

EXISTERE

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EXISTERE

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***Existere* welcomes fiction (including flash fiction), poetry, non-fiction, photography and art submissions for its Spring/Summer 2020 issue. E-mail submissions to <https://existerejournalofartsliterature.submittable.com/submit>. The deadline for our Spring/Summer 2020 issue is June 30, 2020. Only authors and artists whose submissions are selected for publication will be contacted by *Existere*.**

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The Writing Department at York University acknowledges its presence on the traditional territory of many Indigenous Nations. The area known as Tkaronto has been care taken of by the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Huron-Wendat, and the Metis. It is now home to many Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. This territory is subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region.

Table of Contents

Fiction

<i>Sweet Hours</i>	Hana Mason	8
<i>Leftovers</i>	Amber Allen	50
<i>Things Lost in 89 Cloverfield Dr.</i>	Dana Foley	58
<i>Home</i>	Nancy Baele	67

Non-Fiction

<i>Snowbound</i>	Traci Skuce	22
<i>Geographies of the Heart</i>	Brian Braganza	37
<i>Lunch At The North Pole</i>	Louise Turan	60

Poetry

<i>My Body As A Faraway Place</i>	J.L Moultrie	7
<i>Day 24</i>	Ash winters	18
<i>Day 61</i>	Ash winters	19
<i>Snow Day</i>	Felicia Zuniga	20
<i>Candy Factory</i>	Karen Rigby	29
<i>In Having Been to the Capella Sistina</i>	Trish Hopkinson	30
<i>Stuck</i>	Gannon Daniels	32
<i>A Dream</i>	Barbara Tramonte	33
<i>Black Lullaby</i>	Karen Rigby	35
<i>Catching Hope</i>	Diana Rosen	45
<i>You Can't Take These Summers</i>	Michael Andrew Lithgow	47
<i>Two Hedges</i>	Brittani Sonnenberg	48
<i>My Mother Cuts Me Open and Finds an Apple Inside</i>	Diane DeCilles	74
<i>What I Learned In Grad School</i>	Brittani Sonnenberg	76
Contributors		80
Image Credits		84

Note from the Editors

Over the past several months, our editorial team has worked passionately to bring you the Fall 2019/Winter 2020 issue of *Existere* — *Journal of Arts & Literature*. This is the first issue in three years to be published in print, and we are thrilled to be sharing words and art from such a talented selection of contributors.

Issue 39.1 delves into difficult endings, beginnings, and in-betweens, and the clouded light that exists within them. Despite differences in tone, story, and style, the pieces come together to convey honesty, tension, vivid images and movement through a thematic landscape of life and hope. The individuals who are part of this issue gifted us with exceptional work, each piece seamlessly weaving itself into a larger story.

We are so pleased and excited to be sharing the journey of our magazine's re-emergence with our readers. We hope each of you takes the time to immerse yourself in the story this issue creates.

Shawn Grey

Meagan Loose

Emily Norton

Arthur Wong



My Body as a Faraway Place

By J.L Moultrie

Filled with ruins and eventual
happenstance I look for a
way out I dream of ideas
of solace I'm afraid no one
is at the helm I travel the
Earth for my discarded youth
cacophonous silence has taken its
pound of flesh gathering these thoughts
like spilled marbles has left
even the birds out of tune
needling the sky with vacuous intent

Sweet Hours

By Hana Mason

You meet Bobby McClellan on one of those glorious first days of summer when the air is still cool from spring, but the sun is hot enough to peel the skin on your nose. Bobby comes into town to be a tree planter for the summer, and you're staying in your grandmother's old house, just like you do every year. It's the first weekend that the planters arrive. During the week, they're out in the mountains planting and only come down on their dusty old school bus to eat and drink and sleep their Saturdays away. The bonfire in the park on the first weekend is a planter tradition. Somehow you still expect Teddy to hop off the bus with them, bounding his lanky body around and laughing like he used to. But he's gone.

Teddy. The first boy to ever take you down to the lake, where all the girls get kissed for the first time, and give you a peck near the cattails and reeds, your summer sweetheart who slipped two of his perfect fingers into you beneath a shimmering aspen one night and was killed by a widow maker the next day. He'd gone out to paddle and a storm hit, blew a loose branch out of a tree and flipped his canoe. Gone before you even had the chance to love him.

At the bonfire, dusk is falling. There is light behind the mountains, which stand out boldly against the pale blue of the sky, but the valley is dark. You can see everyone's faces by the light of the fire and their headlamps, which cast dark shadows in the brows and cheekbones of planters and townies alike. They look like dark fairies; tree nymphs come out to play.

You see Teddy, blonde hair and brown eyes under a gentle brow, in the dark corners of the forest. The dead boy everyone knows you had something and nothing to do with.

Some people are on the outskirts of the circle, and you can only see them by the brief glow of their cigarettes and the joints the out-of-towners brought in. You can smell them by it too; the fresh

summer air mixes with the sour smell of the pot and the spruce and cedar smoke.

You can always tell the planters from the townies, the locals from the out-of-towners. There's only ever young people at the fires, no one older than twenty-five or younger than seventeen. The planters are always filthy on this first weekend. No time to shower after all that work when a party is involved. Any other weekend they'd go to the campground public showers and make themselves presentable, more tantalizing for potential hook-ups with townies, but tonight they are still covered in dirt, sweat, and sunburn. The loggers are another story – men from another time who lope around town and regard the young and lively planters with a kind of reluctant but necessary respect. It is a symbiotic relationship.

Bobby is surrounded by people, everyone's voices layered over each other, conversations mixed with off-tune songs sung by boys with old guitars. A spot opens up across the circle from him and you sit down beside an out-of-towner chatting up a girl you'd grown up with. While everyone stands around to talk and laugh, a year's worth of gossip ready to spill over the town like a plague of locusts built up under their tongues, you take a good long look at Bobby.

You've never seen him in town before, but the word around town is that his father grew up here. He sits in the glow of the fire and looks somehow less dirty than the others. Maybe it is the new gear, less worn from summer after summer of the town's dusty heat. But mainly it's that his skin has toasted to a glow rather than the customary ruddy burn that everyone else, tree planters and townies alike, sport every summer. He has brown hair, darker than honey-blond but not by much, and dark eyes. His tall, strong body extends into the circle with calculated causality.

Dutchie, a return planter and by far your closest summer friend, sits down beside you with her girlfriend and hands you a barely cold cider in a dented can. You take a long sip and your chest warms under its layers of fleece and thermal t-shirts. In the blue-white glow of her headlamp, Dutchie looks purple, her round face red from the beer and the cold, her long dark hair tied up in a

ponytail and bandana to hide the grease. She's stocky and strong, perfectly built for her job. She calls herself a serial monogamist with a wandering heart, so the town contains complicated heartache for her, too. Her long-time ex sits across the circle, and the girl she left him for. Dutchie's current girlfriend, Leah, sits with you, and it doesn't seem like there'll be any wandering of the heart anytime soon.

"Dutchie," you say. She raises her beer in greeting. "So you came back after all," she says.

"Did you ever doubt me?" you smile and Dutchie smiles back. You've missed her. Dutchie takes a big swig of her beer and cheers along with everyone else when someone hands Bobby the guitar and he strums one long chord to tune it.

An aspen forest, one tree growing many stalks, surrounds the clearing where you sit, with evergreens fleshing out the dark woods. The small round aspen leaves shimmy in the wind. It could almost be a whisper. What are they saying?

"You gonna get some this summer?" Dutchie says, and jolts you out of your thoughts. If it were anyone else saying it, you might consider it rude. You shrug and laugh.

Bobby strums the guitar again and starts to sing. It's one everybody knows, an old song from summer camp days. Everyone goes silent for a moment while Bobby sings the verse, in a clear voice at odds with his broad build. Then, a few voices join in, but you sit silent and listen.

Come and sit by my side if you love me.

Do not hasten to bid me adieu.

But remember that Red River Valley, and the one who has loved you so true.

Bobby catches you on your way home and that's when it all begins. On the planter's weekends off, you go to the pubs with him or get ice cream at the little stand on the corner of Main street. He takes you camping up on the Old Devil Mountain, the mountain with a face. A man at rest, a rugged horizontal profile with a chiseled

granite jaw and furrowed brow, He lays watching town.

As Bobby kisses his way up your torso, he tells you of the old legends, the stories to explain the phenomena. Mostly, they're old wives tales, made up by the women the loggers left behind in town to keep themselves busy, told over weak, milky Orange Pekoe at your grandmother's house before she died. Bobby must know them from his own family.

You know most of them, but they feel good whispered into your body, so you listen anyway, skin goose-fleshed against the cool air. For a fleeting moment, you think of how proud Dutchie will be when you tell her, but then Bobby kisses you again and you're brought back to the present.

"Have you ever heard the one about the girl the Old Devil fell in love with?" he whispers, and your body shakes at the way he rasps love.

"No."

"They say that the man in the mountain was once a logger who had to go into the bush for a long, long time." He tells you this near your neck, damp from his hot breath. "Leaving behind a lady-love. The logger was gone so long that his betrothed forgot about him, and fell in love with someone else. When the logger found out about this, he was so devastated that he lay down right where he stood, and his grief grew and grew till he turned to stone, till he became the very mountain we're on now."

Bobby kisses your wrist. His cheekbones are high and sit above a delicate nose. Up close, his tanned skin is peppered with rust-brown freckles. Bobby looks at you with his big dark eyes and continues.

"His face became the mountain, his veins became the riverbed, his blood the water. And his sadness turned to anger. Any man his true love loved, he killed. Some drowned, some disappeared. All he wanted was to be with her."

Bobby starts rubbing the bottom edge of your shirt between his thumb and index finger, expectant of what's to come.

"Tell me the rest," you say.

"Well, he never did. She died of a broken heart before he

could get to her. Now the Old Devil falls in love regularly, always searching for someone like his true love, getting rid of anyone in His way.”

Some drowned, some disappeared. It all makes sense.

Bobby climbs on top of you, peels his shirt off and fiddles with his belt. You should have known. Someone should have told you before now about the Old Devil killing boys who loved the girls He loved. Poor Teddy. Gone, because of you. Because you were careless. Selfish. Because you wanted to be loved and didn't think about the consequences. You try to push it all out of your mind, but you're overwhelmed. It starts to rain, and drops patter against the already-damp tent walls. All of Bobby's tenderness is gone now, and he enters you hard and fast. You're winded and surprised, but it doesn't hurt. Somehow, you should have seen that the Old Devil loved you now, and that no one who came close to you was safe. Bobby continues to kiss your neck while it happens, and moans there, the sound vibrating through your larynx. Thunder rumbles in the distance and he comes right as lightning cracks. The voices you swear you can hear in the babble of the river or gusts of wind, the eyes you can feel on you as you walk through town. They're His.

You hold Bobby close; your cold hands gripped tight across his strong, golden back like you can protect him this time, now that you know. The storm rolls on even after he finishes and lifts himself off of you, still huddled close to stay warm. The Old Devil says nothing. As Bobby runs a lock of your hair through his fingers, a fire has started somewhere over the mountains, you can count the seconds between the rumbles and the strikes on both hands, but still, you jump in your skin, startled by the violence in the voice of the wind. For now, you feel a shaky peace in the raw cold and breathy atmosphere, Bobby curved around you. Not him, you think, not him, and fall asleep before the Old Devil can respond.

You wake to bright sunlight, and a strange heat, the kind of heat that seems to come from the ground as well as the sky. Something is different, but nothing seems to have changed. You and Bobby walk back down Cleft Trail and part ways in the parking

lot long before it fills up with tourists and hikers from the city. Bobby takes the tent and walks towards the planter's muster station, and you ride your bike home.

It isn't really a road, but rather a dusty path lined with bushes and brambles, wild roses not yet ready to bloom their delicate pinkness. Lodgepoles and white spruce shade the path and sweeten the air. In yesterday's clothes you feel worn out and stiff, but the day is warm and will soon be warmer, and the sky is a hazy blue, so you stay on your slow path. The wind comes up from behind you and you coast on your wheels all the way home. Maybe it's the Old Devil, helping you fly faster and faster down the hill.

By midday, the hazy blue sunshine has turned to smoggy green, and news has come over the radios that last night's storm caused a wildfire on the other side of the mountains. The town isn't a stranger to wildfires, but you can't help but feel a strange pulse in your feet, unsure if it's your own heartbeat or the Old Devil in communication with you.

The tree planters come back into town by evening.

"The smoke's too bad," Dutchie tells you. She's in a bad mood, tired and irritable, so she huffs off without any further conversation. Leah appears by her side and she softens.

Bobby kisses you first thing he sees you, as a soldier come back from war would, rather than a planter smoked out of his work site. He greets Dutchie with a chummy pat on the back.

"We've returned at last." He laughs through his smile and loops an arm around your shoulders. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

Everyone knows, now, about the two of you. It's hard to keep secrets here. You try not to squirm when his lips graze yours when the other planters stare or holler. How much longer, you wonder. How long till the mountain takes him too? You can feel the Old Devil watching, He knows what you did. You can feel the ground beneath you sucking the moisture out of the air and the smog lowers down around Bobby's face, illuminated by his headlamp.

"Of course," you tell him. You could be ready to fight for

him. Convince the Old Devil to love somebody else.

For weeks it teases rain, but things only get hotter and dryer. In the mornings the smoke is worse. Ash and charred pine needles fall slow from the sky like snow, suspended in the thickness of the air. It's deadly cold right when you wake up; then sweltering, oven-hot by the time you finish breakfast. Every so often, as you walk in the still-cool early hours of the day, a gust of warm air comes along a ghost in reverse.

Bobby and Dutchie and many of the others quit tree planting and volunteer their time to put out the fire, which still lies just on the other side of the valley. Leah leaves town and Dutchie mopes around for a while then flings herself entirely into the fire-fighting effort. You watch the vans leave town on the highway, and far in the distance, the road is flanked by the orange inferno of the forest on fire, a picture with the colours edited, what you'd imagined Hell would be like.

You go down to the lake, The Old Devil's heart, Bobby told you, to visit Teddy. They never managed to get his canoe out of the marsh, so you can see it's stern when the water is low. You go and talk to him, apologize.

"Teddy. Are you there?" Your voice can't echo through the thick air and gets stuck right in front of you.

You try to imagine a response, a conversation, but whenever you go down to the lake to talk to him, all you can hear is the Old Devil, a distinct whisper through the cattails, *I'm here; I am.*

When you arrive at the lake, the water is so low it is almost non-existent, now it is a large body of mud and long grass, uncovered hardwood beneath the old carpet of the lake water. People's canoes and kayaks, tied to the dock, are sunken into the ground, which stinks of methane. Far across the bay, into the reeds, you can see Teddy's whole canoe, paddle included, and you think you see the white flash of bone. There is no wind to rush through the cattails and speak to you, but you know somehow that if you were to step out into the shallow water and mud, the Old Devil would eat you whole, finally get to be with His love, and for a moment you consider it, but instead, you turn back and run.

The weekdays are torture. You worry about Bobby, about Dutchie. You start working at a day camp and the kids in your charge complain about the smoke, get dehydrated in the heat and eventually stop coming at all. Better to stay in their air-conditioned cabins then spend time in the cancerous outdoors. A few still come, and you sit with them on the picnic tables in the park and paint rocks. If it's hot enough, you go to the library.

"Is it ever going to rain?" one of them, with a red ring of raw skin looped around his lips from dehydration, asks.

"Of course it is, stupid." His sister responds. "It will, one day," you tell them. "Soon, even." You can only hope. Can't you?

Every time he comes back, Bobby smells even more of smoke. You think about staying home and avoiding him. You think maybe if you don't see him, you won't care, or even better, the Old Devil will forget him, leave him alone, but he shows up at your door, and you can't resist. He kisses you again when you open the door and you fear the house will collapse under you.

Once you're finished, he falls asleep in your room and you go to get water. Your throat burns from the smoke, and you feel tight and gritty in your limbs. The water is lukewarm and dusty, too. You pour it out and get a glass of milk instead. It coats your throat, washes down the ash. The Old Devil speaks soft and thick through the smog. He'll be gone soon. It'll just be you and me.

You sit on the porch till the orange sun starts to rise and leave before Bobby wakes up.

Dutchie is the one to tell you Bobby left, just days after your last rendezvous in Nan's house. She comes to visit you at the camp and while the few kids that still come are weaving bracelets in the shade of the library's porch, the two of you lean against a picnic table and bake in the heat. Her nose is bright red and peeling, and her long hair is tangled in knots.

"Said he came out here to plant, not to fight fires." She seethes with anger for you but wastes no time telling you to get back on the wagon.

"He's gone?"

"That fucker," she says, right in front of the kids. You want

to tear your own skin off so that nothing he ever touched is near you again. You can still feel his hands on your body, and now the fire is within you. You feel your veins twist and burn with anger, disgust, and embarrassment. *It's just you and me.* The Old Devil didn't do this.

It's not yet dawn when you leave. There is some kind of red darkness in the air, and as the sun begins to rise it is nothing but a pale wash of light behind the brown-gray air. As you walk, you sing to yourself, to ward off bears and cougars. Not that it matters now. You almost laugh now at the irony of it all; you sing it bitterly like Bobby might hear it.

*As you go to your home by the ocean,
May you never forget those sweet hours.
That we spent in that Red River Valley, and the love we
exchanged mid' the flowers.*

What was once muddy is now dry and cracked, a picture of a desert somewhere far away. The reeds are dead, and even Teddy's old canoe way over in the bay is dried and cracked, red paint peeled off in long, sticky strips. You can't see the Old Devil Mountain for the smoke, but you can see, way across the dried plain of the lake, the inferno. The blackened trees surrounded by flame-red sky, red beyond the flames, red to a cellular level.

The smoke is worse the farther into the bush you go. You focus on breathing the sweet ashy air. When you reach the base of the mountain you are swathed in it; it's apocalyptic.

You've come to tell the Old Devil to stop. Tell him that you're His. The hot wind whispers to you, *I'm the only one who's ever really loved you.* You think of Teddy only holding your hand when someone was there to see, and of Bobby leaving. Maybe He's right. And maybe you could love Him back. You think fleetingly of Dutchie, by far your best summer friend, and hope she'll be okay.

Everything will be better now. Soon, the fire will go out. Life in town will go back to normal. The Old Devil will sprout a beard of purple fireweed. Then, the trees will grow back. People will forget you, time will pass, but you will always have Him.



Day 24

By Ash winters

Go fetch me an altar
To a god I haven't met yet
I want to laugh at something sacred
Or destroy something important
A thing drenched in meaning
That I don't for a second take seriously
Too much around here I am supposed to be gentle with
Cupped hands and held breath
For fear I might break something of someone's
That is the only unbroken thing left

Day 61

By Ash winters

Made sense

I made it make sense

I gave the fire truck shape to the cloud

And it was shaped a bit like a fire truck

But it was never going to put this fire out

Never going to get me to climb down from this tree

Took the language that the instructions were yelled in

And translated it into words that could be said calmly

Accent so thick

I use it for a diving board

So I could plunge right into deeper meanings

So thick that when anyone talks anywhere now

I can understand it

I use it as a lever to lift ten times my weight

Well over my head

But I still can't stand the sound of it

The space it takes up in me makes me want to rip myself to shreds

Start over

Make myself make sense again

Snow Day

By Felicia Zuniga

We sit on the stained carpet in two-day old pajamas
Your hot breath smells like the strawberry oatmeal I spoon-fed
you for breakfast
Shards of it hardened on your cheek and fingers
ma, ma, ma

Snowflakes crash against the window, we watch them dive
and hide inside
You screech and howl, you're bored here. And so am I
For fun, you stab your finger up my nose and laugh while
blood spills down my lip
wa, wa, wa

How do we distract ourselves as one cold day sticks to the
next
We drenched our summer in play dates - swings and strolls,
picnics and pools
Now it's just you and I holed up alone. Your new bottom teeth
jut out like broken glass
la, la, la

I trace the whirlpool of matted curls at the back of your head
Before you slap my hand away. A minefield of Cheerios and a
surge of yogurt
Expose one of your many strikes of destruction
ba, ba, ba

I try to watch T.V. but you snatch the remote and smash it
against the screen

We FaceTime your dad for six seconds, he can't see us
because you insist on

Pushing the red X to kill every call to the outside

da, da, da

Finally, I scoop you up and squeeze your little body to me as
we walk to the back door

I swing it open and we blink in the rush of light. A wave of cold
washes over us

We are finally quiet and still as we take in

the mystical white world that lies beyond

Snowbound

By Traci Skuce

On December 28th, 1996, I awoke to the tick-tick of snow against my window. To bedroom walls imbued with bluish light. My digital clock glowed with an eight and two zeros. A miracle, an impossible success: I'd slept ten uninterrupted hours. My eighteen-month-old son, still snuggled in beside me, had slept through the night for the first time *ever*. A milestone that made me forget about my impending move, all the sorting and packing I still hadn't done. I leaned in to kiss my son's smooth brow and his eyelids fluttered open. He flopped and wriggled awake. He sat up and pointed at the window. "It's snowing!" I said. Then we scrambled out of bed, past clothes-heaps and empty boxes, into the living room, where I hoisted him onto the casement windowsill.

Outside our second story window, trees and shrubs bore heavy saddles of snow. Rooftops and power lines billowed white. And Quadra Street, usually a loud urban tract, was as silent and white as a winter river.

There were no snowplows. Years before, the City of Victoria sold them all off. Winter delivered drizzles and downpours, not blizzards or plunging temperatures, and over the years, what little snow-removal equipment the City had owned had collected dust. Snow was for other parts of this country; here it had become near-myth.

Overnight two feet had fallen.

It was still falling.

Across the street, my neighbours emerged in outdated ski jackets they must've pulled from closets or crawl spaces. They laughed and chatted while scraping their walks with garden shovels. A group of children moseyed by. Licking mittens, holding out tongues, dragging makeshift toboggans toward the park. Of the cars that braved driving, some swerved and fishtailed, two stalled and required small teams to push them out. Another spun and spun his all-season tires, and after some fifteen minutes, he

abandoned his car by the buried curb.

My son lost interest in snow gazing, anxious for his Playmobil farm and tractor, new again after our five days away. We'd returned the night before, during the first stirrings of the storm, from Edmonton where we'd visited my ex's parents. No one there had mentioned my move. Even when I brought up the lease I'd signed, everyone, including my ex, just stared and smiled politely, as though I only needed to purge this separation from my system, dabble in single parenthood before following him to Calgary. But I had no intention of moving there.

Had I told him that? Spelled it out? Probably not. We'd had so many circular conversations over the preceding months. Again and again I tiptoed around the truth, pretending, even to myself, that I wanted to salvage the relationship, though I didn't want that. Hadn't wanted it since our son was born. But I was naïve, twenty-five, and afraid I'd become the bad guy for not trying, or worse: The Bitch. So I'd suggested a *separation*, distance to reflect on what we really wanted. What, as a couple, we were capable of. Besides, I'd said, it'd be good for him. All those job opportunities in Calgary. The friends he had there. The fresh perspective.

He agreed and he left.

Snow fell and fell.

It enshrouded the abandoned car and blanketed the recently cleared walks. My son sputtered out tractor noises, and when I faced him, all I could see was the work that lay ahead. Duplo blocks strewn across couch cushions. Trinkets and plants on the wainscoting shelves. Tapes and CDs, framed photos, books. Every small thing had to go into a box. Then those boxes carried, along with furniture, down two flights of stairs into a truck I still hadn't rented, over snowbound roads to the new place on Cook. I turned my back on all I hadn't done. Stared at the snow as though ordered to spin every last flake into gold.

One night, months before, I'd stretched out to nurse my son to sleep. His dad was blaring Frank Zappa's *Joe's Garage* in the living

room. When I closed my exhausted eyes, the words GET OUT flashed neon behind them. I could no longer ignore it.

We'd been holding each other hostage, quietly hating each other. Whenever the baby slept, we occupied our hands. My ex smoked on the back porch; he sanded and refinished four kitchen chairs. I knit, baked, built looms out of thrift-store picture frames. The fact I was always tired bothered him, and he envied the attention and energy I lavished on our son, none left for him. I resented his demands for anything at all. His needs added unnecessary weight to this already sizable job. All I wanted, all I *really* wanted, was for him to go away.

Now he was gone. And I wanted to ache with relief. Instead I ached for an earlier, more optimistic version of myself. Sumptuous hours of nothing to do. The capacity to pick up and go. All that had vanished. My future, my life, shriveled to a demographic, a statistic. Single mother. Poor. Welfare dependent.

Back when I was newly pregnant, I'd thought: I'll love this kid. I didn't think about practical things: money, career, community, family support (my family was far-flung, except my sister, who had her own life in Vancouver). Nor had I thought about physical demands. Lack of sleep, for one. Plus I'd become skinny, undernourished, though I ate. I was always chasing my son, keeping him off things or out of things. And I nursed on demand. During my pregnancy, I'd read an article or two, about the benefits of breastfeeding. I'd had conversations with other die-hard lactators at baby groups, and somehow believed nursing would save me a future grief, contribute to the development of a wonder-child. My son would be more confident than other kids. Read early. Never do drugs or need braces. I nursed him without limit, my breasts a twenty-four-hour snack bar he visited frequently. Even at eighteen months, he ate only crackers and bananas. Mostly he fed off me. He'd already sucked the fat off my body; now he was leaching minerals from my bones.

Day two of the storm and paralysis set in. Roads were impassible with no way to clear them. The entire city held captive by weather.

A local radio station quit playing music and devoted the airwaves to the storm. They became an information hub, fielding calls from listeners. At some point, an elderly woman phoned in with a plea for help to shovel out her seniors' complex. The first floor was completely buried. "It's like a tomb in here," she said. Within hours she called back to rhapsodize about the neighbourly squad who'd helped clear windows and doors. "We can't go anywhere," she said. "But at least there's light." After that, I considered calling, even dialed the first few numbers, to implore those anonymous heroes to pack up my life and haul it across the city.

"Don't let a little weather stop you," my father said over the phone. He reminded me of the first winter we'd lived in Toronto, when he rode his ten-speed bike through a blizzard. My mother, though, was the one who'd stayed behind with my sister and me. Wound us into scarves and thick snow jackets, sent us outside to play. I remember how we trudged across the street to the neighbour girls' house. For hours, the entire day, we leapt into plush piles of snow and built elaborate forts; we lay on our backs and let the snow fall to our faces like feathered wings.

I wanted to do that again. Drop into the snow, let it lull me into a long, long dream.

Moving day was pushed to January 3rd. My sister had promised to come from Vancouver as soon as buses started running. Meanwhile I circled my apartment, son on my hip or tugging my pant leg. The night before he'd woken up every two hours to nurse, plus he suspected our imminent upheaval and was needier than usual. In the rare moments when he amused himself, and during his naptime, I emptied cupboards at random or dumped drawer contents onto the kitchen table.

There were so many things I wanted to toss. The cabinet that once housed my ex's records and stereo. An obsolete Mac; a busted bookshelf; a soured old futon; bits of driftwood; a zillion stuffed animals. I wanted to throw them off the porch. Ignite them, watch them flame and burn until there was nothing left but ash.

**

On the third day, the snow reached over four feet deep. By mid-morning, voluptuous flakes tempered to sleet, the sky into a steelier grey.

I'd been trapped inside since we'd come home from the airport. And I was fed up. With dividing and categorizing my possessions. With my son's whiny boredom, his begging for my breasts. I'd had enough of my own exhaustion, my unanchored grief, and I wanted the luxury of leaving. Of stepping through the door because things were too complicated, too much. But I could never leave, never be that person, that parent. My fate was tethered to my son.

Still, I needed to get out.

I stuffed my boy into a polar bear snowsuit. He had no winter boots, so I pulled three pairs of socks over his feet and inserted them into rubber boots. He complained and I used a singsongy voice to reassure him, though it sounded fake, strained, and he tugged on his scarf and cried. I plopped him into the backpack and slung him onto my back, and then closed the door on all those half-packed boxes.

The air was cold, but I welcomed it. The sleet fell like tiny arrows and wind blew sideways. My son was quiet for the two blocks up to Cook, where I merged into a single-file stream of pilgrims, people swaddled in scarves and shawls, trekking toward the city centre.

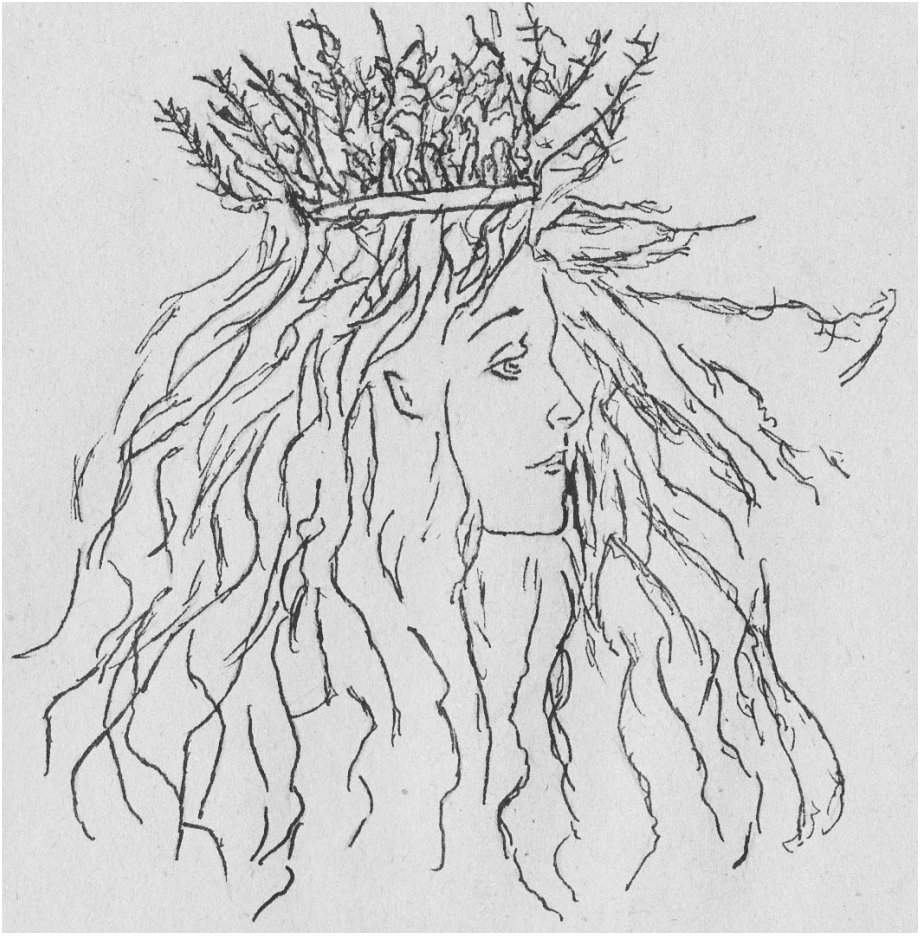
Sleet tapped my jacket and icy gusts filled my ears. The backpack cut into my bony shoulders and my son whimpered behind me. Every few steps I reached behind and squeezed his little boot, told him it was okay. But was it? The snow would turn to rain again; the roads would fill with slush and then run clear. The city would be free again. But what about us? What about me? Back then I didn't know raising a child was not a Hero's Journey. No climax, no final finish, no pinnacle of freedom. Only an accumulation of impossible tasks. And this—moving during a snowstorm—was one more.

We reached a grocery store, and I veered off the path and went inside. I took brief comfort in the warmth, the idle chatter of

other adults, and I was hungry for a change of scenery. I wandered aisles without cart or basket. The dairy case had been pillaged, no milk, and only a few bricks of marbled cheese. Gaps in the meat cooler too, and all the chips gone. Still, fruit and vegetables brimmed over their bins. I palmed the Granny Smiths and clementines, fingered cilantro and parsley. I studied and picked a scab on a russet potato. What had I come for? What did I *need*? I circled the produce bins, once, twice, and finally, broke off a nub of ginger, grabbed a lemon, and paid exact change at the till.

Outside again the sleet turned grittier. Snow was glazed in ice, and the wind seemed to blow from every direction. There was no way around it. My son kicked and yowled. I buried my face in my scarf and carried him home.





Candy Factory

By Karen Rigby

My mother cuts cellophane for gumdrops molded like citrus—each wedge cooled, dusted in sugar, paired in sleeves for someone else’s piñata—but in the heat of a tropical season it isn’t the stainless counter I imagine. It isn’t an odor like burned syrup. In 1967, it’s the rotary echoing at the end of a long hall: not my father. I don’t know who. She hasn’t chosen us, yet. Before the sealing machine. Before vats of pectin and coloring, cases of Christmas nougat, scissors stamp half-moons down her palm. My mother, at sixteen, must have boiled in that second cousin’s house, thinking cellophane saved her from the high rise in Kowloon. In another year, my father flies home from Vietnam. When I think of their future darkening the doorway, I hope there was sweetness, if only at first, and that he told her he loved her. What if her parents, in their poverty, never sent her to a bloody republic, and if my mother, in her wisdom, never boarded the plane? I wouldn’t be born, but neither would she live with madness, even now, his honeycombed brain cleaving away.

In Having Been to the Capella Sistina

By Trish Hopkinson

Surely, god has a mother—
one who looks on past
his formative years of rebellion

and ego searching,
one who casts her spell
into the brushes of Michelangelo,

who aches to give her son
everything in the world.
I stepped across the threshold

onto tiles worn from the feet
of popes and centuries of onlookers,
their necks twisted and eyes straining

to compare the scene to all
the kitsch—mugs and mousepads,
postcards and pamphlets,

digital images—zoomed in
on god's finger reaching, his creation
of the first man, the one

who came before all others,
or did he? Startled by the shush

of security guards, the awkward

mulling of religions mixing
in this chapel bowl, all tilting—
chins upward, eyes to heaven.

Yes, even an atheist or maybe
all kinds do, still revel
in the antiquity of the ground,

the humidity of breathy humans,
our regard for personal space obscured
to take in a distant past, to enamor

ourselves in the art, blissful.
I was unsure as all the rest,
where to rest my hands, how to

stand without disturbing the masses,
where to get perspective,
if there was some. Surely,

Michelangelo too, had a mother,
one who ached for her son
when he gave hours and agony
to adorn a false sky.

Stuck

By Gannon Daniels

Wheels spin no traction and that's it
You're lost in the woods without water
The branches above knuckled for winter
want to protect you with a canopy
but the trees can't help you now they simply
share the bitter cold with you and hold
snow along their arms like magicians
No matter how fast the wind whips about
the snow stays laden on the shoulders
of the naked elms still wanting to see
you home but you can't find home
and wheels pause as you let up on the gas
Pesky balding radials with no hub caps
keep polishing the ice now smooth and shiny
creating a sunken mold of themselves spinning
again when you press the long thin peddle
Come on you say as if you can talk them into
moving you but you are stuck on a road
you've never found on a map
It is dark and the snow may or may not
keep falling down from a sky you can't
see and there is no one coming

A Dream

By Barbara Tramonte

There were sheep
There were cows
They roamed near me
Nuzzling my legs

I was there
in a field
concave
bursting with energy
on that little plot of land
Cows, sheep and
buttons dot the landscape

Suddenly there is a
mixing of tenses
a milking of syntax
and the realization
that in 2020
YOU CAN CALL ANYTHING MILK

Wring out the almonds,
coconuts, udders, soybeans
oats, yogurt, chocolate
It is milk

There is a bowl on the table

in the dream
Convex
oblong, white
waiting
hungry for its purpose to be
filled

I wake up:
This is the true room
where I live
when I am not walking through the
thick mud of obstacles

I get on the Internet and see
a third grade vocabulary test
Question: What is an obstacle?
Answer: White people



Geographies of the Heart

By Brian Braganza

I'm shaken off course.

The Southern Cross constellation sits low as I wake before dawn this first morning in Australia. As the sun rises and tracks across the sky, I have to align my body north in order to see its arc right to left. This point of view collides with my engrained northern hemispheric understanding of the sun's path. From that perspective, I orient to the south, as the sun and stars move through the sky left to right. This worldview inscribed in my consciousness, like writing across this page.

My parents were married just one year when they left India in 1961. A rare invitation to work abroad in Germany could not be denied. My sister was born there and after my father accepted a transfer to Nigeria, I was born in Apapa, near Lagos. After two years, we returned to Europe.

Bloated and yellow with nephritis, aboard the swaying ferry from Las Palmas, I surrendered my first steps and my grip on my father's finger, returned to crawl. I spent six weeks in a London hospital for kidney treatments before my mother and I rejoined my sister and father in Germany.

We immigrated to Canada in December of 1969, I was four years old. Rehau Plastics, the same company that brought my parents from India to Germany and Nigeria, asked my father to open and manage a plant in Eastern Ontario. As a brown boy speaking only German, I settled slowly, navigating this new world with trepidation.

Brockville has an easy geography. The St. Lawrence River, this clearly delineated border with the United States, creates a south boundary. Sundays we'd often circle Blockhouse Island sitting in the car eating ice-cream, watching the river's steady flow. As a teenager I'd spend whole days swimming at this liminal edge. The wake of ships bound for the Great Lakes or Montreal would lift and dip our bodies in great swells.

Through the center of Brockville ran the Canadian National and Canadian Pacific rail-lines. The regularity of train whistles like a call to prayer, resounded through town. As a child at the edge of sleep, the trains' howl or clicker-clatter of wheels on tracks, drifted in the window with the hot breeze, awakened my consciousness to the perpetual migration of people and material across this wide country.

The northern boundary in those days was highway 401, a relentless traffic hive.

This east-west triptych of river, rail, and road tugged at my impressionable heart, and I yearned for travel and movement while holding the paradoxical desire to locate in place. In a land where my belonging was frequently questioned due to my skin colour, I followed my inner call, and in my early twenties, traversed the entirety of the country more than half a dozen times. Gazing at the enormity of the land, the rattle of the carriage on rails, or sway of the bus imprinted a Canadian consciousness in my body.

The country's northern expanse held the vastness of my imagining.

I made trips to Cape Scott at the northern edge of Vancouver Island and L'Anse aux Meadows at the northern tip of Newfoundland. Travelling farther north, to Nain, Labrador; Bistcho Lake, Alberta, and Baker Lake in Nunuvut; I was struck by the hollow winter sun's bare gasp at the surface. I would endeavour to watch the moon rise from any beach, rocky summit or open plain I could reach. I longed for a glimpse of these celestial constants, reminders of my humanity. In the crispness of nighttime, the overhead dance of the Aurora Borealis taught me humility.

Living in Northern Ontario, Aboriginal Elders imparted the significance of the directions. We fasted, laid down sacred herbs, gratitude to mother earth and father sky. We spoke in turn, in the direction of the sun's movement across the sky. Gaspings beneath heat and steam, I learned about our interconnection with land and our place in it, we are not separate, we are one and the same. Moments like this, sitting still on earth, or swallowed whole as I dove into a lake, I'd feel a rare sense of soul, bound to the landscape.

By thirty I'd honed skills in orienteering and map reading. I worked with precision to set and check my bearing, walk to a point and realign my compass, only to verify my mark before proceeding. I learned that to deviate by a degree, could have dire consequences. While navigating the Long-Range Trail in Gros Morne National Park, I'd locate my traverse on a topographic map, and pin-point myself on the land. I was so uniquely and unquestionably present in the here and now, as if I'd risen out-of-body, witnessing myself pick a path through unfamiliar terrain.

While guiding youth on wilderness expeditions, I'd teach them to tell time by reading the sun's position in the sky. This became a game, then a truth, then a spiritual practice. Together we'd navigate across a lake or through mountainous back-country; we'd turn the perplexing trails and successful traverses into lived metaphors for daily life. We'd discover that by listening attentively to our inner knowing we could trust the choices on our paths wherever they may lead, and that standing our ground allows us to locate in our hearts.

Years later I moved to the eastern edge of the continent to what I now know as Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people. As a settler on this land, I built a passive solar home on a drumlin hilltop, used my compass to position the foundation lines, situating the house to make best use of the sun's radiance. I fact checked this by finding the Big Dipper then turning my back on the North Star, I gave thanks for all that came before.

I've since built a stone circle, marking the sun's seasonal rhythms along the eastern ridge; from the sun's most northerly point at the summer solstice to its most southerly point at the winter solstice and back again. Astonished, I've watched from this vantage as harvest moons, lunar eclipses, or a crescent chasing Venus, rise over the horizon. My bedroom window faces east and without fail, Orion arrives in the autumn lying on his back across this ridge, and lifts to stand in the south before laying back down in the west each winter night.

Most mornings, the dog and I circle the property in a sun-wise direction: north is downhill into the pasture, I turn east as I

touch the woods and brook, south at the road, and then follow the powerline west to return home.

In those early days in Australia, I attempt to recreate this sunrise walk, invariably I get spun around. Confounded, my meditative walk becomes a puzzle as I try to discern which way the sun tracks, and so in which direction should I walk to follow its path? I visualize my morning walk in Nova Scotia to mirror it on this new landscape. I feel close and then, overthinking, get thrown awry. Off kilter, I strain, this disorientation is profound.

My father died less than two months before I arrived in Australia. My first and most consistent male role-model, he was a way-finder for my formative years as I explored and came to understand the emerging atlas of my life. As a young man, I easily found fault with his bearings, yet he showed up for me as consistently and without question, as the sun rises.

In the days before we moved him to palliative care, I attempted to navigate a medical system with no map to guide my steps. His nurses rotated daily, and after just a few days I was the one who would brief each new nurse on his condition. The doctor changed weekly and monitored two floors of complex patients. I quickly learned to be persistent and politely pushy to get the most information. It became clear that after his first stroke seven years prior, my father had suffered multiple strokes, and as a result had developed vascular dementia. It was increasingly more difficult to understand his speech, he often seemed disoriented and confused and would fluctuate in and out of consciousness. He couldn't walk and cried out when the physiotherapist tried to assist his movements. The doctors told us he could potentially asphyxiate on anything he consumed having lost his ability to control swallowing and so was eating and drinking very little. The intravenous drip was pooling in his lungs from lack of activity. The doctors presented the option of a feeding tube in his stomach, also stating that due to his lost reserves he would not recover his previous self. As he declined rapidly within days, I watched my mother's struggle to find harmony with her dying husband. His

frailty a discord in their sixty-six years.

My father had made it clear only months earlier, that he did not want to be sustained on life-support. “All people die,” he would say with a shrug. Coming to terms with his imminent death I leaned into the dissonance of my father’s fragility. With my sister returning from overseas, I navigated our family through these uncharted territories. On the day before we moved him to hospice, finding him in a rare moment of clarity, I looked deeply into his eyes, summoned my courage, and told him we were moving him to palliative care, and this is where his life would end. He’d completely lost speech by now and so raising his eyebrows, he pursed his lips, then dropped his eyes in response.

Warwick Thornton’s poetic documentary, *We Don’t Need a Map*, is about the colonial hijacking of the social and spiritual significance of the Southern Cross constellation from Australia’s Aboriginal peoples. The film visits Wurdi Youang, a stone arrangement in Victoria that marks the sun’s setting on the equinoxes and solstices. Modern surveys indicate this alignment is accurate to within a few degrees. If Stonehenge is five thousand years old, and the oldest stone arrangements with solar alignments in southern Egypt are seven thousand years old, Wurdi Youang, still under scientific study, could be up to eleven thousand years old, making it the oldest astronomical observatory in the world.¹

As I travel the road along the Great Southern Ocean, aligned to Australia as the Atlantic is to Nova Scotia’s South Shore coast, I am comforted by the familiar and relentless ocean eroding cliffs and raising sand. These seas are a mystery, trustworthy and welcoming, yet dangerous and inhospitable. Stopping overnight in Warnambool, the surf’s deep draw and rolling tumble fills the open window, consoles me. As the sun lifts over the horizon, I walk the beach beneath the long dawn. The ocean is a sharp edge as I plunge in. This resembles home.

In these weeks after my father’s death, I wonder how my internal compass has been thwarted. As I’m called to re-calibrate my family’s new geography, what are the well-trodden pathways

that refresh my sense of direction? When I am removed from my natural states and placed in one which is foreign—how do I embrace what is unknown in me and reconnect to what is familiar? As the navigational markers, I have grown accustomed to, are flipped, what are the new way-openings that present themselves?

My father had an unequivocal support for my life course. As I was graduating from university, he asked about my goals and ambitions: Would I become a teacher with my English degree? Feeling that he wanted to pin me down, I resisted. I desired freedom from institutional education; I hungered to learn by experience, to create stories of my existence as I moved through the geography of this earth; I wanted to live the poetry I was writing. As I so often struggled to verbalize feelings with my father, I wrote him an honest letter to share these cravings for a life that would open my map, not fold it down. Though he would have loved for me to return to Brockville and live out my life as a school teacher, he never questioned my wanderlust. He and my mom were steadfast in their support that I discover the truth for myself.

My father spoke little, selecting his words with care his simple offerings were often poignant. On my wedding day his words to the gathered crowd were a gift: “They say the son is the father of the man and that the man learns from the son.” A decade later, following this first stroke, a speech therapist worked with my father to regain his ability to talk. Practicing with him I would hold up flash cards with words and pictures, repeating the sounds I’d mouth movements to help him recall how to enunciate letters. Simple sentences became a navigation through a terrain thick and rocky. In moments when he was able to purse and pop his lips to say “P”, or touch the tip of his tongue to the roof of his mouth and tap to say “T”, his eyebrows would raise and he’d nod in recognition. In those times the son was indeed teaching the father as I had clutched his finger to learn how to walk.

The following year, as my marriage collapsed, I sought my father’s wisdom. His words even more precious due to his aphasia, “*Only you can know what is right for you.*”

My father encouraged me to live into my own questions, yet he knew me more than I knew myself. My spiral path eventually led me to working in informal educational settings, creating spaces for individuals to listen to the wisdom in their hearts. Thirty years later I'm in Echuca, Australia, helping adults and young people listen deeply to each other to uncover their shared truths through telling stories. My work here is to strengthen their capacities for self-efficacy, intergenerational belonging, and meaningful contribution to community.

After three weeks in Australia, the disorientation remains entrenched. While hiking in the Grampians with their ancient legacy of rock formations and Indigenous cultural history rooted in the land, I find a surefootedness in the emerging recollections of my father. I want to remember my dad's tenacious courage demonstrated in their relocation through three continents before landing in Canada. He and my mother had a desire to make a difference, to create a life of purpose for their children, and to invest in genuine relationships around them. I didn't so much learn these ways of being from my parents, rather I was steeped in them.

Pouring over dozens of photo albums which my father meticulously maintained, we select photographs of his life for the memorial. He'd flip through slide shows or these ancestral albums, recognizing each face or hilltop, each period of our familial history. He was the archivist of the family, the story keeper. As many of these memories fall away with his passing my grief is a hollow canyon.

At the funeral reception, men from the factory my father managed arrive to share stories of his trustworthiness as a leader, his influence and presence for them in difficult times. In these stories I see the parallel to my life-work as I attempt to lead with integrity and listen with compassion as individuals navigate their life journeys.

In my final days in Australia, my heart cracks open. The moment I release a handful of postcards into a mailbox I remember receiving my father's missives whenever he travelled. Without fail he would send me birthday or holiday cards, his script often

minimal yet his commitment was steadfast. It was my father who would phone weekly no matter where I lived, our conversations barely scratching the surface, yet his reliability instilled the importance of enduring relationships. Memories of receiving my father's personal notes and his voice on the end of a phone become an overgrown footpath.

My father lives in the geography of my heart. Blood pulses through arteries, returns in veins, cyclical like sun and seasons, like Orion rising in the east, or the tide's ebb and flow. Refreshed with each homecoming.

Picking up the maps my father left me, I follow a trail he never could have predicted, yet only he could have imagined.



1 *We Don't Need A Map*, Warwick Thornton, 2016. <https://www.wedontneedamapmovie.com>

Catching Hope

By Diana Rosen

You describe the weight like those black marble sphinxes you loved in the downtown library. Cold, hard, so heavy they need stone pedestals to support them. You reveal how this new depression is like that maze of mirrors you got lost in at the carnival when you were ten, feared never finding your way out back to mom, dad, me. You try, we know you try. Talk therapy. Pills. You say you can't catch hope like you used to fill up baskets of trout at the lake. I ask you to join me in the rooftop pool, remind you how the cool water could shake off your epidermis of sadness. You light up another cigarette, let the ashes fall off by themselves, do that song of sighs that tells me I'll never really know, never understand. I go down to the apartment to fetch your favorite cold drinks. When I return, you are flittering around like a mosquito unable to find the tear in the screen door to fly out. You stare at me like we're strangers not siblings, hug me with your black froth, your spirit's vacancy punching me so I can't breathe. Fearful you will drag me into another abyss, another quandary, I leave the drinks, leave you, without a word, embarrassed that I've intruded into something sacred, too dense, devoid of light. A neighbor found you slack jawed on a lounge chair, the empty prescription bottle on your lap. Still wobbly the next day, I make myself walk back up to the roof where your leftover pain hovers over crumpled butts amidst ashes, the forgotten tube of sunscreen. I outstretch my arms to the everyday clear blue sky of L.A., wish you safe travels, yet my words sound hollow, shellacked with anger

even as I accept that maybe this world wasn't your path. What if the future is hope realized? What if doubt is natural? What if? The thing, the thing, the thing is: We must go on ...

You Can't Take These Summers

By Michael Andrew Lithgow

You can't take these summers free and expect

no one was hurt

cottages, cabins, rafts, bike rides, beaches and

first kiss, everything has an invoice

invisible voices loud and shouting voice

someone's mud

&treessnailsfrogsfernsfish

“if you don't get in there and grab a sandwich” my
grandmother

whispered, “that's your own fault”

someone's always taking something.

Get out of the way

especially if you can't.

My grandparents were first

among their kind on the lake.

Even the summers of children were on stolen land.

Back then, cigarettes on the dock were like love

everyone wanted there was never enough,

so much fun getting the last few

and then lung cancer.

Settler memories.

Can't mention the land without things being stolen

Two Hedges

By Brittani Sonnenberg

There, at the top of the hill,
where two hedges run parallel
on either side of the dirt path,
Scottish farmland stretching beyond,
I stopped, and felt something snare,
as insistent as if it had been my blouse,
caught on one of the holly hedge's toothed leaves.
But no, it was Brandenburg:
the countryside skirting Berlin,
where paths meander,
politely signposted, just like here,
where I would walk and walk and walk
in those genteel German forests,
kind rows of pine, soft undulations of sand.
And then, just as I'd managed to
swallow that swelling, another bloomed,
a much earlier memory, from England,
a longing, a sharp ken
of the holly, the tidy wall of it,
how its bulk guarded the walk.
Wherever I go,
I'm pierced by where I've been,
but often those widowed spells nestle
just inside the beauty of where I'm standing.
The double vision is a double devotion,
but also a ripping sound.

I turned back for dinner,
relieved when the trees closed in on me,
and the forest proffered no pasts but its own.
What are they, these old places,
begging like small children to be picked up,
and held, and comforted, and called by name?
They catch me by the throat,
homecomings hurt, miles from home,
home upon home upon home,
loss upon love upon living.

Leftovers

By Amber Allen

I had just finished sprinkling the organic slivered almonds onto the salad when Marie and Dave knocked. One of my neighbours had obviously judged them as innocuous and let them into the building because they showed up directly at my door. I was counting on the buffer period from the buzzer to pull off my apron and re-apply my lipstick. I personally never let strangers into the building but I understood why someone would take a chance on Marie. There was something comfortable about her beauty. Something honest.

Before Mike and I split up — or divorced I guess is the official word for it — we were all about couple friends. We still saw people we knew from university, and I made time for my sister who was always coming out of a bad relationship, but mostly we worked on finding, and keeping, married friends. Dinner party guest lists easily divisible by two.

This was my first attempt at a dinner party since I had come out as the new, single Angie. I got to keep the apartment, and Mike took the majority of the small appliances, but they don't include a section in a divorce agreement about friends. Something akin to joint custody, I supposed. I made sure to invite two couples so that the men could still go out on the balcony, beers in hand, while the women giggled over bottles of white in the living room. A good host thinks of these things. It may not have been the perfect equation, but I was comfortable being the remainder.

The other couple was Sophie and Malcolm. Sophie was Mike's half-sister. They didn't grow up together, but they had the same stoic, loveless father. We met through Mike, obviously, but I was the only one she trusted to walk her dog for the 6 weeks after she fractured her fibula. So, I felt pretty confident that our friendship could withstand this break up. She was currently twelve weeks pregnant and absolutely glowing in pictures on social media. I have always wanted to be a mother but kids didn't fit into Mike's five year plan. As it turns out, neither did I.

Malcolm arrived 20 minutes late, without Sophie. He had styled his hair in an almost sculptural way which must have required large amounts of time and gel to achieve. It looked unnaturally shiny under the fluorescent lights of the hallway, like plastic. I was so mesmerized by the sheen that I forgot to invite him inside. I just stood there, arms stiff and outstretched, in an awkward pose that suggested we hug. He pushed past me, pressing a bottle of wine into my still open arms, leaving me cradling a merlot in a cloud of his woody musk. I took a minute to breathe before following him in.

When I entered the kitchen, he was already explaining to Dave that Sophie was at home finishing a website for a very picky client. Apparently, she'd been working on this project for a really long time, and the client was never satisfied. "They keep asking for a spicier font or a blacker red," he was saying. "What the hell is a spicy font?" I appreciated how invested he was in her work.

Mike hadn't been so interested in what I do. When Eleanor asked me about a program we were putting on at my branch last winter, he said "Oh, come on. Nothing exciting ever happens at the li-barry. Don't bore the locals, Ang." Then he changed the subject to something I didn't know much about. Which, truthfully, includes a lot of subjects.

"If she thinks a client is hard to please, wait until" Marie's thought was punctuated by a violent hiccup, "the baby comes." I held my hands, still cool from the bottle, against my own empty body.

Without Sophie, we were down to four. I appreciated the symmetry of it, and I said as much to Marie, before thanking Malcolm for making it out solo.

"I guess we'll have to be each other's alternate," Malcolm said. His shirt was a strange colour that fluctuated between brown and maroon, depending on the light. The inconsistency left me unsettled. As a library assistant I believe things ought to be easily categorized. Book. Dinner. Wife.

"I'm happy to be Sophie's understudy," I said. "But, wait, what play is this again?"

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner,” Marie suggested.

“That’s a movie, babe. How about The Dinner Party ... that Paul Simon one,” Dave said.

“Play or movie, I just hope there aren’t any sex scenes in this one. It’s been 6 months since Mike and I broke up, and, honestly, it wasn’t happening much towards the end, anyway. I’m almost afraid I’ve forgotten how to be with a man.”

Dave let loose a sharp, monosyllabic laugh that hung suspended above us. Malcolm walked to the counter and picked up the salad I had prepared. Fresh strawberries stained the spinach; shiny red desire lines leading to nowhere. “This looks great, Angie. Let me bring it to the table for you.” He kicked the pocket door aside with the toe of his shoe and disappeared into the adjoining room. Dave and Marie gave each other a look and ceremoniously followed suit, but not before topping off their wine glasses.

“More like Sartre’s No Exit,” I heard Malcolm whisper from the other room. I counted to ten before joining them.

The main entrée was beef chilli. I had been practicing the recipe all week. I lifted the ceramic centre out of the slow cooker and brought it directly to the table.

“Beef? Oh, here I’ve been drinking white all night. Be a good host and crack open a bottle of red, Angie.” Marie turned her wine glass completely upside down to force the hesitant final drops into her impatient mouth. Mike and I had established a sign for when he’d had too much to drink at a party. I’d give him a little kick under the table that meant “slow it down there, pal, we got the whole night in front of us.” I didn’t have a sign with Marie, though, so I filled her glass with the wine Malcolm had brought.

“Salud!” She flung her glass towards the centre of the table, splashing the deep red liquid everywhere.

“Chilli always reminds me of Mike. He used to make the best chilli back when we were in college. He wasn’t afraid to really pack in the spice.” As he said this, Dave slowly moved his spoon around the edge of the bowl, as if the flavour had fixed itself to the rim and needed to be coaxed back into the food. “What did he call himself, again?”

“El Presidente.” I offered. I had heard this many times before. It felt as though I’d been at college with them, in a way, because I knew all the most important stories.

“Yeah, that was it. El Presidente. Man, that guy is a riot. It’s too bad the new girlfriend is a vegan.”

After dinner, we took the party to the living room. Marie tripped on the single step leading to the den. I have always thought that a sunken living room makes a great impression. Even here in Parkdale, it is a sign of someone who has made good life decisions. Truthfully, since she didn’t get hurt, I was pleased that her stumble had drawn attention to the step.

Everyone sat down on the sectional except Dave who walked towards the book shelf, which I had recently reorganized according to spine colour.

“My God, I haven’t drunk this much in years.” Marie brought the wine glass to her face and touched it to the skin along her hairline. “Drank? Drunk? Drunk, right?”

“I’d say,” Dave said from over his shoulder, with a wink and a smile.

“I’m actually not feeling so great.” She stood up abruptly, disturbing the curated pile of magazines I had left on the table. My tabloids were tucked shamefully under the mattress like a pre-teen boy’s stolen bikini calendar. I followed her into the hallway, but stopped short at the threshold of powder room.

Kneeling on the tile, she began to make gagging, guttural sounds. She had worn her hair pulled back into a bun; a flawless round donut fastened to the nape of her neck. Truly sophisticated. I felt helpless as I watched her heave. I wanted desperately to hold her hair back — the ultimate sign of friendship — but I felt stymied by her hairstyle. It’s always something. I tried cupping the donut with my left hand while patting her shoulder with my right.

“It’s okay, Angie. You don’t need to hover over me. I just need some air.” She stood up, dabbed at her mouth with some two-ply toilet paper, then walked across the apartment to the balcony. Dave went with her. He slid the glass door shut tight behind him.

Malcolm sat on the couch staring ahead, not at the couple but at some undefined point just beyond them. “Don’t worry about it. Marie can be a real shrew, sometimes.” He took a long swig of his beer, never once moving his gaze from whatever lay in that invisible horizon. Then he slapped his hand loudly against his thigh as if to say “well, that’s that, then.”

It wasn’t true, though. The part about her being a shrew. He was only trying to be comforting, in his own way. I tried to show appreciation by turning my body towards his, and his leg brushed up against mine as he leaned forward to put his empty bottle onto the coffee table. The corduroy felt electric against my exposed knee. His virility was intoxicating.

I wanted to ask him if he was excited to be a father, since honest conversations promote strong relationships among friends, but he looked so lost to the world that I just sat there beside him, sharing his silence. Our silence.

“Seriously?” He was jolted back into consciousness by some unknown provocation. “The clasp on my medic alert bracelet gave out again. It must be in the dining room. Listen; don’t tell Sophie, she’s been on me for months about getting it fixed.” I nodded knowingly. I was a keen accomplice in this small deception. I knew from my own marriage that there are necessary secrets in every relationship.

We walked back to the dining room where we were no longer visible to our friends on the balcony. That’s something I like about this place, it’s all angles and shadows. The table hadn’t been cleared — the chairs were pushed back and stained napkins were splayed open on top of dishes. Standing at the edge of this abandoned room felt almost like trespassing. Like it wasn’t my home. I imagined a family interrupted by a fire alarm during their evening meal, leaving everything behind as they clung tightly to each other and ran for safety. We stood side by side overlooking the wreckage. I was always the one to clear the plates when Mike still lived here. Someone had to focus on the guests, he said. Tonight, that was my job.

Standing so close to Malcolm, I was hyper aware of his

breathing. It was a manly sort of breathing, if I had to describe it. Profound and determined. So different from my own which was always tentative. As if I couldn't be sure I was doing it correctly. As if I might have forgotten how.

We got down to our knees and crawled around the room. His large frame adapted effortlessly to the small space under the table. No longer large and assuming, his body looked comfortable. I thought it might fit naturally anywhere. I thought of how easily his body could fit around my own. Then I saw it, gold barely visible above the shag carpeting. Disappointment washed over me. It couldn't be that easy; so efficiently resolved. I reached out to cover the chain with my hand at the same time Malcolm went to grab it. We froze for a moment, his hand covering my own. Enveloping it entirely.

I didn't even open my eyes when I raised my face to meet his. I just pressed forward, trusting the universe and our close proximity to bring our lips together. His mouth was warm and yeasty from the beer. I fought to bury my tongue inside his mouth. I wanted desperately to be protected.

He pulled away. The chain fell back down, nestled deep within the synthetic fibres of the rug. "God, Angie!" He hit his head on the way up. He stood and rubbed the spot that had made contact with the table. "Do you know that I couldn't even drag Sophie here tonight? She said the stress from all the awkwardness might hurt the baby." I winced but I didn't speak. I stayed very still. When you don't move, people often forget that you're there at all. Mike left me at many a pub or party because of my knack for disappearing. I can get lost even in a very bare room.

"I can't do this. I'm just going to go now. Don't worry about the chain; I'll get it replaced on Monday." He sighed, and left the room.

I waited, motionless, until I heard the front door slam and then I silently walked to the balcony. The sound of me opening the door surprised Dave and he quickly removed his hand from the small of Marie's back. As if I had caught him in some lewd act.

"Do you want me to call you a taxi?" I tried not to make eye

contact, and instead focussed on the sad state of my plants. I held the yellowing leaves between my fingers, gently sighing and clucking my tongue while I waited for them to answer.

“What? Angie, we live less than a block away. Why would you do that?” Marie’s cheeks were flushed cotton-candy pink — from the cold or the drinking I couldn’t be sure. I felt a pang of envy at the sight of her perfect, upturned nose in the moonlight. It’s probably what Dave loves most about her.

“Where’s Malcolm?”

They tried to hang around and make polite conversation but I couldn’t accept their charitable banter. I sat, exposed; their words rubbing rough against the hollow. In the end, I walked them to the elevator, like Mike used to do.

Back in my apartment, I forgot about the plates — let them harden and stain overnight. I could always get new ones. I didn’t even think about the homemade pie, with fresh blueberries, which I would end up eating all alone, straight out of the pan. I just shut the door behind me and stood, shoulder blades squared against the sturdy wood door, until I knew it was really over.





Things Lost in 89 Cloverfield Dr.

By Dana Foley

For our first Christmas, you gave me a pair of silver dragonfly earrings.

Two years later, we moved out of our parents' homes and into 89 Cloverfield Dr. together. You got a job in real estate and I worked as a waitress in town. I wore your dragonfly earrings to work everyday and received each compliment on them with a smile and a quick thought of you.

A year into our lease, I lost one of those earrings. The other hung on my jewelry stand, rendered useless without its mate. Still, I held onto it, hoping the lost one would turn up somewhere when I flipped a couch cushion or swept a dusty corner.

Things continued normally for us. I signed up for night school. You bought a guitar. I finally got my driver's license. You joined a baseball team. My cat, Snowball, died. Your mom got cancer, was cured, then re-diagnosed again.

I would wake up early for work, but sometimes crawl back between the sheets before leaving to kiss the back of your sun-lit shoulders. You would grumble, half awake, and ask if there was coffee on.

We were busy, but okay. My car engine died, and I picked up extra shifts to pay the mechanic bills. You had to help your mom with the chemo appointments. I stopped kissing your shoulders in the morning and you stopped asking if there was coffee.

Between it all, I held out hope that my lost earring would show itself again. That is, until you came home from a party at your friend Jeff's with your eyes red-rimmed and your breath still reeking of beer.

"I did something bad," you said.

I stopped looking for the earring after that.

It took me some time to forgive you. For a while, the thought that you ever saw me naked made me want to sew my clothes to my skin. But later I realized we were done long before you 'did

something bad.'

We were like those dragonfly earrings. We had lost something a long time ago, and without it, whatever that was, we were pointless - like plants without sunlight or bread without butter. But still we kept going, thinking that maybe the missing part would show up again if we waited it out just a little longer.

As I packed the contents of my jewelry stand into my last moving box, I touched the lonely dragonfly earring with my fingertips. I plucked it from its spot and tossed it in the trash bag in the corner.

Sometimes I wonder if the new tenants ever found that other earring, pushed into a crack in the floor or hidden in an unused drawer somewhere. But that doesn't matter now. To us it's lost forever, among other things.



Lunch at the North Pole

by Louise Turan

Bill and I met, fell in love, and got married soon thereafter. We have stayed together for thirty-eight years, seldom apart. Needing and wanting to always be together has defined who we are, our relationship, and now, our cancers. But first the Good Part.

In 1980 I was working in Philadelphia as the executive director of a small nonprofit organization. One of my board members was a partner at a large public accounting firm. I asked him if he could help me prepare a complex financial report required for a grant application. The staff person he assigned to work with me was Bill.

In a plush lobby a stately receptionist in a tweed suit asked me to wait as she notified Bill I had arrived. When he came to greet me, I was struck right away by his dark good looks and height. He looked to be a foot taller than me. I followed him down a hallway to a conference room and was struck by something else. My line of vision was almost level with his behind where, it seemed to me, an anatomical part of him had gone missing. It made me slightly self-conscious because I wasn't as thin but I put it behind me.

It was the days of smoking. He offered me a cigarette, which he lit with a sterling silver lighter, monogrammed, his hand extending out from a starched, white cuff, also monogrammed. I had a quick flash of doubt that perhaps he might be too fancy pants for me, but found his childlike eagerness, bordering on comical, endearing. He could not hide his attraction to me, and it drew me in. We had a number of meetings and then several more. We planned our last on a Friday afternoon to be followed by drinks at the Happy Rooster. I had bourbon; Bill was still drinking Glenlivet at the time. He always tells the story this way, how I drank him under the table and he was in the bathroom throwing water on his face to keep up. I think we were both nervous because we knew this was serious: We were in love.

When I told my artsy friends that I had started dating an

accountant, they were horrified. An accountant? Does he have a pocket protector? Green eyeshades? My attraction to him surprised me too because there seemed to be more differences between us than similarities.

I was born in Turkey and grew up in Europe; Bill was born and raised in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh. There was also the height thing: he was six-foot-two and I was five-foot-four. Like Bill, I wore conservative clothes for work but any other time preferred to dress like a bohemian, in jeans with a peasant shirt and espadrilles. Bill preferred his custom suits, hand-made shirts and polished Oxfords and for down-time, khakis, button-downs, and Top-Siders. He was like someone out of a P.G. Wodehouse novel who, unsurprisingly, was one of Bill's favorite authors. When he invited me over for dinner, his antique-filled apartment with monogrammed towels and Baccarat crystal glasses confirmed what I already knew. Bill had fine tastes but, as it turned out, cooking was another matter.

He made broiled steak, frozen peas in a bag, and a salad with bottled bacon ranch dressing. Everything tasted fine but he repeated the same menu on our next date and the date after that. Not wanting to hurt his feelings, I asked if he liked any other kinds of foods. He said he did, that he had eaten a lot of Chinese food during his graduate school days at Penn. Growing up, however, the kinds of food his mother made and served had been limited to accommodate his diabetic father. Mostly bland stuff he explained, like no spices, no sugar, and no carbs.

I rubbed my hands together like a sorceress preparing to cast a spell and invited him to dinner. I was more worried about what he would think of my apartment than what I would cook for him. I lived in a beautiful, historic building on Rittenhouse Square, but my furnishings, with the exception of a grand Turkish rug, were hardly antiques. It didn't matter.

The dishes I made for him—Chicken Provençal, Pasta Carbonara, grilled eggplant with fresh tomato sauce, salads with Dijon vinaigrette—turned into a spiritual awakening, as if he had never eaten before. He gobbled up everything with a passion and eagerness of someone who had figured out a way to eat love. The

joy of eating turned out to be one of many similarities that began to open up, like little presents.

We discovered we were both reading the same book, *The Far Pavilions* by M.M. Kaye. We found a shared passion in museum-going and spending hours in bookstores. We went to Chinese restaurants and drank carafes of wine. But there was something more: Beneath his high polish and bespoke suits was a kindred spirit. In his beautiful, brown eyes, I found swirling, troubled oceans: the familiar glint of loneliness and of pain held at bay.

In late-night pillow talks (a habit we continue), he revealed his traumatic childhood, and I, in turn, revealed mine. Our scarred pasts surfaced slowly and carefully, like we were testing the waters, afraid our horrific memories might scare the other away. Our fathers, both doctors and surgeons, had invested their time and energy in their careers, not in their families. Our mothers, who catered to their demanding husbands and bore the brunt of raising children alone, closed themselves off to us and others. Bill and I shared how, as kids, our individuality was seen as a minus, not a plus, how we were both misunderstood and mistreated. In Bill's case the shaming and abuse was verbal; in mine, physical.

The way we both had survived, by retreating into ourselves, building protective walls, became our bond, like we were two frightened kids clinging to each other for comfort. Our love was intimate, visceral; we needed the feel and touch of warm skin, to drink in the steady rhythm of each other's breathing at night. We confessed our greatest fear was never finding someone to love and be loved back with equal measure. We were different but the same; each other's gift. We bought a center-city townhouse, worked like demons in our respective careers, raised two boys. We held together, through good and bad times, summer vacations in Maine, getting the boys off to college, taking care of aging parents, because it was the life we chose and wanted. Our blanket of protection was togetherness, and with it we could face all that was wrong with the world until cancer turned that world upside down.

In September 2017, Bill was diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer. There was no way around it; the numbers were the

numbers. We were devastated, shocked a healthy, robust man like Bill could get sick. I held his hand after the surgery and comforted our family, but I was a total wreck. The doctors assured us over and over that he would be fine. I carried this hope around with me like a talisman, telling myself that our lives would soon return to normal, but things were not that easy. Bill was fine, but at a cost: The invasive surgery took his manness and pride and replaced it with cruel indignities. He was convinced he was not the same man and would never be. No matter how many times I said he was the same to me, that I loved him no matter what, he refused to listen. He went to work dressed in neon-blue sneakers and policy-breaking ripped jeans, as if in defiance, to prove he was nothing like his well-dressed former self. He was adamant that our lives had changed forever (another trait we share is Ultimate Stubbornness). Feeling alone and afraid, we fell into separate, unreachable zones of sadness. It was as if we had defaulted into our former survivor selves, locked behind our protective walls, not knowing how to help ourselves or each other. At my urging we went to see David, a therapist who had helped us through rough times in the past.

In his reassuring and professional manner, he shed light on what troubled us the most: Bill's loss of identity and my loss of hope; our anger. David invited us to be more forgiving and understanding, not angry. He cautioned us not to let the illness infect our hearts too. Bill and I got back to our routine pillow talk at night and began the slow process of reconnecting. The summer came. Bill went back to work, and I went to our house in Maine to write. We were on the path to finding our way again—until I got cancer too.

In early August I came back to Philly from Maine to go with Bill to see his oncologist, an important meeting where we would learn more about his upcoming treatments. That night I had terrible stomach cramps, something I had been experiencing now and then over the past year, but these were far worse. An emergency room visit the next morning confirmed I had a colonic stricture and needed to be admitted to the hospital as soon as possible. The blockage turned out to be stage three colon cancer. While the surgery

removed the tumor and infected lymph nodes, I would need six months of chemotherapy.

Now we were back where we started a year ago, both of us in shock and in denial. This could not possibly happen to us. Hadn't we already been through enough already? Apparently not. The three-hour infusion of Oxaliplatin into my system was the worst thing I have ever experienced. It took a full two weeks after each infusion to feel somewhat normal again. Bill came to the infusion ward each time to drive me home. The nurses looked surprised when he told them he had just come from his daily radiation treatment.

"You mean you both got cancer? At the same time?"

"Yes," he confirmed.

"Boy, you guys have to do everything together, don't you?" they asked.

Everyone who knows us, and those who don't, make the same little joke. We understand they are trying to make light of a difficult situation. True enough, we are closer than we have ever been before. We have to be. The ground beneath our feet keeps changing, from steady to shaky, to an uncertain path with a horizon that is hard to see. This is what we know: Cancer spares no one. Its deadly cells show no discrimination for race, gender, ethnicity, and culture, eating up bones, organs, blood, lymphomas, and brains. Our lives hang on meat hooks; the threat of cancer's return is ever-present. And even though we are together in this battle, there is always that feeling that catches in the back of the throat if we dare think about the unbearable, of life without the other.

It is a year later and our treatments are over; we are in remission. We have come to our house in Maine to recover, relaxing, reading, and cooking great dinners with the best seafood on earth. Thankfully Bill has learned to cook many wonderful dishes other than the ones he made for me on our first dates. We don't drink as much now, mostly because of what the treatments did to our waistlines, but we still enjoy a snort or two of bourbon to which Bill is a happy convert.

There is a glimmer of hope here, like the silver waters of the

cold ocean stretched out in front of us. We talk of summer, of going to the beach, maybe a trip overseas, little things in the past but big things to us now, pushing us to think positively no matter what, to believe there is a horizon.

In the kitchen, having our morning coffee, Bill asks me what I'm going to do for the day. "I don't know," I reply, happy not to have anything planned. "What are you going to do?" I ask. He gets up and kisses me on the head.

"I'm going to the bedroom to read," he announces.

He says this slowly, our eyes locking because we know what the other is thinking. The bedroom is only a few feet away, but when we pause to think about what happened, what could happen, it feels as far away as the North Pole. I hope he's back in time so we can have lunch, together.





Home

By Nancy Baele

My father made his request shyly, bracketing it with laughter. Of course, you should visit Luke, I told him, no worries about mother. I'll take a train tomorrow. Our conversation ended with him shouting, No! Grace! No! Don't do that! After he hung up, I sat in the chair my parents had given us shortly after Maz and I moved into the ground floor apartment in this old house near the market. It had been a surprise visit. A surprise gift. We were on the front porch when they drove up, my great grandfather's chair strapped to the car roof. You know your father, my mother said, giddy with excitement, when he gets something in his head, it's not in his big toe.

Maz and my father untied the blue chair, centered it in what my mother called our living room, a room with bins and boxes stacked to the ceiling, crammed with things Maz found in the woods or scavenged in the city. My father unscrewed the silver flask he ritually brings on trips and we passed it mouth to mouth. On her final swig, my mother patted the chair. Too bad our big TV took your place, she said, as if comforting a child, enjoy your new home.

Hearing the pleasure and relief in my father's voice, when I said I'd come tomorrow, reminded me of the good time we'd had that weekend. Everyone relaxed. Meals ordered in or take-out. My father as attentive as a sympathetic bartender in topping up our glasses. The days were sunny, hot. We moved freely from the porch to the back yard, sat on frayed canvas chairs in the weedy, unmown grass, watched a goggled Maz, sparks flying, weld a sculpture.

I love seeing our men talk, my mother said as Maz and my father smoked, standing by a drooping sunflower near a ruined fence. We couldn't hear their voices but imagined them exchanging familiar stories, probably my father's reminiscence, repeated yet again, about his first job up north, how he felt dumber than a bag of hammers when the sister of his patient told him to put away his instruments. She knew how to bring on labour. Time to sneeze her,

she'd said, putting a tickling feather up the birthing mother's nose. When I saw Maz show my father a nettle he'd just picked, I thought maybe he was talking about his mother, her knowledge of medicinal plants, her healing powers.

After my parents left, Maz and I moved the chair to our bedroom, took turns sitting on its faded velvet, mottled from use and spills. A gentleman settler's chair, Maz said, leaning back, grinning. Doe skin just might suit it. Eventually, he covered it in hide, hung feathers and furs from its arms to echo the *Warrior Shield* he was making with flattened beer cans, tails. Now it belongs with them, he said, tilting his head to the bandoliers above our bed.

Maz found his first bandolier - centuries old, made of velvet and trade beads - in a thrift shop. He loved everything about it: its age, the way velvet had replaced traditional painted hide, the way trade beads had replaced quill work. Before hanging it, he'd stroked its wide shoulder straps. This wasn't made to carry a gun, he'd said. It's what the Anishinaabe called a friendship bag, made to honour someone. The second bandolier was his own friendship bag, a birthday gift from an artist he admired. The shoulder straps were decorated with flowing floral patterns of discarded computer capacitors and resistors. The pouch displayed an archival film, recording a royal visit where the tribe had been commanded to perform a dance the government had banned from their own ceremonies. One night, when we were looking at the bandoliers hanging sided by side, Maz said, They've got spirit, those two, the artists knew how to pass on what's important with what's at hand.

Enough wool gathering, I told myself, and made a mental list: train reservation, pack, remember to take the catalogue for the final stop of Maz's exhibition in a Swiss museum.

I like everything about a train trip. The sound of the wheels, the haunting, melancholic whistle, the changing landscape. Which philosopher, I wondered as I settled in my backward facing seat, said we understand our lives looking backward but we must live them going forward. As we rolled past snow-covered fields, silos, barns, a scrap yard of rusting cars, hydro lines snaking across fields, I thought of Maz and my life now, a year after the heart

attack that killed him, just before the opening of his retrospective exhibition. My father was apprehensive, twenty years ago, when I told him I was moving in with Maz. He didn't like his track record: six kids with five women, no steady pay cheque, more than twice my age, a charismatic wild streak that might sour. How do you know it's anything more than sex? he'd asked. Years taught us it was more than sex. It was fights and reconciliations, clashes of temperaments, histories, shattering infidelities during drunken binges. It was moments of peace and understanding and adventure and wonder unique to us. It was unshakeable, the feeling we were a good fit. When Maz died, my father said, You were right from the beginning. He was the one for you. He took off his glasses and brushed the back of his hand across his eyes. His voice broke. Things won't be the same without him. He was quite the guy.

Wondering if my father might like to see his mother's name in her schoolgirl hand inscribed on the title page of Tolstoy's little book, *What Is Art*, I'd put it in my purse at the last minute. Fingering its worn cover while waiting for a freight train to pass, I remembered Maz's response when I'd read aloud: *All human life is full of productions of art of every kind from lullabies, jokes, descriptions of the decoration of houses, clothes, furniture to church services and solemn ceremonies.* In our language, he'd said, we have no word for art. It is not something apart from daily life. It's power, gives meaning.

At the train's long whistle of approach, I gathered my things and wondered what signs of decline I would see in my parents this visit, but, sitting in their living room, a log blazing in the fireplace, my mother drinking a martini, my father sipping Scotch, this house and their presence in it seemed immutable. Every horizontal surface teemed with photographs of babies, weddings, graduations, holidays. They rested, framed and unframed, on the mantel, piano, blotted out most titles on the bookshelves. Our wars, our peace, I thought, as I looked at portraits of my mother's brothers and my father's father killed in two world wars and the bearded face of my mother's grandfather watching over us like an old testament prophet. Seeking respite from the surfeit of faces, family history, I

focused on my grandmother's paintings of landscapes and seascapes and looked at my screensaver image - a photo I'd taken of the imprint our sleeping bodies left on soft pine needles during our last visit to Maz's reserve. *Aki, geen-a-wind*, he'd whispered that night, *land, us*.

In the morning, after waving goodbye to my father, who looked almost boyish in his fedora, my mother asked me cheerfully who that man was, then went to the piano. Sitting beside her, I marveled at her arthritic hands moving unerringly over the keys. She played a medley - *The Whiffenpoof Song, Sweet Alice Blue Gown, Old Man River, Annie Laurie* - a feat that seemed a miraculous beacon of clarity in her usual mental fog. At lunch, I marveled again at the way she focused on the table's centerpiece, a Christmas cactus. Seeing her gaze at the pink-tongued bloom, thrust stamen, the ivory filaments knobbed with fertile dust, I remembered the sense of wonder with which she had once gently touched the soft spot on a newborn's head or pushed back a May Apple's leaves to see its waxy flower, remembered how she liked to bring in frozen diapers from the clothes line. Glistening with frost, she'd stand them in the kitchen like stiff wraiths, laughing as they thawed and slackened.

After lunch, she fell asleep in her reclining chair.
And who might you be? she asked when she woke.
I showed her family photographs, repeated names, pointed
to faces.
And you say you are my daughter?
You are my mother. I am your daughter.

Important things happened to me, she said with a piercing sadness.
You know them, but I don't. It's gone, my life.

My father once confided that he found her rare lucid moments harder to bear than her gibberish. As if she had read my mind, she began making unintelligible sounds, whirring and clicking her tongue. To stem her frenzied voice, I led her to the hall and dressed her for a walk. When the phone rang, I went to the kitchen

to answer.

Is it safe to come home tomorrow or has Grace burned down the house? my father joked.

When I returned to the hall, it was empty, the front door open.

Frantically, I walked up and down the street, calling, Mother! Mother! Grace! Grace! She was nowhere. I crossed a busy road, walked past unfamiliar houses, shouting Mother! shouting Grace! until I was hoarse. No answer. At last I heard *chugachuga, whirrrrrrr, diddley dos, rounds and rounds*, followed by high pitched humming. She was sitting in a Muskoka chair on a strange porch, looking up at wind chimes made of tinkling shells. In the early evening light, she seemed like an imaginative child, amusing herself while waiting for a parent to pick her up from school. On the way home, I held her hand. We paused at the front door to look at the crescent moon. Remembering her habit of reciting *Star Bright*, I repeated, *Starlight, star bright, first star I've seen tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might have the wish I wish tonight*, grateful my wish had come true.

We ate supper in front of the TV, watched the evening news. There were close-ups of refugees walking along a mountain path. Two men carried an old woman in a make-shift blanket stretcher. There was a short interview with a nursing mother weeping as she described how her husband, brothers and father died, parts of their bodies cut off before they were shot. Only the baby, waving a little fist as it tugged on her breast, caught my mother's attention. A real honeybunch, she said with a smile.

Later, lying in bed in my father's place, my mother's profile, in sleep, looked like that of some old queen in a medieval crypt. Her Roman nose, a flesh and bone reminder of centuries of empire, migration, human coupling, took in air. Her open mouth expelled it in gentle puffs. When, at last, I fell asleep, I had a vivid dream of being on the move, of walking with people who seemed familiar but whose faces were shrouded, hidden. Sometimes they carried my mother and sometimes my mother carried them. They called for help, but no sound came from their lips.

We woke to a sun-filled day. After breakfast, my mother

stood at the kitchen window watching two black squirrels in their mating chase around a pine. What fun, she laughed. When they disappeared into the upper branches, she resumed her own squirrel life, wandering through rooms, opening drawers and cupboards, gathering and hiding things in this house where she's lived all her married life, a house she'd claimed as her true home at the age of eight when it was vacant, between tenants, convenient for quarantining her and her brothers. Isolated, to protect others from contagion, they had lived like young, red-spotted animals, their parents talking to them through a window, leaving food and clean clothes on the doorstep. She remembered sleeping on the floor, fights, night laughter, running wild through moonlit rooms.

While she roamed, I thought of the looming deadline for my translation contract, took out my laptop, opened the file on *My Landscape*, a memoir, written by a war bride who lived on the Wikwemikong reserve. I thought of Maz whispering, *land, us, aki, geen-a-wind*, while reading, *Landscape, that sixteenth century word, meant vistas, nature paintings to me when I arrived on Manitoulin Island. Now, in my ninetieth year, landscape means being in the land, a record of my time here.*

As I was writing, *Paysage, ce mot de seizième siècle*, my mother returned with a tube of toothpaste and a deckle-edged photograph of my father and Luke, both in uniform, standing in front of their hospital ship. I watched her hide them under the cushion of her chair. Before she could sit down and squish the toothpaste, damage the photograph, I took her hand and told her we were going to see Eric at the train station. Whatever you say, she said playfully, you're the boss.

We were early and walked up and down the platform, our boots leaving footprints in the fresh snow. I noticed her determined expression, her purposeful pace, as though she was in charge, certain of her destination.

My father was the first passenger off. He looked buoyant.

Younger.

He kissed my mother.

Well Gracie, he said, good to be home.
You can say that again, she laughed.
Until she hugged him and called him Eric, I wondered if
she knew who he was.

I made coffee, set the pot and mugs on a low table in the living room beside Tolstoy's book and Maz's catalogue, pulled back the heavy drapes to let the winter sun stream in through the tall windows framing the sofa where my parents had settled side by side. My father opened his overnight bag and gave my mother a plush monkey. She patted it, put it on her lap, picked it up, stared at its plastic eyes.

I saw it just as it was time to board, my father said. It seemed the perfect thing to bring home. Ever since Luke has been in a wheelchair and on oxygen, he's been living in his son's house. He has his own little apartment. A bathroom, a small kitchen with a microwave, a fridge, a pull-out couch where I slept. His son enrolled him in a program about service animals and a monkey seemed the best choice. Luke's monkey is the smartest thing I ever saw. Like a guide dog. Brings Luke his water bottle. Brings his newspaper. Made us remember being in North Africa, seeing a sailor whose pet monkey gave him a tot of rum every day.

My father draped his arm over my mother's shoulder. He looked pleased at the way she was cuddling the toy animal, stroking it.

The monkey made us think of our ship, he said. Luke remembered how we treated the wounded from Ortona. No penicillin. Maggots ate the rotting flesh. Once, in Algiers, we waited and waited for one of our crew. Time ran out, the ship had to leave. On the way back, we hoped he would be there. Instead, his body was hung high on a pier, testicles stuffed in his mouth.

He paused, was silent for a while, then said quietly, Luke and I, we've seen some things.



My Mother Cuts Me Open and Finds an Apple Inside

By Diane DeCillis

I swallowed it whole,
 a shiny red orb
to catch my mother's eye.

It slipped through my carotid
 like the moon
through Basho's lake,

glided through my lungs—
 a luge
sledding on air.

It fell as Newton's
 gravity into the cavity
of my heart,

rolled pinball smooth
 through channels
of vein and artery.

It bobbed like dashboard-dolls,
 floating

on waves of plasma,

traversed my liver's lobes

like Mallory

scaling Everest.

It swung across my pancreas—

think Foucault's

leaded pendulum.

and slid through my intestines

like Williams

sweet cold plum.

It then bumper car-ed my ovaries

dropping eggs

like ripe persimmons,

to be plucked

by Mother's hand

who held it to the light,

and still

didn't know me

any better.

What I Learned in Grad School

by Brittani Sonnenberg

I didn't learn how to drive until I turned 27,
the same age more with-it Americans start
thinking about a retirement fund,
the same year I learned how to masturbate,
the same year I started grad school.

My driving coaches consisted of a Chinese boyfriend,
who had learned a few years earlier,
and a Palestinian drivers ed instructor, who yelled
FLOOR IT! when we hit the Michigan highway.
My masturbation coaches were my best girlfriends in grad
school.

Over mimosas, they offered feedback
on my short stories and my self-pleasuring reports,
although my nascent fumbling felt more like homework than
heaven.

I spent my days signaling and changing lanes
and critiquing plots and story titles,
and my nights wrestling with shame and desire,
prodding myself with a vibrator,
like a determined retiree with a metal detector and miles of
beach.

Until one day and then one night, I could parallel park and
come on command.

I was still a beginner, however, in all three subjects.
I burst into tears when a short story got eviscerated in
workshop.
Then cried again after I ran into a parked car.
My freshman comp class consoled me—
they were ten years younger but had crashed a lot more cars.
My reproductive parts, meanwhile, felt like faulty plumbing.
More often than not, my boyfriend couldn't get them to work,
and the times that he (or I) could, there would suddenly be a lot
of gushing liquid, like a burst pipe, and the bed as flooded
as some poor homeowner's basement.

My girlfriends found this hilarious,
and congratulated me on my porn-star waterworks,
while I wondered what was wrong.
Years later, no longer driving, (I had moved to Berlin)
but still very much masturbating,
My then-husband and I threw a dinner party.
One of the guests was a demure Swedish artist.
When asked about her work, she sweetly explained
that she created pieces using women who "squirt,"
letting their cum hit her canvases, then coloring their
liquid exclamations in.
I suddenly wanted everyone else to disappear,
so she and I could discuss her process for the rest of the night,
or maybe for the rest of our lives.
I considered volunteering my services,
but just stayed silent, nodding, offering her more wine.
I was drunk, but not that drunk.

I can understand why I didn't drive until 27 —
I grew up in Singapore, lived in big cities, etc.,
But why the hell did it take me nearly three decades
to get sexy with myself?
Sometimes, before then, boyfriends would ask me
to masturbate during sex, and I would comply,
try to look turned on, feel nothing.
My private parts were so private that
they denied me access, too,
as if my own pleasure were a
fiercely guarded government secret that
rebel factions were dying to get a hand on.
Ha, ha. But I do think I'd internalized, or intuited,
or inherited the message that tapping into that power
would mean betraying something, or someone else.
That it be bad, a three-year-old thought for a 27-year-old
woman to have.
Was it my mother's own sexual trauma as a child?
Or a joy I feared feeling?
I don't know.
But when I first began experimenting, all I could do was cry.

And when things started to “work,” it still felt messy and
unresolved.
For example, why did the sheets have to get so wet?
And why was there no end to the orgasms, once they started?
I felt like a millionaire's 4th of July fireworks display in reverse,
One big finale, and then I could go on and on with
discrete explosions for an hour or longer,
While the crowd grew bored and stopped clapping.

I still don't really get it.

And since we generally only hear about and see men coming on screen, and a lot less from the ladies—
Aside from some blissed-out moans and eye-rolling at the camera,

I'm not sure where my fellow females come down (ha, ha) on the issue themselves.

I think our pleasure is probably like any other natural gift: something to be tended and coaxed and protected,
Never forced or undermined by agonized analysis or apology.

In summary, after two years in Ann Arbor,

I graduated with an MFA, a driver's license, and three sex toys.

I didn't have an agent or a book deal,

but I felt like a real American, who could finally drive.

and a real woman, who could finally come.

And then some.

CONTRIBUTORS

Art

Karen Grosman is based in Toronto, Ontario. Her practice concentrates on painting, ceramic sculptures, large scale ceramic art installations and ceramic jewellery. Recent paintings deal with concepts of death, rebirth, and impermanence. Ceramics explore ideas of superficiality, hidden meanings, the façade and the abject.

Gareth McGorman is a scale modeler living in Toronto who commands a small army of 1:35 scale soldiers. One day while bored at home he tried taking some photos of his brother's cat being ambushed. From there he started taking pictures of the soldiers interacting with various objects and appliances around the house. *@armymenaroundthehouse*

Sofia Rybkina lives in Saint Petersburg. She is a poet, professional violinist and illustrator. Sofia also happens to be a member of the French Poets Society. Her works have appeared in such literary journals as *Slovo\Word*, *La Page Blanche*, *Capulet Magazine*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Vestal Review*, *L'Etrave*, *Lichen*, and others.

Anni Wilson: I am a print-maker working in linoleum. My work is set in the universe of the Industrial Revolution, a period whose themes resonate with those of our own: class divides, gender inequalities, capitalistic greed, the alienating effects of technology. Recent work has appeared in *ellipsis*, *Folio*, and *The Emerson Review*.

Fiction

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Nancy Baele, former art critic for the *Ottawa Citizen*, writes fiction grounded in visual art. Her story, *Home*, owes much to the work and thought of artists - Barry Ace, Robert Houle, the late Ron Noganosh and the late Leo Yerxa. She is grateful for Damian Tarnopolsky's perceptive editing.

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Hana Mason is a Victoria-based writer who can't seem to stop writing about her home town of Calgary, AB. She is the editor-in-chief of *This Side of West Issue 18* and a part-time barista. Recent publications include *Riddle Fence* and *Little Fiction/Big Truths*.

Non-Fiction

Brian Braganza writes creative non-fiction and poetry. Having lived on three continents before he was 5 years old, he has found home on Mi'kma'ki, the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaw people. Brian inhabits and facilitates liminal spaces, helping individuals find home in themselves, so they can positively show up for others.

Traci Skuce lives in Cumberland. Her work has appeared in several literary journals, such as *The New Quarterly*, *Grain*, and *Prairie Fire*; this past year she was longlisted for the CBC Short Story Prize. In April 2020, her short story collection, *Hunger Moon*, will be released by *NeWest Press*.

Louise Turan's work appears in journals throughout the U.S. and Canada. Her creative nonfiction and fiction publications include *Bluestem Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, *Superstition Review*, *Forge*, and *Carbon Culture Review* among others. She was a finalist in the *Whitefish Review's* 2018 Montana Award for Fiction. She lives in Philadelphia and Maine.

Poetry

Gannon Daniels lives and works in Los Angeles, California. Her poems have been seen in several journals, including *Sanskrit*, *Cimarron Review*, *Whistling Shade*, *Gemini Magazine* and *DIAGRAM*. Her first book, *The Occupying Water*, was published by *GaltArtHouse*.

Diane DeCillis' poetry collection *Strings Attached* (Wayne State Univ. Press) has been honored as a *Michigan Notable Book for 2015*, won the *Next Generation Indie Book Award*, and was a finalist for the *Forward Indie Fab Book Award*. Her work has been nominated for three *Pushcarts*, and *Best American Poetry*.

Trish Hopkinson is a poet, blogger, and advocate for the literary arts. You can find her online at *SelfishPoet.com* and provisionally in Utah. Hopkinson will happily answer to labels such as atheist, feminist, and empty nester; and enjoys traveling, live music, wine-tasting, and craft beer.

Michael Andrew Lithgow's poetry and writing have appeared in literary and academic journals including *The /tEmz/ Review*, *Poemeleon*, *Event*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *ARC Poetry*, *Cultural Trends*, *CV 2*, *Seismopolite* and *TNQ*. His first collection of poetry, *Waking in the Tree House*, was shortlisted for the *Quebec Writers Federation First Book Award*. Work from this collection was included in the *2012 Best Canadian Poetry in English* (*Tightrope Books*).

J.L Moultrie is a native Detroit, poet and fiction writer who communicates his art through the written word. He fell in love with literature after encountering Fyodor Dostoyevsky, James Baldwin, Rainer Maria Rilke and many others. He considers himself a literary abstract artist of modernity.

Karen Rigby is the author of *Chinoiserie* (*Absakta Press*). Her poems have been published in *The Spectacle*, *The London Magazine*, *Australian Book Review*, and other journals.

Diana Rosen's work appears in many online and print journals and anthologies including *RATTLE*, *Tiferet Journal*, *Dime Show Review*, among

others. Poems have been accepted for the *Reform Jewish Quarterly*, *Book of Sighs*, an art and poetry anthology, and an essay will appear in *Far Villages* from *Black Lawrence Press*. *Red Bird Chapbooks* has accepted her flash and poetry to be published as *Love & Irony*.

Brittani Sonnenberg is the author of the novel *Home Leave*, a *New York Times*' Editors' Pick. Her nonfiction, short stories, and poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *the North American Review*, *NPR*, and elsewhere. She is based in Austin, Texas, and serves as a visiting lecturer for the University of Hong Kong's MFA Program.

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Ash winters is an emerging Toronto-based poet. Queer and sober, their work navigates complex and colourful emotional landscapes. They graduated with their BA in English from Lakehead University in 2010. Their work has recently appeared in *Reverie Review* and their desk is cluttered with projects nearing completion.

Felicia Zuniga is a communications specialist and freelance writer in Calgary. Her poetry has been published in *Montreal Writes*, *CV2- The Canadian Journal of Poetry* and *Critical Writing*, *The Antigonish Review* and *Freefall Magazine*. She has a Master of Journalism from Carleton University and a Bachelor of Arts in English Honours, with a Creative Writing Concentration from the University of Calgary.

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