoning would sink in.

“It ain’t my past,” Uncle Jack told him. “It’s yours.”

The train began to slow, but it seemed that Uncle Jack knew about that, like he had been this way before. He wound his arm and tossed Cal’s bag into a swath of weeds beside the rail bed. He leapt off the edge of the car.

Cal sprang to the open door and clung to the frame as he peered down at the passing railbed. Uncle Jack was walking south of the line with Cal’s bag over his shoulder. Cal looked up and squinted into the rising sun, the same thing he had done for ten years when he made early morning runs to the supply yard.

Everything was gone—his clothes, his socks, his notebook, his water, his last paycheck, even his sketches of rail routes. Instinctively, he searched his pockets and frisked his jacket for something familiar, something that belonged to him, something to convince him that this wasn’t a dream. Once more, he stared into the distance, but Uncle Jack was gone.

The train picked up its pace. Cal tried to judge its speed and spot the best place to jump. The train was bound to slow down at some point, he knew, either for a

scheduled stop or a grade crossing or a curve or for a drop or a recoupling. Uncle Jack knew that much, and Cal could wait for his chance, too. Once it arrived, he would go back. He would get his bag and his clothes and his money, everything he owned. But the train kept running north to Cleveland, north to Buffalo, straight into Lake Erie for all he knew.

Maybe that was what Uncle Jack was talking about. Maybe he was not a liar. Maybe commitment was no different than being stuck. In the glade of passing trees, he thought of the 58 bus. He tried to envision his mother—her lined face, her driven stare—but he couldn't see her, couldn't remember her, as if he had been traveling for years instead of hours, and she seemed a blur behind the bus window. Was it commitment shrouding his memory? Commitment to the next ten miles or twenty miles or fifty miles? Or was it resistance, resistance to turning back, to retracing his steps, to jumping. He thought about Slim Bobby and Sunfall Sam and Woody Guthrie. He remembered them, for sure. He wondered if they had ever jumped. He wondered if they felt the urge to backtrack. He wondered if moving on was always their first choice or their only choice.

The wind rushed into his nostrils and dried his eyes. His jaw tightened and, into the wind, he shouted the name of Uncle Jack, but he could barely hear his voice. He shouted the name again, imagining the sound as more of a curse than a name. The clear plastic wrapped around the single pallet of Granny Dot's Sunrise Syrup rustled in the car. He kneeled in the doorway and tugged on the laces of his Chuck Taylors. He gripped the door frame with one hand, just as Uncle Jack had done, and rubbed his half-finger as the wind whipped up an aroma of lemongrass and engine oil. He breathed deeply as he looked down to the rail bed—to the streaks of grass and gravel. His Chuck Taylors vibrated as the train sped further from Uncle Jack, from Pennsylvania, and closer to someplace he could not see, someplace he could only imagine.

How Our Calls Cross the Ocean

by Megan Gannett

“I love grocery shopping with you in my pocket,” I said to Damien last night, shaking water droplets off a bundle of parsley. “I used to mumble into the mic and wear a hoodie to hide my earbuds, and now look at me talking out loud to myself. I mean, this is what makes me happy, isn’t it?”

“That’s right, doll,” she said gently, the way she does when I talk like this, which is a few times a day. I glanced out through the entwinings of university couples to the haze of the Edmonton street—smoky from wildfires—and pictured us walking there, in the restored June scent, in less than two weeks. Then she said, “When I’m there with you, I won’t be in my office with the door closed. I won’t shut these blinds and whisper in your ear, tell you that when I slid my shorts off this morning I felt your mouth on me and started pulsating, imagining—”

While she spoke, tremors of light shot their forks through my abdomen, the man in front of me squeezed an eggplant and batted a pancake of snot from his beard, and I had to giggle at the ceiling to keep from enjoying myself more than is socially acceptable in a thirty-five-year-old woman at the supermarket.

—you facing the sunrise, she was saying. With your calves wrapped in bed sheets and half your hair stuck to your armpit and old and deaf Pete banging on the door of our master bedroom saying breakfast’s on and your bro’s kids playing in the snow and me not caring scooping you into my pelvis nudging you wet and barely stopping to breathe down your back before getting so deep inside you that you have to hobble down the stairs to fetch our bacon.

I don’t want to give the impression that we are constantly carrying on in this way, humping like gerbils via the radio waves (and deep-sea cables; I recently confirmed for myself how our calls cross the ocean). It’s possible I tighten up these run-on sentences of hers, make them punchier than they really are. But it’s her voice you’d have to hear to know why the words don’t matter. That voice is all it takes—and why I’ve made it on six visits, in five years of dating. And while it may seem strange for her flyby erotica to feature my family members and the rooms of homes we’ve never lived in, my dad *is* old and deaf and I come from a land of frigid daybreaks. I submit to you that these details are what make our dreamscapes real. We are good storytellers, and that’s why we’ve lasted.

* * *

Damien has a ten-year-old daughter named Claire. They live in Queenstown, New Zealand, where Claire’s other mother lives also, and where she and Damien run a ziplining company. The name of the other mother is Kerri. I have met Kerri twice, once after I was attacked by grief on the zipline, and once over FaceTime.

My high-flying experience I will get around to saying more about, but the Queenstown queers called it a “penic etteck,” and later at the bar kept dropping stories of their own struggles with anxiety—I’m a yell-in-the-car girl, she’s a jump-out-of-car girl—as though promoting the beery, therapeutic benefits of being able to laugh at oneself. I felt nothing. I perched demurely nodding on the faux rustic stool between my love and her ex, whose day off it had been and to whom she’d reached out in the absence of a better idea, thinking it wise, I guess, to recruit someone quieter. Damien seemed a tad shell-shocked by the realness of her Canadian girlfriend; though two and a half years strong at that point, we hadn’t met in person for over a year. She patted my hand while slapping the table and guffawing at what her friends found most deranged about each other. Once in a while her nervous system got turned around, and she slapped my hand and patted the table. Her shoulder leaned into me. It was a distant comfort that began to build as I focused through thin cotton on skin and muscle and bone. I could be lonely next to her, I realized. So was the distance so bad? Perhaps we were fine—stretched across the Pacific.

On my right was Kerri’s wonderful, uneasy presence. She oozed dissatisfaction. At first I thought her beef was with me, but when she looked me in the eyes I saw it was with everyone else. She peered into me as though looking for a ghost at the sight of whom she was ready to break. I don’t know if she found him. She smiled without awkwardness after a moment, broke my gaze as her spine straightened, and was erect with silence until I began to ask about Claire, and autumn plans, and hiking in the area. I know Damien, and have a pretty good idea of the Kerri she talks about. That Kerri has a sense of humour. But I think she’s also the kind of person who is unable to pretend things away, and while I could be wrong, I think she wanted to make it clear that even in that zoo of a town there was room for my loss. Either way, it was beside her in that bar that I saw my hard-edged dream blur. The dream was Damien and me, in some cure-all way. I was thirty-two and had lost a child; this was not a new feeling. I relaxed into it, into Damien, as Kerri wouldn’t and hadn’t, let my feet touch down on the shores of Lake Wakatipu.

* * *

It sneaks up on you, a relationship made of pixels and dings and bluely glowing windows that import, at the pace of their unfolding, mundanities from the far side of the globe. Say it begins five Septembers ago. You’ve met by chance in Nova Scotia, polished off a summer fling. Now you spin around opposite poles.

It’s the occasional FaceTime, at first. One day you pause in the middle of talking to feed the cat, and she asks to see him. You dangle his paws in front of the monitor and coax him to yawn. Two weeks later you’re eating supper together, you and the cat and the Kiwi. (Well, you and Ember—that’s the cat’s name—are eating supper. She’s singeing together what her Scottish mum calls a fry up, really

just a slutty breakfast, but God help you if you call it *brunch*. Steam curls off the kale, fat spits in the pan, and as she flips and jiggles and swears and spills marmalade on the floor, those brownish tiles which you've never set foot on, you can damn close to feel the heat of her body, from the burned thumb to the roots of her hair.) Your actual vicinity, your own kitchen floor, has nothing on your east coast summer together, which seems to grow ever more recent as the days pass. Your shared geography you talk to death and it only comes more alive.

For example, what was her first impression of you? Divorced, bereaved nerd? (There you were writing manuals on the sagging deck of your aunt's cabin, lanky indifference in a Pikachu onesie.) *What were you thinking when—?* is the kind of question you ask each other, but in a bit of a jittery way; by now you've aged enough to know that you shouldn't reminisce like this, prematurely. The intimacy whose beginnings you're hearkening back to is, after all, newborn. You don't spoil it, though. Because it's fun to recall how you were both scared when the boat knocked a rock, off the point in the dark with the tide coming in. Her blood on your leg (she'd cut herself, reacting suddenly). Did the kiss help? Of course it did... And once you've mapped out every emotion that you did feel or might have felt between the second week of July and the last week of August, individually and as a fledgling pair, you retell it all from the aunt's perspective. What was Aunt Robyn thinking? The dead husband's gay granddaughter whom she barely knew—this was Damien—pleading childhood memories of the place and turning up on weekends. Come on, you say, smirking. Aunt Robyn knew.

Most of all, in the early months over video chat, you marvel at basic things. Like the fact that your hand has to be in the back while holding hands and hers has to be in the front, and how her head meets your chin when she stands on your toes. Like the odds of both your dads being from Cape Breton and winding up loosely related through marriage. (*Are there odds more Nova Scotian?*) And the crossing of your paths. We would never have heard of each other, you say. We would never have even heard of each other, if—because it's true. If your partnerships hadn't ended simultaneously, if she hadn't come to Canada for the first time in years...

You don't lose your independence. If anything you start getting out more, beckoned by the shine of having a life to describe when you come in from the cold. You try taking work to cafés and cross-country skiing in the river valley. *Her* life, you believe, is unfailingly interesting. Days off she's up early with Claire, who's only five at this point, hiking or biking; on weekdays she hires and fires people and organizes tours, like the world-famous plunge down a nighttime mountainside. She's just spent eight hundred dollars that she doesn't have switching to an iPhone, and while she won't admit it, this is totally in support of your addiction to Apple products—an addiction she's now caught. She mocks her Pavlovian elation at the sound of the FaceTime ringtone. *I almost cry when it's*

not you. You try to support her attempt to use less mobile data. At this you fail.

For what you have you coin the term LDS: long-distance stalkership. I'm a stalker, I'm such a stalker, you say when you wake and text her in the middle of the night, but with a fondness that to you represents a thirty-year-old's ease with herself, or something.

She becomes slightly performative about mealtimes, showing off her cooking skills for the benefit of the webcam. This kind of makes you want to hide your love of adding graham crackers and your favourite kind of EnviroKidz cereal to smoothies, but you don't. Instead you garnish the smoothies with the shapes of flowers—banana rounds for petals round a blueberry, for example—to demonstrate how maturely you do perpetual childhood.

On occasion you clip and file your nails and rub coconut oil all over your hands to torture her, but you're still too shy to pee in front of your laptop. You have sex, of course. Of course you have sex with each other, over FaceTime.

It's been a very long time since you fell for someone, and you wonder if this is what the honeymoon phase looks like in 2014.

One freakishly mild December's night you go swing dancing with friends. A truck turning onto Whyte Avenue sprays brown snow on your tights and you think, *Where my girlfriend lives it's tomorrow, and summer.* But you don't tell anyone. Not yet. You are not warm inside, exactly, but there is a seeping awareness that *something* is alive in you. Years ago you had this grown-up life before you had this childish one, and one day it fell out of you like the weight of the sun. What has your apartment been since, if not a hollowness for your hollowness to go home to? You are one crater inside another. You did everything right the first time, and didn't get to keep any of what mattered. How could an effort like that be repeated? Although wasn't it almost easy, acquiring it the first time. Unimaginably easier—it seems like it must have been. The education, the husband, the high chair smeared with butternut squash. You kept your job and your apartment.

You have hated that apartment.

In twenty minutes you will find her in it—in Queenstown, inside your iPhone—strolling up a long hill to the top of Thompson Street. Dark-fuzzed arms and upper lip sweat. You'll lay out in her backyard whose cut of the sky hangs with paragliders, and into whose heat moisture emanates from the dark green base of the mountain. She'll lift weights and do a little yoga while you take your phone into the shower with you, brush your teeth and fall asleep. Your view of the world spliced with hers. A choppy, spacious dream.

I was looking forward to today, and although I'll admit to getting sidetracked, it's not too late to turn it around. All the smoke from up north has made me woozy lately and I thought I'd take the day off as a treat to myself. Rest up, go for a walk in the clean air (if the forecast held), maybe try that new docuseries about the fall of the Russian monarchy. Since Cody died I haven't been much in the habit of taking weekends from my job as a technical writer, but I shouldn't let work sprawl out over my days.

I was looking forward to the alone-time, too. They had an unusual dump of snow down in Queenstown, and Damien's gone with Claire backcountry skiing for a couple of days.

My day began with the smokeless light, a cool brightness on my eyelids while the cat was waking me up. I let him bound and scamper in and out of the room each morning—which lately means two p.m.—even though his pastime is to knock small objects down on my head. I guess part of me likes to be pestered, in the morning. Before you get ahead of yourself, though, Ember is not my fur-baby. He's a cat. My parents might sign my Christmas card to both of us (*that's* a relationship they can wholly accept), but I don't use him, I assure you, to sublimate my deepest love in this life. That line of thinking's a further laceration. I know the difference between a cat and my toddler.

When I went to the window it turned out to be raining. Imagine, that in comparison with the sepia pall that had darkened the city for a week straight, coating our tongues with particulates, some cloud cover emptying itself would fairly dazzle. I knew the fires were still burning out there, that the smoke had left on a whim of the winds. Thank God our family farm was to the south. But rain had come and that seemed hopeful, and it felt like the most manageable option was to take back the air as soon as it cleared, to suppress my anxiety that we are growing short of breath, the world over. I cracked the window and caught a whiff of such pure flowering freshness that I backed away for some reason, almost tripped over Ember.

This shall be a screen-free day, I resolved, affecting a pompous British manner as I sometimes do in my head. I am trying to learn to parent myself.

I watered my indoor plants while the coffee was brewing and the radio kept my mind on a focused track. I would make pancakes and a massive smoothie and read. Later, when I saw that "home3" had called while I was making breakfast and my phone was on airplane mode, my chest dilated as though the missed call were from Damien—even as I rolled my eyes at my own physiology. (Damien is home2, the farm is home3; there's no home1, because that's me.) By this time I

was at the river. I shut the phone off completely, then, and sank my shoes into the mud.

What happened is this. Coffee was fine, pancakes were fine, the swell of inward space due to airplane mode was fine. Then I walked down to ground level and stepped outside and smelled the spring.

Now, I am barefoot in the reeds and loosened mud where the water has smoothed out a flat over hundreds of years. Down to my T-shirt, tracks squelching beneath the sound of the rain on the river and I am not cold. One shoe has been swallowed permanently, near an abandoned shopping cart I was trying to move. I've gone soft-eyed. Glasses hung on a bush.

It wasn't springtime when we scattered his ashes. Seven and a half years ago... Cody's father and me. Just a few handfuls, they came to. The kid loved the mud—this mud—which is why we brought him here. I'm sure they all washed away. First snowmelt. But the moisture is a shock, today, after weeks of drought and smoke, and you can see where it's brought me: to the place of my little one. Drowning in the smell of the blooming. For it is places that unhinge me from time to time, places broken open by the meetings of weather and season which make my life its painstaking thing, distinct from yours, which pull water up through these leaves and dust the peaks high above Damien's house with lichens. And which, flooding into my body, sharpen memory and imagined fates—such as the future that overwhelmed me, that once, on a zipline, in the Land of the Long White Cloud.

In my apartment I have crisp white walls and windows that shut tightly and compact rectangles of blue light which are conduits to lives being lived elsewhere. I love the solace I find there, my laptop perched on a chair beside the bathtub while I light candles and exfoliate my long pink self—on many nights, and in the dull ache of some winter afternoons. I am comforted by my indoor life in the northern hemisphere, tolerably stimulated while insulated against sensory excess. Ugh, I'm not a lab rat. What I'm saying is I know where home¹ belongs, and it's here on the eroding banks of the North Saskatchewan, where I can't actually bear to be. By now you're probably wondering why I don't think it can work, in the end, between Damien and me. Have I said as much? She has a Canadian passport, but can never leave Claire. I can never leave Cody.

I tell her both of these things.

* * *

The first time I met Kerri, the time over FaceTime, she said to me—tucking her blunt mint-green bangs out of sight above the rim of a climbing helmet—"It'll be good to have you here in time for Claire's bike race."

This was said with such matter-of-factness that Damien laughed, as did Kerri's new partner, Rose, who'd been dropping off lunch when I happened to call. Kerri had a tour group waiting. She glanced between the two of them in bewilderment and then snort-giggled, gasping that she had to rush back "up top" but wished me "a good-as-gold night in Canada."

"Claire's got three mums and six grandparents," said Damien. (This was an early estimate where Rose was concerned, though a funny one.) "Kerri wants to up those numbers to four and eight!" The phone wobbled, but I saw her hand fly out to high-five Rose.

* * *

Hang on—can you see what that moment might have meant to me? All I was witnessing, I knew, was the humaneness, the stronger ties, even, that can result from a separation. But I couldn't help feeling like some cosy, polygamous cult was trying to welcome me, to extend its chain of hands across the ocean, and I loved this and hated that I did, and hanging up shed angry, hopeful tears.

* * *

Two and a half years ago, while Damien drove to Christchurch to pick me up for our first sexathon in Kiwiland, I didn't have the luxury to be nervous. I was vomiting thirty-five thousand feet above the sea—into a bag and then my sweater—between bouts of clear-air turbulence.

By the second week I felt cleansed and relaxed. Then on the eve of my maybe-stepdaughter's bike race, I was yanked back off the ground. Was this a condition of happiness, to let the earth quit the soles of my feet? Swaying on a zipline platform next to Damien and her friends, I gazed out through towering, invasive firs at an expanse of red-brown mountains, sandwiched between blues. The softness of the sky's blue and the hardness of the lake's blue and the farness of the moss below seemed to cast a spell, together with the piney air gorging my lungs, and the fact that—for the first time—I loved my fear.

Maybe we are looking for the right mix of danger and safety, and that is the dance of our lives. I was already jacked up from hours spent thinking I was about to meet Kerri, not Damien's friend Kiri, their names sounding identical in a New Zealand accent, and as we suited up I had watched the object of my affection and the ones who seemed to know her best with a childish, niggling dismay. Damien reached straight into the crotches and underarms of Kiri and Kiri's girlfriend—adjusting straps and clothing and fondly pinching their flesh—as though nothing could be more normal than their bodies' proximity to one another. I don't think it was sexual jealousy that I felt so much as a desperation to be physically unextraordinary to my own boo; I wanted my damp knee-pits and the sunscreen that whitened me like a mime to feel natural by her side. At the same time, I was

longing to, um, text her, and make fun of the little ways in which our communication broke down when we were IRL. At a distance we would never have failed to be on the same page about the fact that “Kee-ree,” in this context, meant Kiri. She would laugh at that.

Kiri’s girlfriend had kept asking us how we did it, how we stuck out the distance. Now Kiri, leaning boldly off the platform with extreme trust in her leash and carabiner, said, “This is great, eh. Us and you guys. Love me some dyke time!” We snapped some selfies. Then she said, “But didn’t you used to be married to a man, mate? What’s up with that?”

Now excuse me, but I’ve been bi as fuck since the age of twelve. I hid it from my folks for aeons, which given my husband was a hell of a lot easier than it would have been for Damien and Co. But the last thing I needed twenty years later was a charming, if slightly chauvinistic lesbian in board shorts telling me that the hairy pecs I’d once slept on threatened the purity of her club. It didn’t help that Damien had had a bumpy road to embracing my sexuality, in the beginning. I would have loved to say that yes, I used to be married to a man named Luke, and we used to dress up like Pokémon, invent dance moves inspired by our cat, and sleep with a baby in between us. (And yep, he looked like both of us and we’d created him for free.) It could have been nice to be asked why I thought it hadn’t worked out, my marriage to this man. Damien’s was a nosy crowd; wouldn’t they have asked this about an ex-wife? I would have said that we’d tried to hold on to each other, tried to keep hearing each other, that it wasn’t our son that cracked us so much as a long-standing brittleness in the way we’d hammered ourselves together. Although that would’ve been a load of bullshit, probably. Instead I closed my eyes as the old, resented, tenacious shame of feeling different among the different coursed through me.

“They were in love,” said Damien dreamily, closing the slight gap between us. She cupped my sweaty neck and kissed my temple.

Kiri did some backstepping. It was agreed that in honour of bisexuals as “brave as,” I should be first to plunge to my doom.

* * *

Have you ever leapt backwards into the unknown on the strength of a person’s gaze? Nothing’s as closed or open as a face, and shivering here in the mud I can see I have read my life based on the way it’s looked out at me. From the depths of eyes, I mean. My great acts of will have been a running towards or away from what I’ve seen in a face. My mum’s exacting love, every change in Cody while he was sick, the gaze of the man I was married to retreating, hardening like wax.

I think what I saw in Damien before I shut my eyes and fell to what I was sure

would be my death was the promise that she wasn't going to push me. Not ever. She would stand on that platform for as long as it took, while seabeds sank and eggs dripped through our fallopian tubes and our parents died of coughing fits holding back their alternatives to our dismal choices. Of the South Island girls who'd continue to swarm her, she might tussle with a few—never neglecting, all the while, to keep loving me. Keep our eyes locked. Via the deep-sea cables?

I decided flying and screaming to move to New Zealand.

The neurosis of want and its argument had ceased, when I jumped, like a cresting wave.

I've often told her how sad I am that she missed those seconds of suspension; I was singularly hers, though for less than the time it took for the whole of the rushing landscape—or whatever word we are missing in English that would describe the earth as it includes the sky—to gasp itself into me. The mountains lunged at me strangely, bunching inside my rib cage, and the lake levelled up through my lungs. There was no Cody here. Of the futures I had tried on from the inside out, this one contained the least of him. No cottonwoods would snow on rivulets down to the river, no highway stink like his grandparents' farm. By the time the pulley carrying me slowed within reach of the next jaunty staff member I was crazed and hyperventilating, like someone who wastes the best of her days.

* * *

I have four missed calls from an Otago number. When my thumb hits “call,” Kerri answers. What you have to understand is that since that night at the bar following my “penic etteck” three years ago, I haven't seen Kerri or spoken to her. I liked her just fine—in fact, it was her poise in holding space for me that gave me the balls to have limitations. I did not attend Claire's bike race or become her fourth mother; I planned my trips to Queenstown around her vacations, actually. I did not join a modern family of the Southern Alps. I told my love to fuck whomever she pleased, and she did, and she broke up with me several times. But she always yearned, in the end, to watch Ember go down on the wand of my vacuum cleaner. And she loved that FaceTime ringtone. So there you are.

Kerri says, “She tore her ACL again. Will you yell at her for me?”

“Damien?” I stand up groggily, my wallet and its contents spilling from my lap. Facedown near a mud-swallowed ankle lands the photo I've been curled up around. It is no longer raining but I have to clench my jaw to stop my teeth from chattering.

“They were out with some folks you might know. One guy's asthma, they had to turn around, and your girlfriend thought it would be a good idea to let them go

ahead so she and Claire could take their time. Then she wiped out *bad*—still way out from the trailhead—and Claire had to ski down for help, by herself.”

“Is that not safe?”

“Not a great call.” Kerri’s voice is husky, syrupy, one shade deeper than Damien’s. How does the pair of them manage, with those ridiculous accents, to sound so sexy? They should have a podcast. Or if that’s too brainy, host bad country. I would listen. “Anyway, we’re at the hospital, starving—whatcha up to? Rose is working. Dame’s phone’s dead and she’s in a rotten mood, but she meant to tell you herself. I’ll pass you on when the doc’s done gabbing. With her flight to Canada coming up, I won’t blame you for killing her.”

Kerri’s not actually mad, I can tell; she just wants company in her frustration. Extra company—a feather bed of it. Because truth be told she’s got friendsfamilycoworkersRose in a picturesque package of a town, and that is what props her confidence, surely, her chatty tone. She assumes I’ll warm to her. I get it, she’s pissed off and hungry, stuck in an ice-bath of fluorescence with her best friend who’s imperfect and their prodigiously athletic kid. She had plans for a Sunday alone. But I’m disappointed. She’s not the woman-of-few-words I have made of her.

“I’ve heard of bigger problems,” I say, numbly aware that Kerri has too, and that my rage is dusted in its own kind of pettiness.

I hang up.

I bend my knees and spring out of the mud, crashing down on the soiled photo. The image is on my hard drive and I can print it out anytime.

* * *

“You’re ahead, babe. Pause, babe, pause.”

Damien shifts her weight forwards while clamping an ice pack to her knee. A blip of silence on her end is followed by the synchrony I find so comforting: two tracks of tinny audio, spooling out a movie. We’ve got each other on our iPhones and *Top Gun* on our computers. Claire has put herself to bed down the hall. Here in Edmonton, it’s three a.m.

When she hits pause again, I freeze Mav in the middle of his assholish smirk (which she’s been emulating since high school). “What’s up, you?”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

For once we haven't communicated the crap out of things the moment they happen. It was nine o'clock when I got in, and I somehow got warm. Now Claire's asleep and we can talk, but we haven't; both the accident and my rudeness to Kerri have gone unmentioned. I haven't brought up the river or the photograph, either.

I am arrogant. I've grown cynical towards our conflict rituals, and I think I know what comes next. She'll ask my forgiveness for wrecking herself and our Canadian summer; I'll say I'll apologize to Kerri. She'll flare up at this reminder of my actions; I'll whimper piteously. She'll do a speech straight out of *The Notebook* about how happy we make each other even though we make each other insane, which will be laced with rhetorical pornography and the bolstering of her stance that there's a line-up of twentysomethings dying to marry her. *Guess who made vegan red velvet cake—dropped it off at my work? Sophie. You know the bakery girl. She put on lipstick to match and invited me to an art show. She's funny, she's hot, she's here, you're not! I hate vegan cake! I don't want to date Sophie. I want you to fly bus walk here without telling me and get lost ask directions get a sunburn off the snow and when I come home to you stuffing up a carrot cake hands gooey with animal products I want you to throw me down on the table and take me so hard I—well, probably get a yeast infection from the icing sugar. I reckon my closet's tall enough for your onesies. I want to fight about where the toaster goes. Let's pick Claire up from school and tell her you're ours now.* I will groan with jealousy (foolishly defensive of my baking skills), and giggle and get turned-on and turn ravenously sad and say I wish I could do it, I wish I could move for her. She'll taunt me—*May I ask what time it is, sweetheart? This is your best life, is it? Alone with your phone, burning the night away on an app you think loves you...* She'll go quiet, say it's because she cheated on Kerri. That's what you're afraid of. I'll say it's not. She'll say it is. I'll do a speech about how paltry are her cobwebs and freshest flirtations in comparison with everything real that's happened to me that she can't understand. She'll cry. I'll cry. We'll manage to say "goodnight" and "I love you." A day or two will pass, then we'll cook a meal together. I'll give the cat the vacuum and watch her laugh while he dips his tongue into the vortex of suction. And finally after a FaceTime bath we'll have quivering braying FaceTime sex, and when I let go it will not be without the vague notion of standing at the edge of an abyss, dropping stills of my life into the grey matter of a bodiless mind—a fever dream that wraps the earth and knows, for better or worse, that I was here.

Tonight Damien starts with none of this. Instead, she tells me my story.

"You're in a tough spot," she says. "Your girl lives thirteen thousand k's away. Your memories of your boy live in Edmonton. You've thought about what it would mean to leave your flat, those shit Alberta winters. And you'd do it for me if you could, but you can't. And it's alright." There's an odd flushed look on her face.

Her sincerity makes my throat ache and is also so frustrating. She's gearing up to leave me for the zillionth time, and the fact is that one of these days she'll get the job done. Permanently. Maybe not tonight; but there are things you can stand for five years that you can't stand forever. I'm on my feet, glaring at the rectangle in my palm.

"I've told you that Cody's a part of you, a part of us. You're Cody's mum and that's how I see you. He's with us in the grocery store and on our walks. He's in everything we do, baby, even when I'm inside you he's—"

"*Shut up!*" I cry, into a ready silence. I manage to say "goodnight" and "I love you" before my thumb stomps the red button.

* * *

She's a bit stoned and half-asleep when I call her back on my laptop.

"You're beautiful," I say harshly. "Everything you say is beautiful."

She yawns, limps gingerly to the bathroom, rumped dark hair fuzzing into the background. "So what's the problem?"

"What if it's not the same?"

"What if what's not the same?"

I can feel pooling beneath my breastbone the light we make. You can't dam it. When the channel blasts open you might not be safe, but you might not be ruined, either.

"What if—" My desktop image is of Cody and me laughing, by some lilacs. I have crushed our faces into the mud. And they're still—well, blazing out of the depths of a monitor, which is a slice of plastic specked with food particles. My boy laughs and laughs. With strokes of the touchpad I hide twenty-seven-year-old me behind Live Movie of Girlfriend, who's not a bad listener while she pees. "What if—when I move to Queenstown—"

"—everything changes?"

"Yes."

"And you miss having me in your pocket, all the time?"

"Yes." What if none of it's real, a trick of the miles? I can't lose home2.

Damien is laughing, her face next to Cody's, and the laugh won't be rendered thin by my old speakers. From unfathomably distant it bubbles up through my organs, close as you please. "Baby," she splutters, scolding. "Goddamn." She wraps a hand in toilet paper, dabs her leaking eyes, and as her arms move and my view jiggles I know she's wiping with the same wad between her legs.

I make her tell me.

"I fucking hope it's not the same!"

And I too split my sides, because she makes a good point. Some time ticks by; she's stuck on the toilet due to age, injury and being too detrimentally in love with me to stand up. When we're done she looks right in my eyes, which means she's had to gaze purposefully into the lens of her iPhone. Which is dumb. What screens really want is to break up like ice floes.

I know this because I am loved and ridiculous—even Cody thinks so, I can tell. And for once in a stack of blue days I can see a way through.

POETRY



Do You Know These 10 Common Warning Signs of Depression

by Megan Gannett

Not able to get out of bed
because you are handcuffed to a 1200-pound Kodiak bear
that has four tranquilizer darts in its neck and snores.
Persistent thoughts of harming yourself
by eating at Taco Bell.
Little everyday things that used to bring you joy,
like setting fire to your city and throwing bricks in policemen's faces,
now seem more like work than play.
Pieces of darkness flake off of night's canopy
to settle on you slowly, gently, until
you are covered in a uniform layer of black ash.
You suddenly realize you are rooting for the administrative assistant
in the Lifetime original movie you're watching,
the energetic young woman who wants to seduce the husband,
kidnap the child and murder the wife.
Even the voices in your head
don't want to talk to you anymore.
When sleep finally comes there are no dreams,
merely an announcer saying that that service
is only available to Premium Subscribers.
You find yourself pretending that every bill that drops
through your mail slot is a letter from a dear friend
threatening you with violence unless you repay the money you borrowed.
Loss of appetite except for truffles; apparently even a very sad person
can eat an entire box of those.
A small bronze plate appears mysteriously
on your bedroom door to declare that occupancy
by more than one person is both unlawful and ludicrous.

Myosotis in February

by Gianna Sannipoli

You are the lover
I'll remember when the world goes dark.
You gave me a bouquet of scorpion grass,
depressingly hued, lulled me with a
romantic appellation and an origin of a knight
who fell into a river. I watched an army of blue
mouse ears follow the mist of your voice,
conducting sylphs in the telling of that river,
that Parisian water waltz. I waited at the bank's bench
so devotedly that it became a displaced pew. I wore
unremovable Red Shoes, cross-tucked under the wood.
Amongst the weeds were mice wielding novelty nacre
scimitars and other things demagnetized from your armor.
Pinching creatures, ankle-slitting swords, rising from
malignant roots. All that came up was breathless and
piercing. No daisies. Blood-draining blue. Love, I have
not forgotten. I need no more reminders. I never knew I
needed mercy until each morning molded over with the
dark tar of your absence, and it was my dance, my stalk
stuck in it. Lifeless. Unmoving. A rotten bench.
Pointe shoes. Ill-natured flowers. Hours of indelible devotion
lost in language: ne m'oubliez pas, ne m'oubliez pas.
Out of darkness, into some softer blue. I will forget you.

Riding the Wild Nor'wester

by Donna Faulker

Spider's web a
sticky mess to clean. Whistling
kettle boiled over

again. It's never
cold. My tea cup waits, empty.
I wish to leave behind,

the spider, its messy
cobwebs snaring
flies outside. I wish

to drift away
ride the wild nor'wester.
It's hot breath

shouts at washing
drying. It preserves the baby
bird who failed

at flight, a tiny body
decaying prone on scrap.
Too young to fly, his nest

replaced. I wish upon
puffed up dandelion faces
ready to be set adrift.

The nor'westers
thieving teeth
tossing washing, stashing



pegs. Pink and blue
confetti in the hedge.
It's blustery tail, trails

away but I remain.
The window web flexes
The tea cup waits.

The bird is becoming dust
Dandelions bend but don't break.
A wish granted but not for me

Benediction

by Katherine DeCoste

Let this anger too be tender.
Let the tide go out still aching for the shore.
Let the crow shatter already-dead bodies.
Let the driftwood church burn before morning.
Let the morning break tuneless and dry.
Let the grief litany itself.
Let the body its own ash swallow.
Let this tenderness too be anger.
Let me number each wave where it falls.
Let the crow light the kindling.
Let the driftwood church burn before mourning.
Let the mourning be tuneless and high.
Let the litany grieve itself.
Let the body be its own ash. Wallow.

Cyclone, almost after Fiona Apple

by Katherine DeCoste

The poplars seeded twice this year
and we can't get good get gone
go anywhere fucking go
they attacked all my systems until they shut
down mid-air, midsummer
 tumbling
from cumulus to crown

I will indulge in you
box me and tie me with tape to this
tarnished once-oak floor, God help
me and we can't get out get in
get around it or anything else
we're snowed in here
and the river is haunting me
 swiftly and surely
all the way west

The maps we made of the moon's
surface are less than useless
my mother asks why I dispose
 of medical waste she keeps
piles of photographs of a body
I do not recognize and points to it
Saying my name

I'd dance across prairies
and into mountains with you but it's
 Nothing personal only I need
to trace the moss lines to higher altitudes
And clearer airs I am giddy
with oxygen sickness, with wide-eyed
and wide-legged births of new languages

Doppelgänger

by Bethany F. Brengan

its not the mirror
i know her
its the fun
games with
sticks on bones
names that sound
like mine

me and not-
out
lines

shadows
selves
impressions in
mind

im over
that
no matter
how much more
hated
i am and
-i am

what
i started with

what
were only
echoes

that frightens me
now
house glass
stones flying
other

people told me
this would happen
me watching from the
side, side-
wind and leeward

smudgy

someone elses

no!
here
isn't me

loved or

other

I forget
hands

I forget
voices

Afterword

by Bethany F. Brengan

“I always thought of paradise as a library, not a garden.”
(Jorge Luis Borges from *Borges at Eighty: Conversations*)

When I dream, it is both—books
along a maze of mossy shelves, never more
than shoulder-high. Heaven becomes a puzzle
without frustration. Hummingbirds
and sparrows dart between memoirs.
Rabbits bound beneath novels. A small overhang
of slate protects poetry from rain; wild
sweet pea vines trail down spines. I pick
new friends and old at will: unknown philosophers
and favored novelists, childhood loves and
unpublished letters, original drawings
and maps previously lost at sea. From every
bend along the path burst soft
gasps of discovery. Delight sits on our shoulders
like sunbeams. There’s some irreverence

in the presumption
that God will form Paradise
to your own tastes, still...still...

What is heaven
but the place where your soul’s
hackles finally drop? Under pinkening
trees, the labyrinth is alive with sunset-colored salamanders
and words, the constant whisper of geniuses
and saints and regular idiots, all proofed
and purified. A treasury where neither mold nor
malice corrupts, where booklice
and shame cannot break in and steal.



Exit or dancing, for what it's worth and it's not about not being disabled

by Samir Knego

When I dream about dancing I don't dream about being able to stand or step or spin

I don't dream about dancing as something physical, not really

I don't dream of it as something that my body could do or cannot do or should or would do. No,

I dream of dancing as a feeling, as a joy as a floating as a you and I

In space somewhere just moving and laughing and being together

And maybe there is music and maybe there is only perfect silence but somehow

I know that this feeling, this being, this thing that is of my body but not quite in it--

That this is dancing, for what it's worth.

Roofer

by Catherine Edmunds

Danny knew a good strong gust would strip off the tiles
next door, he knew to avoid re-used slates from China,
he didn't use spirit levels, didn't measure, used an old
wooden ladder which bounced around like a zany
because aluminium froze your fingers in winter.

Lunchtime,
he'd climb to the top of the roof, no scaffolding,
eat his pie and build a spliff, his yellow fingers
curled round the photo I gave him, just a bit
of fun I said, just a laugh, but don't tell anyone.

In another age, Danny would have been poacher,
not ploughboy and I, the Lady of the Manor—
we would have run away with the raggle-taggle gypsies,
we would have had crazy, fearless children.

My husband employed an expensive firm
to put everything right and finish the work.

Ten years have passed, but I still remember
the smell of plaster, dust sheets, brylcreemd hair,
eyes that crinkled with smiles and smoke, rough hands
holding a photo, pert, innocent.

I have borne my husband two sensible, quiet sons.
They go to a good school where they will never learn
about tanalised roofing laths, they will never consider
how grey concrete tiles turn slick and blue
in the spring rain, and how when the sun shines
they are glorious, bright as the reconditioned rococo mirror
my husband bought for the library.

I love my sons and I love my husband
and I love the mirror, but sometimes,
the mirror looks back.



Sitting in the Fog

by Laura Glaves

Fighting the fog is futile.
So I let it engulf me.

Its cool mist carries me
to that numb place
where I can breathe a little easier.

The clamor of the outside world grows muffled.
Chatter turns to whispers.

I sit still in my fog
and remember you.



Match Box

by Meryl Reinhart

At times I am the flame
Atop a teetering match
Carefully held
Between nimble fingers.
Capable of great destruction
Of eternal rage;
Or capable of great good,
Like warming hands like yours.

But then,
At times,
I am the striking surface –
Used and abused
By flames glow bright
And then forgotten
In their path of light.

Living in a Bubble

by William Doreski

Tycho is my favorite crater.
Fifty-three miles wide, impressed
in the southern lunar highlands.
Its eject blankets a network
of rays extended like arms
to embrace us when we arrive.

Yes, we're going to live there
in a large plastic air bubble
with auxiliary bubble in case.
We'll have a perfect view of Earth
in its agony, the seas rising
to wash away the human stain.

In downtown Hartford decades
after Wallace Stevens left it,
I heard the vacant storefronts
cough like hopeless smokers,
their ghosts unraveled, lying flat,
the landlords reduced to ash.

I heard the river of rivers
snickering as incoming tide
reversed its flow, threatening
to overwhelm the weedy levees.
I knew it was time to relocate
to the surface of the moon

where the windless light and dark
would stifle the warp of time.
Einstein didn't think of that,
although his antennae detected
the slightest cosmic nuance.
He would have thought the bubble

of necessary air too large
to transport. He didn't think
of running plastic tubing
from Earth to inflate the bubble,
which we'll ship all folded up
and erect upon arrival.

You'll like living in a bubble.
You'll find Tycho picturesque
as the mountains of Japan.
Let's practice holding our breath
and let's save up for the spaceship
that will free us from this planet

of decrepitude, grief and decay.
Soon enough the crunch will come,
nuclear war and pestilence.
But we'll be off in a stink
of blazing hydrogen, our last
exclamation nailed to the sky.

Faintly Falling

by Denver Jermyn

After the diagnosis, he drives
back to the shop, sets a 2010 Toyota
on the hoist, arranges an oil pan,
and spins the plug from the drain.

Gone the children, alcohol, and cigarettes,
he shuffles around the garage
in the haze of grease and lubricants
stooping his bent frame under hoods.

He knows everything
about any make and model,
resets check engine lights,
undents their bodies,

refuses his own treatment.
On low nights he sleeps in coveralls
on a cot in the small office
to be closer to her urn.

Under the old Toyota, the oil stream
thins to a wisp, a thread, to drops
faintly echoing into the pan.

If I Were a Tree

by Lorraine Whelan

My curls could be leaves
crispy and crinkly they would frame my face
and wave in breezy gusts while tethered to my head.
Rustling.

My limbs could be thin branches
or preferably wing-things with soft feathers,
they could flutter among the leaves of my hair.
Whispering.

My body could be some kind of nest
a nourishing stillness to all the movement –
the fluttering, the waving, the looser parts free.
Steadfast.

And secure as a hearth, a home.
If I could really be a being –
part of a new nature, a dryad-bird –
a force that I am not.

Lord of Dance

by John Whitney Steele

If you wish to join Lord Shiva's dance,
stand and stretch your right arm straight ahead,
bend your left knee and raise the foot behind you,
hold your big toe with your left hand and spin
your arm to form a bow behind your head.
Hold the pose and enter Shiva's trance.

Ask Lord Shiva how to dance the fire dance,
hold the hour-glass drum in your right hand,
beat the pulse, sustain the universe,
hold the tongue of flames in your left hand,
not burn your flesh, destroy the universe,
fling your arms and legs with wild abandon,
and not lose your tranquil inward glance.
Now you know you are the Lord of Dance.



Clover

by Louise Wilford

Lie in the itchy, late-evening grass,
herb-dry blades brushing your naked arms,
hair's hands sinking fingers into the cool earth.

See, through the half-closed edges of your eyes,
the brown-tipped flowers, pale wasps in the corn-dry grass.
Floating patiently among the ragged dandelion,

the sluggish cowed nods of daisies, greasy buttercup smiles -
tasting the hot air, adrift. Let your thoughts
lift and fall on the grassy sea, following the bee's

bobbing wander, shadowing the aimless ramble
of distant clouds. Let your thoughts swim
and dissolve in the wild red evening sun,

coasting, rootless, on a sea of clover.

There is a Place

by Henry Matthew Ward

There is a magical place,
somewhere between memories and dreams,
where we are not quite sure
whether events have happened
or are yet to happen...
whether they are things remembered
or things hoped for.
Only the very young
and the very old can get there.
A place where a kiss
can make the hurt go away;
where a hug has no hidden agenda;
where "I love you", means just that...
nothing more...nothing less.
A place where tears
and smiles mingle together;
where appearances don't matter,
but we are beautiful, anyway;
A place where music is poetry
and poetry.....is music.
You and I have been there,
but that was so long ago...
When did we wander away?
Have you found your way back yet?
I know it's out there
waiting for me to return,
and I shall.

NON FICTION

SURVIVAL MANUAL FOR A MEMBER OF THE ECCLESIA BILLINGS, MONTANA, 1969-71

by Melanie Reitzel

1. Help your mother gather up the four younger children and get them into the car on Sunday mornings.
2. On the way, try to guess who in the congregation will be this week's Examples. Shake your head when The Apostle points to those who have fallen. Try not to squirm during the four-hour sermon.
3. Nod when the Scriptures are quoted. Pretend you care about the Latin root of the word "transgression." Promise you'll never step across the boundary from obedience to sin. If you lower your eyes and nod knowingly, everyone will believe you're sincere.
4. Sing whatever the congregation sings. The message does not apply; the refrain is not yours. Meanwhile, try to remember the lyrics to every song they wont let you sing.
5. Keep a few things of this world to yourself that you have been commanded to give up—old pennies tucked tight into the black pockets of their cardboard folders tucked safe in the bottom drawer of your desk under sheets of your calculus homework that are filled with symbols your mother can't understand.
6. Agree to renounce fiction in all forms. Stories, however, never die—they'll wait for you. You shall find them.
7. When school is out, ride your bike downtown. Open the door to the courtroom slowly. Sit in the back where you won't be noticed. Imagine you are the lawyer for the defense telling the judge that you object. Guess how each jury member will vote.
8. Tell no one. If caught, say you're witnessing justice.
9. Find ways every day to say Yes that really mean No.

Clearwater Lodge on the Gunflint Trail, a Trip Journal

by Wendy Lane

"...once upon a time the Gunflint Trail was a primitive trail used primarily by foot or dogsled to move goods down to the port of Grand Marais on Lake Superior for trade."

Visit Cook County website.

Monday, August 10 Clearwater Lodge, 2020

My spouse Judy and I, with our scotty Gus, arrived late afternoon at historic log cabin number 3 in a misting rain. Turning our green Forester into the driveway, I parked the car and we began to unload. Judy took charge of bags of food, dog kibble and cleaning supplies, while I carried duffels of clothes, toilet paper and art supplies. Lighter, bulkier items were packed in a soft plastic topper on the roof. Shuffling quickly back and forth between the car and a screened-in porch entrance to the cabin, I dropped bags on the porch picnic table, trying not to get the gear or me wet.

A growling rumble and then loud whip crack, sent a rolling thunderstorm over us dumping pelting rain. Unfortunately, I hadn't begun to unpack the topper yet. Placing a portable stool next to the car, I stepped up, and reached overhead to unzip a corner. Cold water had pooled on top and began to pour over my fingers, inside the sleeves of my jacket, and down the side of the vehicle. I pulled out one bag of bedding and then quickly zipped the topper back up. Running from car to cabin, my clothes were drenched in a matter of minutes. Between repeated dashes, I took short breaks, listening for the thunder that predicted vivid lightning strikes. Unconsciously I hoped the storm wasn't a bad omen.

Turning our attention to the interior of the small log cabin, we opened all the windows. The rectangular central room housed an open layout of kitchen, dining and living room. At each end were doorways covered by a hanging curtain for privacy. One led to the master bedroom, the other to a smaller bedroom and bathroom.

The cabin was clean and tidy, except for a window screen in the kitchen that looked as if it hadn't been washed in a season. The pandemic gave both of us an obsessive cleaning disorder. I used Clorox wipes to rub down the door and faucet handles, light switches, and toilet seat. Judy sprayed disinfectant on table, counter and cupboard surfaces as well as refrigerator shelves before putting groceries away. I cleaned dresser handles and drawers, then began unpacking our clothes.

When I covered the futon couch with a sheet, Gus jumped up and made himself

at home. He watched while Judy and I pulled off Northwoods-themed resort bed covers, replacing them with our own sheets topped by sleeping bags for extra warmth. Stuffing the resort linens in plastic bags, we stashed them on the floor in a corner of the larger bedroom.

While cleaning and unpacking, we kept our face masks on. No, we didn't have allergies, nor were we germaphobes. But travelling in the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, we couldn't know if the cleaning staff or renters in the cabin before us had the virus. We weren't taking any chances. There were still a lot of unknowns about how the coronavirus was transmitted. Before we left home that morning, we noted 618 new cases in Minnesota.

During the six-hour, 318-mile drive, we made only two rest stops using our porta potty inside a pop-up tent in parking lots. After reaching the town of Grand Marais, we picked up fresh meat, produce, eggs and dairy items at the food coop. There was a line of people wearing face masks outside because of the limit on shoppers inside. Finally, turning onto County Road 12, also known as the Gunflint Trail, we drove the last 31.4 miles to our two-week vacation home, Clearwater Lodge resort. After a long drive and a couple hours of cleaning, we were beat. By 5:30 in the evening it was time for supper and a break.

Judy said, "You're still wet. Take a hot shower, and I'll pull together some dinner." She made hamburgers on romaine lettuce with cucumbers and onions, and defrosted the frozen tomatoes stuffed with wild rice she had prepared ahead of the trip. We sipped on glasses of chilled prosecco. A dessert of cherries with a cookie topped it off. The celebratory supper revived us. Our vacation had begun.

After sunset, I stepped out on the porch to look at Clearwater Lake, pleasantly surprised that the water's edge was only a few feet from the cabin. It was calm and quiet. Sky and water mirrored one another in midnight blue. In between, a strip of forested land was a silhouette in black. No stars were visible in the cloudy night sky after the storm. A couple of distant night lights from cabins across the water provided soft illumination. I let out a slow breath. It seemed we had managed to arrive safely.

I thought about getting sick with Covid while here. We were one hour away from North Shore Health, the nearest hospital in Grand Marais. I said a silent prayer, "Please don't let us get sick. I just want us to enjoy our time here." Then I tried to set the worry aside.

Back inside the cabin, I opened a window next to the bed, so I could listen to the lapping of water against the dock and the new animal sounds of our surroundings. Dropping backwards on the firm mattress, I got a whiff of fresh clean air that blew across the lake and encircled the room, infusing it with the

scent of pine needles from trees around the cabin. I fell asleep quickly.

In the dark, the temperature dropped, and a chill woke me and I got up to shut the window, afraid cold air blowing on top of my head would give me a cold. I reached down to Gus' dog bed on the floor. He wasn't in it. When we went to bed, he was laying on the couch and must have spent the night there. I figured he was okay and fell back asleep.

It seemed only moments later when my eyes opened sleepily, and I smiled to hear the laughing echo of loons. Checking my cell phone, the time was 4:00 a.m. Then I heard Gus shaking his collar, followed by a dull thump as he jumped off the couch, then clip-clopped his nails across the floor. He settled into his dog bed stuffed between the narrow walls of the bedroom closet. I began to fall asleep only to be woken again a short time later as Gus emitted a sort of grouchy old man grumble. It occurred to me that he might be cold. I got up and put a wool blanket over him. That seemed to settle him. Judy mumbled, "What's going on?" "Nothing, Gus was just cold, go back to sleep." We all snoozed, cozy under our blankets.

I had barely closed my eyes when Gus shook his collar again around 8 a.m. to demand breakfast. I immediately did a mental check on my physical state. Could I smell? Any chills, aches or pains besides muscle soreness and stiffness? All was well. I needed to let go and relax.

"How did you sleep?" I asked Judy. She stretched and said, "It took me a while to fall asleep because of the scratching sounds of mice in the wall. We're going to have to make sure all the food is put away, and the garbage is in the covered trash can outside every night." "Oh! I didn't hear them," I replied, feeling repulsed.

After breakfast, I walked Gus down the gravel road to look at cabins 4, 5 and 6. Mosquitos swarmed. They seemed at least three times the size of those at our home in the city. Luckily my natural bug spray worked well so they were only mildly irritating. I was just grateful we didn't have biting black flies to contend with.

Back at the cabin, Judy declared, "I want to unpack a bit more and still have to take a shower before I can hike." "Sounds good. I'll go to the lodge to check my email." Grabbing a face mask, I left Gus with her, and walked the trail through the woods to the main lodge.

A short walk uphill and then a turn on the path revealed a beautiful old two story, hand hewn log building. The lodge was wrapped on two sides by an attached covered porch overlooking a sloping lawn to the lake. The craftsmanship of the historic building was evident. I learned it was built in 1913, and made without

nails. The covered porch was added in 1927. Windows and doors were trimmed in blue and green paint, and all had been lovingly maintained over the years.

The lodge porch was the only place to get internet at the resort. The interior wasn't open to the public because of the pandemic. Several guests sat on the porch, checking their cell phones, chatting, or gazing at the waterfront. I downloaded the next mystery book in the series I was reading on Kindle, posted a few pictures on Facebook signifying our arrival, and checked email. Relaxing in my wood Adirondack chair, I gazed at the lake shimmering under the warm sunny day.

A rowboat floating in water was tied to the side of a metal dock, from where a man stood throwing a ball into the water for his excited chocolate lab. The dog charged down the dock, sprang into the air and jumped with legs splayed. With a loud splash the lab joyfully fetched the ball, swam back and jumped up on the dock, dropping his prize at the feet of his owner. The man repeated the throw, the dog took off running and flew into the air to once again jump in the lake. Soon the dog emerged from underwater shaking his head side to side, while gripping the ball in his grinning mouth. On the third throw, the dog ran swiftly after the ball, leapt from the dock, and slammed his chest straight into the inside of the parked rowboat. THWACK!

I gasped. The lab dropped onto the boat bottom stunned. Either the dog misjudged the distance and thought he could leap over the boat, or in his joy of retrieval, he hadn't realized the boat was tied there. He just focused on the trajectory of the ball and leapt. I found myself praying the dog wasn't seriously hurt, just as I had prayed for us the night before. If he was hurt, I wasn't sure he could receive help in time, with the closest vet in Grand Marais.

The dog's owner walked slowly toward the boat, speaking gently to the dog. The dog turned toward his owner's voice, and tried to step up onto the dock but couldn't manage it. He just rested his front paws on the seat and sat on the boat bottom, not moving. The man knelt and gently picked up the big dog, setting him softly on the dock. The minute the dog was safely out of the boat, he ran the length of the dock, past the end of the tied boat, leapt in the water, and promptly came up, swimming with the ball in his mouth again. I exhaled. Until then I had not realized I was holding my breath. I suspected the dog could have internal injuries, but if not, at the very least he would be sore and bruised. The owner smiled then, in relief, or the belief that his dog would be fine. I hoped this was an isolated incident, not another omen of bad things to come. When did I get so superstitious?

Would we get our feet knocked out from under us by the virus? If so, could we recover? Judy was 66, and I 64. I had underlying health issues. The days we

experienced pure uncomplicated joy weren't as frequent as they used to be before Covid-19 exploded in the United States. This trip was meant to bring a little of that simplicity to us. We were among the privileged retirees who didn't have to work and could afford to travel. Webster's dictionary defines a retreat as, "an act or process of withdrawing especially from what is difficult, dangerous, or disagreeable." We hoped staying isolated in a remote cabin close to the Canadian border would give us a haven from fear. It was only the morning of our first full day here, and already the virus invaded my mind.

As I walked the path back to our cabin, I bumped into Judy leading Gus. She wanted to visit the lodge too. I took Gus's leash from her and said I would take him back to the cabin. The loose lab at the resort could be a recipe for disaster. Gus fights when approached by strange dogs off leash. I returned to the cabin and sat on the porch with him, writing in my journal until Judy returned. After lunch and then a nap, Judy suggested, "Let's go for a hike." Loading our daypacks with water, bug spray, and dried fruit and nut snacks, we drove to the lodge, stopping to ask for recommendations. A staff member suggested Honeymoon Bluff trail, only a few miles down the road on Cook County 66.

The trailhead began off a small circular gravel parking area. A steep ascent led up multiple wood steps to a hilltop overlooking Hungry Jack Lake. Our reward for the heart pumping climb was a tiered rock overlook with wood railings, allowing a safe and unimpeded view. Miles of blue and brown lakes surrounded by tree-covered green rolling hills and mineral streaked rock walls stretched into a boreal forest. A fierce wind whipped our hair and we had to yell to hear each other. Welcome to the heart of the Gunflint.

On our way up, we passed four hikers coming down the path, two men and two women. None were wearing masks. In our excitement to hike, we forgot ours in the car. Stepping off the path, we turned away to let them pass. Gus' leash was a bit too long, and he lunged at the first woman as she went by. Judy yelled, "GUS! Get back." He seemed as shocked as we were after the incident. We had to watch his aggressive response with strange people and dogs.

Not a long walk, but hiking up steep steps and then walking back downhill challenged our knees. A good mile workout. By the time we returned to the cabin, it was mid-afternoon hot, and we were both sweaty. I suggested, "How about a swim in the lake?" "Perfect."

A few yards from our cabin was a sandy bottomed swim beach. The water in Clearwater Lake is just what it says. Clean and clear. That is how we found the resort initially. A 2017 article from The Loon 103.7 online titled "Minnesota's Top Pristine and Stunning Clear Lakes" rated Clearwater third out of the top five.

Judy ran straight into the icy cold water and dove head first with no hesitation. Not me. I took a couple steps, let my feet get numb, then a couple more steps until I couldn't feel my calves, etc. In the end I could only manage waist-deep. But it felt good to cool down.

At three years old, Gus had never been swimming. We had a green canvas life jacket for him that clipped around his chest and belly. Attaching his walking leash to the jacket, we beckoned him to follow us into the water. He liked the cool temperature, but stayed on the shallow edge of the shore where he could walk with his feet touching instead of swimming. Judy threw some pine cones out to entice him. He ran excitedly toward the deeper water, only to stop short the minute he hit swimmable depth. We let him proceed at his own comfort level.

Judy grilled steak for our dinner, served with salad and baked potato. I did the dishes. We carried lawn chairs to the end of the dock, to sit and watch the changing red and yellow sunset sky reflected in the water. It was the first time since arriving that I felt fully in the present moment. No conflicting thoughts worried my mind.

When the night sky emerged from the sunset, we stashed the day's trash bag in the covered metal bin outside, then settled in bed to read. A distant quiet motor got louder as it moved closer to the cabin. Peeking out the window, I saw a staff member driving a golf cart. He pulled up to our trash can, removed our garbage bag, and drove off. We learned this was a nightly routine at all the cabins. A precaution against easy temptation for hungry bears or other night scavengers.

At 10:45 pm. Judy remembered a Perseid meteor shower was expected that evening and suggested we go back on the dock to check it out. We didn't see the shower, but in the clear night sky, a sprinkling of stars spoke of hope. Children's laughing voices echoed across the lake in the dark. I wondered aloud how many others before us had taken retreat in this cabin. We were too tired to stay awake any longer and said goodnight, sleeping peacefully.

Atlantic Oceans of Food and Flesh

by Saskia Layden Kaya

Sometimes when I miss Turkey, I sit in Central Park, drink too much coffee, and endlessly crack open and swallow down salted pistachios. I get all hyped up on caffeine and daydream myself back to the Mediterranean. I pretend the park is the beach and the coffee and pistachios are Turkish. But the label on the bag of pistachios says they come from “the USA or Iran.” The company is not even sure where their fucking product comes from. The coffee, I guess, is Italian—the paper cup reads *Segafredo*—but I’m sure the beans grew in Colombia or maybe somewhere in Africa. Maybe both. The bastardized system of producing and transporting food around the world makes me ache even more for the local fruits and vegetables of the Turkish coastline. While in Turkey, I used to go for walks in the evening, strolling slowly towards the seaside along a dirt road sprinkled with a few small markets selling snacks, cold beer, salty yogurt *ayran*, sunscreen, souvenirs, and fresh-squeezed orange and pomegranate juice mixed together to create a magenta-colored brew. The vendors would sit lazily, subdued by the midday heat, rotating fans creating waves in their loose clothing and hair, watching me as I picked fresh mulberries off of the trees along the way.

I close my eyes and feel the dulled warmth of the late summer sun on my face and arms. It is September in New York but maybe for a moment I could block out the sounds of the Fifth Avenue traffic and instead imagine the lapping of the waves and the voices of young Turkish men selling mussels and corn along a long stretch of beach on a hot July day. Maybe I can throw pistachio shells on the ground like they do in Turkey, and maybe the park attendant won’t give me that scolding look that tells me to take my feet off the chair and pick up my shells.

I open my eyes and decide to buy another coffee—my current addiction, distraction. I go back to the coffee stand on the edge of the park and take my place in line. I notice a young male barista and begin to watch him intently, intrigued. My gaze is fixed and penetrating. I watch him work and move his smooth, white arms, his skin like marble in the afternoon sunlight. I study his movements and while I wait my turn to approach, my daydream drifts me out to sea once again. He thinks he is being polite when he glances at me and smiles, but I see a tiger—teeth shining white, eyes like turquoise Mediterranean skies.

I take him in, transported from these city streets to a place where lovers’ secrets become the memories that haunt me. I close my eyes and New York is once again an Atlantic Ocean away. I arrived here just two days ago, and my mind has not yet caught up with my body. It feels as if I floated here, carried by a gentle force that suggestively nudges me in new directions. Concrete and clamor surround me, but his eyes remind me of my recent past—lazy afternoons on dusty seaside stones,

my skin still bronzed from lost hours among the sounds of the turquoise surf and the voices of young Turkish men walking along the rocky shore with giant trays of warm *simit* balanced on their heads.

He thinks he is merely speaking, working, moving discreetly and undetected through his day, but I vibrate with each of his movements and my eyes travel through his body's secrets. His delicately constructed face—eyes, teeth, and nose perfectly in place—guides me enticingly downwards, past his lips, chin, and collarbones. I arrive at his waistline and watch the details of his torso dance beneath a thin cotton veil. But he cannot hide from me. The Manhattan sky watches me watching him, and the gaping mouths between clouds and sun smirk and smile and sigh as if to say, “Finally someone has noticed our prince.”

Enchanted by an accidental seduction, my imagination wanders. I picture a white room and a canopy bed with soft, fresh sheets. The moonlight shines through the open French doors and reflects the marble of his arms and torso and the inner pathways of his waistline, guiding me to the center of him, down his legs, wrapping around to the inner spaces of his thighs. The evening breeze carries with it the scent of night-blooming jasmine and the salt of the sea. He thinks he is invisible, unnoticed, but I watch him, and the poetry of his body overflows into mine. He is the prince.

I look around to see if others notice his majesty, but they are consumed by their monotony, staring at city maps, scolding their children, drowning in their glowing screens, in their fried potatoes, in the empty conversations of expired love. The voices around me hum. Soft and subdued, they hammock my senses, cradle my carnal longings. The buzz of humanity, my cloister, my cover, my hiding place, my veil. In their ignorance, in their distraction, he is mine.

I feast on his presence and imagine all the ways I could consume him. From collarbone to waist, hip bones, knees, and the surfaces of his inner thighs.

Pablo Neruda, on the beholding of a queen, writes of the reverberating sounds of rivers and bells shaking the sky with hymns that fill the world. The vibrations of Neruda enter my mind and the fire beneath my feet swallow us into an intimate dance.

Yo te he nombrado el príncipe.

I have named you the prince.

Nadie ve tu corona de cristal.

No one sees your crystal crown
or your marble skin
or your Mediterranean eyes.

But I have named you the prince.

In my daydream you tell me that I taste like honey, and I believe you. I am transported back to a sun-drenched seaside bungalow where the delicate scents of narcissus and wisteria drape from bleached wooden balconies. There was the setting for many Turkish breakfasts, complete with the sweet nectar of honey from the pine forests of the southern coast—best when mixed with the smooth texture of fresh cream and the crack of ripe walnuts.

My prince, pour the honey down my neck. Let it run a thick, golden river down my spine. Let the blue sky bear witness: the city has begun to burn. A silent, secret fire brews beneath our feet. I close my eyes and as the thick liquid softly drips down the soft valleys of my spine and upper thighs, my body travels from Mediterranean waves to the floor at your feet.

*Sólo tú y yo,
Sólo tú y yo, amore mio.*

Only us, my love.

And after watching you prepare my coffee, out of focus and far away, I realize I have traveled deep into the void, lost in the deliciousness of memories that have morphed into fantasies. Then you ask me, “How would you like to pay?”

Monotony is a slap across my cheek, waking me up from the desires of my underworld. Dreaming and passion now sting my eyes. My cheeks flush, and my body exposes hints of a secret. I blink, half-smile, and hand you the cash.

I walk away with a shy nod of gratitude. I leave you to your work. The city swallows me again, but my head is filled with dreams, and in them you taste like honey.

Synesthete: Reality as a Scientific Quandary

by Genevieve Allaire

As a synesthete, the idea of escapism is fascinating to me because I already spend so little time in what is widely considered to be the real world. Escapism is to abscond from what you know, but it is my neurological standard to exist in a dimension neither true nor disproven. I live within a reality that —while not up for debate—is also not rooted in documented physics.

There is a word for it: *Synesthesia*. One who is synesthetic has crisscrossed associations between at least some of the five senses. According to Wikipedia, chromesthesia—in which the individual in question “sees” colors upon listening to music—is among the most common variant of synesthesia, with grapheme-color synesthesia (in which numbers or letters take on color) not far behind. Some synesthetes understand time as a circle or revolving loop in and outside of their body.

The thing is, there’s so much more to synesthesia, and it’s not found on Wikipedia. To the best of my knowledge, it has only ever been found in the laser etchings of my own brain. An adult of authority once assigned *synesthesia* to me at age 12, but the one responsible for my birth disgraced me for speaking of it—and that is how you can live 26 years in complete and utter denial about your own existence.

I experience smatterings of each aforementioned type of synesthesia. For example, I do associate music with colors, although the relationship is much weaker than it was ten years ago, and the musical genres are limited to orchestral string or piano. Their colors and shapes are amorphous, shifting, like how I imagine a legally blind person would experience a kaleidoscope. Years, to me, are just vertical columns, with January at the top and December at the bottom. Each year lived is one more column added to the right of the previous column. I can remember important dates very well because they glow, they glow from the grid of their month and they glow along their own vertical column. But I can only remember dates if they happened to me (as such, my studies of world history have not benefitted from this association.)

I have struggled with math my whole life, but I’ve never spoken aloud the colorful reasons why: Certain integers stubbornly take on hues and are totally unwilling to compromise. I must pause and think hard to convey what I experience. 0 is one of those very stubborn integers: It is clear, always. It can be clear like glass or clear like used Tupperware because translucence or opacity

depends entirely on context. 1, on the other hand, is white. White/1 is the number that has confused me the most throughout middle and high school, college, and graduate school. 1 is parallel to your paper margins, perpendicular to the sky, and so boldly white it would dominate any other paint card around. 1 is white. And white is 1.

3 is blue, always and immovably. 3 is blue like the shell of a robin's egg or the sky on a sunny cloudless day, matte, opaque, and so velvety you can almost feel it on your tongue. Along with a color, 3 is also the first integer to present with a personality (robust, younger than its positive value, foolish, blunder-heavy, but with good intentions).

4 is the luckiest of all numbers and so presents itself in terms of magical surrealism. 4 is a *sparkly* orange; the glitches of light floating around its figure are ethereal; the sparkles can look like an artist's depiction of the North Star on the eve of Jesus' birth (surely not), or sometimes they are silvery, glare-reflecting; the kind of cheap glitter you would buy in a plastic tube from the craft store.

8 is a matte orange, and 8 is—I dare say—the most malevolent of the first ten integers. 8 exists to deceive you. 8 is obese for having eaten the children of its brethren, for having gorged upon the stolen goods of its neighbors. 8 is as close to evil as any number can become. However, its neighbor 9 is not so nefarious. 9 is duplicitous, but it can be endearing. If 9 were a person, you might address it as you *little sneak!* but with a smile on your face and a hug soon to follow.

10 is usually nothing, but sometimes it exists within the black and white of a newspaper. But, from 11 onwards, integers cease taking on color, with rare exceptions. Sometimes, a number will have a hue of its primary color leaked onto it (e.g. 3,000 will be a *very* light variant of 3's original robin's egg blue). But the integers stop taking on original colors beginning with 10 or 11.

Grapheme-color synesthesia implicates not only numbers, but letters as well. While letters are totally colorless to me, the *names* of select loved ones do have a color assigned to them. This is a nascent process and it is a function of time and affection—the amount of time it takes for a color to surface usually indicates my strength of sentiment about that person. It usually takes more than five years of knowing and interacting with that person, but one exception exists. (There is one man, red like a fire hydrant, who has emerged unapologetically from the ether after just two months. The implications are overwhelming.)

I experience life through motifs. I've always understood symbolism well in my high school literature classes because I live in pictures. Let me explain:

I have what is known as a photographic memory. For my own part, this skill is

weak in the sense that I cannot produce photo-realistic illustrations from memory, nor can I recite entries from a phone book. My own process of documentation is scientifically and mathematically useless, as it is driven solely by emotion. In the great words of The J. Geils Band, *Freeze frame*:

I now implore you to call to memory a trauma of your own. I am asking you to remember a terrible thing you've experienced, that changed your life forever, and not for the better:

What were you wearing?

I think most of us are able to recite the picture-perfect details of what life looked like the day it derailed and caught on fire in front of us. It's an unhappy fact, but one that has evolutionary backing, because during times of crises and/or traumas, our brains have the fantastic way of saying *I am going to permanently document all of this so you can take notes later and learn how to avoid it*. This process is pre-installed within us; we do not choose.

But what if you experienced that kind of photographic recording for *every* emotional moment in your life? What if every time you felt lightly melancholy to paralytically depressed, or mildly hopeful to emerging from the throes of bliss—what if, in those moments, your brain dutifully court-recorded every sight your very retinas rested upon?

Welcome to my life, *mon amie*.

I have been called (by more than one) a sensitive and emotionally-driven person, and I accept this designation without dispute. As a result, there is seldom a week of my life that passes without experiencing a feeling noteworthy for my brain to photograph; to oil-paint in real time; to print and laminate and store forever.

Internally, however, these photos are not mine to peruse at my leisure. These photos do not belong to me *at all*. Despite the fact that I have hundreds to thousands of photo albums stored within my head, I am unconsciously obligated to surrender copyright at the moment of photo capture. What happens next is out of my hands, and instead up to that little man who lives at the top of my brain.

He doesn't have a name, but I am referencing here a short man, with eyes red and emblazoned, hair mottled with adrenal sweat stuck straight up in so many directions. This is a chain-smoking, unhinged man, crazy with thoughts that he is *determined* to prove at every cost. This man has photos and documents, all relating to the Case, tacked wall-to-wall in his office, with various pictures connected with jagged colored yarn. This man is a conspiracy theorist who

thrives on the insane.

And this man lives inside of my head. This is a man who I have never seen eat nor sleep nor abandon post. Despite never leaving, he always has yet another cigarette to pull from his shirt-pocket and *flickflickflick* WOOSH light and gasp inwards and exhale with all of the pressure of the world, so help him if he shrugs. He is here to solve the mystery, *A Beautiful Mind* style.

This little conspiracy theorist has been gathering data my whole life. He gathers data—not only from the photographs he receives, but perhaps more importantly—from his own research. My little conspiracy theorist dresses as a shrub, shuffling unconvincingly along the sidewalk, armed with a point-and-shoot camera and a determination that nothing can dislodge, not even death. My conspiracy theorist has *so much more documentation* than I ever thought was possible. He is a man who would die for his cause.

I have lived my life assuming that most memories and moments are just water off a duck's back: They occur and they roll off and behind me, no longer my own, only to rejoin the senseless mass from which they originated. This is logical, given that there are limits to even the most advanced of computers. After all, how many records of 26 years could possibly be stored within flesh and blood?

To my chagrin, it would appear that there is no mortal limit.

And so my conspiracy theorist works and works and works and works and *works* because there is nothing else. There is only him and The Evidence and The Case.

What is The Case, you might ask?

I imagine that if you'd ask him, he'd laugh behind crude clouds of smoke. There is only one case that matters, he would say. The case is about (and here he would gesture towards the board with the pictures and the jagged yarn connecting them) how do all of these photographs relate to one another, and *why*?

His answer is worse than an explanation. It's really just another question. And so if you think you'd stand there and simply catch flies when presented with such a lunatic statement, then perhaps you and I have more in common than we may have surmised.

This is why the man in my head is a Conspiracy Theorist (CT). Not only is his quest so very fallible; it is also useless. Let us humor his logic: Let's say that CT is correct, and there really *is* evidence of visual configurations in my life that all relate together to explain emotional patterns: Even if this was true, *how* and *why* would this evidence alter the existence of anyone, least of all myself?

If you asked CT that, he would probably answer unperturbed in some cryptic way, like *If you even have to ask that question, you've lost the plot*. This blind sass explains why CT and I have experienced such animosity over the years. Yet his quest for logic may appear to be harmless, perhaps cute, metaphor and meta-anthropomorphization of what it signifies to try and *find one's own meaning*—but if that was the case, why would I try so hard to evict him?

As it turns out, CT is not here to make friends. CT is here for the truth *and nothing but*. Harm may befall any number of people in this quest for answers, but it matters not, for no price can be put on Truth (well, his version of it, at least).

Let me explain. Whenever I feel depressed to the point of even ephemeral bed rest, CT uses this brief interlude as the opportune time to force me to see his truth. When my guards are lowered via sadness and my eyes are closed, CT capitalizes upon this moment to gleefully retrieve a roll of his own curated film strip and project it onto my mind's eye until he is convinced that I am convinced. After all, this is CT's moment; this is his opportunity to showcase his work. *One childhood friend's basement around noon in July // the light blue button-down you wore that still disappointed your father anyway // stoic sessile cacti warped by heat that you saw in your rearview as you pulled out of the sand driveway // one baby elk curled up sleepy and alone on the shoulder of I-180 in Arizona // the number 88—*

Every new image shocks you with the way that it is completely and totally unexpected. How could you know this was coming? Most of these visages you hadn't even realized you had recorded at all (CT must have been in his shrubby outfit) but here they are. These pictures do not coincide with a fiery life trauma (at least most of them) (and the ones that do have nothing in common with what you feel now) *// the polyester shallow-v-neck t shirt slightly stained gray from university washing machines // lesser celandine // crying as you tripped over the mossy log // purple Gatorade zero // sitting on Shelly's floor in tears //*

The lack of nuance of this last series of visages evokes from me the criticism that perhaps CT's work is really a bit on the nose—after all, of course we know that these were the worst of the terrible times—*// LP's pointed black block heels with the dress and fleece tights in December 2013 // a bottle of Captain Morgan gifted to you in the chemistry building // your first sober cigarette // questionably calm rabbits for sale at Rosedale //*

You can concentrate and realize that probably these images evoke sorrow because you felt isolated in each moment. You feel doubly isolated now, that you are here to watch them again alone *Her name was Savannah wasn't it and you disappointed her because you didn't do enough of the biology project // that light blue zip up sweatshirt //*

the mustached so-called cop who stopped you when you were riding your bicycle // the man who saved you from an oncoming bus which you truly had not seen or heard but you wish he hadn't been there at all, don't you // the black Tevas you bought at the store that probably no longer exists at 400 something main street // the silence of your mother when her hair had that first blonde brilliant hue of a woman not yet gray who goes to the salon dutifully // the questions you were asked instead of the ones that mattered // the way your boney thumb reflected the white light in the sky by way of its crescent half-moon against skin faintly blue and struggling // a diet coke that you drank instead of alcohol // Allie from California who confided in you on your journey from Delaware to Maryland that she was ashamed of herself for eating at Thanksgiving and so that was why she was running // Niko //

At that last bit, you are drawn out of this terrible forced viewing because your armpits are soaked and the fan makes your armpits feel cool, and you are struck with the wonderfully mortal realization that *Oh I was sweating because I was scared*. At this moment, reality once again presents itself as an oasis away from the horror of your life, and it is to this refuge that you abscond.

CT does not appreciate your absence at all. CT is up there, stomping his heels, throwing a fit like a petulant child, and you can feel his anger in your throat, your chest so very tight and he is trying in vain to shut down all systems, he is calling out *Shut it all down, boys* because he thinks he's got you now.

CT can do this anytime, anywhere. And he does.

So when you go pale and someone asks if you're alright, what on earth could you possibly say? Something about *black Tevas* and *questionably calm rabbits*. This is exactly what CT planned. As the only viewer, anything you try and report back to the public is *completely senseless*. It is harmful to you and only you. This is CT's genius, and it is why he proud to show you his work. He has so moved his audience (you) to the point that you cannot reasonably communicate with anyone who has not seen CT's work.

If you had not yet absconded to that oasis, CT would also show you how he was transitioning into a velvety maroon for the subsequent year and how it also took place all of it at night and coincidentally not even that far from the lesser celandine scene, isn't that clever, and if you wondered *why maroon* then don't even worry because—

If it is nighttime, you may chant out loud to yourself, *"It's over, I survived it!"* Over and over and over again until you are shouting, and hopefully you don't have neighbors. You think that saying this will make it go away, but you continue:

"I am here now I am here now I AM IN HERE"—and but CT is just smiling wryly because the mark of a truly good writer is how he influences his audience, and look at you now, curled and fetally entombed, or else locomoting lurching forward in the blackness of night towards god you don't even know what but a legal substance of the type that is sold at gas stations to those with photographic identification of having survived so many years and there you could buy CT's poison, and if the physiological conditions are right, they will be potent enough to knock CT on his ass for a few minutes, and you can use those few minutes to pummel him and keep him down there while you work out a plan to keep on feeling this way, this way where CT is all the way down and beaten so you can breathe again—

// the royal blue shiny polo you had to wear at Trabant Center and one time your hair was purple while you wore it and Rachel had scabs all over her face and neck while she bummed a Marlboro from you and told you in all seriousness to wear a helmet //

This is when you walk away.
Even now.

* * *

It occurs to you, while you run, that there is more to this. The Wikipedia page had said that some people assign shapes to taste. *How odd*, you thought to yourself. *Because everyone knows that apples and pointy and all fruits are very bright inside of your mouth just like the sun on a clear summer day.* Right?

Is that the only instance? The taste of bitter—a tablet of Tylenol beginning to break down on your tongue before swallowing—is featureless. You feel it only on your tongue and in the characters of your face smashed together in disgust. There is nothing in your mind's eye. But vegetables are similar to fruit, if they are fresh. If they are fresh, I can taste the sunshine inside of my mouth. How did Pablo Nerudo say it? Something like—*with the electricity of lemons* and that's exactly how it feels, you are so alive. Salt is the same. Freshy ground black pepper is the light of a full moon. Coconut milk tastes infinitely round when cooked with ginger and cumin and turmeric and garlic and serrano.

The Wikipedia page also mentions that physical pain may be assigned colors and shapes. Here you are, having lived 26 years and thinking that you've been going crazy what with your triangles of back pain and swirling coils tunneling their way from your clavicles when you closed your eyes and saw yourself in the third person. The pain was like a lightning strike, two long thin isosceles triangles (one per shoulder) and the pain like worms flooded with isopropyl alcohol; squirming wildly, impossible to placate, always moving. *There is a term for this*, it occurs to you for the very first time.

It is a visceral shock to learn that not everyone around you is forced to watch painful movies in the way of *A Clockwork Orange*, eyelids taped open and guttural screams you attempt but fail to suppress. You have marveled, your entire life, at the strength of these involuntary viewers: Where do they get it from? How do they stay seated during this torture and then *move on with their day*?

While there may be other people in the theatre, it turns out that their presence is undocumented—and, from your early research, it is also unlikely. You have yet to meet another person who sees it all the way you do. And now that you know it's uncommon, you are glad it's just you in that theatre. This is a private pain. Others have been spared: They don't know it and they shouldn't have to.

So far, the discourse of my experience with synesthesia has sounded confusing at best and harrowing to perilous at worst. On the rare instances that I divulge these details to those on my periphery of closeness, I am often cooed at and told that they could not imagine the pain. This response of theirs is consistent regardless of my mood as I illustrate the details to them. These non-familial loved ones of mine mean to sympathize and treat me with kindness, and I appreciate the effort.

I certainly believe that they can't imagine it. But, how difficult can something be when you have been adapted to it your entire life? Breaking news, *ma sœur*. This is not my first rodeo. It's easier than it used to be. And —well, there are secrets that I have. I have delightful secrets and beautiful visuals that happen that CT projects for me in those rare moments of physical bliss. (It's no wonder this part of this pathology is never spoken of. I am describing, here, the incredible synesthetic wonder of seeing things when you close your eyes and *arrive* with another.)

Often, it's gorgeous visages: Northern bare deciduous trees with dendrites like arms reaching towards a cold and unforgiving sky, the understory glazed with snow and a layer of ice that reflects the burgeoning sunlight. More than once, I have seen brick houses lining the wet asphalt streets of my juvenile neighborhood, and next to these saturated black roads stand blooming trees, proud and tall and bearing white and pink flowers. The path I ran in a cross-country race in New Jersey when I almost lost the trail but didn't: Fully green hardwood trees on my right and mangled understory to my left and turf up ahead, the stomping of young women's sneakered calloused feet sending tiger mosquitoes up into the warm thick static electricity air so laden with humidity, the tingles of two or more of these unidentified insects brushing lazily against my bare calf. The white shirt my para-coach was wearing when he asked *How many bugs did you swallow* and I held up one index finger to signify *one tiger mosquito* but he acknowledges me with a sweet southern drawl and turns away because he thinks I am signifying, with that finger, a need for a break and time to breathe, but really I was saying, *one entire bug has traversed all the way down into my digestive tract, and that's not*

even all. One time, CT gleefully presented an image from his shrubbery-disguise days, when he had recorded a four year-old you in the parking lot of St. James Catholic Church and the willow feather's soft of your hair falls across your face as your mother asks you what you think that noise was, and your scrunch your toddler face so tightly together and proudly respond *a squirrel.*

And so these visages can be moving. They *can* be basically heart-stopping in their beauty and grace and statehood. These are the reels that CT is the most proud of: I imagine that, in these moments, he is jumping up and down and screaming *I knew it* because the way the arriving pulsates and electrifies and surrenders my body feels adjacent to how I felt among all those trees, before I had ever even arrived, but these moments were really just mental isotopes of one another. This is CT's *magnum opus*, and this work of his can bring me to the sweetest tears I've ever shed.

But it can also make me laugh for days on end, because sometimes, I arrive with no warning, eyes shut tight with nothing expected, and I return with unexpected motifs that I cannot decipher. This column year, I have seen a box of Good 'n Plenty on the sickly beige speckled linoleum of my laundry room from my childhood (but keep in mind, I have never tasted nor purchased said candy), one thickly drawn snowflake on a backdrop of in-your-face cerulean-blue, the abstract colors of one very special chartreuse plaid shirt at once separate and also greater than the sum of its parts, the black grid lines bending all around so that they are spidery thin like paper barely covering the fact like Elliott Smith's voice, so thin until they bend out convexly and disappear and you leave my body. Just as with CT's *magnum opus*, these visages appear unapologetically and without explanation.

CT is dedicated to his craft, but he is not all bad.

If I let CT stay, if I maybe turn a blind eye to the rising electricity bill and the upstairs pounding of pacing footsteps while I am trying to sleep, CT will want to work *with* me. CT will be my partner, not only in crime but also in happiness, and he *wants* me to see the sheer magnificence of when it all comes together visually. He lives to see me tear up with joy.

It is in these moments that I realize we were a team all along.

And that brings us to my confession: I knowingly house a red-eyed, wild-haired, sleepless chain-smoking man in the upstairs of my head. I did not choose him, but he chose me. And now, finally, I have decided to keep him here. He reeks of BO, but Christ, I admire his tenacity. Because in a world so devoid of meaning, I've got my own mad scientist, determined until the day I die to make sense of it all.

And I am here to watch.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jenny Flores is a writer from Mississippi. She is currently working towards her MFA in Creative Writing. Her writing has appeared in multiple blogs and magazines, including GEEZ, Writer's Market, and Down in the Dirt.

Timothy Parrish is a Pushcart Prize-nominated writer and critic living somewhere in California and teaching most usually at UC Davis. Parrish's recent short fiction has appeared in *Raritan*, *Ploughshares*, *Equinox*, *Vestal Review*, *Sonic Boom*, and *Blood and Bourbon*.

Jeffrey Ihlenfeldt lives, writes, and teaches in Lancaster, PA. His fiction and creative nonfiction have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Ascent*, *Story Quarterly*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Solstice Literary Magazine*, *Cumberland River Review*, *Adirondack Review*, and *Quiddity*. Jeffrey is a two-time finalist for the Fulton Prize in Short Fiction and has been nominated for Best of the Net. A featured writer at the Lancaster Book Festival and the Greater Reading Literary Festival, he has been a writer-in-residence at Ledig House International Writer's Colony and The Artists' Enclave at I-Park, among others. He holds an MFA from Goddard College.

Megan Gannett is a queer settler writer from Edmonton. Her work has appeared in *The Antigoneish Review*, *CV2*, *The Goose*, and elsewhere. She has an MA from the University of Alberta.

Kurt Luchs (kurtluchs.com) has poems published or forthcoming in *Plume Poetry Journal*, *The Bitter Oleander*, and *London Grip*. He won the 2019 Atlanta Review International Poetry Contest and has written humor for *The New Yorker*, *The Onion*, and *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*. His books include a humor collection, *It's Funny Until Someone Loses an Eye (Then It's Really Funny)*, and a poetry chapbook, *One of These Things Is Not Like the Other*. His first full-length poetry collection, *Falling in the Direction of Up*, is forthcoming from Sagging Meniscus Press.

Gianna Sannipoli's poetry has been published in *The Cardiff Review*, *London Grip*, *The Seattle Star*, *Mason Street*, *The Wild Word*, *Panoply*, *One Sentence Poems*, *Dodging the Rain*, *Red Coyote*, *Otis Nebula*, and Gnashing Teeth Publishing's anthology, *Love Notes You'll Never Read*. She is the Poetry Editor for *San Antonio Review*.

Donna Faulker (née Miller) drinks tea without sugar, mochas with marshmallows, and vodka and orange juice in a tall glass with no ice. Donna has two dogs, a one-eyed cat, and three teenagers. She lives in New Zealand with her husband, Victor. Donna has had poetry published in *fws: Journal of Literature & Art*, *Havik: The Las Positas College Journal of Arts and Literature*, *Tarot Poetry Journal New Zealand*, *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review* and forthcoming in *Lemon Spouting Journal of Visual Art and Literature*.

CONTRIBUTORS

Katherine DeCoste is a queer white settler currently pursuing their MA in English on the stolen territories of the *ləkʷəŋən*, Esquimalt, Songhees, and *W̱SÁNEĆ* peoples. Their work has appeared in *Plenitude Magazine*, *Grain Magazine*, *The Antigonish Review*, and elsewhere.

Bethany F. Brengan is a freelance writer and editor who splits her time between the US Olympic Peninsula and the internet. Her poetry has appeared in *After Happy Hour Review*, *Channel*, *The Gordon Square Review*, *The 2015 Poet's Market*, and *CV2: The Canadian Journal of Poetry and Critical Writing*. She can be found at [Essays No One Asked For](#).

Samir Knego is a writer and poet with work in *Living Artists Magazine*, *To Be Young (And Disabled)*, *Claw & Blossom*, and elsewhere. He's on the editorial team at *Decolonial Passage* and lives in North Carolina with a bright green wheelchair and a little black dog. Find him on Twitter and Instagram @SamirKnego or at [A Very Decaf Person](#).

Catherine Edmunds is a writer, artist, and fiddle player with an award-nominated Irish folk/rock band. Her published works include two poetry collections, five novels, and a Holocaust memoir, as well as numerous short stories and poems in journals such as *Aesthetica*, *Crannóg*, and *Ambit*. She has been nominated three times for a Pushcart Prize, shortlisted in the Bridport Prize four times, and was the 2020 winner of the Robert Graves Poetry Prize. Catherine is married and lives in historic Bishop Auckland, in the foothills of the Pennines in the north of England.

Laura Glaves (RN, BSN, BFA) is an award-winning artist and emerging poet. Her poetry has been published in *Open Door Poetry Magazine* and has been accepted for publication in *Pure Slush Books Lifespan Anthology*. Her nursing career spanned thirty years and eight specialties. Her publications include "Supporting Emotional Regulation and Emotional Availability through Home Visitation" in *Zero to Three* and "Managing Asthma" in *AAACN Viewpoint*. She enjoys writing poetry about the human experience.

Meryl Reinhart lives in South Orange County, CA. She graduated from California State University, Fullerton with two BAs in Liberal Studies and American Studies, with a minor in Elementary Education. She works as an after-school teacher with second graders, but is pursuing a career in writing. On the surface, her biography looks spick and span but underneath are signs of struggle. Writing is her outlet, so she has decided to take a dark turn in the mental well-being category.

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, NH. He has taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent book of poetry, published in 2021, is *Mist in Their Eyes*. He has published three critical studies, including Robert Lowell's *Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.

CONTRIBUTORS

Denver Jermyn lives and writes in Toronto, ON. His poetry has previously appeared in Vallum, In/Words, parenthetical, The Cadaverine, and others. He was shortlisted for the 2017 Eden Mills Writers' Festival Literary Contest and received first honourable mention in the 2012 Vallum Award for Poetry.

Lorraine Whelan is a Canadian writer and visual artist based in Ireland. Her prose, poetry, and art criticism have appeared in Ireland, Canada, USA, Luxembourg, and online. Her artwork is included in public, private, and corporate collections in Ireland, USA, Canada, UK, Belgium, and Australia.

John Whitney Steele is a psychologist, yoga teacher, assistant editor of Think: A Journal of Poetry, Fiction and Essays, and graduate of the MFA Poetry Program at Western Colorado University. His chapbook, *The Stones Keep Watch*, is to be launched by Kelsay Books in the fall of 2021. A Pushcart Prize nominee, his poetry has recently appeared in *The Lyric*, *The Orchards*, and *Road Not Taken*. Born in Toronto, ON, and raised among the pines and silver birches of Foot's Bay, ON, John lives in Boulder, CO where he often encounters his muse while hiking in the mountains. Website: [John Whitney Steele](http://JohnWhitneySteele.com).

Louise Wilford lives in Yorkshire, UK. Her poetry and short stories have been widely published, most recently in *Bandit*, *Pushing Out the Boat*, *Makarelle*, and *English Review*. In 2020, she won First Prize in the Arts Quarterly Short Story Competition and the Merefest Poetry Competition and was awarded a MA in Creative Writing (Distinction). She is working on a fantasy novel.

Henry Matthew Ward (Matt) is a Tennessee native with a BS degree from Middle Tennessee State University and an MA from Ohio State University. He retired from teaching and real estate development in 2005, leaving time for his hobbies of classical music and writing. He and his wife live in Murfreesboro, TN.

Melanie Reitzel is a retired RN lactation specialist who reminded her patients how to be mammals. She received her MFA from San Francisco State University. Her poetry, creative non-fiction and fiction have been published in various anthologies and in journals including *Poet Lore*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Tulane Review*, *Popshot Magazine* and *North American Poetry Review* (which nominated one of her prose poems for a Pushcart Prize).

Wendy Lane lives in Minnesota with her spouse Judith and their Scotty dog Gus. She is retired from a successful career as a visual artist, and human resources professional in arts and academia. Wendy is writing her memoir as a collection of creative nonfiction essays, but is as yet unpublished. In addition to writing, Wendy enjoys reading, plein-air landscape painting, and traveling.

CONTRIBUTORS

Wendy received her BA degree in arts administration, an MFA in painting, and is a certified life coach. She takes writing courses through The Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, and meets every other week with her writing group.

Saskia Layden Kaya is from New York and after trying Brazil, Madrid, Italy, Amsterdam, and Denmark, she now lives in Fethiye, Turkey. She is currently compiling poems and essays written over the span of 20 years for a full-length memoir. Her published work can be found in Visible Magazine, Berlin Art Parasites, and The Rising Phoenix Review.

Genevieve Allaire is a scientist in southern New Mexico, where she resides in the company of the desert plants she loves the most. She holds a B.S. in Plant Science from the University of Delaware and a M.Sc. in Plant & Environmental Science from New Mexico State University. Originally from the northeastern United States, she has worked as a botanist in the private, public, and federal sectors throughout her native country.



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