THE FIELDSTONE REVIEW

PLASTIC IDENTITIES/ESCAPISMS

ISSUE 13, 2020/21

PT. 1 PLASTIC IDENTITIES

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ISSUE 13, 2020/21

POETRY

Reliance on Reliable Plastics

by Elizabeth Barbaza-Cousineau

Reliable plastics make our world an easier place
 to live in
So convenient, so fast, so fast food, so consum
able.
Melt and mould, stretch and shape,
Smooth, shiny, clear, psychedelic colors, we lov
e it all!

Our plastic world is so reliably spectacular.

Plastic keeps everything fresh beyond expiry da
tes,
Beyond the years, we will ever conceivably com
e to know.

In centuries to come, others will rely on our plas
tic, for it will endure when we do not.

Plastic nation, celebration, integration, plastic st
ation
Buff and shine, snip and trim,
Swipe to win, cards all in, deal them up and let t
he credit begin...
and perhaps end with deep cuts.

 ·

Girl Call

by Dorothy Neagle

I was a girl, meaning
not allowed to touch my own body

when it pleased me. Not allowed
to bleed and show it. I had to hide

the blood and all its cousins.
I had to lie about it. On our farm

I was allowed to be dirty, but I
could not be strong. When I reached

my full height, I was not allowed
to own what I knew of where the

briars broke my skin, how the
green paint inside a blade of grass

got inside the scratches, left me prickling
when I went to bed without a bath.

Fragile is what they called me instead.
But I remember, anyway, how I grew

up in the woods, inside of books, burned
my eyes looking up at the sky

and I touched what I liked, and I bled
when I was ready, and I was rarely

your idea of clean, but whatever you
thought clean was, you were wrong.

 ·

Pondering over Plasticity

by Yuan Changming

There's no doubt, I would paint my skin
Into a colorless color, & I would dye my hair
Wear two blue contacts, & I would even
Go for plastic surgery, but if I really do
I assure you, I will not remove my native village
Accent while speaking this foreign tongue (I be
gan
To imitate like a frog at age nineteen); nor will I
Completely internalize the English syntax &
Aristotelian logic. No, I assure you that I'll not gi
ve up
Watching movies or TV series, reading books
Listening to songs, each in Chinese though I hat
e them
For being too low & vulgar. I was born to eat du
mplings
Doufu, & thus fated to always prefer to speak M
andarin
Though I write in English. I assure you that even
if I am
Newly baptized in the currents of science, dem
ocracy &
Human rights, I will keep in line with my father's
Haplogroup just as my sons do. No matter how
We identify ourselves or are identified by others
, this is
What I assure you: I will never convert my proto
selfhood
Into white Dataism, no, no
In the yellowish muscle of my hea

 ·

Digital Narcosis

by Elder Gideon

"The Greek myth of Narcissus is directly concerned with a fact of human exp
Greek word narcosis or numbness. The youth Narcissus mistook his own refl
himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechani
Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He w
and had become a closed system. Now the point of this myth is the fact that
themselves in any material other than themselves...."

—Marshall McLuhan. The Gadget Lover. (1964)

Echo seated on a warped boardwalk
Bench but it's not the sea she sees or
Peeling nickelodeons boarded up.
Only her phone. Before going home
To squalling tenements decades ago
After sweltering factory work she could
Escape for some hours. Here in a rowdy
Vaudeville or dance hall to release
Her body's desire for space and air
Or return his glance between mixed race
Couples swinging hard. No urban din
Could later quell the swollen urge
To hear her pant his name in the back seat
Over the car radio. Whitewashed
Rock music segregated souls' roots
Into vises between suburban walls.
TV screens televised national vice.
My Lai abroad. Riots at home.
Assassinating our own.
The only cultural authority
Is commercialized leisure
In which teenagers, entertainment
Industries, parents, reformers,
And government officials all jockey
For position and control. We

—Jacobson. (2004)

Are the product now. Identities
Commodified into pixelated
Pools drown Narcissus. He's facedown
Out of Echo's reach some yards away
Alone on his boardwalk bench.
Neither look up from their phones
To see each other. Nor hear
The sea level rising.

 ·

Paper or Plastic?

by Tanasha Martin

A tiny circlet of paper
loosely hung around my wrist,
my companions shriek in shared circumstance,
our cries reverberate off hospital walls.

The Spirit of Detroit tops
a tattered, yellowed certificate,
its foundation soft, stamped, and sealed
in pink and black, “vital record” its background.

We shuffle through school
seen through the lens of papers
that carry the creases, smoke, and mildew
of backpockets, wallets, and forgotten cabinets.

Everyone has them.
And when we are important enough
to sling a burger or drive a Jetta,
we carry its precious permanence in laminate.

When you are important enough,
we check in the boxes and fill in the spaces:
plastic grin, freckled, and fair-skinned,
with little time or energy to question the frame a
lready set.

Paper or plastic?

We flash them at registers and
in the hope of a Bailey’s on ice at a long hard da
y’s end.
They carry the heaviness of mortgages,
the joy of legacies, and the shame of repossessi
ons.

When they are lost or mistaken,
we rush to re-establish that we are important en
ough.
Anxiety crashes like waves to drown
who we are in the what we are.

We struggle through our lives
seen through the lens of plastics
that trade us like promissory notes where chang
e
is not counted, so we place them in dark, safe s
paces.

The Spirit of Detroit tops
A fresh, warm-from-the printer certificate,
its foundation stiff, stamped, and sealed
in official consistency, on “vital record” backgro
und.

A tiny circlet and paper
loosely hung from my toe,
my companions silent in shared circumstance,
exist in echoes of hospital drawers.

 ·

Blood Loss

by Carter Vance

I felt it flowing through windows,
between walls, in salt air and sea spring
whispers we could take to brick
with us when fading starts,
trips the box breaker.

It struck me still as the
silver cups, upturned and making
noise replied tenfold down
dreaming streets.

I was the kind to go weary
in heat, dizzy-blank from
fear of fortune,

But in this time I am not
so rushed, three-sails and
wounded, yet again.

 ·

Plastic Passions

by I.B. (Bunny) Iskov

Can there ever be a forever love?
Only pliable plastic delivers decades of delight.
Love must be molded like celluloid
to make it steel-strong.

Is love immune to the acid test of time?
Toxic talk eats away at its fibre,
with no guaranty of reliability,
no extended warranty against breakdown
or failure to perform.

Can feelings be shared with that significant oth
er?
In some relationships you may say how you feel
because no one will listen to you anyway.
It is safe in a love affair perpetuated by poetry.
The poem invents a love that lasts forever.

Is love adequately expressed in words?
There are thousands of ways to write about an a
ffair.
Romantic odes expose plastic passions.
Hidden under bleached boxes of old Valentines,
love poems serenade cadavers of long-gone lov
ers.

Does a pre-fab home preserve a love?
Large blue bins contain spent plastic longings,
recycled and sold at second-time-around price
s.
Re-used love goes cheap worldwide.

While I hunger for the well-preserved saran-wra
pped love,
my laminated heart lets me easily wipe clean
messy aftermaths of spoiled love affairs,
one of the advantages of plasticality.

 ·

Lonely Journey

by Rafael Chidiac

I stand, waiting
To start my lonely journey
I don't want
To go

A deep breath,
The first step.
Heavy back
With no load.

I passed a crossroads,
A while back
Which is where
It would have begun

Had I not taken
The road less travelled
The road less wanted
The road less done.

In the distance
Lights are twinkling,
On a road divergent
From my own

At the end of mine
Is unearned pity
The fearful blindness
Of things unknown.

 ·

Bitten

by M. Brett Gaffney

Bitten

My pack's mouths full of teeth and talking.
They ask me to learn their body language,
how the hair stands up on their spines
like a slope of pine trees,

why their lips curl back like a scared kid
fingering his brother's pocket knife.

In East Texas, two dogs attack a small girl,
their bodies like angry bricks.
Doctors say half her face is paralyzed.

The next day I kneel down beside
one of the outsiders, a wiry mutt
shaking in the corner of the room,
the hole in his side like a crawfish nest.

He won't look at me while I clean him.
I want to believe he remembers
my blood in his mouth, my scars
and bright spots like stars constellating
my skin. But maybe he doesn't.

Maybe it's just that some dogs bite
and some dogs don't and some that don't
do when the right moment comes along,
when the tension is hot and foggy,
and our bodies are just flesh in the way.

Sometimes I dream about just letting them fight
.

I stand back and watch the storm unfold,
the meanest of them sitting beside me,
and the little girl's there too with her hand
on the beast's head, his tail wagging
to the beat— *we are all of us hunger.*

 ·

Credit Card Gal

by Carol J. Forrester

Scuffed up, she is difficult to read.

Face turned toward the bulb,

legible lighting is a dying flame,

no denying the shine's rubbed off.

Makes things difficult for herself.

Can't take it like she used to,

her brittled smile doesn't scan,

the swipe of his thumb showing

stretch marks threatening fractures.

All that raised beauty

worn down to the grain.

Even his name is fading slowly,

letter by letter

to a shadow of a scratch.

And she's waiting for the postman,

the white flash of an envelope

not marking her surrender

but defeat.

 ·

Sit Back, Relax

by Jessie Brown

I love the popcorn, scrape of hands
in greased cartons... *Fucking genius*. The kind
of thing
I can't say—another problem

my brothers don't have, like high heels, fear
of interrupting, or five kinds of lotion
(face, hand, foot, body, cuticle)... *This is so*

not a chick flick. Like the inability
to tune out someone else's baby cranking
three rows back. It's tempting to change seats.

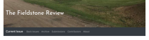
Just move up front. But not behind
a tall guy. They don't dread craned necks,
nightsweats, salesmen who flirt... *No way*.

Just trade in the patience, the need
to smile—the need? *Forget it*.
Yes, it's easy to stand up—

sink into an aisle seat, legs apart,
take up all the air. You think
I should apologize, you can think again.

 ·

FICTION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Prelude and Fugue

by Diane Callahan

Jane

Jane had a secret: she knew the real reason Mom was leaving.

Her parents' words floated up and up, hovering over the stairs like a ghost. They had no idea that their well-behaved, barefoot princess had turned into a spy, crouched on the steps.

"Is there someone else?" Dad asked.

"I wouldn't do that to you." Lies, lies, lies. That was Mom. "I know you've felt it, too. That we're… That it's not working."

"Guess I have. If we're talking like this all the time, that probably means something. But there goes twenty-one years, huh?" It sounded like invisible boa constrictors were twisting around her father's throat, choking his words into tears.

"I know," said Mom, oh-so-gently.

Jane wanted them to hurl insults, to scream about neglected dishes and vanishing paychecks. Instead, they cried. All while holding each other. No one to comfort them about the heartbreak except the one who had caused it.

"What about Jane?" her father asked into her mother's hair.

Yes, what about Jane? She was just a girl with songs in her head who had turned twelve and a half this very day. Half birthdays were important because they were turning points—who would her thirteen-year-old self become? For now, she was Plain Jane, reincarnation of Austen, Superman's daughter. *Me Tarzan, you Jane.* That was the cute boy in her church choir, teasing her. The secretary at her dentist's office was also Jane. All these other people lived in her name. Jane, a name too old for her gangly limbs and swelling pimples. The type of ordinary name that spoke of being an only child with divorced parents.

"We'll figure it out," was all Mom said.

When the kitchen floorboards creaked, Jane backpedaled up the stairs, rewinding in time. She settled into the swivel chair at her desk, popping in earbuds and opening her newest songbook. Her father would be up soon. *Sweetie, let's have a talk. Sweetie, I need to tell you something.* Dad was always the messenger, flying upstairs on his winged shoes, carrying the burden of dead hamsters and fake tooth fairies. Mom stayed far away.

"Hey, pumpkin," Dad said, voice soft as marshmallows. Sugary, too.

Jane realized with a start that her earbuds weren't connected to anything. She yanked them out, tossed them aside.

"What's going on?" she asked, blinking at him with wide-eyed innocence. "I heard some shouting downstairs."

He scrunched up his eyebrows. "Shouting?"

"Not shouting. I mean, just…*noise*."

Her father nodded sagely, like he knew exactly what she meant. Maybe he did.

He leaned against the edge of her desk and picked up her songbook, letting it flap open like a crudely drawn bird, a loose V-shape in the sky.

Dad pretended to thumb through the pages. "Your mother and I need some time apart, so she's going to stay at her friend Becca's for a while."

Becca wasn't really a friend—not *just* a friend, anyway. Jane's window overlooked the front yard, and she had seen the two of them outside. It had been snowing, the ground already shrouded in white. Mom had shut the car door with a wave and trudged toward the porch. Her blonde friend ran from the curb, leaving deep footprints in the snow, and they collided into a hug, an embrace that lasted ten eternal seconds. Then their faces melded together, and it was all horribly romantic.

Dad didn't know, and Jane wouldn't tell. Or would she? Should she?

"How long will Mom be away?" she asked.

"Not long."

"What happened?"

Dad sighed again. She didn't look at him, didn't want to see the tears there. Salt water, that's all it was. "It's just something that happens when you've been together for a long time," he said. "You grow apart, want different things from life."

But Jane had seen stories of old couples. Together for 64 years. Died while holding hands. Not till death did they part. Maybe love wasn't real, and people stayed together out of routine and stubbornness. It was easier to keep it together than to make things messy by letting it all fall apart. But if that were true, then Mom and Dad would have kept it together, too.

Dad noticed her silence. "It has nothing to do with you, sweetie. Nothing at all. I want you to know that."

Nothing at all. Yes, that was how she felt. Like she was nothing at all.

"I know," Jane said.

"So, it'll be just you and me here at the house, for a little while. We'll have the whole run of the place. You can even sing at ungodly hours. I don't mind." Jane heard the smile in his voice, though her eyes continued to trace the swirls of wood grain along her desk. Every swirl outward said, *Tell him,* and every swirl in said, *Don't you dare.* Like picking petals off a flower: yes, no, yes, no.

Jane looked up at him and met his puppy-dog eyes. What had those eyes done or not done to deserve losing her mother's love? She couldn't imagine going for years and years with the secret crawling beneath her skin.

"There's something you should know," Jane said.

Her dad tilted his head and waited patiently for elaboration. An obedient dog, sitting on his haunches, waiting for a treat.

"I don't want to do choir anymore." She winced at how easily she'd chickened out.

"Oh." He cleared his throat and looked down at the songbook in his hands. "Well, you don't have to go to church, if you don't want to. I'm not opposed to that. But the singing… You have such a beautiful voice." At that last word, his own voice broke.

"It's boring. All the songs sound the same," Jane said. At her father's crestfallen look, she quickly added, "But I dunno. Maybe I'll stick it out for a bit longer."

Dad nodded. "Sometimes you need to wait and see how things turn out." His voice was steadier now. Thank God.

Jane shrugged. "There's one song I've been trying to learn, but it's kinda hard, and Pastor Mike wouldn't let me perform it, anyway."

"Let me guess—this one?" Her dad flipped to the page she'd flagged with a pink post-it note: "Think of Me."

The corner of her lips twitched into a shy smile.

"Seems like a tough song. *Phantom of the Opera* isn't exactly beginner stuff," he said.

"Yeah, that's what I like about it." An idea came to her. "Do you want to hear it?"

"I'd love that." And from the way his eyes softened, she knew he meant it. "I could give the accompaniment a whirl, too," he said, nodding toward the keyboard tucked away in the corner of her bedroom. Her heart felt full.

How could anyone hurt him? How could she even consider hurting him more with the truth? It might've been the harder choice, but in the end—

"She loves someone else, Dad. I saw them together. Mom and Becca." The secret spilled from her lips like a song, and Jane marveled at how a string of sounds could contain so much pain.

"Oh." He rubbed a hand down his face, the gold band still glinting on his ring finger. "For how long, do you think?"

"It doesn't really matter. Does it?"

"That's a long time for something not to matter…" he muttered to himself. His brow furrowed and he blinked quickly, as if flicking through memories in his head. He made no move to run back downstairs, to confront her mom. For the first time, Jane saw her dad cracked open—a man uncertain of the future.

In the weeks that followed, the spilled secret would spawn long downstairs arguments and a messy divorce. Messy because her father would cry how betrayal was betrayal, even if it was with a woman and not another man, and her mother would insist that she had never meant to fall in love. Messy because her parents would have tense conversations over possessions they'd collected across their lives, though they'd ultimately decide to throw things away rather than hurt with the memory of togetherness. The mantra became "Get rid of it, get rid of it, get rid of it." Some things they agreed belonged to Jane, like the Baldwin piano downstairs, or her favorite leather reading chair, which sagged in the middle. Others—couches and books and paintings, pots and pans—were discarded along with the life they had once represented.

But for now, Jane put her hand on her father's and sang.

Jay

Jay let a sea of high schoolers carry her down the hall, her unnaturally colored hair—the shade of red velvet cake—bobbing along the waves. Streamers of pink hearts littered the floor and limped across the walls. Valentine's Day was nearly spent, the trash cans filled with wilted roses and cartoon-themed kiddie Valentines that came with heart-shaped cherry suckers—an ironic symbol of maturity, like the seniors wearing onesie pajamas on fourth Fridays. Hilarious.

She dodged a couple of guys who were blocking the lockers, teasing poor, shy Sharon Wood: *"How do you brush your teeth? Can you show us?"* God, high schoolers were so immature. The dudes in question, Ryan and Travis, nodded at Jay as she passed, in that cocky *Sup, homie* way. In response, she raised her Eyebrow of Disapproval, and they removed their asses from Sharon's locker, laughing down the hall with their hands in their pockets.

"Jaaay!" shouted Ryan, the shorter of the two, as he chased after her. "I heard you got a lot of roses sent your way today."

"Three isn't that many. They're probably all from you dorks, anyway," Jay said dryly. She had learned how to cultivate her badass image after years of telling people exactly what was on her mind. Girls brought her along on shopping trips for honest opinions on their outfits, and boys, well, they wanted no-bullshit reports on what all the girls said about them on those shopping trips.

"So you have your heart set on someone else?" Ryan leaned in, unsubtly inhaling the faint spice of her perfume. But she wasn't wearing it for him.

"None of your business." She sauntered off and clutched her black bomber jacket around herself, smiling at the thought of the lacy scarlet lingerie beneath. *Only* lingerie.

Her "someone else" would've gotten the card she'd sent by now, anonymously. In fact, she knew he had, because he'd been grinning the entire day. More importantly, he'd grinned *at her*. She'd contemplated sending a mixtape or whatever, with songs by The Police, but had nixed the idea as being too on the nose. The art of flirting involved subterfuge and subtext.

When she arrived in the choir room after the two-fifteen bell, Mr. Evans sat alone at his desk, his ebony skin looking extra soft in the sunlight from the far windows that faced the back of the school. Would that thought be considered racial fetishism? She'd learned about that in English class, when they were reading *Othello* and the conversation went wildly off topic, and one of the girls said that liking someone for their skin color was just as bad as hating them for it. But Mr. Evans' charm transcended the physical world, beyond race and gender and age.

Jay made sure to close the choir room door behind her.

Mr. Evans was 31, and 31 minus 18 was only—carry the one—13 years apart. Well, she was almost 18. On the cusp of legal adulthood, which meant nothing, except that she'd probably have to stop smoking pot with her friends, in case she got caught. She didn't really like how loopy it made her feel, anyway.

He looked up from his desk and smiled with a dazzle that would make an orthodontist faint. "Ah, Jane!"

Jay fiddled with the collar of her jacket, her heart pounding so hard she worried Mr. Evans could see it through the fabric. Maybe she wanted him to see. She tugged the zipper down an inch, exposing more of her collarbone.

"Are you staying late, Mr. Evans?" she murmured, imagining making out with him, screwing him on top of the piano. No, fearless Jay would say "fucking." FUUUUUCK.

"I can stay for a while, sure." He set down his pen. "Feel free to call me Corbin, Jane."

"And you can call me Jay, Mr. Evans."

"Right, right. I just remember from your middle school days."

Jay frowned. He had been her substitute music teacher in seventh grade when Ms. Brambles had appendicitis. She didn't like to think of her younger self sulking at the back of class every time another girl sang the solo that should've belonged to her.

Mr. Evans raised an eyebrow. "Is there something in particular you want…to discuss?"

They'd been flirting on the down-low like this for months now. Every class, he made a sly comment about her tradition of standing barefoot on the risers, saying, "Well, we can get started now that our *naturist* has settled in." Their special inside joke.

"You don't mind if I bother you?" Jay asked coyly, chewing her lip in a way she hoped looked sexy and not like an attempt to eat her own face.

He gazed into her eyes, giving Jay his full attention. "I have a little time."

"I thought we could, um…" She fumbled to find her confidence again and frantically looked away from him. Her heart leapt as she spotted what was on his desk—the Valentine's card she had made him, with scarlet paper the same shade as her hair and a geometric heart in a dozen colors. "You got a card," she said, analyzing his expression for acknowledgement.

Mr. Evans rubbed the back of his neck. "Seems like I have a secret admirer."

"But you've probably got an idea who it could be from…"

"I have someone in mind." His eyes flickered toward the door, then up to her, and they seemed to say, *I can't make the first move.*

Jay couldn't stop herself from beaming. She pulled down the zipper of the jacket, sucking in her stomach as she pushed out her chest.

Mr. Evans bolted up from his chair and put a hand in front of him, censoring the view. "Jay?! You're not…?"

"I'm not what?" Her stomach dropped to the floor, the windows of the choir room making her feel suddenly exposed. For one petrifying second, she imagined Dad standing outside, crying.

"Are you trying to get me *fired*?" Mr. Evans nearly yelled.

"No!" Jay folded her jacket tightly around herself, arms across her chest. "I…I really like you, Mr. Evans."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Oh God, I didn't—"

The door to the choir room opened, and a woman popped her head in. It was the little blonde history teacher, the one Jay could never remember the name of. She had a babyish face and wore a floral skirt that looked like it had been stolen from her grandmother's closet.

"Corbin? You ready to go?" the woman asked, then spotted Jay. "My apologies. I didn't think you'd have any student conferences today."

"We'll be done here in a minute," Mr. Evans said, not even glancing at Jay.

The history teacher gave a wave before shutting the door behind her.

"Jay, you're a talented singer and very, uh, bright—"

"You don't have to say anything," she said hurriedly. "Let's just…forget this ever happened. Don't be weird about it."

Mr. Evans swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing, and nodded. Turning on her heel, Jay zipped up her jacket, not looking back. Her mouth tasted like she'd just thrown up, but she willed the tears in her eyes to evaporate. In her pocket, her phone buzzed with some notification. She whipped it out and unlocked it, scrolling through her contact list. Her thumb hovered over one name: Mom. It would be late morning where her mother lived, time for Valentine's Day brunch—with Becca. She imagined them giggling over muffins and mimosas, making happiness look easy.

Confessing her love to Mr. Evans was supposed to have been easy. In her head, he ripped off her jacket and ravished her neck with kisses. In her head, they shared clandestine picnics on the choir room floor and sang "Time to Say Goodbye" when they tried to break up but then couldn't stay away from each other, all until Jay threw her stupid graduation cap in the air and they could finally hold hands in public, and he'd give her that you're-better-than-the-rest-Jay smile that had melted her insides from day one.

Instead, he'd labeled her as jailbait, turned her into a complete cliché. All the times he'd teased her about walking around barefoot or met her gaze and announced, "Perfect!" when her section hit the right note—those happy memories were tainted now. She wanted to melt into the floor out of shame. If only she could sing her heart to him, make him understand the passion and potential that fizzed between them. Maybe he would've taken her seriously if he'd known music wasn't a hobby for her but a calling and sharing that ultimate connection with someone else felt like a metaphysical experience. Love, with an intensity few people ever felt.

As she made her way down the barren hallway, she kicked at the foiled hearts that mocked her from the ground. She was eye-of-the-storm Jay. She didn't need belittlement from adults who thought she was young, when she was so goddamn old.

Evelyn

Evelyn strode toward the art museum exit, the applause dwindling behind her as she chased her boyfriend into the parking lot. She swung open the glass front door, which had a flyer plastered on front: "An Evening with Musical Duo Evelyn and Sage." The picture showed the two of them performing at their senior recital, with her mouth open in song and Sage accompanying her on piano with his long, frenetic fingers—the same fingers that caressed her shoulders and tickled her bare feet when she rested them on their apartment coffee table. Switching to her middle name had been Sage's idea, and he'd even gone from calling her "Jay" to "Evelyn" on a daily basis. Evelyn and Sage. It sounded like a clothing boutique or a wedding catering company—classy, sophisticated, privileged.

She had welcomed the new identity, shedding her old one like snake skin . Evelyn was a fresh-out-of-college professional who had chosen to pursue what her daddy deemed her best at. The name reminded her of a certain choir teacher, although it had soon become her own. All the high school overconfidence of "Jay" left her cringing; however, Evelyn possessed enough self-awareness to know she'd look back on these early days of her career and feel an equal tidal wave of embarrassment. Especially after what she'd just endured.

"What the hell happened back there?" she asked, once she'd caught up to Sage.

"It was one wrong note." His gaze targeted his red hatchback in the distance.

"I thought you said you'd practiced that part more on your own, since you knew—"

"I'm not perfect, all right?" he snapped, unlocking the car. "You should know to keep going, even when I mess up. That's Performance 101. And I told you that aria was too ambitious."

She chewed the inside of her cheek to prevent herself from blaming him again. Their practice sessions for "Il dolce suono" had involved Sage insisting she'd sped up halfway through the song and her insisting that he had slowed down. More than once, their rehearsals ended with Evelyn barricading herself in the bathroom to choke down angry tears. Sage would talk softly to her through the door until she opened it, and he'd kiss her into the bedroom to explore a different type of rhythm, one where they felt aligned in perfect synchronicity. Whenever they fell into that pattern, Evelyn reminded herself that Sage had the talent needed for sought-after graduate scholarships, that he understood the intricate frustrations and ecstasies of music better than any of the non-musicians she'd dated. Surely, three years of shared passion were worth something.

Evelyn clutched her bag of sheet music as Sage opened the driver-side door. "We still need to go talk to my dad," she said. "He'll be wondering where we went, if he's in there."

"You can go talk to him. I'll hang out here." He sat down, his legs facing out the door, and grabbed a pack of menthol cigarettes from the center console. Evelyn stared at him. He was her ride home, and if she went inside on her own, everyone would be asking where her boyfriend was, and she didn't think she could explain without calling him a dick, or bursting into tears, because it had been the worst performance of her life—

"Jane? There you are!"

She turned to see her dad jogging toward them. It seemed impossible that he hadn't seen the angry looks on their faces from afar.

"Sorry, *Evelyn*," her dad said, catching his breath. "I should call you by your proper name."

Evelyn sighed. "It's not my 'proper' name. You don't have to call me that."

His gaze flitted between the two of them. "You two leaving already?"

"Yeah. We are." Sage stood from the driver's seat, and his expression contained a challenge.

Evelyn gaped at him. Who the fuck did he think he was, telling her where to go, who to be? The calmer part of her knew she should be embarrassed about airing their dirty laundry in front of her dad, but she couldn't quell the lava-hot rush of indignation. "I'm staying, Sage. There are people in there—" she jabbed a finger back at the museum "—waiting to talk to us. Mr. Hitchcock came to see us perform. Our classmates. People we know, who are expecting us."

"I don't mind giving you a ride—" her father began.

"You really want to embarrass yourself like that?" Sage asked, completely focused on Evelyn. "Be my guest."

"It's not that big of a deal," she muttered through the lump in her throat. Her dad was shaking his head, and she wished he hadn't come at all, wished he hadn't twirled her around the kitchen when she'd first told him about getting the gig.

Sage clenched his jaw. "Fine. Whatever. I'm not hashing this out in front of—whatever. I'll meet you back at the apartment, and you can bitch about it there."

In one step, her dad stood between them, head cocked. "What did you just call my daughter?"

Seeing her dad, in his baby blue polo and capris, stand like a bouncer against her boyfriend's muscled chest would've been comical—if Sage hadn't been wearing a threatening scowl on his face.

"Seriously? Stop twisting my words around," Sage said, in a low voice. "You're always out to get me, man."

Her dad crossed his arms. "I'm out to make sure my daughter isn't being pushed around by some loser."

"*Loser*? Finally telling me what you really think, huh?" Sage scoffed. The two men were close enough to shove each other. Or land a punch square in the jaw.

"Quit it, both of you." Evelyn surprised herself with her own calm. She put a hand on Sage's arm. "I'm not coming back to the apartment tonight. We'll talk later, okay?"

Sage shrugged off her touch, hurt written across his face. He had expected her to defend him against her dad's "loser" comment, she realized.

"No, not okay," Sage said. "I'm done with this passive-aggressive bullshit."

"I'm just trying to stop you two from punching each other in the parking lot!" Now Evelyn was the one squaring up to Sage, while her dad frowned behind her.

"You think I'm the type of guy to pick fights like that?" Sage rubbed a hand over his mouth.

"No, I know you're not, but—" Evelyn took a deep breath. For a moment, she saw everything with reawakened clarity. So much about Sage thrilled her—his touch, his potential, his moments of utter sweetness—but it wasn't worth this. It wasn't worth the memory of standing in a parking lot, her dad with his hands in his pockets looking deeply uncomfortable, and Sage's accusatory glare, and the twisting sense of failure in her gut.

"You know what, this isn't working," she said at last, and it was like the words had sprung from her subconscious, a truth she hadn't thought to voice. "The whole music duo, living together—I'm done."

Sage blinked hard, confusion written across his face. "Evelyn, babe—"

"I'll get my things tomorrow." She didn't want to look at her father, but she could sense his worry like a stench.

Her now-ex-boyfriend straightened up, a dozen emotions flashing in his eyes. Then his expression smoothed out with a familiar coldness. A chill ran down Evelyn's neck.

"Okay," Sage said slowly. "I'll need copies of all your sheet music, though. I've been wanting to find someone who knows how to perform well, anyway."

The words wounded her in a way no others could. Even if he'd said, "I never loved you" or "You were terrible in bed," she could've picked out the thorns. But this... *Someone who knows how to perform*. It gutted her. Right down to her deepest self, the words twisted. How many times had she asked herself that question: *Am I good enough?* She never liked the answer.

Before Evelyn could muster up a response beyond a sputtered protest, Sage sat back in his car. Slammed the door shut. Started the engine.

Her father took her by the hand and gently pulled her out of the car's way as the red back-up lights glowed. Evelyn risked a look at her father and glimpsed unexpected redness around his eyes. She hated to think he felt sorry for her. She had no tears to shed. No feeling of dread. Only numbness. Maybe even a lightness.

"You know, uh," her father whispered, "sometimes people stay because they're afraid to try for more. It's brave of you not to be afraid."

"I guess so." She wondered what the point of the past three years had been. It felt like she'd only learned to hurt, and she had become the type of girl who could be as easily erased as a bad recording.

One thing she knew for certain: she no longer wanted to be an Evelyn. What was more, music had stopped calling her name, and she had no desire to chase after it.

Red

"Red, you okay?" Her fiancé smiled down at her, his suit jacket folded over one arm, face flushed from dancing.

"Just a little tired." She had plopped down on a bench outside the ballroom next to some bushes, breathing in the cool September air. For the entire lesson, she'd felt like a music-box figurine going through wind-up motions. Unease had settled in her gut—how could she even begin to voice the thoughts in her head?

"We've got to get that waltz down so we can impress everyone at the wedding with our sexiness," Lee joked.

Every mention of the wedding sent a pang through her. She tried to think of what her normal self would've said. "Yeah, everyone should be oohing and aahing, not gasping in horror when I trip over myself and break my ankle."

"Trust me, they'll be too distracted by my horrible rhythm to even notice."

She gave him a lopsided grin. "You do move like a giraffe. A poor, newborn giraffe trying to stand on its legs for the very first time."

He pulled an expression of mock indignation, pressing a hand over his heart. "Hey! I've gotten better this past week. Right?"

"You only caused my toes unending agony twice this lesson, so yes, that's much better." It was easy enough to tease him, even if she couldn't bring herself to be lovey-dovey. She kicked off her stilettos, crossed her foot over her knee, and rubbed her heel. Pink marks lined the perimeter of her ankle where the shoes had bitten into her skin.

He sat down beside her, taking one of her icy feet in his warm hands. "Well, we've got a few months to master the moves. Feels like it snuck up on us, after a decade of planning..."

Even though it had only been four years, it had felt like a decade, with how long their engagement had stretched on, graduate school and moving and funerals all making it impossible to nail down a date. Now, here they were, finally learning to dance for the occasion. That slow burn defined their romance: they had fallen in love gradually, starting as co-workers at the same marketing agency, then becoming friends who gossiped at lunch together every day in the cafeteria, before deciding after one particularly long happy hour that they should kiss and see what happened next.

But the letter nestled in her pocket had made her wonder if she had simply been following a script. Lee, with his forehead kisses and silly jokes, was safety and comfort all rolled up into The One. So why did her heart yearn for someone else?

Daniel's sloppy handwriting and his earnest words remained etched in her mind: *You make me so damn passionate about life. As long as you exist somewhere out there in the world, I'll be happy. I love you and love you and love you.*

"Where do we go from here?" Lee asked, and the question seemed to have sprung from her own whirlwind thoughts.

"Where's 'here'?" She met his eyes, which were soft and slate blue and storm-cloud dark. Could she spend a lifetime without them?

"I mean, after we get married, how do you think the rest of our lives will go?" His tone bordered on philosophical.

"Well..." She struggled to grasp a future that was so hypothetical to her now, but she couldn't bring herself to hurt him with the truth. Not when he held her foot in his hands like he was caring for an injured bird. "We'll get married. Obviously. Maybe we'll have a daughter named Lana."

He squeezed her toes. "Penelope, you mean."

"Okay, so after *Penelope* has grown up to be the most accomplished singer-songwriter of her time, we'll take vacations to exotic places like Orlando. Then we'll both retire from the agency..."

"You really think our daughter will be a singer?" he asked.

"Of course. She'll take after her mom." She tried to smile but couldn't force one to stay on her face. "Although my singing days seem like a lifetime ago."

"Yeah, it's weird to think that you used to do operas and stuff."

She shrugged. "I like that operas aren't afraid to be dramatic. The way the songs express emotion is so genuine and..." She trailed off with a sigh. Part of her felt unfairly frustrated with him, as if his inability to truly understand her past obsessions was another sign of why she couldn't stop thinking about Daniel—the friend she had made at a classical concert Lee hadn't wanted to attend. After the show, she and Daniel had spent hours at the bar with his likeminded friends, talking about music and life. She could still remember how he pinched his fingers together when he wanted to emphasize some crucial observation about why Gerald Finzi was the most underrated composer of all time.

They lived in different states, but after the concert, he had suggested they write to each other. He wanted to exchange real, handwritten letters sent by post because, as he'd stated with great confidence, "That's how it should be done. Let's not lose the old ways," and she had laughed at him while secretly feeling a flutter in her chest. And what to call that nebulous wanting within her? That deep, unfulfilled longing to be understood and to understand herself?

"So, we'll retire to the Balkans. Then what?" Lee asked with a smile. "You've been staring off into space."

The ache in her chest grew almost unbearable. "And then...we live happily ever after, I guess." Her voice didn't sound like her voice anymore, and she couldn't get it to say what she wanted.

You're so important to me, but...we can't be together.

I don't want to marry you.

I've fallen in love with someone else.

"I'm so lucky to have you, Red," Lee whispered. He tucked a strand of scarlet hair behind her ear and kissed her forehead. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too, but—" The words strangled her. In her mind's eye, she was twelve and a half, looking down from a window, watching two women run toward each other in the snow.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?" Lee's brow furrowed as he gripped her shoulder. She pulled herself away from him and set her feet on the dirt. With steady hands, she took the square of paper from her pocket. Somehow, touching the letter calmed her.

"I need you to read this."

Lee's expression shifted to one of nervousness, as if he sensed the letter contained something terrible beyond comprehension. She couldn't watch him read it. Instead, she closed her eyes and listened to the silence around her. No, it wasn't silence. Dying leaves rustled in the wind, not yet ready to fall, and cars whooshed across nearby roads, heading to destinations she'd never know. Beside her, Lee breathed a heavy sigh, one that carried a new burden.

She chanced a look at her fiancé. His slate eyes were on her, full of sudden awareness and hurt, and she could do nothing for it.

"Do you love him back?" Lee asked in a flat voice.

"I..." She nodded. "I do."

Across days of conversation, the pain of their goodbye surpassed losing the parents she had known before the divorce, forgetting the first love she'd daydreamed about before she grew jaded, and abandoning the music she had known in her soul before she'd come to fear it. All her life, she had given into truth, coaxed it from her mouth and let it burn the familiar to ashes.

When she moved into a one-bedroom apartment a week later, she left the furniture wrapped in plastic and the color-coded cardboard boxes scattered about every room. From a box labeled "STUDY," she unearthed a notebook and pen, sat cross-legged on the floor, and wrote a letter to a man who loved music.

Mom

"Mom, this is impossible." Her twelve-year-old daughter slumped at the piano bench beside her, wearing a grimace that screamed, *Please kill me now*.

"Just start at the measure you're struggling with. And remember to sit up straight, honey, or you'll get back problems like your dad." She tapped the girl's spine. Lana, in turn, made a show of straightening up and curving her fingers in a robotic fashion, then proceeded to play the measure of Bach perfectly, taking her hands off the keys with a flourish.

"Ta-da! Can I go now?" Lana asked, slouching again. In addition to her father's horrible posture, she had also inherited his olive skin tone and his precise sense of rhythm, although she seemed intent on wasting her musical talent.

"We've only been practicing for fifteen minutes," she chided. "The clock doesn't lie."

Lana shrugged. "I'm never going to be some musical prodigy, if that's what you're going for."

"I don't expect you to be. I just think that piano is a valuable life skill. Like swimming or...or cooking."

Lana shook her head with a pitying look. "There's no use reasoning with you. Not when you're in teacher mode."

"I know it's frustrating now, but the better you get, the more you'll enjoy it," she insisted, leaning her hand against the bench. "And that comes with practice. It's the same for any instrument, or hobby, really."

"Uh-huh." Lana's attention had been pulled away by something outside the living room window, which overlooked the front yard. One of the shaggy-haired neighbor boys had stopped by a fire hydrant with his golden retriever.

She simultaneously wanted to hug her daughter and push her off the piano bench. Instead of doing either, she said, "Well, let's call it quits for today. You seem too distracted anyway. What's his name?"

Lana swiveled around, her ears reddening. "It's not like that!"

"You've been ogling him for a minute straight. Unless you're trying to tell me you really want a puppy? Oh, did I miss my chance to make a joke about puppy love?" She chuckled and expected to receive a glare in return, but her daughter's expression closed off from all emotion.

"Aren't grandpa and grandma supposed to be here soon?" Lana muttered.

"Yes, they should be here at five, and they'd love to hear you play." She wanted to erase her daughter's guarded look, to say, *You can tell me anything*, in the silent way her dad had when she was young, coming up the stairs on his winged shoes to deliver messages. Part of her almost burst with the desire to tell her daughter what she didn't yet know—that the whole reason Lana's grandparents had put the past behind them was because their granddaughter had entered their lives, and in the decades since the divorce, they had become less halves of a former whole and more their own selves. Even though they weren't together in the romantic sense, they could at least play the part of cookie-baking, gift-wielding grandparents.

Shaking all those thoughts away, she told Lana something else: "You can ask me anything you want, you know."

Lana shot her a skeptical glance. "What would I even ask?"

"Come on. Just ask me about something that's on your mind. I don't care how personal or stupid of a question it is."

"Okay, fine, you weirdo." Lana looked out the window again, as if imagining the boy and his dog that had passed there not long ago. "So you and Dad met at a concert and then you used to give each other love letters, right?"

"Yeah, we did." She didn't mention that, even after they got married, Daniel would ask her to check the mail from time to time. She'd find letters he'd snuck into the mailbox, handwritten in that familiar script and waxing on about his latest thoughts on their lives, from Lana's baby hair to the chapter he'd been writing on underappreciated choral composers.

"So... It's been, like, *decades* since then," Lana continued. "How... I mean, what comes after the first part? You like someone. You tell them how you feel. Then what?"

At her daughter's words, she saw a sudden flash of memory—her slate-eyed love asking, *Where do we go from here?* Though she could interpret the pain more objectively now, like an out-of-body experience, she still didn't like to dwell on that moment.

"You keep finding reasons to love them," she said at last. "Maybe you reinvent the feelings you first had for them, even if it feels different than before."

"*Maybe*? Shouldn't you know by now?"

She laughed. "You don't really grow surer of things as you get older. You just pretend. For your kids."

"Gee, thanks, Mom. And here I thought you were dispensing wisdom, given your age and all."

"Save that smart mouth for your grandma." At that, she shoved her daughter off the bench. Lana flailed her arms and grabbed the edge of the piano, giggling.

The doorbell rang, and Lana shot up. "I'll get it!"

She smirked as her daughter ran for the door, almost standing from the bench herself. But something pulled her down again. Reaching for the wicker basket on the floor, she pulled out her husband's piano arrangement of Puccini's "O mio babbino caro."

When her fingers graced the keys and her bare feet alighted on the cold golden pedals, a song tickled in her throat and expanded into something more than just mere notes strung together; instead, the sound unfolded promise and possibility, until she understood that music had made her. No name could capture who she was when she sang, and the feeling required no reinvention—it forever contained a simple truth. Of wholeness. Of love. Like floating in the ocean, when she'd close her eyes and ride the tide's gentle rhythm, the sun's warmth becoming all that was.

"Mom said they'd be here at five," she heard her daughter say, the sound distant and muffled.

"That's good." A man's voice floated over to her from the doorway. Daniel's voice. "How'd your lesson go?"

Some murmurings. Then—

"Jane?" he called out. And her heart called back.

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Plastic Breath

by Alfonso Salvatore Avalosi

After seven days of intolerable confinement, Izzy decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, Clara.

She had been bedding her crippled body since the morning darkness, inundating her extremities with signals to flex, and, with any hard-earned luck, move. Her weak arms appeared up to the task, she guessed her weight to be just shy of one-hundred pounds. Her legs, however, remained stubborn, anchoring her to the bed. For all the training she had subscribed to these counterparts, none was more rigorous, more vital than her breathing regimen.

Izzy's relationship with oxygen had always been of a toxic nature. A university athlete who had relied upon her immaculate lungs for victory, it had been an unreliable ankle that decided that ten metres from an important finish-line was the time to snap, end her career, sink her into the depths of depression, and enrol her in a new lifelong sport: smoking. Three packs a day, four when she was feeling particularly guest (or bad), for fifty years.

And now the ghosts of cigarettes past were preventing her, in spite of her cooperative arms, from liberating herself, and, more importantly, Clara.

Izzy exhaled a laboured breath, painfully inhaled another. She should have been accustomed to it by now, but the air filtering throughout her sanctuary still tasted as artificial as it sweltered. She felt the rather stale intake claw through her mouth and nostrils, hoping to reach the pair of black bags that kept her going for no real purpose.

Save for Clara.

The clean dose of oxygen reached her ashen lungs, then exited her mouth and nose in another laboured exhalation. Izzy imagined the polluted molecules warning the new wave of respiration about what corruption lay within her.

She looked to her right, locked eyes with the never-blinking Clara, and, with a look that said "Don't you dare move now"—she couldn't risk precious breaths on her roommate's deaf ears—began the arduous journey.

Izzy watched as she willed her right arm across the cantilevered that felt like kilometres of bed. The feeble limb made pitiful progress before stopping entirely, as she may regain what energy she could.

A surge of anger propelled her arm against the plastic sheet dividing her and Clara. Izzy's hand slid down the thick material until it landed in the crevice between the sheet and edge of the bed. Using this as a pivot point, she began to lift her torso upward with her right arm, while pushing against the mattress with her left. The juicy idea of giving up had crossed her mind, just as it had when her former severely ill self, besieged by physical and psychological cramps, had desired to raise her run-to a crawl at the three-thousand-metre-mark. Her conditioned lungs had burned then. Now they were volcanic.

But the agony and certain death would be worth it. Not only for herself, but Clara, who had never felt a pang in her endless life.

Izzy now found herself at a ninety-degree angle: the top half of her body sprawled literally across the bed, the bottom half remained affixed to where it had been since she endeared upon this suicide mission. With a gulp, she gathered her courage and, with her barely-working arm, she cared her right hand to push against the plastic sheet. The damn thing was like a wall of concrete. Her reluctant body threatened to pull the plug on the whole operation, but a little bit of that wholesome anger, and a lot of thinking about what would happen to Clara if she failed, helped free the bottom of the plastic sheet from between the mattresses. Izzy exhaled so deeply, the fog outside of her only window found its way to her eyes.

One breath.

Her vision slowly...

Two breaths.

...slowly...

Three breaths.

...returned.

She felt her old nemesis oxygen assisting her rushing blood to restore her vision. But she knew better; death had brushed past her.

Above it, she urged herself.

Izzy hadn't intended to escape by falling on her head, but as she dominated herself closer... closer... closer, then over... over... over the edge of the bed, it seemed the only way. Her head free of the plastic sheet, the faint aroma of cooking bombarded her olfactory senses. She couldn't help but sacrifice a valuable breath to take in the recipe she had shared with her daughter long ago. *You're using too much garlic powder*, she thought, the seasoning burning her sinuses. But that was Isabelle: too much or too little of everything.

Her shoulders hanging over the edge of the bed, thinned blood rushing to her head, Izzy wondered—not for the first time—what Isabelle would think when the time came to trudge upstairs, check on her dying mother, and find her however she ended up. *Hopefully, with Clara in my arms*, she thought.

She wondered if her daughter would even care.

The pair of Izzys had lived a life of few kisses and plenty of bites. Izzy had made the cliche attempts to live via her namesake: Isabelle's ankles were still intact, after all. Her daughter had indeed run; not on the track, but away from home, turning the typical one-off act of rebellion into a quarterly sport. When Izzy had been too preoccupied with her career to know life's unwanted biographic details, the casting out of her father; the selfish act of naming her after herself (never mind the tradition), the reason for her isolating unattractiveness, the asthma and other varieties of respiratory ailments courtesy of her chain-smoking. That her only child had decided to punish her by never marrying, never having children, was not lost on Izzy. Still, when Izzy had became too ill to breathe on her own, it was Isabelle who lugged her to the hospital, and it was Isabelle who brought her home, tucked her into bed, and made sure the oxygen-tent kept her alive.

But after seven days of intolerable confinement, seven days of embarrassing baths and changes, seven days of no words exchanged save for begrudged greetings and farewells, Izzy had decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, Clara.

Below and Clara.

She could no longer see her only friend, but knew she was right where she had left her. *I'm coming*, she thought, hoping the suffocating air not here wouldn't render her a fat.

Like in the old days, when slower competitors somehow cruised past her, good old-fashioned anger fuelled her cause, and she writhed her dangling body further over the edge of the bed like a fish out of water. *A fish that wants out of her damn bowl!* she growled herself, and grew angrier at her handicap. The fingertips on her right hand touched something cold, hard. It took her a moment to realize she had touched the floor. Her left hand, still pushing against the furnished-up sandbrother, worked alone to send her over the rest of the way.

In the space of seconds, Izzy saw the ceiling, then her abdomen, then her legs, the latter two crashing down on her. Within the same seconds, she had felt emptiness beneath her, then the same cold, hard floor forcing itself into her neck and spine. Precious breaths were knocked out of her, and the fog returned, this time most certainly accompanied by death.

It took her a few moments to realize that death smelled as awful as like garlic. A few more moments, and Izzy understood she hadn't died... and that her daughter wouldn't have heard a thing if she had. She remained alone. On the floor. Alone. For now.

Alone enough to save Clara.

Slowly, surely, Izzy wriggled away from the bed until her dumb legs hit the floor. Still, her daughter remained unaware of her plight. Still, she lay. But in case obliviousness turned to awareness, Izzy needed to move as quickly as her lame body would allow at this late stage in the race. *Last one-hundred metres*, she implored.

Since sitting herself up was impossible, she needed to figure out how to get Clara to come down to her level. *Could've just grabbed her*, and brought her into the bed, she thought, regretting her decision to stupidly. But she knew it wouldn't have been fair to Clara, to have her lifelong companion go from breathing one brand of plastic air to another. No. She wanted Clara's first breath to be one-hundred-percent, certifiable oxygen... even if it was tinged with garlic.

Izzy flexed the fingers on her left hand, expecting to feel the pain of a hernia that long-ago ankle, that was powerless from crossing this finish-line. Everything felt in working order. Hand shaped like a spider, the fingers crawled along the floor until they found the nightstand's foot. They climbed past the bottom drawer, then the middle, then—

She stopped, having reached as high as she could go. She looked at the progress her hand had made, then looked at the nightstand's foot, which was the tips of her fingers so close to the top. So close to Clara.

No longer able to uphold itself, her arm fell to the floor for her daughter not to hear. Her shallow, disputate breathing became shallower, more disputate. The retinal fog grew thicker. And she was certain the last time she would see Clara was in the memories she had very limited time to relive.

Sneaking into her late mother's bedroom—this very same bedroom—to sneak a peek at Clara, high on her shelf.

Receiving Clara on the eve of her mother's passing—in this very same bedroom—in the condition that she pass Clara on to her daughter, should she have one, when her own end was near.

Asking Isabelle to take Clara off the shelf and sit her on the nightstand, the plan to release Clara had then been confirmed, all the more so by her daughter's routine-sweet and cutting remark: "Ugly thing." Even had Isabelle loved Clara as much as she had, Izzy felt it her duty to finally free her.

Come on, you useless cigarette-holder. Last fifty metres.

Her nicotine-stained spider-hand rediscovered the nightstand's foot, and, once more, began its ascent.

Past the bottom drawer.

Forty-metres.

Past the middle drawer.

Thirty-metres.

Past the bottom of the top drawer.

Twenty-metres.

Finding the top drawer's knob...

Ten metres.

...where it hung...

Come on.

...unwilling to move.

COME ON!

Her hand sprang back, the drawer with it.

Sliding.

Sliding.

Sliding...

Until the heavy piece abruptly stopped, having reached its limit. The nightstand leaned slightly forward, and Izzy glimpsed her legacy on the dead meat filling of a four-wide-nightstand sandwich. But the nightstand had other plans; before it settled back into place, it made sure to shake free the tall, glossy box.

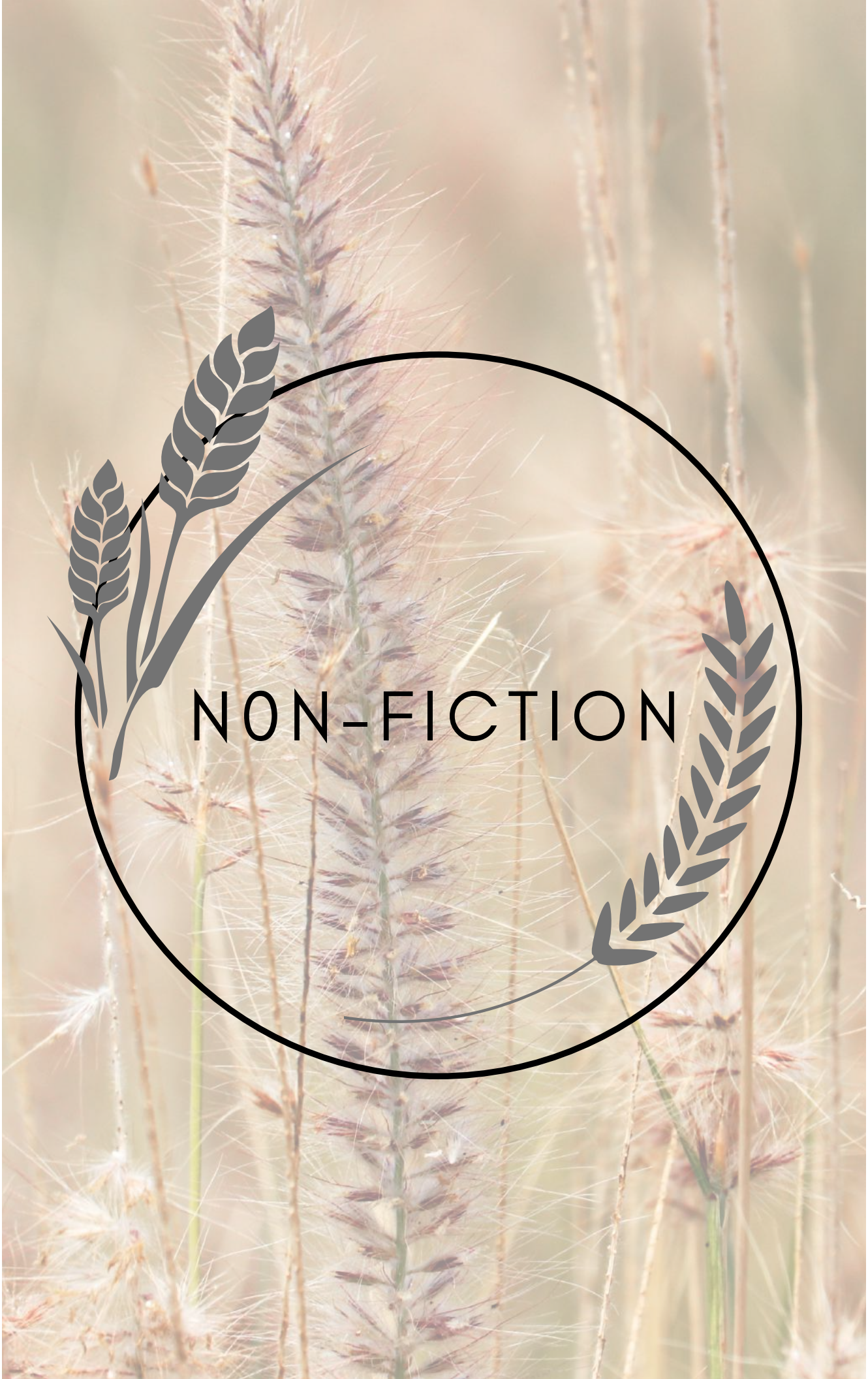
The impact was painful, a sharp corner hitting her right eyebrow in the eye, but nothing compared to the furious her lungs were pulling her through. Instead of fog, there was rain. Izzy blinked the burning tears away, bringing not the nightstand into focus, but a face.

And what a beautiful face it was. Skin made of meringue. A faint smile on pink lips barely formed. Rosy cheeks forever pinched into dimples. Black eyebrows arching over a pair of unblinking, bejewelled eyes. Had they seen Izzy? All five Izzys? From Grandma Izzy to this very rescue-for-an-Izzy?

They stared at each other for some time, Izzy refusing to blink, like her little friend, lest she slip into death during one of those slivers of blackness. The smell of garlic was fading. She couldn't tell if her daughter was altering the recipe in some way, or if her senses were gradually shutting down.

Last ten metres, she thought. Perhaps her final thought.

Izzy used the left hand that made this final reunion possible to locate the pristine cardboard flap above Clara's head. Not with anger, but love, Izzy tore open the lid that had sealed the doll in her prison for three generations, and watched as Clara took in her first-ever breath of fresh air.



NON-FICTION

Skiing in Jeans

by Mikkilynn Olmsted

We sit on her oversized floral couch, dogs gnarled together on the north end, me in the middle, and nonna propped with a pillow on the south end. I pull her legs up to rest across mine. I barely feel their weight. A green oxygen tube drapes over the couch and loops down into a long pile of neon plastic. Tube stretches across the living room, disappears down the hall. Her emergency alert necklace blinks through both her t-shirt and sweatshirt. I lean to lay my chest on her shoulder. Nonna moans from my body's pressure. Bone against bone. I sit upright.

She snuggles the cannula nose piece closer to her septum, simultaneously tugging the tube across her body. Air whistles.

She closes her eyes behind smudged eyeglasses, which provide more peace of mind than vision, her eyes weakened by macular degeneration and age.

We are three days shy of eight weeks from her 89th birthday. She weighs less than her age. Friday nights are our girl nights. On this eighth day of the Winter Olympics, we're watching men's aerial skiing, and when I mention that another skier is starting, she efforts up, smiles. "That looks like fun," nonna says, her face light, grinning. The skier launches himself from the top, all muscles, all movement still and tight, flying until he lands smoothly across blue finish lines. Fists pump; a scream. The announcer yells, "He's done it! He's gone the distance, but is it enough to take the lead? It is! Ladies and gentlemen, he's done it! A dream four years in the making."

"I would be terrified," I say. "They go so fast and all downhill."

"I could do it. I did, you know."

I nod, I know. She means she used to alpine ski.

"For two years with the group from the bank. We were all the same on the slopes—bank officers, tellers, typing pool girls, it didn't matter. I got to intermediate, in only two winters. And then I had to stop because your grandfather decided it was too much. We were married and he hated the snow and he didn't like the idea of me going up with the group. What if I fell, he said, what if I get really hurt? Then what? Besides, I got pregnant the next spring, anyway.

But boy, was I good."

#

I imagine nonna as young Willie.

Willie giggles loudly, straight blonde hair framed around prominent cheekbones, brown eyes sharp behind bottle-cap eyeglasses, lean, petite legs, muscular arms. I imagine her seeming innocent to the servicemen returning from the war. Willie is three quarters through her senior year at West High School and seventeen and three-quarters years old when one January night after closing up the drugstore on 16th and California, she comes home to her stepmother, listening to the radio, swaying in the rocking chair. At near midnight, Willie expects a quiet, sleeping house.

"Your father and I are getting a divorce," she says flatly, continuing to rock. "You've been paying us $50 a month, and since it's just me and my daughter now, with no income and neither of us no way to work, rent's going up to $100 a month. When you get your money on Friday, come home straight. Don't go to the movies with your friends." Willie swallows; there will be nothing left of her paycheck. "That's the way it has to be," her stepmother says as Willie turns into her bedroom.

Two paychecks later, Willie agrees to be the live-in babysitter for her sister, Myra, and her lover, who swears he's going to divorce his wife. For babysitting evenings and weekends, Willie pays $20 a month, sleeps on the couch in the studio apartment, keeps her suitcase of clothes, a pair of heels, and a shoebox of treasures out of reach underneath the couch. The studio apartment is closer to downtown, which means more walking and less paying fare for the trolley. She knows she will finish high school. Myra and her lover ask for the week's rent by Wednesday, and by Saturday, they're asking for another loan—not much, something to buy groceries for their two toddler sons, they tell her. Myra takes to meeting Willie at the drugstore on payday Fridays.

Willie turns down the full-ride scholarship to teacher's college to enter First National Bank's typing pool with other girls from the class of 1947. "Becoming an English teacher was a child's dream," her father says. Reading books is something she could do anytime, anywhere, and she does. She's always in a book. "A girl needs a job until she gets a husband." Willie hasn't much to argue, since her sister and her sister's lover stay out more nights, for longer, and soon she's buying the bread and milk. Every evening, most especially Friday evenings, she stretches out on Myra's couch, cuddling her nephews and library books.

A morning that July, weeks into her professional job, Willie skips down First National Bank's main flight of granite stairs. Down, back up, down, back up. Heels clack clack clack clack, clunk. Skirt whipping lightly above her knees. She challenges another new girl to a race to the bottom of the stairs. Their full laughs echo around the marble and brass entryway.

"Girls," bellows the bank's undersecretary of the vice president, leaning over the balcony on the floor above, "do you know who that is you're keeping from going down the stairs?" The bank president halts, "Now, Henry, it's fine." He adds, smoothing his tie, "You girls look like you're enjoying your jobs." We are, they say, nodding, and Mr. Bank President hops the next two steps himself.

Willie joins the bank's ski team. On Sundays she rides the ski train to Winter Park. In long johns and Levis, she sits on rented skis to ride down the bunny hill. She teaches herself. When it gets so cold only ski bums and the ski patrol remain on the mountain, she keeps at it. She soon stands upright. She learns to tuck. She races the stockbrokers. Willie skies until the very last minute before the last train returns to Denver.

At the end of ski season, Laura, another West High grad typing pool girl, begins inviting Willie to Sunday dinners. Laura's brother, Carl, is wallpaper in a crowded Italian home. He is short, one arm unusable, permanently maimed. He's distant, newly home from a tour in the Pacific. He never speaks. Willie only knows he's there because everyone in Laura's family is there. In April, Laura announces Willie's birthday. Carl sits next to Willie at the oval table. Because it is her birthday and because she is no longer just a guest on this day, Laura's father offers Willie a plate of spaghetti he has prepared for her. "This, this is the way we eat spaghetti." Red pepper flakes top a mountain of spaghetti. Willie chokes on the first spoonful and Carl laughs to tears. "I don't think it's very funny," she says, reaching for water. "Salute," they say.

It is no surprise to Willie when Carl offers the way off Myra's couch. They'd rent a room in a house. They could get a hot plate and a percolator. With her bank salary and his part-time janitor wages, it'd be tight. There wouldn't be any extras, but they could make it. Do better, together.

A month after her nineteenth birthday, Willie meets her father for morning coffee. They sit across a small wooden table in another rented room in a house that serves as a brothel, a speakeasy, and a day-wagers' respite. She comes alone.

"Happy, are you sure? Is this really what you want? To get married, to him?"

"I don't see how it's any of your business," she responds.

"You're over eighteen. You can do what you want. You don't need my blessing. "He picks at sod caked into swollen brown knuckles.

"I'm not asking for it," she says.

They both know she isn't pregnant.

Carl and Willie tell Carl's family together. "You marry him?" his father says to her. "With one arm no good. He no finish high school. He drink too much. He no work much."

Yes.

This is unspeakable desperation.

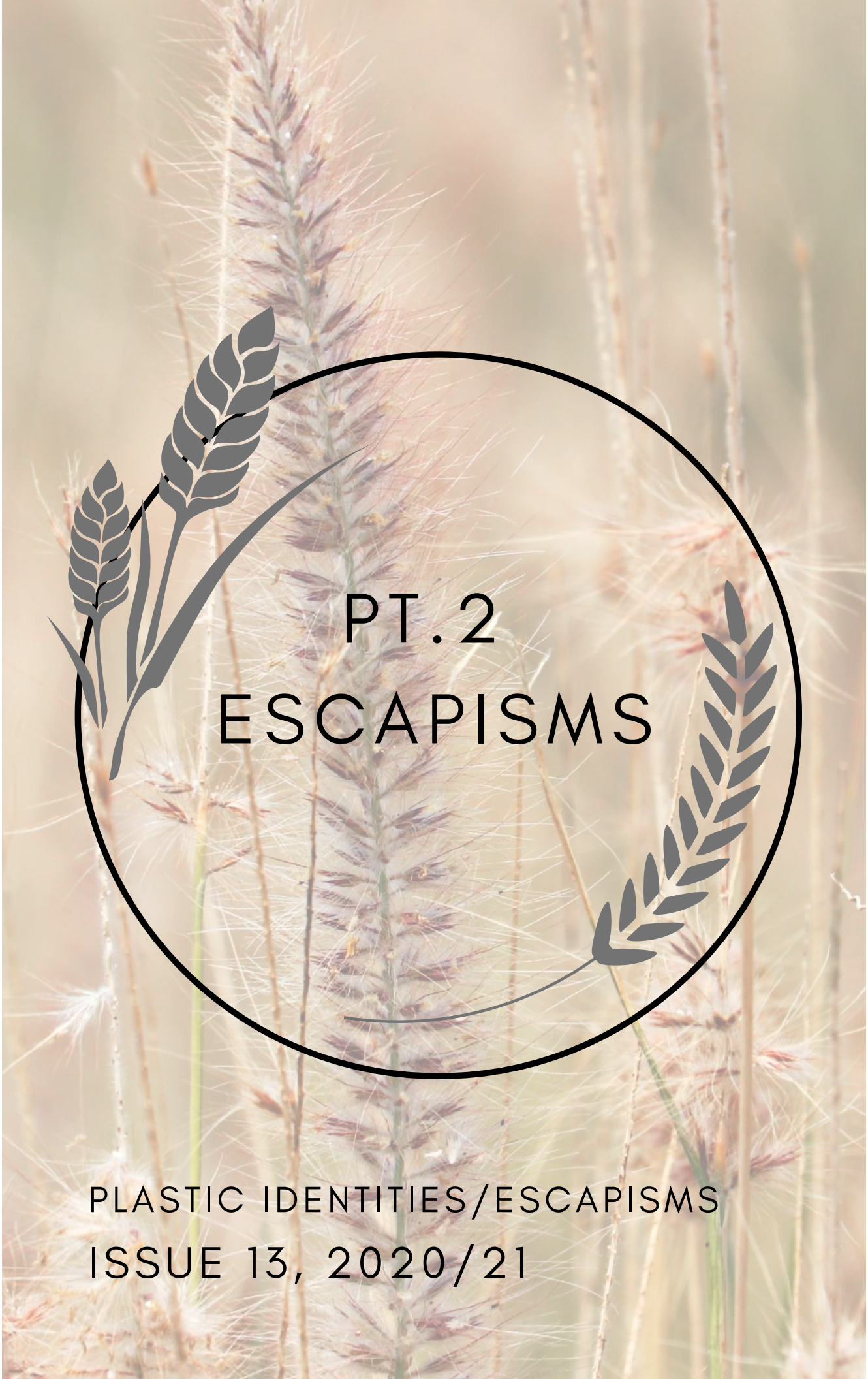
In the afternoon, the Justice of the Peace marries Willie and Carl with Laura and her fiancé their witnesses. Immediately after, all four catch a downtown trolley to the drugstore for celebratory milkshakes.

#

Nonna struggles to push herself up to sit straighter against the couch cushion. Her legs still stretch across my lap. She slowly pumps her swollen feet. We are distracted by the dogs who yip, by another car commercial. Soon, I announce the upcoming skier.

"I could do it. I did, you know," nonna says.

I nod, I know.



PT. 2
ESCAPISMS

PLASTIC IDENTITIES/ESCAPISMS

ISSUE 13, 2020/21

POETRY

Do You Know These 10 Common Warning Signs of Depression?

by Kurt Luchs

Not able to get out of bed
because you are handcuffed to a 1200-pound K
odiak bear
that has four tranquilizer darts in its neck and s
nores.

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 i
n 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 ad
ministrative assistant
in the Lifetime original movie you're watching,
the energetic young woman who wants to sedu
ce 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 frie
nd
threatening you with violence unless you repay t
he 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 occupanc
y
by more than one person is both unlawful and lu
dicrous.

 ·

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 ga
(Jorge Luis Borges from *Borges at Eighty: Con versations*)

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 pinking
trees, the labyrinth is alive with sunset-colored sal
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 abo
ut being able to stand or step or spin
I don't dream about dancing as something physi
cal, not really
I don't dream of it as something that my body c
ould do or cannot do or should or would do. No,
I dream of dancing as a feeling, as a joy as a flo
ating as a you and I
In space somewhere just moving and laughing a
nd being together
And maybe there is music and maybe there is o
nly perfect silence but somehow
I know that this feeling, this being, this thing tha
t 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
next door, he knew to avoid re-used slates from C
he didn't use spirit levels, didn't measure, used an
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 gy
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 h
holding a photo, pert, innocent.

I have borne my husband two sensible, quiet sons
They go to a good school where they will never lea
about tanalised roofing laths, they will never consi
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 rocc
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 hea
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-
Floating patiently among the ragged dandelion,

the sluggish cowled nods of daisies, greasy butter
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.

 ·

FICTION

The Fieldstone Review

Vol. 14 No. 3 · Spring 1994 · Quarterly · 96 pp. · $4.50

I Saw Your Mother Running Naked Through Mayfield Park

By Nora Ellison

The sun was just rising, casting long shadows across the manicured lawns of Mayfield Gardens Estate as I ran through the park, my lungs burning with the cold air of a November morning. I was late, late for my shift at the estate's greenhouse, late for my first day back after a month-long absence, and late for the conversation I had been dreading since I left for college. But none of that mattered anymore. None of it mattered because I had seen something I could never unsee, something that had turned my world upside down in the span of a few minutes.

I was on my way to the greenhouse when I first saw her. My mother, Diane Ellison, head groundskeeper at Mayfield Gardens for twenty-three years, was standing in the middle of the rose garden, her gardening gloves still on her hands and a pair of muddy boots on her feet. She was talking to someone, but I couldn't see who it was from where I was standing. I assumed it was one of the other groundskeepers, maybe Tom Bradley or Carlos Mendoza, the two men who had been her closest friends and allies since I was a kid. I didn't think much of it at first. My mother was a private person, and she had never liked the idea of her personal life being on display for the estate's wealthy owners, the Hawthorne family, who only showed up twice a year anyway. I was about to turn and walk toward the greenhouse when something about the way she was standing stopped me cold. She was gesturing wildly, her arms flailing in ways I had never seen before, her face flushed with a kind of anger I had never seen directed at anyone except herself. I was about to call out to her, to ask if everything was all right, when she turned her head and I saw who she was talking to.

It was a man I had never seen before, a tall, broad-shoulders man in a dark jacket and a pair of expensive-looking boots that didn't belong in a public park at six in the morning. He was standing too close to my mother, his hand raised as if he was pointing at something in the distance, and she was shouting at him with a ferocity that I had never heard from her in my entire life. I couldn't hear the words from where I was standing, but I could see her mouth moving, her jaw clenched, her eyes blazing with a fury that was so different from the quiet, patient woman I had spent my whole life watching from the sidelines. I froze in place, my backpack still slung over one shoulder, my keys still in my pocket, my brain refusing to process what I was seeing because it didn't fit anywhere in the story I had told myself about my mother and our life together.

The man turned his head, and I recognized him. His name was Jonathan Reed, and he was the son of the family who owned the estate, the boy I had grown up watching from the kitchen window of our cottage as he rode his horse across the lawn and threw parties that lasted until dawn while his parents slept in their distant wing of the house. I had never spoken to him more than once, when I was twelve and he was fifteen and he had asked me to bring him a glass of water on a hot day in July and I had spilled half the glass on his boots and he had laughed and told me it was fine and I had spent the rest of the afternoon hiding in the greenhouse because I was too embarrassed to look him in the eyes. He was twenty-two now, I had heard from my mother, a senior at a private university in the city, and he was home for the summer because his father had suffered a heart attack in March and his mother was too overwhelmed to manage the estate on her own. I had heard all of this from my mother over the past few months, in the brief, exhausted phone calls we had made to each other while I was in class and she was working double shifts to keep the lights on in the greenhouse and the roof from leaking in the rain. I had heard all of it and I had never connected it to the man I was now watching from a distance as he grabbed my mother by the arm and she jerked her arm free and stepped back and he said something that made her shoulders sink and her head drop and I felt my own shoulders sink and my own head drop in response to her pain as if I was feeling it myself.

I ran. I didn't think about it, didn't plan it, didn't weigh the consequences or the risks or the fact that I was late for my shift and that Tom would be waiting for me with his arms crossed and his face set in the kind of disapproving frown he wore every time I was late, which was almost every time I was late because I had spent the last three years of my life treating the estate's greenhouse as a place to be when I was not anywhere else, a place to hide from the world and the people in it and the expectations that I was supposed to meet but had never wanted to meet because I was too busy being a disappointment to my mother to be anything else. I ran because I had seen something I was not supposed to see, something that was between my mother and her pain and I had stepped into it without asking permission and I had to get out of it before he saw me and before she saw me and before I had to pretend that I had not seen what I had seen.

I made it to the greenhouse without being seen, but my hands were shaking so badly that I could barely unlock the door with the key I had been carrying since I was fourteen and had never used because the door was always propped open with a brick during the summer months. I sat on the concrete floor between the rows of tomato plants and tried to breathe the way my mother had taught me when I was little and I had woken up from nightmares about the fire that had killed my father and she had sat on the edge of my bed and held my hand and counted my breaths in and out until the panic had passed and I was able to sleep again. I could not count my breaths now. I could only sit there and shake and think about the way my mother had looked at me when I was twelve and she had caught me hiding in the greenhouse instead of helping her with the dishes and she had said, quietly, that I was old enough now to stop running from my responsibilities and that the world was not going to bend itself around my feelings just because I was sad and that she was sorry she had let me spend so much time alone but she was tired and she had enough to worry about without having to chase her daughter across the estate every morning before she could even start her own work and I had felt the shame of that conversation for weeks afterward and I had promised myself that I would never let my mother see me as a burden again and I had broken that promise the moment I had seen her arguing with Jonathan Reed and I had run instead of staying and I was sitting in the dirt of the greenhouse floor with my knees pulled to my chest and my head in my hands and I was crying for the first time in three years and I was not sure I was crying for my mother or for myself or for the version of us that had been easier to believe in when I was twelve and she was the only person I had left and I was not sure I was ready to let that version go but I was not sure I had any choice in the matter anymore.

I stayed in the greenhouse for an hour, maybe two, I lost track of time, and when I finally stood up and brushed the dirt from my knees and checked my phone I had three missed calls from Tom and one text that said simply "Where are you?" I did not answer. I did not know what I was going to say when I walked into the greenhouse and saw him or when I walked into the estate office and saw my mother or when I walked into our cottage that we shared for twenty-three years and saw her sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands and her eyes red and her shoulders still shaking from the argument I had witnessed from a distance like a coward like someone who was not her daughter but a stranger who had no right to be anywhere near her pain. I did not know what I was going to say to her when I finally saw her again, but I knew that I had to say something, that I could not pretend that I had not seen what I had seen and that I could not go back to the version of our relationship that had been built on my mother's silence and my own willingness to accept it because it was easier than asking questions that I was not ready to hear the answers to.

I walked back to the cottage at seven-thirty, an hour and a half late for my shift, and my mother was not there. The kitchen was empty, the coffee pot was cold, and there was a note on the table in her handwriting that said she had gone to the estate office early to talk to the manager about some repairs to the greenhouse roof and that she would be back by noon and that there was leftover stew in the refrigerator if I was hungry. I ate the stew standing at the kitchen sink with the note still in my hand and I read it three times and I could not tell from the handwriting whether she was angry or tired or ashamed or whether she was all three at once and I could not tell from the note whether she had seen me at the greenhouse or whether she was pretending she had not seen me because she was too tired to deal with the consequences of what she had seen and I could not tell from the note whether she was waiting for me to come home and explain myself or whether she was hoping I would stay away long enough for the conversation to be postponed another day or two or three while she decided how much she was willing to give me and how much she was willing to withhold and how much of her own pain she was willing to share with a daughter who had spent the last three years treating her like a problem to be managed rather than a person to be loved.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of waiting. I called Tom and told him I was sick and could not come in and he said he would find someone else to cover the shift and I could make it up next week and I hung up the phone and I felt the guilt of that lie settle in my stomach like a stone and I did not care about the guilt because the guilt was easier than the fear and I did not care about the fear because the fear was easier than the memory of my mother's face when she had been arguing with Jonathan Reed and I did not care about the memory because the memory was too painful to carry and I was not ready to carry it yet and I was not ready to carry it because I was still twenty-three years old and I was still my mother's daughter and I was still the person who had been raised to believe that silence was a form of love and that protecting my mother from my own pain was the highest duty I could perform and that I had failed at that duty the moment I had stepped into her argument with Jonathan Reed and I did not know how to forgive myself for that failure and I did not know how to forgive my mother for being the person who had made me feel that I was a burden in the first place and I did not know how to forgive anyone for anything I was feeling that day except for the fact that I was still breathing and that I was still sitting in the kitchen of the cottage we had shared for twenty-three years and that I had not left yet and that I had not packed my bags and that I had not called a taxi to take me to the bus station and that I had not written a letter to my mother saying that I was sorry for everything I had done and everything I had failed to do and everything I was about to do because I was still a coward and I was still my mother's daughter and I was still the person who had been raised to believe that silence was a form of love and that I was not ready to stop being that person yet.

My mother came home at noon, carrying a bag of groceries and a small potted plant she had bought at the nursery on her way back from the estate office. She saw me sitting at the table with the note in my hand and she did not say anything about the note or about the fact that I was late for my shift or about the fact that I was sitting in the kitchen in the middle of the morning when I had never been home during the day since I had moved back in three months ago. She just put the groceries on the counter and she put the plant on the windowsill and she sat down across from me and she looked at me for a long time without speaking and I looked at her and I waited for her to say something about what I had seen but she did not say something about what I had seen she just sat there and she looked at me and I could see that she was still angry and she was still tired and she was still ashamed of what I had seen and she was still my mother and I was still her daughter and we were still two people who had spent twenty-three years learning how to love each other without ever learning how to talk about the things that mattered most and I did not know how to change that pattern and I did not know if she was willing to try and I did not know if I was willing to try either but I was sitting at the table and she was sitting across from me and we were breathing the same air and we were both alive and we were both in the same room and that was more than I had deserved to hope for when I had run from the greenhouse and I was not ready to say anything about what I had seen but I was ready to stay at the table and I was ready to let her see that I was still here and that I was still her daughter and that I was still willing to try and that was all I could give her that day and it was not enough but it was more than I had given her in three years and it was a beginning and I was twenty-three years old and I was still learning how to be a person and I was still learning how to be her daughter and I was still learning how to love her without running and that was all I could do and that was enough for now.

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-blonde-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.

The Fieldstone Review

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 pull 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.

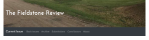
Everything was gone—his clothes, his socks, his notebook, his water, his last paycheck, even his sketches of rail routes. Instinctively, he searched his pockets and frisked his jacket for something familiar, something that belonged to him, something to convince him that this wasn't a dream. Once more,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



The Fieldstone Review

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 fairness 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, rumpled 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.

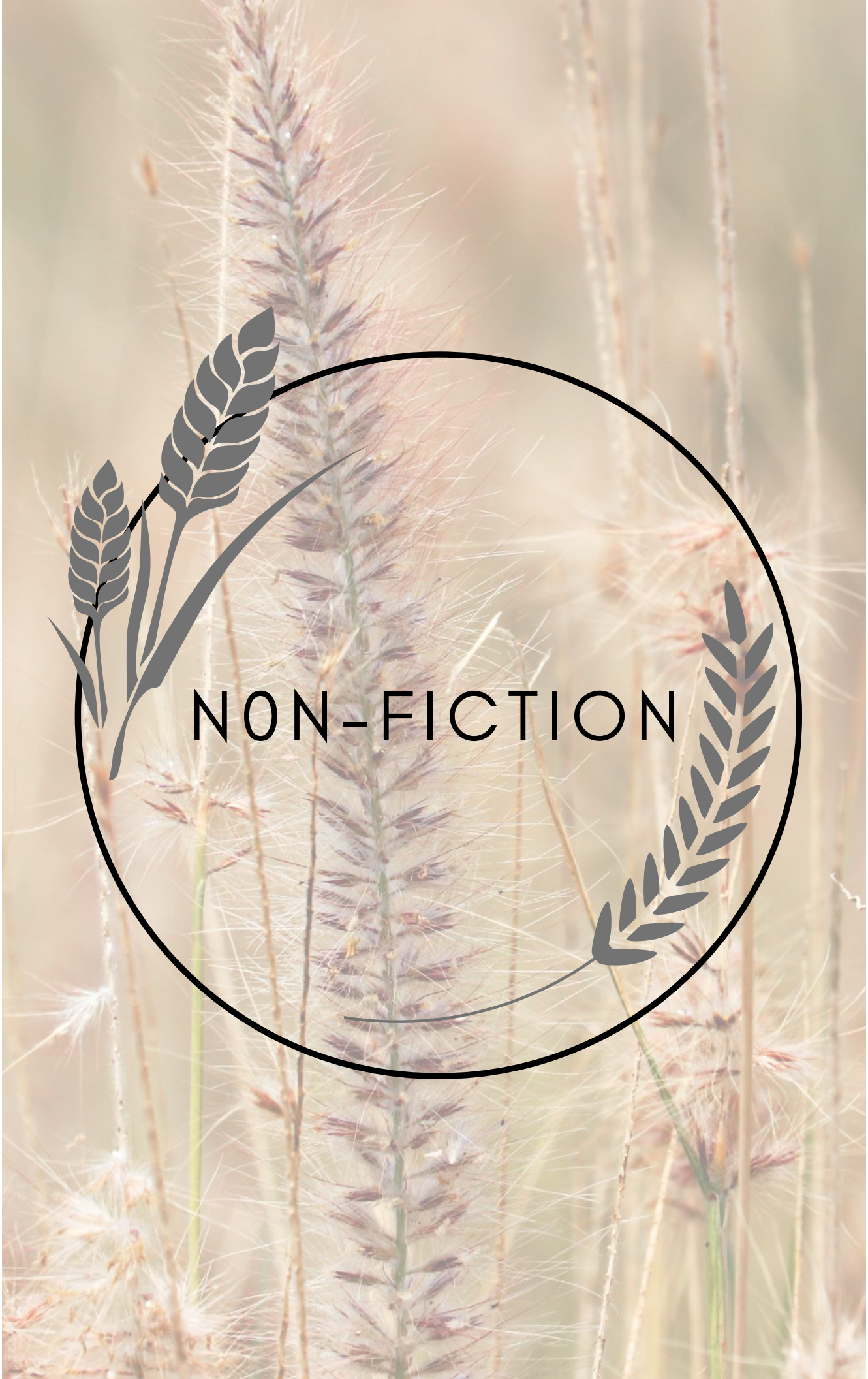
Damien is laughing, her face next to Cody's, and the laugh won't be rendered thin by my old speakers. From unfathomably distant it bubbles up through my organs, close as you please. "Baby," she splutters, scolding. "Goddamn." She wraps a hand in toilet paper, dabs her leaking eyes, and as her arms move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



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*.

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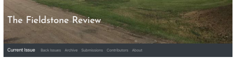


Clearwater Lodge on the Gunflint Trail, a Trip Journal

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.

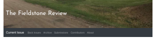
Judy ran straight into the icy cold water and dove head first with no hesitation. Not me. I took a couple steps, let my feet get numb, then a couple more steps until I couldn't feel my calves, etc. In the end I could only manage waist-deep. But it felt good to cool down.

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.



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.

2 is blue, always and immovably. 2 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, 2 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. 2,000 will be a very light variant of 2'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 form 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 *flickflickflickWOOSH* 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 shrubbery 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 2012 // 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 Neruda 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.

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

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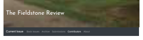
CONTRIBUTORS



The Fieldstone Review

Our Contributors

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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.

Synesthete: Reality as a Scientific Quandary

Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi born in Toronto, Canada, spent a decade penning an eclectic bibliography of award-winning short and feature-length screenplays, before transitioning into the world of prose. His work oftentimes explores the lives of everyday people who find themselves trapped in the complex labyrinth of physical, mental, and emotional illness and isolation, self-doubt and self-reflection, and must find a way—*if any*—to confront themselves and the world around them, in real and surreal settings. Currently, several of his short fiction pieces are enjoying stays in multiple publications.

Plastic Breath

b

Elizabeth Anne Barbaza-Cousineau-I'm an award winning multi-media artist (BFA, AOCA, and Post Grad AOCA), poet, fiction and non-fiction multi-genre writer. I have been writing poetry, short stories and articles for different Canadian publications over the years, am the main writer for the Simcoe County Steampunk Society Annual Zine *What in the World is Steampunk*, and have recently expanded into the international market with my first submission to be published by*Fox Hollow*.

Reliance on Reliable Plastics

Bertrand Bickersteth writes and researches on Alberta's black history. His poetry has appeared in Kola, Freefall, and the anthology, *The Great Black North: Contemporary African Canadian Poetry*. He was born in Sierra Leone, educated in the UK, resident in the US, but raised all over Alberta. He currently teaches Communications at Olds College and is editing an anthology of black literature from Alberta.

Accidental Agriculture

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.

Afterword Doppelgänger

Jessie Brown is the author of two short collections, *What We Don't Know We Know* (Finishing Line Press) and *Lucky* (Anabiosis Press). Her poems and translations have appeared in numerous local and national journals, including venues like *The Comstock Review*, *New Madrid*, *Minerva Rising*, *Full Bleed*, and the *American Poetry Review*. She lives in Massachusetts, where she leads poetry workshops both independently and in schools and communities throughout the Boston area (www.JessieBrown.net).

Sit Back, Relax

Michelle Brown is again writing poetry, essays, and creative nonfiction after a detour into law and treaty negotiations. Her work has been heard on CBC Radio1 and she has performed at The Flame in both Vancouver and Victoria. She was long listed for the 2015 *PRISM international* creative nonfiction competition and received an Honourable Mention in the Canadian Authors Association Victoria 2016 Flash Fiction contest. Her website www.skyblanket.ca features photo essays written while she was in South America and Turkey. She is working on a memoir, *Coming Out Sane*, about living with PTSD. She is Cree from the Métis Nation.

The House on Strathnaver Avenue

c

Diane Callahan strives to capture her sliver of the universe through writing fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. As a developmental editor and ghostplotter, she spends her days shaping stories. Her YouTube channel, Quotidian Writer, provides practical tips for aspiring authors. You can read her work in *Translunar Travelers Lounge*, *Short Édition*, *Riddled with Arrows*, *Rust+Moth*, and *The Sunlight Press*, among others.

Prelude and Fugue

Yuan Changming published monographs on translation before leaving his native country. With a PhD in English from the University of Saskatchewan, Yuan currently edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Qing Yuan in Vancouver. Credits include ten Pushcart nominations & publications in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry* (2008-17) &BestNewPoemsOnline, among nearly 1,600 others across 43 countries.

Pondering over Plasticity

Rafael Chidiac is an American Lebanese who lives in Luxembourg. He enjoys poetry over all other forms of expression and has recently gained the courage to start sending poems to an audience beyond himself. He likes to write about big emotions and small things.

Lonely Journey

Hejsa Christensen completed her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia (2016) and was awarded the *2014 Random House/Hazlitt Award in Creative Writing*. She has written features for *Canoe and Kayak* and *Outpost* magazines.

On Family

Nancy Cook is a U.S. writer and lives 475 kilometers from the Canadian border. She runs the "Witness Project," a series of community writing workshops designed to enable creative work by underrepresented voices. Nancy has just returned from Northern Ireland where she offered arts programs for people affected by the sectarian conflict known as "The Troubles." Her newest work can be found in *Existere*, *The Tangerine*, and *Litbreak*.

Myself and her Majesty's Government

Kym Cunningham received her MFA from San Jose State University with emphases in creative nonfiction and poetry. She acted as the lead Nonfiction Editor of *Reed Magazine*, the oldest literary magazine West of the Mississippi. She received the Ida Fay Sachs Ludwig Memorial Scholarship, the Academy of American Poets Prize, MARY's Editor's Prize, and two Pushcart Prize nominations for outstanding achievement in her writing. Her writing has been published in more than a dozen literary journals and two anthologies. Her first poetry chapbook was published in February of 2018.

In Sheep's Clothing

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Holly Day has taught writing classes at the Loft Literary Center in Minnesota since 2000. Her published books include *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*, *Piano All-in-One for Dummies*, *Walking Twin Cities*, *Insider's Guide to the Twin Cities*, *Nordeast Minneapolis: A History*, and *The Book Of*, while her poetry has recently appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *SLAB*, and *Gargoyle*. Her newest poetry book, *Ugly Girl*, just came out from Shoe Music Press.

The Bird

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

Benediction
Cyclone, almost
after Fiona Apple

Donald Dewey

Past Prime Time

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.

Living in a Bubble

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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.

Roofer

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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*.

Riding the Wild Nor'wester

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*.

I Saw Your Mother Running Naked Through Mayfield Park

Nigel Ford is English, lives in Sweden and works as a writer, dramatist, visual artist, journalist, curator and translator. Recent publications include a short story in *The Fortnightly Magazine* (UK) and poems in Orbis (UK).

It's a Life Like Any Other
Down Mines of Dreams
A Waste of Beauty Chimed

Carol J Forrester published her debut poetry collection, *It's All in the Blood*, in 2019. Her work focuses on the Shropshire countryside where the grew up, mythology, feminism, and history. She's been featured on *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Ink Pantry*, and *Eyes & Words*, though her parents would say her greatest literary achievement was being shortlisted in a poetry competition by The Farmer's Weekly. She now lives in Crewe with her husband, and their pond of koi.

Credit Card Gal

Peter Freeman lives on Salt Spring Island on the west coast of Canada. He writes nonfiction and fictional novels, screen and stage plays, short stories, magazine articles, children stories, and poetry. Peter has been shortlisted for the short story, "In the Waiting Room", and a finalist for a poem, both of which were published in the Best of 2018 Adelaide Literary Award Anthology. Peter's nonfiction book, *Cape Horn Birthday: Record-Breaking Solo Non-Stop Circumnavigation*, is published by Seaworthy Publications Inc. of Florida, and his book of fifty poems, *Growth*, is published by Adelaide Books, New York.

Hidden Message

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M. Brett Gaffney holds an MFA in Poetry from Southern Illinois University. Her chapbook *Feeding the Dead* (Porkbelly Press) was nominated for a 2019 Elgin Award from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association. She works as co-editor of *Gingerbread House Literary Magazine* and writes about scary stuff on her blog at No Outlet Horror Reviews.

Bitten

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

How Our Calls Cross the Ocean

Myrna Garanis is an Edmonton poet/essayist. Her essay "All Tied Up" was recently shortlisted for the Edna Staebler personal essay contest and is published in *The New Quarterly*, Spring 2017.

Hemingway's Beard

Elder Gideon holds an MFA in poetry, keeps a decades-long iconography practice, teaches high school English to underrepresented students, and learns as a disciple of a Gnostic master Tau Malachi, with whom he co-authored *Gnosis of Guadalupe* (EPS Press, 2017). His creative concerns orbit divinity in materiality. This selection (in addition to twelve already published) come from his first manuscript *Aegis of Waves*, for which he's seeking a publisher.

Digital Narcosis

Laura Glawe (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.

Sitting in the Fog

Trudy Grienauer is a writer and translator based in Edmonton, Alberta. Recently, she had a poem published on Edmonton transit buses and another performed by a local choir. She is a regular contributor to readings and anthologies of the Edmonton Stroll of Poets and is currently working on a longer manuscript about the history of her Austrian grandparents.

The Lab Coat

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Atar Hadari's *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of H. N. Bialik* (Syracuse University Press) was a finalist for the American Literary Translators' Association Award, and his debut collection, *Rembrandt's Bible*, was published by Indigo Dreams in 2013. His Pen Translates award winning *Lives of the Dead: Collected Poems of Hanoch Levin* is out from Arc Publications. He translates a verse bible column for *MOSAIC* magazine.

Winnie

gillian harding-russell is a poet, freelance writer, reviewer and editor and has been a mentor and juror. She received an MA in English Literature from McGill and a Ph.D. from the University of Saskatchewan. She has four poetry collections, most recently *IN ANOTHER AIR* (Radiant Press, 2018) which was shortlisted for a Saskatchewan Book Award. In 2015, "PROUD MEN DO NOT LISTEN" was shortlisted for *Exile*'s Gwendolyn MacEwen chapbook award, and in 2016, "MAKING SENSE" was chosen as best suite in the same competition. Poems have recently appeared in *Heartwood* edited by Lesley Strutt (LCP publication, 2018) and will soon appear in *Resistance: an anthology of sexual abuse*, edited by Sue Goyette (Coteau). Poems have recently come out in *The Nashwaak Review*, *The Society*, and *Exile* vol. 42, issue 1, and a couple will appear in *Transition* magazine soon.

Two Skeletons in a Cave in France

Shauna Eveleigh Harris is an emerging writer from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. She graduated from the University of Regina in 2007 and has been working as a trauma therapist in northern Indigenous communities. Her poems have appeared in *Vintage Gypsy* magazine and *The Society*.

Milk Soup

Randel McCraw Helms was, until his retirement, professor of English at Arizona State University. Making poems is his vocation. His work has recently appeared in such venues as *Coe Review*, *Avis*, *Sicklit*, *Pilgrim*, and *TXTOBJX*.

Potion Against Heart-Ache

Pamela Hensley is a Montreal-based writer whose fiction has appeared online and in journals including *The Dalhousie Review*, *EVENT Magazine*, *Litro*, *Montreal Writes* and the *Bristol Short Story Prize Anthology (vol. 11)*. She is currently at work on a novel inspired by the life of photographer Fred Herzog.

Not from Here

Debbie Okun Hill was born/raised on the prairies but now gardens words full-time in rural southwestern Ontario. She is a member of the League of Canadian Poets with over 380 of her poems published in over 135 publications/e-zines including *Descant*, *Existere*, *The Windsor Review*, *Vallum*, and *Other Voices*. *Tarnished Trophies* (Black Moss Press, 2014) is her first trade publication. Follow her blog: *Kites Without Strings*.

Her Resistance
Hidden Series of Lies

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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.

Uncle Jack and Sunfall Sam

I.B. (Bunny) Iskov is the Founder of The Ontario Poetry Society, www.theontariopoetrysociety.ca. In 2009, Bunny was the recipient of the *R.A.V.E. Award* (Recognizing Arts Vaughan Excellence) in recognition of outstanding contribution to the cultural landscape of the City of Vaughan as Art Educator / Mentor in the Literary Arts discipline. In 2017, Bunny received the Absolutely Fabulous Woman Award for women over 40, for her contribution to the literary arts in the Golden Horseshoe. Her poetry has been published in several literary journals and anthologies and she has won a few poetry contest prizes. Most recently, Bunny had one of her poems published in TAMARACKS, Canadian Poetry For The 21st Century, Lummox Press, James Deahl Editor.

Plastic Passions

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Nolan Janssens was born in Santiago, Chile; took his first steps in Antwerp, Belgium, and grew up in British Columbia, Canada. He was born without borders; thinking outside the box is part of his make-up.

Painting on Waves

Sarah Jensen is a writer and PhD candidate living in Toronto. She also teaches a creative writing class at York University, where she and approximately 3000 other union members were on strike. As an exercise she hopes to share with her students when the strike ends, she has been making strike-related art every day of the labour disruption. This is the university's second strike in three years.

a strike, a show of hands

Denver Jermyn lives and writes in Toronto, ON. His poetry has previously appeared in *Vallum*, *ItyWords*, *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.

Faintly Falling

Zak Jones is an American expatriate poet living and writing in Canada. His poems have appeared in *Hart House Review*, *Half a Grapefruit Magazine*, *Milkweed Zine*, and *Palimpsest: Yale's Graduate and Literary Arts Magazine*, among others. Zak is a graduate student at the University of Toronto where his creative work intertwines with his research to explore the particular traumas abound within the Southern United States.

Kiremit Caddesi, Balat, Istanbul: June 2015

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Samidha Kalia is a literature student. Most of her stories deal with time and memory. Her interests lie in analyzing Neil Gaiman's work, writing reviews for publishing houses, re-writing the myth of women in folklore and fairy tales, along with eating good food and being a chai addict.

Conversations in Rhetoric

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.

Atlantic Oceans of Food and Flesh

Zach Klebaner is a filmmaker, poet, and comedian who holds a B.A. in Film from Hofstra University. While he was a student, he co-founded the theater troupe Ambiguity, hosted an open mic frequented by various artists, and wrote for the student-run comedy program *Thursday Nite Live*. His poetry has appeared in *Crossways Literary Magazine*, *Wax Poetry and Art*, and *Verse-Virtual*, and he was the third-prize recipient of the 2019 *Wergle Flomp Humor Poetry Contest*.

American Ways

Miles Knecht was born and raised in New York City. He is a recent graduate of Haverford College, where he studied English literature with a focus on contemporary fantasy. As a life-long lover of the mysterious and unexplained, flowers, and overthinking things, he writes plenty of poetry about all three.

The Devil's Rope

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.

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

l

Naomi Lakritz lives in Calgary and is a former columnist and editorial writer at the *Calgary Herald*. Her work has also been published in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Ottawa Citizen*, and other Canadian papers.

Mildred Mendelson

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.

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.

Clearwater Lodge on the Gunflint Trail, a Trip Journal

Rachel Laverdiere writes and teaches in Saskatoon. She has worked as a language teacher in South Korea, Quebec, and Saskatchewan. Read Rachel's short fiction and creative nonfiction in the most recent issues of *Filling Station*, *FreeFall*, *Dime Show Review*, and *Soliloquies Anthology*. You can follow her on Twitter @r_laverdiere or learn more about her at www.rachellaverdiere.com.

Orange Soda Paradise

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.

Do You Know These 10 Common Warning Signs of Depression

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Kyra MacFarlane is a young poet and fiction writer originally from Spiritwood, Saskatchewan. Two of her poems are to be published in Saskatoon publications - *lions* zine, and the *Tonight It's Poetry* anthology,*Poetry All Over the Floor, vol. 1*. She is currently pursuing an English degree at the University of Saskatchewan. Her interests include music (both playing and listening to it), reading, writing, and cuddling with her dogs. MacFarlane is a feminist, volunteering at the University of Saskatchewan's USSU Women's Centre. You can find her at music venues, feminist rallies, and the library. MacFarlane also operates "Timely Tinnitus," a blog where she posts music reviews.

Anxious Moon

Lesley Machon is a junior high language arts teacher. She devotes herself the lifelong task of question-asking, querying assumptions, and empowering young minds to engage courageously with curiosity. A lover of colourful skies, fusion food, and contradictory adverb/adjective arrangements like "comically serious," and "audaciously afraid," she is known to many as an avid learner and teacher alike.

A Eulogy to Honour the Death of Original Thinking, Laid to Rest by the Educational System

Tanasha Martin was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. Published works include *The Pine Hills Review's: Unicorns Special* ("Hope for Flint"), The Writing Journey's, *Reasons for Hope* ("Peer", "Digital Footprint", and "Once More, With Feeling"), *Human: An Exploration of What it Means* (online: "Touched", "Personal Bubble", and "All Smiles"), and *Near Myths* ("A Tale with No Fairies", "The Scant Structure Slayers", and "Everglow"). Additional works can be found at tanashamartinwrites.wordpress.com

Paper or Plastic

Allison McFarland writes novel(la)s. She pursues an MFA in Writing at the University of Saskatchewan. Her work has appeared in *filling station Magazine*, *Boston Accent Lit*, *Hooligan Magazine*, *Nōd Magazine*, *In Medias Res*, and *FOUND*, the second chapbook by Malform Press. Loft on 8th published her chapbook, *Marianne's Daughters*, in March 2018. She holds a BA (hons) in Law and Society and a BA (hons) in English with a concentration in Creative Writing, both from the University of Calgary. She is the co-founder and co-editor of the magazine antilang.

Aesthetician

Douglas W. Milliken is the author of the novel *To Sleep as Animals* and several chapbooks, most recently the collection *Cream River* and the forthcoming pocket-sized edition *One Thousand Owls Behind Your Chest*. His stories have been honored by the Maine Literary Awards, the Pushcart Prize, and *Glimmer Train*, and have been published in *Slice*, *The Collagist*, and *The Believer*, among others. His website is www.douglaswmilliken.com.

Lonesome Jubilee

Valerie Mills-Milde lives, works and writes in London, Ontario. She is the author of the novel *After Drowning*, (Inanna Publications and Education) which won the 2017 Silver Ippy (Independent Publisher Books Award) for Contemporary Fiction. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous literary journals across the country. A collection of these pieces was short-listed for the Black Lawrence Book Award. *The Land's Long Reach* (Inanna Publications, 2018), is her second novel.

Triptych of Crayon Man on Tight Rope

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Dorothy Neagle is a Kentuckian who lives and writes in New York. She has studied writing most recently at the Unterberg Poetry Center, and her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Dialogist*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Glass Mountain*, and more. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Memoirist*, *The Nastona*, and *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*. You can find her on instagram @aentlencesaremyface.

Girl Call

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Mikkilynn Olmsted writes nonfiction, poetry, and fiction. Her writing explores women and their complex relationships with self, family, and women. When not writing, she snow sports. Mikkilynn teaches writing and folklore at Metropolitan State University of Denver in Colorado, USA. Her writing has appeared in *not enough night*, *High Grade*, *Jephyrus*, *Hautlief Review*, and other journals.

Skiing in Jeans

Nicholas Olson is the author of *The Adirondack Haystack Still Floats*, a collection of short stories studying the North American working-class, released in 2014. Olson curates his own series of essays at www.balloofrice.com. He lives in Regina, Saskatchewan on Treaty 4 Land.

Happy 40th Jen

p

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 *Rattler*, *Ploughshares*, *Equinox*, *Vestal Review*, *Sonic Boom*, and *Blood and Bourbon*.

Three Women, Three Women Blues

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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.

Match Box

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).

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

Kate Rogers was shortlisted for the *2017 Montreal International Poetry Prize*. She has work forthcoming in *Catfeminea, the Great (Coliichan)*. Her poems have appeared in *Twin Cities Cinema (Hong Kong–Singapore)*; *Juniper*; *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*; *The Guardian*; *Asia Literary Review*, *The Goose: a Journal of Arts, Environment and Culture* and other publications. *Out of Place*, Kate's latest poetry collection, is reviewed here.

That Cunning Woman, Cutty Sark

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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*.

Mysostis in February

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.

Lord of Dance

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Nathan TeBokkel is a PhD student at the University of British Columbia, where he studies poet-farmers and the intersections of agriculture and aesthetics, drawing on his background in genetics, melon farming, and food safety audits. He has published articles in *Word Hoard*, *PostScriptum*, and *The Apollonian*, has a book chapter and a review in press, and has disseminated poems in *Propaganda* and a chapbook held together by dental floss.

Ray's Rocket

D.J. Tyner is the person behind Atlantean Publishing, was placed second in the 2015 Data Dump Award for Genre Poetry, and has been published in issues of *Amulet*, *California Quarterly*, *Cerillon*, *The Dawnthreader*, *Haiku Journal*, *The Pen*, and *Tigerlark*, and online at *Atlas Poetica*, *Bindweed*, *Poetry Pacific*, and *Scarlet Leaf Review*, as well as releasing several chapbooks, including the critically acclaimed *Our Story*. D.J. Tyner's website is at https://djtyner.blogspot.co.uk/. The Atlantean Publishing website is at https://atlanteanpublishing.wordpress.com/.

New Nomads

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Carter Vance Carter Vance is a writer and poet originally from Cobourg, Ontario, Canada, currently residing in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. His work has appeared in such publications as *The Smart Set*, *Contemporary Verse 2 and A Midwestern Review*, amongst others. He was previously a Harrison Middleton University Ideas Fellow. His latest collection of poems, *Places to Be*, is currently available from Moonstone Arts Press.

Blood Loss

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Benn Ward is a journalist, a writer, and an Associate Editor of the *London Reader*. He curated the issues "Words from Within" on mental health stories and "Wish You Were Here" on travel writing. Among other publications, his writing has appeared in *Southwinds*, the *Global Intelligence*, and occasionally the *London Reader*. He is working on his second degree in creative writing at the University of New Brunswick and lives part-time between Fredericton, NB and London, England. You can find him on twitter @BennWardWrites.

New Nomads

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.

There is a Place

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.

If I Were a Tree

Louise Willford 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.

Clover

James W. Wood's recent work has appeared in *Vellum*, *PRISM International*, *The Vancouver Sun*, *Stand (USA)*, *The North (UK)* and *The Interpreter's House (USA)*. He is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *The Emigrant's Farewell* (The High Window Press, Leeds, UK, 2016) and grew up in Canada, becoming a citizen in 1981. He now lives in the Gulf Islands off the coast of British Columbia with his wife, son and dog.

Apotropaic

Amos Jasper Wright IV is native to the dirt of Birmingham, Alabama, but has called Alabama, Massachusetts and Louisiana home. He holds a master's degree in English and creative writing from the University of Alabama, Birmingham, and a master's degree in urban planning from Tufts University. He lives and works in New Orleans. His fiction and poems have appeared in *Arcadia*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Clarion*, *Folio*, *Grain Magazine*, *Gravel*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Interim*, *New Ohio Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Off the Coast*, *Pale Horse Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Salamander*, *Tecenda Literary Magazine*, *Union Station Magazine*, *Yes*, *Poetry*, and *Zouch*. His debut short story collection, *Nobody Knows How It Got This Good*, was the recipient of the Tartt First Fiction Award from Livingston Press. His author website is available at www.amosjasperwright.com.

The Lens Grinder

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