

The Fieldstone Review

Plastic Identities





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ABOUT THE FIELDSTONE

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

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

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EDITOR'S DESK: PLASTIC IDENTITIES AND ESCAPISMS

by Ian Moy and Shane Farris

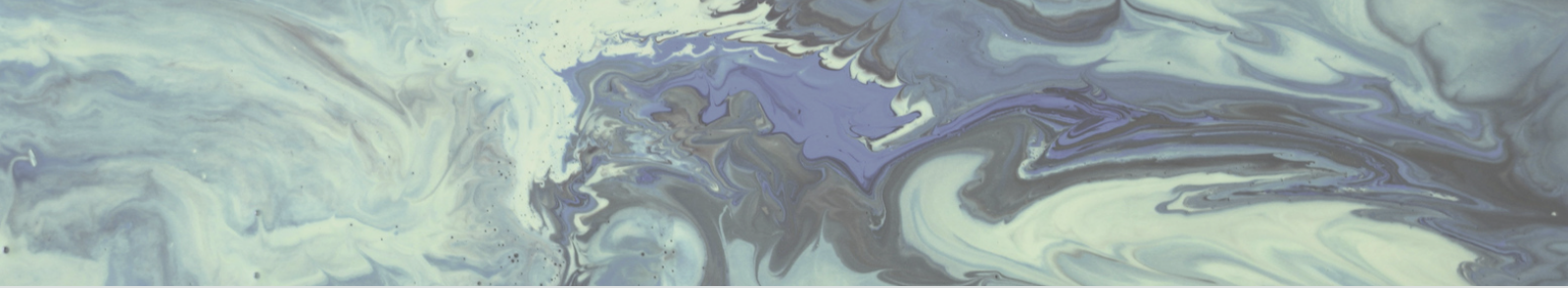
Any string of ideas related to the state of the world at this point will doubtless sound like conversations being had by all of us in our everyday lives. The past few years have been a struggle for all and more than that for a great number of us. We would like to thank you for your patience as we bring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



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.

Plastic Breath

by Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi

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 testing 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 good (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 smelled. She felt the rather stale intake race 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 centimetres that felt like kilometres of bed. The feeble limb made pitiful progress before stopping entirely so 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 newfound leverage, she began pulling her weight 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 fit self, besieged by physical and psychological cramps, had desired to slow 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 laterally across the bed; the bottom half remained affixed to where it had been since she embarked upon this suicide mission of sorts. After a quick mental team huddle with her barely-working parts, she used 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.

Move it, she urged herself.

Izzy hadn't intended to escape by falling on her head, but as she shimmed 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 cliché 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 she was home, Isabelle would blame Izzy for all of her 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 become too ill to breathe on her own, it was Isabelle who rushed 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.

Beloved 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 out here wouldn't render her a liar.

Like in the old days, when slower competitors somehow cruised past her, good old-fashioned anger fueled 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 goaded 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 bunched-up comforter, 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 an awful lot 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. Alive. For now.

Alive enough to save Clara.

Slowly, surely, Izzy wriggled away from the bed until her dumb legs hit the floor. Still, her daughter remained downstairs, oblivious, or willfully so. 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 tent, she scolded herself, save yourself this stupidity.* 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 a break, akin to that long-ago ankle, that would prevent her 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, and was angered and disappointed to see 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, disparate breathing became shallower, more disparate. 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—on 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 sneer 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 as the dead meat filling of a floor-and-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 perfectly in the eye, but nothing compared to the torture her lungs were putting 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, bejeweled eyes. Had they seen Izzy? *All* the Izzys? From Grandma Izzy to this sorry-excuse-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.

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 consumable.
Melt and mould, stretch and shape,
Smooth, shiny, clear, psychedelic colors, we love it all!

Our plastic world is so reliably spectacular.

Plastic keeps everything fresh beyond expiry dates,
Beyond the years, we will ever conceivably come to know.

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

Plastic nation, celebration, integration, plastic station
Buff and shine, snip and trim,
Swipe to win, cards all in, deal them up and let the 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 began
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 give up
Watching movies or TV series, reading books
Listening to songs, each in Chinese though I hate them
For being too low & vulgar. I was born to eat dumplings
Doufu, & thus fated to always prefer to speak Mandarin
Though I write in English. I assure you that even if I am
Newly baptized in the currents of science, democracy &
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, not
In the yellowish muscle of my heart

Digital Narcosis

by Elder Gideon

“The Greek myth of Narcissus is directly concerned with a fact of human experience, as the word Narcissus indicates. It is from the Greek word narcosis or numbness. The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system. Now the point of this myth is the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of 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
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.

—Jacobson. (2004)

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 already set.

Paper or plastic?

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

When they are lost or mistaken,
we rush to re-establish that we are important enough.
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 change
is not counted, so we place them in dark, safe spaces.

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

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

Blood Loss

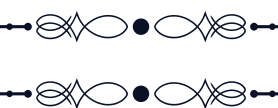
by Carter Vance

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 other?
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 affair.
Romantic odes expose plastic passions.
Hidden under bleached boxes of old Valentines,
love poems serenade cadavers of long-gone lovers.

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

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

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 brittle 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.



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.



CONTRIBUTORS

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 Edition, Riddled with Arrows, Rust+Moth, and The Sunlight Press, among others.

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.

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.

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 Nasiona, and The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature. You can find her on instagram @sentencesaremyfave.

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.

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.



CONTRIBUTORS

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

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.

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, Lummo Press, James Deahl Editor.

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.

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.

Carol J Forrester published her debut poetry collection, It's All in the Blood, in 2019. Her work focuses on the Shropshire countryside where she 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.



CONTRIBUTORS

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).

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*, *Zephyrus*, *HazMat Review*, and other journals.



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