



THE
FIELDSTONE
REVIEW

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Editor's Note

Michael J. Horacki

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Sincerely,
Michael J. Horacki
Editor-in-Chief

Poetry

slight epics **j. tate barlow**

I Drunken bohemian waxwings in Whitehorse Yukon
their beaks redstained
tumble out of trees in november are rescued
recover in hamster cages til
sober enough to navigate
A number of each year's flock will carouse
in frozen fermented berries
risking fatal intoxication
by fruitof rowan

II Construction cramps the darkening downtown
Toronto street as snow begins
Sewer grate snagsandmangles
rips from mycar its exhaust system
Impaled in hesitation's din
forward?orback?
i'm quizzed by a wearied
constituent of the hardhatted crew
"What're you try'n t'do?"

Houses on Siletz Spit
Scott T. Starbuck

“Sawed logs within the spit indicate that the portion of the Siletz Spit on which the houses had been built must have suffered previous erosion, sometime after 1895. After that early erosion the dunes must have built back out and become re-established.”

- Paul D. Komar and C. Cary Rea, *The Causes of Erosion to Siletz Spit, Oregon*

Every hundred years or so
the river swells like a sea
and crazy happens –

driftwood in living rooms,
underwater saltwater kitchens,
docks and moorages swept away.

Old ones' homes are dry
on upriver stilts
while new construction is gone

as if it never existed
until the next owners
and those who would cheat them

arrive from the east.
Gary at Coyote Rock told me
this would happen

to anyone who didn't listen
to men who have dwelled here
ten thousand years.

Gathering
Elizabeth Andrews

As I rake, I watch coyotes hunt for mice.
They chase the grey blades,
run behind the hum of the grind,
and dive between rows
of dry, spun yellow.

The hay falls sideways, like stacked
skeletal arms collapsed
under the sun. The rays spread out
in front of me, turning the whole field
smoke's-end red.

The tractor's vibrations run
between my legs and last night rolls back.
The girl from homeroom I showed
the cows to, then brought to the loft above
the milking machines.
Behind the barn door slats moonlight
filtered white strips over shadows
and yellowed cat skulls sat
near bins of cow corn
and moulded straw.

I readjust the throttle and
recall the sound of the floorboards
cracking, the way our feet got
wrapped in blue twine while calves
bawled from their stalls. I can feel
my lips, chapped and burned, but last night
they were soft with spit and pressed
on hers against the echo
of a coyote's dry cry.

I turn to check the rows
and watch one of them pause,
jump and fall out of sight
into all that shifted hay.

The Best Place for Solitude is an Abandoned Mall
Chelsea Eckert

dragons of neon,
exhibitionist noise:
visions that went and tickled her
when the sky got too wide and she
crawled into a shell long outgrown
by its well-intentioned

bottom-feeders.
the escalator exhaled
with the weight of her. the wine was
good and did not ask for her money.
how tight (thought she) how quaint
the world is between a

few weeping walls,
between the macy's, and
the gamestop, and the sephora, signs
askew and asleep, limbs left to sigh
in their decomposition. how can you
even stand up in this town

(said a boyfriend)
it's too goddamn small
but as she fell asleep against the lip
of a fountain she thought of all the
shops laid out in the same place day
by day and, longing for a map,

unknotted with wonder

Cabinet Card, 1884
Cyndi MacMillan

Cradled in sepia, nameless, perhaps five
with surreal eyes fixed into infernos.
Her pout holds a last breath, camera shy.
A girl on a deathbed, a casualty posed
on pale satin. Unseen, someone mourns
outside the frame, blisters their knees
so dimples again deepen, cheeks warm.
The loss bleeds into this century,
but there is something about her chin,
a resolve, as if a nursed will has outlasted
yellowing lace, sermons on fatherly sins,
and each staunch infirmity of the past.
An unbearable promise warps the print,
stares down pity with undying resentment.

passing
Shauntay Grant

remember that night we sat up late cracking dice with the cosmos? you were shifting – eyes resolved to study sky and star.

there in the wood i poured over you, an eclipse: black, mute, sure. disrobed and we were both vulnerable. brushed for pulse (lips, neck...). drained two vials of lavender sealing your pores. tasted 'til the moon dropped, and you were fixed on Vega. tried to fool the dawn.

but flames fell before the cinders. and violet struck, threatening fire.

you were cold. and calm while i gave my hands to murdering rodents, pests, all i might crunch above the storm. and it came. radiant surge colour. shades of anguish. brooding whispers. our senses gone rogue.

and from the creek, coyotes catching scent. then paws, flattening moss.

and selfish for time, i gave up gathering stones. so morning came – certain, and without remorse (a sly, swift clench). and all i could, with these blind palms, is rally two salvaged stones.

and so we went out, firing craps at the gods.

Fiction

Shingle Spit Road **Meaghan Hackinen**

There are two types of people: those who don't mention their past, and those who won't shut up about it. My father's brother Vincent fell in with the first, so I'll just tell you what I know.

Uncle Vincent, never Vince, traded college for the army and shipped out at twentyone on peacekeeping missions in Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. "It was hard on him," my father said. After a brief stint hitching through Argentina, Uncle Vincent returned to his homeland. With the commercial vehicle licence he earned in the military, Uncle became a school bus driver on Hornby Island, British Columbia. About as far as you could get from anywhere.

Every summer vacation we'd drive up for Labour Day weekend. Uncle Vincent's blue trim trailer, parked on an overgrown quarter-acre off Shingle Spit Road, felt cramped and dingy, the countertops and cupboards stained a sad, sallow yellow. A single shelf of books lined the dim, wood-panelled hallway. I once witnessed mother half tuck an envelope under one of the owl-shaped bookends: five hundred dollar bills.

"Vincent's marriage collapsed," said my father. It was a warning. We were on the ferry to Hornby Island, leaning against the upper deck guardrail with the sun on our backs, waiting for the horn to sound.

I think my father, in his reserved way, was trying to remind me to behave myself. Uncle Vincent didn't cope well with additional sources of stress. But I took the statement as evidence of how fragile and hinging on disintegration everything was. There were no genuine failsafes, all of us just a guardrail away from toppling headfirst into the roaring blue abyss. A classmate had recently introduced me to the activist magazine *Adbusters*, and I had begun to view the world a shade or two darker than I used to, those foaming whirlpools of big pharma, corporation, and greed now visible just below the surface. I wondered if finances had factored into Uncle Vincent's divorce.

My older cousins, Luce and Aimée, named by their Quebecois mother, visited intermittently, and even as teenagers they slept in bunk beds. We played Scrabble together, Uncle Vincent the arbitrator of recurrent disputes. I remember how Luce and Aimée would smirk after he penalized me, it was *always* me, for slipping in bogus words.

Uncle got by, even in the dry season, on a well out back. He took military showers and flushed the toilet with a red plastic pail. I remember clogging it once, real bad. Panicked, I poured down another pail, while Uncle bellowed at the door, "Amelia, we're havin' a water shortage, case you didn't know!"

My turds swirled 'round in circles like shameful carousel horses until the toilet bowl finally drained.

One visit, just after I'd aced my ninth grade exams, we were lolling round the picnic table beneath two ancient maples, their leaves a bold, bright green and big as your face. The adults drank pinot grigio that my mother had brought and chatted, only half-listening, about the lesser-off folks on the island.

“It’s because of capitalism,” I cut in. “Communist countries, like Cuba—”

“You don’t know about communism,” Uncle interrupted from across the table. “You don’t know a thing.”

The skin under his stubbly beard burned the same rouge that his ex-wife painted her lips. His eyes, cold, locked on to mine like an enemy target.

“What they teach you in school – well, what *do* they teach you?”

My parents – where were they? The two of them must have been present, but my memory of this moment is like a spotlight in the night sky. Only Uncle Vincent and I are illuminated.

I swallowed. “We’ve got to look out for each other. Look out for—”

“Listen,” Uncle interrupted, “you figure out what’s what.” His voice cut like a rusty ax that’s kept its edge. “And don’t ever let no one talk bullshit to you.”

Don’t trust me here on the details. My parents must have rematerialized, maybe my father topped up their glasses while I sulked away. I remember lying back in Luce’s top bunk, ceiling close overhead, reading Archie comics. With every page I turned, the contents of the previous faded, so I had to flip back in order to catch the punchline. Back and forth. Again, again. But I couldn’t grasp a word of it.

Learn to Care
Derek Mascarenhas

Vito was the biggest kid in my class. Parker was the smallest. They fought on a spring day after we went for confession. The priest used to come to our school, but he was getting old, so that morning our class walked to the church instead. The air was still damp from the rain that had fallen earlier in the morning – it had come down hard for a few hours, but nothing like the storm we had last week.

I tried not to step on the earthworms that had been forced from their flooded homes; they littered the sidewalks and driveways. I'd heard that if a worm gets cut in half, the two pieces both survive, and each becomes a whole new worm. Vito had already squashed five worms, and, to the disgust of the girls, picked one up with his bare fingers. He ran up behind Parker and placed it on the shoulder of his yellow rain coat. Even though it wasn't raining Parker had his hood up, hiding his red hair. He must have felt Vito's hand because he brushed the worm off his shoulder, and onto someone's soggy lawn. Vito shoved him from behind and he landed on the lawn as well.

"I needed something to confess today," Vito said, and a few boys laughed.

"I'm sure you have plenty already." Parker got up and tried to wipe away the mud from his coat with his sleeve, but it just smeared down the front.

"You'll have to tell your daddy to buy you a new one." Vito saw Miss Allen approaching, and before she arrived he rejoined the line of students walking two-by-two.

"What happened, Parker?" asked Miss Allen.

"Nothing. I just tripped."

"You've gotten your nice coat dirty."

Our real teacher, Mrs. May, would have found out what had happened and disciplined Vito, but she was off having a baby. Miss Allen was covering for the rest of our grade-eight year. She believed almost anything we told her. Vito once told her he hadn't finished a project because he was out with his mom fundraising for cancer – everyone else knew Vito didn't have a mother.

Parker stuck beside Miss Allen for the rest of the walk to the church.

The first thing I noticed on the old building was the large wooden cross at the front. It was tilted, hung like an 'X' with one long leg. The storm must have loosened a few bolts. My mom had hung crucifixes outside of mine and my sister Ally's bedroom doors. There wasn't enough space to nail them directly above the door, so she just slid them against one corner of the frame, so that the corner nestled into Jesus' armpit. Occasionally, if we slammed our doors, the crucifixes came crashing down. Mom always put them back in their place. Although, last week after we all returned home from the hospital, Dad told us not to do anything to upset her for the next little while.

~ ~ ~ ~

Our whole class went for confession one by one in the little booth with the soft red curtains. It took forever. I stood in line waiting – wanting to escape, to cut myself in two like a worm and be the half that got to wiggle away. I never knew what to say after, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” Father Baxter should have to confess his sins to me, too; then it would be fair. I told him that I stole from my sister and lied to my father. I hadn’t stolen anything from Ally but figured I’d be covered for lying because I’d said I lied to my Father. With his raspy voice, he gave me three Hail Marys. Even though I’d made up my sins, I felt better as I walked out of the confessional – it felt good to be forgiven.

~ ~ ~ ~

Father Baxter’s face looked tired as he held Mass for us. I could hardly hear his voice as he read from a Letter to the Corinthians. Our class knelt in the two glossy wooden pews at the front. The rest of the church was empty. Two thick candles with crosses printed on them sat on top of the altar. I watched their flames flicker as Father Baxter coughed. It sounded like the type of cough that came with a bad flu, one that might cause something sticky and oddly coloured to be spat up. We waited for him to catch his breath.

Parker sat with his hands together at the end of the front row. He had his eyes closed. There was something about the way he prayed that I both admired and pitied. When we were younger, Ally and I used to pray like that. *Goodnight, God. I’m going to bed with my sleepy head. Thank you for the work and play, thank you for this beautiful day.* We spoke to God like He was in the room with us, and yet when we told Him about our day we acted as if He hadn’t seen it Himself. It had been so much easier to believe then. I never questioned anything about religion – God was a given, and, as Ally used to say, we were “Cat-licks.”

When Mom lost her baby last week, my faith flickered like those candles. I couldn’t understand why God had done nothing to save my second sister. Why He took such a small life before it had even lived. Some people said God wanted the baby for Himself, but that didn’t make sense to me. It seemed selfish, considering how much it hurt everyone else. I’d never seen Mom cry like that before; it was impossible not to join her.

Father Baxter finished coughing and went back to blessing the bread and wine.

Vito was kneeling one student over from me, directly behind Parker. I watched as he pulled a bible from the wooden slot. He held it by its spine, reached out and poked the corners into Parker’s hunched back like a fork.

Parker’s posture straightened immediately, but he managed not to make a sound. Vito poked him again. Parker turned this time, and whispered, “I’m going to tell Miss Allen.”

Vito smiled, and mouthed, “I don’t care.”

I thought of my mother again. *I don’t care* was like a swear word in our house. Any time Ally or I said this, Mom immediately gave us a stern look and replied, “*Learn to care.*”

Vito’s jabs with the bible continued. I could tell Parker was trying to ignore him. I wanted Father Baxter to hurry up so we could go up for communion, but he was taking his time wiping the inside of a gold chalice with a neatly folded white cloth.

Vito, annoyed that he was no longer getting a response, raised the book above Parker's head and brought it down with force; it was a solid hit, making a loud and hollow knock. Parker let out an agonizing, "Ahhh!"

Vito returned the bible to its slot before everyone's eyes were on them. Miss Allen came over right away.

"We're in church," she said to Parker. He was holding his head, but she didn't take any notice.

I wanted to tell Miss Allen what had happened, but Vito was much bigger than me, too, and I was afraid he'd start picking on me if I did.

Father Baxter finally shuffled to the top of the centre aisle with his shiny chalice.

My class stood and filed into a single line to receive communion.

With hands folded in front of me, I took a half-step forward in the line every few seconds and stared up at the cross at the front of the church. The longer my eyes were on the cross the angrier I became – angry at Vito, angry at Miss Allen for not knowing it was Vito, and at Father Baxter for not even noticing. Most of all, I was angry at God for not doing anything, again.

I almost didn't realize that I'd reached the front of the line. Father Baxter held the round host in front of him. I raised my hands and he placed it into my palm. The light wafer melted on my tongue, tasteless, as always.

When I returned to my seat I put my head down and prayed. I tried to pray from the same place I did when I was younger. After a few moments I knew it wouldn't be the same. So instead, I just told God what I wanted. *Stop Vito from hurting Parker.* I knew we weren't supposed to test God, but He tests us every day. I asked Him to stop it, and if He didn't, I decided right there and then that I'd stop believing in Him. It was a thought that had never come to me before, a thought both satisfying and frightening. I had the power to kill God, by simply not believing.

~ ~ ~ ~

When we got back to school it was already lunch hour. As soon as Parker came back outside, Vito went after him. Vito chased him down and cornered him by the portable classrooms. It was like Vito only had room in his head for one idea at a time. Or maybe he was just encouraged by the fact that nothing had stopped him. Most of the boys gathered around, wanting to see how far he would go.

Vito grabbed Parker by his yellow coat and lifted him up against the portable wall so that his feet dangled. Parker squirmed, but couldn't get free. Vito was so much taller and heavier that it was hard to believe they were the same age.

Vito punched the space next to Parker's head on purpose; the metal wall rattled.

Parker swung his legs, kicking as hard as he could.

Vito held him with both hands and shoved his back against the wall two times.

"Stop," Parker pleaded, tears pooling in his eyes. "That hurts."

“You think I care?”

Mom’s voice came to me again and I almost blurted out her words.

Vito shoved him again, with even more force than before.

The tears rolled down Parker’s face like wax down the side of a candle. “It’s not fair!” he screamed.

For a second it I felt like I might cry too, but I held it back. God wasn’t going do anything. He didn’t care, because He didn’t exist – if He did, He wouldn’t allow such things to happen.

“Vito,” I said, surprised by my own voice. “You made him cry. What more do you want?”

Vito looked at me over his shoulder, gave Parker a last shake and threw him to the ground.

Vito turned to me. “You want to be next?”

Vito’s gaze sent a chill through my body. “No,” I said, and held my breath. I wanted to turn and run, but stayed standing there.

I heard someone shout, “Principal!”

The other boys scattered, but Vito held his ground.

In those last few moments, I knew why I was the only one who saw it all. I saw Parker’s clenched jaw, and how quickly he was breathing. I saw the rock in his hand, and how tightly he gripped it. I saw the fire in his eyes as he raised his arm back.

Non-fiction

Beyond the Cucumbers **Clarissa P. Green**

“Here’s the image,” I say to my sister Nancy. I am sitting on the side of her bed, holding her left hand a little too tightly. Under the covers, eyes closed, she takes a deep breath. “We are at a spa, lying side-by-side, slathered in mud. Our eyes peek out.” She nods. Smiles weakly.

My stomach twists into a knot. Mud. Side by side. Sounds like a joint burial. Nancy nestles deeper into the pillows. Her eyes open, look at me, disappear again under eyelashes that drift up, down.

When I stand up, Nancy squeezes my hand. Eyes still closed, she says, “Our eyes are covered by cucumber slices. We’ll meet – beyond the cucumbers.” She chuckles softly.

Nancy and I have been talking about how to celebrate, should she survive this medical crisis. She wants to go to a spa, which for her would be a special treat. I find spas frivolous, even silly. But my sister is teetering on a thin edge, and if she lives I will take her anywhere she wants to go, no complaints.

Since I arrived at Nancy’s, I sense Madame Death everywhere. Just now her gauzy presence breezed by. I imagine her in the leather bucket chair by the end of the bed, chin in hand. I turn away, close my eyes, but even then I feel her swimming in my protoplasm.

In the next room, younger sisters Casey and Suzie wait for my report. We three rushed here when everyone – her son, doctors and palliative care nurses – thought it was the end. We’ve been here for eight days.

But she’s still alive.

This surprising fact leaves everyone in limbo. We want to take care of her, and feel pressured to return to our lives hundreds of miles away. It’s impossible to talk about this without feeling a ragged guilt.

~ ~ ~ ~

It is Nancy’s blood cells that cause the trouble. Her bone marrow, which produces a stream of life-giving bits, has shut down – again. It is a consequence of the chemotherapy she received to treat ovarian cancer several years ago. Even though the chemo drenched her in chemicals that blasted the ovarian cancer out of her, it rearranged her body’s relationship with its bone marrow. She ended up with aplastic anemia, which means she has times when her white and red blood cells and platelets disappear. Then, she is consumed by a voracious fatigue. She needs treatment to kick-start her bone marrow. There is no guarantee it will work. At some point, we have been told, it won’t and she will die.

She had a treatment several weeks ago. So far it doesn’t look good.

The last time this happened, as Nancy seemed to slide toward death we endured weeks of hoping her bone marrow would respond. She consumed a dazzling pharmacopoeia and spent most days connected to bags of intravenous blood products. She became our own Sleeping Beauty. While she slept, we – her son, daughter-in-law, grandchildren and sisters – tended, talked, prayed there would be a “bump” in the statistics about her blood. We knew that a change in numbers indicates a chance at more life.

During that time I also felt Madame Death swish around. I touched the icy pool of life-without-Nancy, felt myself slip into cold water that crushed my heart. I cried and cried, said over and over, “Don’t die don’t die, don’t leave, don’t don’t. Please. Please.” Daily, I begged all forces to give me a few more days with my sister.

No one imagined how she could live.

But one morning at 2:00AM Nancy awakened from a semi-coma and began to sing. She called. My heart tap dancing, I grabbed the phone on the first ring.

Her voice: “I’m going to be OK. I’ve been singing every song I know.”

Then, her hearty laugh, a sound I’d thought I would never hear again. How could this be? For weeks she’d been inert, unwilling to eat, puffed up like a blowfish. Palliative care nurses orchestrated every routine.

“*What?* For weeks you’ve been dying and now you’re making *music?*”

I sat up, turned on the lamp. She told me she’d been at her keyboard singing her way through her huge black binder. I was speechless. My sister, a musical India rubber ball, bouncing forward.

Music. Of course. It’s the music.

In a hospital examining room days after that call, Nancy’s doctors told her the treatment had kicked in. She called me to report: “Isn’t this *great!* It *worked!*” How deeply she believed their medical analysis of why she had survived. But I had other thoughts. Although I didn’t tell her, I knew her intimate relationship with music was as powerful as any pharmaceutical.

What I did say was, “Sounds like you’ve had a spiritual transfusion.”

“Spiritual transfusion? What’s *that?* You and your wild ass ideas. It’s the meds.” A laugh.

This time, since receiving the kick-start serum, there’s been no “bump” in her blood count. Instead, bleeding. When that started, Nancy called, described blood flowing from her mouth and nose at night.

“It won’t stop. I don’t know how to make it stop.”

Her voice was that of a child, the little girl sister I once knew. To avoid imagining what she was telling me, I covered my eyes.

Then, a whisper: “I’m not ready to die. I don’t want to bleed to death.”

I thought about how blatantly the body bleeds when it has too few clot-forming platelets.

“OK, OK,” I soothed, “no matter what, it’s going to be all right.” But images of her blanketed in blood flooded my mind. Despair, cloying as a wet wool coat, settled in.

Although it was midnight, I called Casey, then Suzie. We talked about work schedules and coordinating arrival times.

~ ~ ~ ~

Nancy and I are the fourth and fifth in a family of eight children, seven of whom are still alive. All of us are over fifty-five years old. She and I occupy the middle of the lineup: three older brothers lead and three younger sisters, one deceased, follow us. Casey, who is five years younger than me, is an artist married to another artist. Suzie, seven years my junior, is a mother and music teacher married to a businessman. I am a divorced mother, university teacher, therapist, and writer. Nancy, our lead sled dog, is a mother; and she has had more careers than the three of us put together, *and* has been married the most times.

Only sixteen months apart in age, Nancy and I wore identical smock dresses when we were little girls. We slept in matching twin beds, received the same dolls for Christmas and turned in unison when Mother’s called, “Girls!” Raised as if we were one child, we acted like two halves of the same cookie. Together we braved our brothers’ torments, played piano duets and shared swimming lessons.

When our bodies and personalities took shape, our differences emerged. Then, sparky and angry, we pushed away from one another. There stood Nancy: petite, curvy, sensuous, musical, popular. I was tall, straight, studious, drawn to perplexing questions about life and love. Both of us, we later discovered when we talked about those years, felt abandoned by the other.

It took until our mid-thirties to find one another again, but when we did we again became each other’s biggest fan and ever-ready confidante. For over sixty years, no matter where we have lived, we have talked about life’s journey. We touch base several times a week, swap stories of children, family members and friends. We visit each other whenever we can. When she is ill we talk several times a day. I go to take care of her as often as I can.

We have a vibrant bond with our younger sisters. When our mother was at the end of her life, to fulfill a promise we made to her, we four left our families and moved into her house to care for her while she died. There, for the first time since we were teenagers, we lived together and provided a gentle embrace for Mother until she died.

That summer, our familiarity and routines shattered, we four discovered a deep reservoir of ways to be present with Mother and to care about each other, too. That summer, we say, was the most intimate experience of our lives.

And then Nancy got sick.

~ ~ ~ ~

Not long into this recent medical crisis, I helped Nancy get to the chair in front of her vanity. Standing behind her, I brushed her silver hair. In the mirror: her closed eyes, her wan smile, my face twisted with sadness. When I asked her what she needed to happen while all four sisters

were together, her eyes popped open. Looked into mine. I could see she thought I believed she would die soon.

“I don’t want to think about that,” she said.

But a few days later she said, “OK, you asked, so here it is: I want us to sing.”

My eyebrows shot up. Sing? *Sing?* Nancy could barely manage to *talk*. But then I remembered the previous year’s nocturnal songfest.

“You want to sing?” I said, “OK. Sure. Let’s do that.”

She nodded. When I told Casey and Suzie what Nancy wanted to do, their faces registered the same amazement. We huddled into a knot, silenced, sad.

Since childhood, we four have sung together. Our father promoted singing – not shower songs, but close harmony, preferably *a capella*. A musician with a sincere appreciation for close chords and tricky key shifts, Dad made sure parties revolved around music: group singing, people playing instruments, jamming. We got stirred into the musical *mêlée*. All seven children took lessons, played instruments, and sang.

We daughters still make music. Casey’s cello music touches places in me nothing else can. I sing in a choir that focuses on Broadway musicals and plunk a guitar. Suzie, the youngest, makes her living with music. Her passion is only matched by Nancy’s, who for decades has sung barbershop harmony with groups and quartets. It is the sky in which her personal star shines brilliantly. There she has lived and breathed music. I have always thought Nancy’s veins are filled not with blood but with the sound of music.

We all knew what her request to sing meant. She chooses a barbershop arrangement. She sings bass, I melody, Casey baritone and Suzie tenor. We proceed slowly, note by note, chord by chord, singing words and lines over and over until our voices are a precise blend. Until our sound causes goose bumps. Because we focus on every aspect of the music, this process typically takes hours.

~ ~ ~ ~

The afternoon of our singing took place in Nancy’s bedroom. Barely able to keep her eyes open, she lay back against pillows. Suzie set the keyboard on the end of the bed. Casey and I pulled chairs up close. Nancy passed Suzie the music she’d chosen and Suzie plunked out the melody to “Me and My Shadow,” a tune by Billy Rose, Al Jolson, and Dave Dreyer. Then, under Nancy’s direction, we began.

All alone, I’m feeling oh so blue,

Me and my shadow, strolling down the avenue,

Me and my shadow,

Not a soul to tell our troubles to...

We found our parts and began to sing. Every minute or so, Suzie held her hand up, played one of our parts and waited for it to be sung. Nancy lifted her head off the pillow to listen, nodded when the sound was right. Then, on to the next chord. Over and over, one phrase then the next. Then a whole line in harmony – all four parts.

After an hour Nancy propped herself into a sitting position. Soon after she said she wanted to stand, so I helped her get on her feet. She wobbled, lay back down.

Minutes later she said, “OK. Singers stand. We can’t get the sound unless we’re all on our feet.” She stood up again, grabbed onto me and the window sill and nodded to Suzie to begin.

And when it’s twelve o’clock

We climb the stair

We never knock

For no one is there...

As we sang, Casey’s, Suzie’s, and my eyes were trained on Nancy. In the next half hour, her eyes lost their far-away veil. Her cheeks went from pale to pink. Her fingers began to pulse with each note, her hands to wave with shifts in tone. I remembered the scene from the movie *ET*, in which the extra-terrestrial, saddened about a dead flower, touches the dead blossom with a glowing fingertip. His energy flows into the flower and restores it to its former golden brilliance.

Standing by her bed, now infused with sound, my sister did the same thing. From beneath drugs and death she unfolded, stood upright and alive. She recreated herself. The changes in her swept us, hang gliders in her updraft, into her universe where we four became one sound.

Just me and my shadow

All alone and feelin’ blue.

After four hours she said, “I’m tired now. We’ll polish it off tomorrow.” A full smile on her lips, she eased herself underneath the comforter and closed her eyes. Seconds later she was asleep.

Suzie, Casey and I closed her door quietly and walked into the living room. We sank into the sofa and sat there, wordless. Suzie reached out and pulled all six of our hands into bouquet.

“I can’t stand this. It’s just too hard,” I whispered. “I’m going to grab a beer; anyone else want one?”

~ ~ ~ ~

We didn’t sing the next day. Nancy was too exhausted. She needed a transfusion. Nothing about her looked good. But when we bundled her up and took her to the clinic, there it was – a “bump”; her platelets had doubled. Nancy nodded, smiling, as if she knew the treatment was working. I smiled back, knowing the music was again working its magic.

The “bump” only lasted one day.

“Let’s just wait and see what happens,” said her physician the next day, his hand resting on her shoulder. Nancy nodded.

~ ~ ~ ~

“So,” I say, continuing our conversation about the spa, “tell me – what kind of a spa do you want?”

Late afternoon light sneaks through her blinds, turns the room golden. The glow invites tears. Nancy adjusts her pile of pillows and pulls the comforter under her chin, closes her eyes.

“Ocean,” she says.

“You want the spa to be on the ocean?”

“Yes.” Silence. “Walking.” More silence. “Yes, we need to walk. On a beach.” Her eyes open, meet mine. “Small, intimate.” She touches a tear on my cheek.

“Where?”

“West Coast... wind, rain.” Silence. “Rubber boots. Slickers. I’ll have to buy one.

Yellow. Maybe purple.” She grins.

“Who will be there?”

“All four of us. We have to sing.

The Power of Drums

Fraser Sunderland

In the few weeks that passed after Jake's funeral, I wasn't so interested in making a lot of noise at home. I wasn't in a mood for playing music – alone or with anyone. This was due at least in part to the fact that my drums were still in Montreal, nestled in a pile behind Topher's dining table. That was right where I'd left them in a mild panic as we scrambled to take the train home to Toronto.

I spent a lot of time listening to the recordings of our band practices and our Montreal gig. An active listening, down in my room with the warm lamp light. I'd sit in the red rocking chair with my headphones on, eyes closed as the sounds flowed through me.

I could hear us playing on the tape. I could hear Jake picking individual notes or thumping lines out with his thumb; yet now he wasn't around. What had occurred that took him away? How can he be there then, but not here now? I was clueless. Perhaps I was looking for answers on the tapes. Maybe if I listened very carefully, or if I played it backwards, I might be able to hear the meaning behind why events occurred as they had. If American politicians can hear Ozzy Osbourne encouraging kids to shoot themselves, maybe I could hear the Universe's explanation as to why Jake was no more.

Nothing.

The nights in my room passed and I continued to study our tapes. I started feeling locked in: locked in my room, locked in the false reality of our recordings. It was like I was expecting to burst through into a new understanding of things, but had yet to find a pin to pop the bubble. I needed to release something forceful and primitive. Maybe I needed to bash the skins again.

Flash backward.

Before Sweet Untasted's very first gig, I was looking to upgrade my little red kit. As luck would have it, Jake's mom, Leanne, called one evening with some cool news.

"The thing is, I work with a guy – he's older than you – who plays drums, and he's selling his old set," she told me over the phone.

"Uh-huh..."

"He's all excited about the new set he's just ordered. He says it's top of the line and all that. Anyway, he's selling his old set, and he's heard me talking about you guys a million times, and he asked if you'd be interested in his old set."

"Uh-huh..."

"He brought it to work today, packed it in my trunk, and it's in our basement right now. He says you can play with it for a while, to see if you want it."

My shoes were tied and I was out the door before another word was uttered. I tore up to the Vernon house on my bike, arriving as the sun set. Jake greeted me at the door, as excited as I was.

“Fraser, you gotta check out these babies,” he whispered to me. “Some serious shit goin’ on.”

I kicked my shoes off, and the two of us ran towards the basement door.

Jake and I tumbled down the stairs and turned the corner into the main space. There, in front of me, sat a truly beautiful sight. A magnificent set – British racing green, accented with golden platters and silver shafts, stood proud and sturdy like a mountain. The whole shebang, a concert of visual harmony. They were perfect, and I hadn’t even played them yet.

A snare, two toms, and a floor tom sat around the big kick drum. The high-hat, two crashes, two rides, and a Chinese cymbal floated above. And to top it all off, three rotary-toms (like three upside down hubcaps with skins stretched over their backs) sat above the high-hat, looking like something Alex Van Halen might play.

Feeling giddy with pleasure, I sat at the drum throne and further examined the kit. The hardware (all the chromed stands and supports that hold the drums and cymbals in place) was strong and brawny, noticeably more so than that of my little novice kit back home. Everything about these green monsters promised robust strength and rich, professional quality. They were built to last.

I launched into a beat, and shuddered in rhythmical orgasm. Oh, I wanted them! Sold! I’ll take ‘em! Gimme, gimme, gimme!

“Dude, you have to buy these,” said Jake with a knowing look.

“I know. I know.” I bit my lip. “Any idea what the guy is asking?”

“Eight hundred.”

“Eight hundred bucks,” I said with a gasp. “Dammit! That’s a great price!”

“Totally reasonable.”

“If you were to buy these new, in a shop, you’d pay that much for the hardware alone! Oh, I gotta talk to Mum and Dad about this. Maybe they can make it my Christmas or birthday present – and I’ll pay half – or something like that.”

And that’s what happened. I paid half and the drums were mine – set up in my room downstairs by the following weekend.

Flash forward.

Now they sat, neglected, in a pile behind Topher’s dining table in his apartment in Montreal. If they were to be any good to me now, I’d have to go get them. Yet I dreaded the idea of having to go back to Topher’s. The memories were still too fresh.

Our red Nissan Sentra was in the shop for a tune up so my dad had a rental car for a few days. We left before the sun was up on Saturday morning. Dad drove like a demon, chewing up asphalt with the borrowed blue chariot. The journey was surprisingly straightforward, due in part to the snow having melted away in the four weeks since I was last there. We pulled up to a parking meter outside of Topher’s apartment as Dad’s wristwatch beeped noon.

I pointed at the tiled floor where we laid Jake down. Dad did his best to show compassionate interest, while not allowing me to dwell on each little detail that was still burning in my mind. With a hand on my shoulder, he nudged me out of my internal play-by-play, past the front steps up to the buzzer.

Topher came down to greet us. He was very accommodating and tried his best to make us feel welcome. On the drive up, I had been thinking about him, and trying to put myself in his situation. Did he feel a little isolated here in Montreal? Did he relive that horrible night every time he walked through the lobby of his building? At least I was surrounded all day, every day, by people who were aware of the situation, even if they didn't know Jake. Maybe Topher was lonely and without a support group to turn to. But what did I know about how he lived? Not that much. In fact, I didn't know Topher very well at all.

I really wanted to grab my precious drums and split, but we let Topher take us for a quick walk around town. The sun shone, and although it was still a little cool, the city was alive with people and activity. It was inviting. All the same, my drums were packed into the car and we were shaking Topher's hand goodbye before the sun went down.

"You don't have to go immediately, you know," Topher said as I closed the trunk shut over a pile of drum stands and cymbals. "I can put you guys up for the night if you want to hang out. It's no problem."

"Nah, I really just want to get home tonight." I felt rude and guilty for saying it, as if I knew in my heart that I owed him some bonding time. The truth was, though, that I didn't feel comfortable there. Every detail in every square of sidewalk spoke to me about Jake's death – the wonderful highs that preceded it, the utter suddenness of its occurrence and then the sting that followed. I wanted to collect my treasure and get home to my own, safe, bed.

I gather he was a little disappointed, but he quietly accepted my wishes and let my Dad and me get into the car without pressing any further.

As I drew my seat belt around me, he leaned his head towards the open door. "Hey, I'll be back in Mississauga in a month. We'll get together then."

"You bet! I've got your number." Dad turned the key and the car came alive. I motioned with my thumb to the pile of drums in the back seat. "Thanks for keeping these things safe. I'll talk to you soon, Topher."

We drove away, down the narrow one-way street, waving goodbye to him as we turned the corner. I felt bad for not being able to give him more time, but at that particular moment, I needed to take care of myself, and that meant getting me, my Dad, and my drums back home safe and sound as quickly as possible.

As Dad drove on, I was free to relax a little, knowing that my drums were now back in my possession. The gentle rhythm of the car moving along the highway rocked me into near sleep. I remembered way back to how drumming had become so important to me, and felt a smile spread across my face as I remembered the unexpected journey that led me to it. Mitchell Peach was a prolific little kid when I met him at grade school years ago. We were not particularly close friends, but as it turns out I owe my entire drumming history to him.

We teamed up to work on the grade eight science fair project. He introduced me to his very welcoming family, and walked me through their beautiful home. When we got down into his basement, he pointed out his latest hobby. He was taking drum lessons and his dad recently acquired a kit for him to practice with. They were old. In fact, they were ancient. Even I, with no previous exposure to drums, could tell that this assemblage of wooden hoops and stretched animal skins had seen many, many seasons. In an era when everything is mass produced, these drums almost looked handmade. The very wood of the drums was dried and splitting, painted a faded, tomato red. The yellowed skins were actual skins of goat – some mangy, once-live yet long-dead barnyard animal. Each skin was hardened and stiff, almost brittle, yet still strong enough to withstand being hit by an amateur player.

I appreciated the charm, and the character. I loved the suggested history as it compelled me to imagine how this drum set had come to be in Mitchell's basement. What stories could they tell me? Who had loved them? Who blistered his fingers in moments of musical release? Who crafted them, and from which sacred tree? My imagination slipped away into all the past lives, into the minds of the past owners, past musicians.

To look at them fascinated me, but when Mitchell took a seat behind them, picked up the sticks and began to play a rhythm, I was transfixed. I don't know for how long, but I was compelled to watch and to listen with much consideration, paying close attention to the sound, and to Mitchell's movements and postures and the physical theory behind creating the rhythm. It made me shiver to hear the sound.

I was impressed. Mitchell was kind enough to indulge me for a moment. I sat down to play the same rhythm that he'd just played, and I know that I was able to reproduce the beat in a relative sense. Sitting there, behind those large, round objects that made such an incredible sound under my control, was very exciting. It all made sense to me. I immediately knew that I could play drums. I knew that I was a drummer, and that I was a good drummer. I needed to investigate these instincts by playing more.

There was an instant connection made between me and the instrument. I didn't need to be shown anything else. I knew that the rest was all just differing combinations of the same four or five skins being struck in different patterns to a constant beat. In mere moments, I discovered a very primal current that rippled under my skin. I was empowered.

That same power flowed through me whenever I played throughout the years that followed. It was a kind of natural addiction – being addicted to the joy that playing drums produces. As Dad pulled into our driveway with my drums packed in the trunk, I hoped that my journey with drumming was not yet over. I didn't know what was going to happen, where they were going to take me, but I was hoping they would speak to me again when the time was right.

We unpacked the drums in a heap on the floor of my bedroom. After a late dinner, I went down to set them up properly. I've never had a more awkward moment with them. A whole lot of the magic that they contained seemed hushed. Perhaps in an effort to clean their wounds, I wiped them all down with a damp cloth and stood back to observe them. For a second, I considered playing, but I stopped short. I needed to leave that aspect of getting reacquainted for another day. There was still some healing to do before I could whale on them again.

Contributors

Chelsea Eckert

Chelsea Eckert is a creative writing undergraduate at San Jose State University; in fall 2015, she will be attending UNC Greensboro for her MFA in creative writing. Her work has appeared or will appear in *Stoneboat Literary Journal*, *Dressing Room Poetry Journal*, *Touchstone Magazine*, *Jelly Bucket*, *99 Pine Street Literary Journal*, *The Maynard*, and *Ignatian Literary Magazine*. Stalk her like a hungry catamount at <http://chelseaeckert.me>.

Contributions:

The Best Place for Solitude is an Abandoned Mall -- Issue Number 8, June 2015

Clarissa P. Green

Clarissa P. Green's memoir, fiction, and poetry draw on her years as a family therapist and focus on family relationships, aging, and how memories are transformed by time. A Simon Fraser University Writer's Studio graduate, Clarissa's latest publications appear in *Untying the Apron* and *Animal Companions*, *Animal Doctors*, *Animal People*.

Contributions:

Beyond the Cucumbers -- Issue Number 8, June 2015

Cyndi MacMillan

Cyndi MacMillan is a writer who lives in New Hamburg, Ontario, home of North America's largest working waterwheel. Her stories have appeared in the *Kitchener Citizen* and the *Record*. She attempts to give equal attention to her poetry, short fiction, and novel-in-progress with the support of her husband and young daughter.

Contributions:

Cabinet Card, 1884 -- Issue Number 8, June 2015

Derek Mascarenhas

Derek Mascarenhas is a graduate of the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies Creative Writing Program, a finalist and runner up for the school's Penguin Random House of Canada Student Award for Fiction, and a nominee for the 2015 Marina Nemat Award. He has works published or forthcoming in *The Dalhousie Review*, *Switchback*, and *The Antigone Review*. He is presently working on a linked short story collection, *Coconut Dreams*, and a novel.

Contributions:

Learn to Care -- Issue Number 8, June 2015

Elizabeth Andrews

Elizabeth Andrews is from Caledon, Ontario. She received her BAH in English and Classic Civilizations from the University of Toronto and has since completed certificate programs in both publishing (Ryerson) and creative writing (Humber). Her poem "Salvage Yard" won first prize in *Polar Expression's* annual 2013 contest and she has also been featured in U of T's *Varsity Magazine* in print and online. She's currently working on her first novel.

Contributions:

Gathering -- Issue Number 8, June 2015

Fraser Sunderland

I was born in Glasgow in 1975 and raised in Mississauga. I graduated from Sheridan College's animation program in 1998, which led me to live and work in Salt Lake City, Halifax, Toronto, Sudbury, and Hamilton. I've worked in the video-game and television industries for companies both mammoth and minuscule. My favourite way to play hard will always be behind a drum kit.

Contributions:

The Power of Drums -- Issue Number 8, June 2015

j. tate barlow

j. tate barlow moves to the music, and favours the key of E-flat. Singer, composer, mother, lover of the extraordinary ordinary – *c'est elle*. Born in Toronto, uphill from a great lake. Published recently in *The Rotary Dial*.

Contributions:

slight epics -- Issue Number 8, June 2015

Meaghan Hackinen

Meaghan Hackinen is a Vancouver-born bicycle enthusiast whose two-wheeled adventures have taken her down the Pacific Coast, across Canada, through the Sierra Cascades, and into Baja California. She also plays roller derby, and has a pretty impressive handstand. Meaghan is currently enrolled in the Creative Writing MFA program at the University of Saskatchewan. Her writing explores relationships, experiences on the road, and encounters with wild places.

Contributions:

Shingle Spit Road -- Issue Number 8, June 2015

Scott T. Starbuck

Thomas Rain Crowe wrote about Scott T. Starbuck's latest book, forthcoming from Fomite Press, "*Industrial Oz* may just be the most cogent and sustained collection of quality eco-activist poetry ever written in this culture, this country." Activist Bill McKibben wrote, "*Industrial Oz* is rousing, needling, haunting." Starbuck was a 2014 Friends of William Stafford Scholar at the "Speak Truth to Power" FOR Seabeck Conference, and will be a 2015 writer-in-residence at Playa near Summer Lake, Oregon. He blogs at riverseek.blogspot.com. Website: riverseek.blogspot.com

Contributions:

Houses on Siletz Spitz -- Issue Number 8, June 2015

Shauntay Grant

Shauntay Grant is a Nova Scotian writer and storyteller. She has shared her work internationally at festivals and events, and as Halifax's third Poet Laureate (2009-11) she organized Canada's first national gathering of Canadian Poets Laureate in 2010. An MFA in Creative Writing candidate at the University of British Columbia, Shauntay's work has been critically acclaimed by numerous publications including *The Globe and Mail*, *Quill & Quire*, and *Canadian Review of Materials*. She is a recipient of a Best Atlantic Published Book Prize from the Atlantic Book Awards, and recently one of four Canadian authors selected by the Writers' Trust of Canada for its prestigious 2015-16 Berton House Writers' Retreat Program. Learn more about her work at ShauntayGrant.com.
Website: ShauntayGrant.com

Contributions:

passing -- Issue Number 8, June 2015